



Northern Ireland
Assembly

OFFICIAL REPORT

(Hansard)

Volume 13

(12 November 2001 to 20 January 2002)

BELFAST: THE STATIONERY OFFICE LTD

£70.00

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Produced and published in Northern Ireland on behalf of the
Northern Ireland Assembly by TSO Ireland,
which is responsible for printing and publishing
Northern Ireland Assembly publications.

ISBN 0 339 800011-9

Volume 13

12 November 2001 to 20 January 2002

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

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<i>Minister of Education</i>	Martin McGuinness
<i>Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment</i>	Sir Reg Empey
<i>Minister of the Environment</i>	Sam Foster
<i>Minister of Finance and Personnel</i>	Mark Durkan (<i>Until 13 December 2001</i>) Dr Seán Farren (<i>From 14 December 2001</i>)
<i>Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety</i>	Ms Bairbre de Brún
<i>Minister for Employment and Learning</i>	Dr Seán Farren (<i>Until 13 December 2001</i>) Ms Carmel Hanna (<i>From 14 December 2001</i>)
<i>Minister for Regional Development</i>	Peter Robinson
<i>Minister for Social Development</i>	Nigel Dodds

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

Monday 12 November 2001

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

Members observed two minutes' silence.

ASSEMBLY BUSINESS

Rev Dr Ian Paisley: I have two concerns, Mr Speaker. First, on Friday 2 November, when a vote was being taken, you had to leave the Chair; no one was in the Chair. Can the House have an assurance that when such circumstances arise in the future, a Deputy Speaker will be appointed, even if a vote is to be taken? That will allow those wishing to make points of order to do so.

Secondly, I understand that you have asked your officials to report to you on the incident in the Great Hall last Tuesday. When will that report be made available to the leaders of the parties in the House? It is only right, given the accusations that have been made about certain Members, that we should know what the officials of the House saw in the Great Hall.

Mr Speaker: With regard to the first matter, I remind the Member, as I did at the time, that the reason for my having to vacate the Chair was to give advice that had been requested. Because there was some noise and commotion, it was impossible to hear what I was being asked or for the Member to hear my response. I happily assure the House and the Member concerned that a Deputy Speaker will, in future, take the Chair even more promptly than happened on that occasion.

On the day of the untoward events last week I met with the Head of Security of the Assembly and asked for a full report. That report was provided to me at the end of the week, and I was able to read it over the week-end. A further report, including recommendations, was provided to me today. I wish to ensure that the inquiries are complete, and I wish to consider the reports and the recommendations. They will come as a full report to the Assembly Commission which, as the House knows, is the body charged with responsibility for Assembly affairs.

The principal burden of that report will be to ensure that Assembly staff managed the incident appropriately and to consider how any such incidents could best be handled in the future. If Members have complaints about the conduct of other Members — or about the conduct

of anyone who is the responsibility of a Member — that complaint should be taken to the Standards and Privileges Committee, where it can be considered in the context of the House. Members also have the option of legal recourse, and I understand that some may wish to take that option.

The report will go to the Assembly Commission, not to party leaders, and it is the appropriate body. If Members have complaints, the proper recourse within the Assembly is to the Standards and Privileges Committee. I trust that that is of assistance to the House.

Rev Dr Ian Paisley: I understand that. However, I would like an assurance that we will see the report. Members who have loudly accused other Members now say that they will not go to the police, because they do not accept them. That is not the way in which business should be conducted. Members of the House should be prepared to stand over the statements that they have made. There seems to be a way of getting out of that.

Mr Speaker: As I have explained to the House, the report will go to the Assembly Commission. It is the responsibility of the Commission to decide how the situation will be handled. It is one matter for Members to get caught in an altercation with one another and another matter for Assembly staff to find themselves caught up in those circumstances. I am protective of our staff. They should not fall victim to any dispute between Members of the House. How Members choose to handle the situation is a matter for themselves. I have outlined the proper procedures.

Mr Tierney: On a point of order, Mr Speaker. Will Members see the report after the Commission? Mr Paisley was speaking, I think, about party leaders, but it is right that all Members should see it and any recommendations that it contains.

Mr Speaker: That is a matter for the Commission to decide. All Members are represented on the Commission. The minutes of the Commission's meetings are published and made available on the Internet as soon as they are approved. Some material will therefore be widely available.

Mr Dallat: Has our gratitude to staff for their outstanding handling of the situation been conveyed to them?

Mr Speaker: I have already conveyed my gratitude to the staff for the way in which they handled a difficult situation. If the Commission is satisfied that the situation was handled appropriately, suitable approbation should be forthcoming. I should not prejudge whether the Commission will make the same positive assessment as the Member has made.

Mr J Wilson: On a point of order, Mr Speaker. I shall not ask you to go into detail about what you have already read and about the contributions that have been made

to the report by staff, but I would like to know whether the report takes into consideration what was happening off camera? There was some preparation to disrupt events in the Great Hall.

Mr Speaker: The inquiry has not concentrated on what was, or was not, filmed by the television cameras, but on the observations of staff and others. If Members wish to make representations to that inquiry, they are at liberty to do so. I advise them to contact the Head of Security. I have already received a preliminary report, which I read at the weekend, and a further instalment, including some recommendations, which I will be studying. However, I would not be surprised if the Head of Security were to bring me further instalments of the report as responses are received. I trust that that clarifies the matter.

Rev Dr Ian Paisley: On a point of order, Mr Speaker. Further to the point of order raised by the Chief Whip of the Official Unionist Party, surely it is dangerous to propose that something that was not seen, and which had nothing to do with what happened in the Great Hall, be included in the report. Who can judge what happened? I have heard judgements that certain individuals orchestrated the incident. I have already made a statement on who orchestrated it, which I am not withdrawing. The videotapes prove that what I said was right. People who could make up stories should not have access to the inquiry.

Mr Speaker: Let me be clear on this matter: Mr Jim Wilson's question, as I understood it, was whether the material that was caught on camera would be the sole evidence on which the inquiry would be based. I replied to the Member, and to the House, that the material that is being gathered concerns what staff members and others saw. Whether or not the incident was recorded by camera is another matter. The inquiry is not dependent on viewing videotapes of what happened, but on the experience of staff and others who were present.

Mr Tierney: The Minister has informed me that the incident is still being shown on Eurosport.

Mr Speaker: I am tempted to become involved, but I was brought up to resist temptation, and I will do so now.

RE-DESIGNATION LETTERS

Mr Speaker: I wish to advise Members that I received three letters dated 6 November from Members last Tuesday, each of which states:

"In accordance with Standing Order 3(8) as amended today, I give notice that I am changing my designation from 'Unionist' back to 'Centre' to take effect seven days from today."

The letters were signed by Mr David Ford, Mr Sean Neeson and Mrs Eileen Bell. In accordance with the revised Standing Orders, therefore, these Members will be re-designated as "Other", to take effect from Wednesday of this week.

Mr Poots: On a point of order, Mr Speaker. Have you been assured that Mr Ford's stomach will be back in good working condition after his re-designation back to the centre?

Mr Speaker: In this professional capacity, I do not generally enquire after the physical, or other, indisposition of Members, unless they bring it to my attention.

Mr Gibson: Mr Speaker, what was the position of Committees after Members' re-designation? What was their legal status, given that the proportional balances that were put in place were altered? Are any decisions that were made during that period legally acceptable?

Mr Speaker: Order. As far as Standing Orders are concerned, that point is wide of the issue. The membership of Committees is decided by a motion in the Assembly. There was no attempt to change that, and the detail of Committee membership is a matter for agreement and votes in the Assembly. I trust that that lays the matter to rest, although if the Member wishes further clarification, I will show him which Standing Orders apply, rather than take up the time of the House. The Member can take it from me that the functioning of Committees was not adversely affected.

12.15 pm

SEPTEMBER MONITORING ROUND

The Minister of Finance and Personnel (Mr Durkan): Mr Speaker, with permission I will make a statement on behalf of the Executive about public spending allocations in 2001-02 following the September monitoring round.

In this monitoring round there are some resources to distribute as a result of savings emerging in a number of spending programmes. As I have said in previous monitoring round statements, the main purpose of these exercises is to adjust the allocation of resources to meet cost pressures in priority services. As an Executive, our aim is to ensure that our financial plans are adjusted to take account of changes in the delivery of public services. In doing so, we are, of course, guided by the strategic objectives in the Programme for Government. Fortunately we are not bound by the priorities of our predecessors. I say that on behalf of the Executive, and not in any party capacity.

Around £66.2 million was available to the Executive for reallocation in the September monitoring round. That had arisen from a number of sources. The Executive agreed in July that the balance of unallocated room to manoeuvre from the June monitoring round should be held over until September to facilitate the best possible interaction with the Budget process. Some £21.7 million has been withheld for that purpose.

Added to that, some £44.2 million of savings were declared by Departments as a routine part of this monitoring round. The Department for Employment and Learning surrendered significant sums from its employment programmes and as a result of a reduction in student loan subsidies. The Department for Social Development advised that the Northern Ireland Housing Executive is expecting increased receipts from house sales this year amounting to some £8 million and is also expecting an easement on Liganside expenditure plans that will release £5.2 million.

I have frequently drawn attention to the constraints that we face in planning spending. The availability of resources through savings of this nature should not deceive us into believing that our spending programmes are not under considerable pressure. As I was reminded in the Chamber last Monday, there are significant demands for spending on services that are badly needed and that would be of clear benefit to the public.

In this monitoring round, as in most others, the bids exceed the resources available. Bids on this occasion amount to £128 million. Nevertheless, given the pressure on services and the wide range of aspirations that many people have, the Executive have looked strategically and pragmatically at how best we should use those resources.

We face major problems today and tomorrow in schools, hospitals and many other important public services. There is also a long way to go in tackling the equality agenda, reducing levels of deprivation throughout the community and making a difference to the quality of life of all our people. That will be the true test of devolution. However, with the limited resources available we have sought to relieve the most immediate of those pressures, while at the same time tackling the longer-term weaknesses in infrastructure and the shortfalls in major spending programmes.

In considering those issues, we came to the view that health, education and roads were among the services facing the most acute difficulties and that they would have to be given some priority. However, the key difficulty in meeting that challenge was to find ways of addressing those priorities without simply shifting the burden to another sector.

I have said before that the Executive want to adopt a more forward-looking approach to our financial management and give spending authorities greater stability for planning purposes. We also want to get better use out of the spending power available and to take account of the Assembly's views on how we might achieve that.

In drawing up the draft Budget for 2002-03 which I presented to the Assembly on 25 September, careful heed was taken of Members' points about the levels of reallocation in all monitoring rounds so far and the high levels of underspending at the end of a year.

We agree that we need to make better use of our resources and improve financial planning and estimating. In the draft Budget we looked at how the pattern of underspending in monitoring rounds could be used to advantage and concluded that some £48 million of spending power could be allocated for planned carrying over into 2002-03 without undue risk and based on anticipated underspending this year. We are confident that it will be possible to manage resources in the next few monitoring rounds and through 2002-03, and to make good that requirement.

With that aim in mind, the Executive's approach to this monitoring round has been based on the assumption that it would be prudent to set aside approximately £21 million now, leaving a balance of £27 million to be found in the December and February monitoring rounds. Based on analysis of foreseeable underspending patterns, I am confident that we can proceed.

One consequence of this approach is that the scope for meeting additional bids is less, but I am sure that we will find it preferable to use resources more effectively at the planning stage than always to face late reallocations in monitoring rounds. I am, however, especially conscious of the needs expressed by the Ministers from the Departments of Health, Social Services and Public

Safety, Regional Development, Social Development and the Environment. I assure Members that the issues highlighted by those Departments and others will be considered further in the December monitoring round.

Of the remaining £44.9 million available, the Executive have decided to allocate £33 million now and to earmark a further £11.9 million to meet pressures in the Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure on which we cannot currently take a final decision. I will return to that point later.

Details of the additional allocations are set out in the table attached to my statement. While I do not propose to explain every allocation in detail, I will indicate some of the more substantial or significant items.

For the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development and the Department of the Environment we will meet more of the costs associated with foot-and-mouth disease. We will also help the former to provide disabled access to Forestry Service premises.

The Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure will also receive support to provide disabled access to premises, to meet urgent health and safety requirements in the Public Record Office of Northern Ireland and to meet costs associated with the Golden Jubilee celebrations. That Department also faces some fundamental funding problems, which I will too.

In the Department of Education, provision has been made for special schools and to help ensure that meeting the commitment to deliver Classroom 2000 does not impede the drive to improve standards and raise attainment levels.

Additional allocations have been agreed for the Department for Employment and Learning to meet pay increases which were higher than planned and to support those with disabilities on Disability Advisory Service programmes.

Substantial provision is also being made to meet contractual commitments for Worktrack and to respond to the unexpected demand for individual learning accounts (ILAs). The suspension of ILAs was announced by Dr Farren on 26 October because of concerns about aggressive mis-selling by providers, and new accounts cannot therefore be opened. However, the Department for Employment and Learning still requires additional money to meet existing commitments.

For the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment we have agreed that a substantial part of the inescapable costs so far incurred in the creation of Invest Northern Ireland should be met from easements identified in other areas in the Department.

In the Department of Finance and Personnel additional funding has been provided to cover the costs of completing the census.

Health Service costs are again a major feature of the monitoring round. Some £8 million was allocated to the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to address some new costs that are associated with further pay pressures that arose from contractual, legal and regrading issues and increases in the drugs bill. The Department of Finance and Personnel is providing funding to address the immediate and increasing demands for dialysis and to reduce the waiting lists for cardiac surgery.

Funding is also being provided to replace medical equipment in the Royal Group of Hospitals' cardiac surgery unit and to provide two linear accelerators for Belvoir Park Hospital. That will replace equipment that is past its normal life expectancy and reduce waiting lists and waiting time for people who require cancer treatment.

As I indicated earlier, additional capital receipts from the Housing Executive from favourable conditions for house sales were a major source of the savings that have been redistributed in the monitoring round. That has led to reduced rental income for the Housing Executive, and the Department of Finance and Personnel is providing the Department for Social Development with funds to make up for that. It is also meeting the costs of some public liability claims.

The Department of Finance and Personnel is allocating funds to the Office of the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister to cover the cost of foot-and-mouth-disease advertising and to meet the commitments of the North/South Ministerial Council.

As I indicated earlier, there are two further bids from the Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure to cover the costs of library services. They must be given serious consideration in the coming months. In agreeing the draft Budget for 2002-03, the Executive recognised the serious consequences that would arise if the Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure had to absorb the pressure from an ongoing job evaluation of library staff along with other pressures. The Executive agreed that it would be untenable to expect the Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure to meet the cost of implementing the results of the evaluation exercise. A consultancy study on the job evaluation was carried out to ensure that the proposed allocation of such a large sum was fully justifiable. However, it is likely that the bid will have to be met, and the final position will be clarified as soon as possible.

The Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure also faces growing difficulty as a result of inherited deficits in museums. The sum of £1 million was included in the draft Budget proposals to address that problem in 2002-03. However, the Executive understand that further resources are required to make good the deficit up to 31 March 2002. Therefore they have agreed that resources

should be set aside to cover that pressure, subject to further analysis by the Department.

The Executive have concluded that while some important issues of principle must be addressed, it is likely that we will have to meet pay arrears of £10 million for librarians and a £1.9 million deficit in the main museums. Thus, the Executive have agreed that it would be prudent to set aside £11.9 million now so that if we are satisfied on the outstanding issues, the allocations can be confirmed quickly. The outworkings of the outstanding matters will be confirmed in the December monitoring round statement, if not before.

In a similar vein, the Department for Regional Development has highlighted several difficult pressures, particularly with public transport. However, the Executive concluded that consideration of those pressures should be deferred until the December monitoring round.

It is important to reflect on the approach that we should take in future monitoring rounds. In recent times we have been extremely fortunate because considerable sums were available for reallocation through monitoring.

Indeed, this has been unprecedented when viewed against historical patterns, though we should not underestimate the effect of not having to cover security costs, which consumed substantial amounts of in-year room to manoeuvre in the years before devolution. We have, perhaps unknowingly, been enjoying the benefits of a significant peace dividend since the introduction of devolved government. The room to manoeuvre has been welcome, but the pattern cannot be expected to continue. The situation has created the expectation that we will always be able to meet a substantial amount of any emerging pressures. There is evidence that, as a result, there is a growing dependency on monitoring that we will not be able to sustain. The Executive have acted to promote more strategic forward planning by taking some in-year room to manoeuvre into the Budget planning. This means that we can use the spending power in that context when the full range of planning issues is being addressed together. This should produce a better outcome than could be achieved in the more limited context of monitoring. We will continue to apply this approach with prudence.

12.30 pm

In addition, we have agreed that we must concentrate on addressing pressures through effective management and reprioritisation of our activities. In future Budgets and monitoring rounds, we may have to deal with unexpected increases in costs by reducing previously announced allocations. That means retaining real flexibility for the Executive and focusing more on delivering the outputs and outcomes that are being sought from public services, from existing allocations.

Inevitably, we must face up to the hard choices that lie ahead and take the tough and unavoidable decisions that confront us — that is the very essence of government. The Executive will not shirk this responsibility, and, by taking the necessary decisions, we remain determined to make a difference to the way our public services perform. As Minister of Finance and Personnel, I am for public services and wish to see improvement and development for the good of all those who need and depend on these services. I commend the reallocations to the Assembly.

The Chairperson of the Committee for Employment and Learning (Dr Birnie): The Department for Employment and Learning was a substantial net contributor to this monitoring round to the tune of £12 million, and that was recognised in the Minister's statement. This does not concern me per se, but the Committee is concerned by some of the reasons that have come to light for easements in the area of the Department for Employment and Learning, particularly the New Deal easement. Some of that was engendered by the decline in unemployment, which is welcome. However, does the Minister agree that £4 million of the reduction in spending on New Deal arose from a bottleneck in the delivery system in the relevant Departments, particularly with staff vacancies in jobcentres and weaknesses in the Social Security Agency system for identifying New Deal clients?

Mr Durkan: The Chairperson of the Committee for Employment and Learning is right to identify the Department as a significant yielder of easements in this monitoring round. There will not be the spend on some programmes that was anticipated. In the case of the Jobskills programme, that is due to reduced training costs, and the situation with New Deal is due to the later implementation of some programmes and the bottleneck issues the Member referred to. The Department is working on all of those issues, and the Executive recognise the importance of these programmes, not least because of the more questionable economic climate that we now face.

Mrs Courtney: I welcome the Minister's statement and congratulate him on his final monitoring round as Minister of Finance and Personnel. Does he agree that given the needs of our society as evidenced by the list of unmet bids, and the demands of health and education, we must find innovative ways to finance our public services? That is not only desirable, but essential.

Mr Durkan: I agree with the Member that there is pressure on our resources from commendable and attractive bids that we simply cannot meet. That shows that we need more money. We must try to obtain more money from the Treasury or else we must use available means to raise resources ourselves. We must also get more out of the money that we have. That means that

we must have more effective procurement, not to save money, but to release to services money that would otherwise be spent on transactions.

We want to target our spending better to ensure that that money goes further to meet real need and to deliver bigger and better outcomes. We must also see what more can be done to supplement the public expenditure spending capacity with the spending capacity that the private sector can bring through public-private partnerships. Again, we do not wish to substitute public expenditure, but to supplement it and add to the investment that we undertake and sponsor in the public interest.

Mr J Kelly: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle.

I welcome the Minister's allocation of £14.3 million to the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety. A figure of £2.5 million has been allocated for the bill for drugs; £5.5 million for junior doctors, midwives and the Working Time Directive; and £1 million for the Fire Service. That leaves £5.3 million to address the serious shortcomings in the Health Service. Given the winter pressures that the Health Service faces, the existing waiting lists for beds and the room to manoeuvre within the Budget, can the Minister re-address the shortfall in the Health Service?

Mr Durkan: I accept the Member's observations about the distribution of the £14.3 million allocated to the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety. We must meet those real issues and pressures. The allocations for the drugs bill, junior doctors, midwives and the Working Time Directive are important in their own right. I accept that that money will not go directly to new services or to meet many of the service pressures that directly affect people. However, it will help meet some of the Department's important cost pressures. If we did not make those allocations other services would suffer; therefore those pressures must be met. Nonetheless, we have been able to put some money into service improvements. I accept that the Member would like the amount to be greater.

Our approach has been to re-allocate moneys from this year's Budget to next year's Budget. However, we must remember that we are attempting to secure a £48 million carry-over in order to improve the Executive's scope in next year's Budget. The Executive's tight position was reflected in the Executive position report. Our adoption of that approach has enabled us to increase the money for health and social services next year by £30 million, which is over and above the original indicative allocation for next year. The room to manoeuvre that allows us to carry over money into next year has enabled us to give further priority to the Health Service in next year's Budget.

Mr Poots: I welcome the additional £13.3 million allocation to the Health Service. However, does the Minister recognise the community's concern that,

despite the extra money that has been pumped into the Health Service, waiting lists are still growing? Has he asked the Health Service why those lists continue to grow, despite its additional income?

I listened to the Minister's comments on victims' issues, and I do not doubt his sincerity in that regard. Why was the bid by the Office of the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister for funding for victims' issues unsuccessful? If the Office of the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister was given the same criteria as other Departments, why was its bid not made on time?

Mr Durkan: The Executive are aware of the huge pressures faced by the Health Service and the difficulties in translating the investment and priority that we offer it into performance of a standard that the public has a right to expect. The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety has worked very hard to resolve that problem. The Executive are carrying out a needs and effectiveness evaluation, involving the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety, the Department of Finance and Personnel and the Economic Policy Unit to examine issues such as those mentioned by the Member.

In the September monitoring round there was no bid in respect of victims' issues, and that was indicated at last week's debate on the draft Budget. Perhaps the Member is confusing the allocations under the September monitoring round with the Executive programme funds, from which a bid for victims' funding was made.

Mr McCarthy: I welcome the extra funding for the Health Service, but it is not nearly enough. The average person would not understand why the Minister is holding back, in other words why he is not spending £11.9 million of taxpayers' money. Why is he not spending that now, when we all know that the Health Service is in dire straits and is getting worse?

I welcome the Minister's acknowledgement that priorities exist, and health is a top priority. However, is it not time to put that extra funding into health, when the public is crying out for reduced waiting times, cancer care, nurses, community care and many other services.

Mr Durkan: The £11.9 million is not simply being held over without good intentions for its use. In my statement I explained the Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure's serious historical underfunding. The Executive have agreed to meet that deficit so that the Department's work can progress. Therefore in all likelihood that money will be allocated to the Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure.

In the draft Budget statement I explained the attempts to carry forward money from this year's monitoring rounds and incorporate it into next year's Budget. That approach has enabled us to further prioritise health in next year's Budget.

12.45 pm

Members may recall the indicative allocations for next year that the Assembly published last year. We have now been able to add an additional £30 million to those allocations in next year's Budget. That increase surpasses what was already planned. The practice of carrying forward money is allowing us to invest more money in health.

Ms McWilliams: I too am concerned about holding back almost one third of the current allocation — over £11 million — first, for deficits in museums and, secondly, for something that we should have known about. It is a massive sum of money, and numerous questions will undoubtedly be asked about that.

Can the Minister clarify that the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety's budget was to meet in total the £3.8 million for replacement equipment at the Royal Victoria Hospital and Belvoir Park Hospital? It is unfortunate that the cardiac surgery unit's equipment was tied in with the cancer equipment at Belvoir Park Hospital. Having taken related evidence just last week, I am aware of the enormous anxiety of patients currently waiting to enter Belvoir Park Hospital. It is totally unacceptable. Will this bid now meet that cost in total? We must have answers to that. It is not good enough for us to ask those people to wait longer and longer for important information that could save their lives.

I am pleased to hear the Minister say that previously announced allocations may have to be seriously addressed. However, I am more concerned about the type of planning that is being undertaken. Will Committee members be in a position to prepare themselves for those announcements? If there are now to be cost reductions, is the Minister in any position to say where those might be?

Mr Durkan: How, precisely, the money will be used for Belvoir Park Hospital and the cardiac facilities at the Royal Victoria Hospital will be for the Minister and the Department to detail and proceed with, working closely with the Committee. I take fully the point that Monica McWilliams has made. I recently visited some friends in Belvoir Park Hospital, and I am aware of the issues there.

Many questions will be asked about some of the wider points. Many questions have already been asked about the Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure's allocation-in-waiting — the term "in-waiting" has been well used recently. If we do not meet this obligation it will have severe implications for that Department and many of its programmes. We must ask if it is absolutely inescapable, and all indications now seem to point to the fact that it is. While all the questions that have been implied will be valid, and, it is to be hoped, the answers to them will also be valid, the underlying

question is do we need — and it is right — to allocate money in this area? That is the question that the Executive had to answer.

In respect of the wider issue, we cannot assume that monitoring somehow makes this a "Good Ship Lollipop" — that a few extra sweets will always turn up. There is a danger of that; people are starting to assume that there will always be some "give" in monitoring. As some Departments and Members have reflected this morning, we must recognise that we need to look not only at the easements that are coming from elsewhere to meet the pressures we face, but that we will reach a point where we must curb back. We will have to restrain spending in other areas if we are to ease those pressures. We must reach a point where our work in monitoring rounds is more pressure-led than easement-led. As a result of these pressures and priorities we will determine what happens. I am not in a position to anticipate or speculate as to what programme areas that will apply to.

Mr J Wilson: I congratulate the Minister on his elevation to higher office over the weekend. If he is trying to wear too many hats, and needs some more, this side of the House could help him out. We might have one or two lying about that he could wear. I could supply one or two myself, because I am not wearing them at the moment.

My question has been touched upon already. It is proper to repeat it. Above all other matters that are referred to me, there is the matter of the Health Service. There is the question of the long waiting lists for pain clinics. There is the issue of psychiatric care and the issue of waiting lists in general — the list goes on and on. Another important issue — again it arises in my constituency — is the provision of clean water. I am concerned about the treatment of foul and polluted water that daily enters our freshwater systems. Is the Minister conscious of the need for increased investment in those two areas?

Mr Durkan: The Executive are aware of the compelling case that exists for expenditure in various areas. Mr Wilson has reflected the importance of Health Service issues to him and to his constituents. Other Members have also reflected that. Our approach aims to create more space for addressing those issues. That means, however, that we are unable to fully meet the attractive and worthy bids in other areas of expenditure.

I thank the Member for his kind remarks and compliments. The number of hats I am wearing will be reduced — I will be decommissioning at least one hat in the near future. I will do so on the basis of very profound advice that was given many years ago by a character in Derry called "Wabbits". He had a fondness for removing metal that did not belong to him — metal that was doing a perfectly good job where it was — and furnishing it to scrap merchants. One apocryphal

story about “Wabbits” was that he was accused of breaking into a bank and sawing off the cashier security grills and metal plates. After having spent so much time in the bank doing that, he was asked why he did not take the money that was in the drawers. “Wabbits” in reply gave the very good advice: “One man; one job”.

Ms Lewsley: Today is a very poignant occasion for many in the House, because it will probably be the last time that Mark Durkan will make a statement on monitoring rounds as Minister of Finance and Personnel. I thank him for his efforts as Minister of Finance and Personnel.

Today’s statement has been a very strong wake-up call for many people in relation to society’s needs. The bids have again outstripped the resources. Clearly there is a need — as the Minister outlined in his statement and in a reply to a Member — to ensure that all Departments scrutinise their expenditure plans to make sure that that money is going to direct core funding. Departments should not be depending on monitoring rounds to deliver on the real needs that exist.

Mr Durkan: I agree with Ms Lewsley’s point about the need to fundamentally re-examine departmental expenditure on an ongoing basis, rather than in a reactive way through emerging pressures in monitoring rounds. That is part of the thinking behind the needs and effectiveness evaluations that the Executive have commissioned and which will be considered early next year. The Member referred to an observation made by Monica McWilliams, and that is also valid.

Not only will the Departments have to re-examine their plans; this is an area in which the departmental Committees can make a significant contribution as well. In the past I have made the point that, when considering financial statements, a great deal of attention has been paid to bids and, in particular, to bids that have not been met. The more that Departments and Committees can focus on the quality, reality and priority of the plans for the expenditure as allocated, the better for us all.

Mr Hay: I welcome the Minister’s statement. I suppose that the allocation of extra money to any Department has to be welcomed. I am, however, disappointed that there is no allocation to the Department for Regional Development in this monitoring round. In his speech, the Minister made roads and the public transport system a priority; but he has told the House that the Department for Regional Development will have to wait until December for extra money. I encourage the Minister to put the Department for Regional Development at the top of his financial agenda when December comes.

I see that further money has been allocated for the completion of the census. Will the Minister tell us the cost of carrying out the census for Northern Ireland?

Mr Durkan: As I indicated in my statement, some of the bids by the Department for Regional Development for public transport will probably be more sensibly taken in December when a fuller picture will be available, rather than doing a bit now and a bit later. The House does not appreciate recurring bids of that nature.

In respect of roads, part of what we are doing in this monitoring round, in carrying money forward to next year, is helping to support the very significant priority allocation to roads in next year’s Budget. We are talking about a year-on-year overall increase of around 15% for the Department for Regional Development. Just as for health, the carry-over strategy that we are working on is helping to fund that priority.

Further work was required to complete the census. There were problems given the outbreak of foot-and-mouth disease that meant that there had to be tracking back to ensure coverage. That is why additional money was required.

Ms Gildernew: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. I welcome the Minister’s statement. However, I have a number of concerns. The Department for Social Development has surrendered more than £13 million in this round and has had less than £3 million returned to it. That is a grave matter, given that this Department is specifically responsible for dealing with the most marginalised and vulnerable members of society. I refer to those people who have to rely on benefits, who cannot avail of affordable social housing and who live in communities that have suffered 30 years of discrimination. Will the Minister explain to the House — *[Interruption]*.

Mr Speaker: Order. I am having difficulty hearing the Member.

Ms Gildernew: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. Will the Minister of Finance and Personnel explain to the House, given the continued absence of the Minister for Social Development from meetings of the Executive, how the Executive decide which bids to support? How do they reach their judgements on bids submitted for social development, given the huge disparity between revenue in and revenue out? Will the Minister of Finance and Personnel explain how the Executive can decide that it is more important to provide £800,000 to the Department to cover unexpected losses in rental income than to provide money for warm homes, for kitchen and bathroom replacements and for tackling the increase in homelessness and the lack of community infrastructure? Even with 17.5% of homes in Fermanagh still unfit, nothing extra has been given to meet these sorts of needs. Go raibh maith agat.

1.00 pm

Mr Durkan: The Member has made a number of points. There were too many points for me to cover in

one answer, particularly if I am going to be fair to other Members who wish to ask questions.

The Department for Social Development has important responsibilities for a range of services which, as Ms Gildernew said, relate to the needs and circumstances of people in need in this community and more widely. Most social need is dealt with by the benefits system, which, while it falls within the remit of that Department, is not covered in the Executive's discretionary spend through the departmental expenditure limit but instead through the social security budget, which is part of annually managed expenditure.

Additional money above the amount expected came through from house sales. It is not that money has come in through house sales, but that it is more money than was anticipated. It is right that such receipts, wherever they emerge, should come to the Executive for consideration and not fall to the Department where they arise. Not all Departments are in a position to generate or receive such receipts, not least the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety.

Members ask us to show due priority and not adopt an approach that allows Departments — as Seamus Close said — to receive money which is then locked up in that Department, rather than made available for wider priorities. That is exactly why the Executive are adopting this approach. The Executive take decisions on the bids and pressures set against the priorities that they have agreed for themselves and that have been endorsed by the Assembly through the Programme for Government. The Department of Finance and Personnel and the Economic Policy Unit, based on work with Departments, prepare recommendations on the bids that the Executive should do most to meet. The Executive then take decisions based on those recommendations and other reflections.

The Chairperson of the Committee for Education (Mr Kennedy): I welcome the additional money allocated to the Department of Education to assist the two inescapable bids concerning special needs and Classroom 2000. However, while I note the Minister's recognition that Northern Ireland's schools face major problems, the Department's initial bid for £9.3 million to help to redress those difficulties in school budgets has not been met in whole or in part. That bid reflected the need to match the Chancellor of the Exchequer's allocations for schools in England. Will the Minister assure the House that schools in Northern Ireland will not be treated less favourably than those in England and Wales and that this matter will be rectified in the next monitoring round?

Mr Durkan: I accept the Member's welcome for the allocation, and I also accept that the Education Committee feels that more could be done in relation to school budget pressures. Members must remember the overall

context. I remind Mr Kennedy that the Executive are not in a position to meet all the bids that they would like to meet, and certainly not on the scale that they would like. The bid in question centres on helping schools to meet the pressures on their budgets that arise due to increases in non-teaching costs. I recognise the difficult budgeting situation of schools, but I equally recognise that there is a difficult budgeting situation for a number of other services, not least those that have been emphasised by other Members. However, at this point I cannot anticipate, or speculate on, what areas are likely to emerge in the December monitoring round, beyond those that the Executive have already agreed as areas for consideration.

Mr Dallat: I welcome the Minister's decision to adopt a more strategic approach and to prioritise spending in Departments. Does he agree that that approach is also a necessary prerequisite to ensuring that our representations to the Treasury on the Barnett formula are more credible and more likely to attract additional funds?

Mr Durkan: I accept Mr Dallat's point. Unless we can show that we manage our expenditure strategically and that more of our spending is planning-led, we will not be able to put together the sort of case that people want us to put to the Treasury. Our case for more money — or our case for more scope in the use of money — will not make much of an impression on the Treasury if we are not seen to adopt a hard-headed and whole-hearted approach to ensuring that our Budget plans meet the needs of the community.

Mr McElduff: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. I thank the Minister for his competent stewardship of his finance portfolio to date. I welcome his statement and commend him on his election as party leader at the weekend.

As an Irish Nationalist Member, I am concerned by paragraph 20 of the Minister's statement, which states that the Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure is receiving extra money to meet the costs associated with the Golden Jubilee celebrations. That is happening when money would be better spent on the Health Service.

How much money is being set aside for local celebrations of the fiftieth anniversary of the British Queen's coronation? The Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure is becoming very partisan. Public money has been spent on marking the bicentenary of the Act of Union. I want to give the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure and the Minister of Finance and Personnel early notice that 2003 will mark the bicentenary of the execution of Robert Emmet.

Mr Durkan: I thank the Member for his compliments. I knew that there was a "but" coming; there had to be.

That must be the longest time that Barry McElduff has gone without making a dig.

I want to put the matter into perspective. The Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure covers a range of activities, including events and programmes to mark various anniversaries. The Department supports numerous commemorative events, in different ways, and it is not the case that it has assisted only the Act of Union commemorations. The exact balance and spread of such programmes are for the Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure to decide.

Northern Ireland will be expected to participate in events and programmes that are being planned elsewhere — not just here — and various agencies and entities will want to participate in those events. There is pressure on the Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure to meet that demand, and the Executive have now done so.

Mr Leslie: The Minister's statement was full of gloomy tidings that the largesse — the largesse of the Durkan years — may be ending. What does he know that we do not?

The Minister stressed that we should expect the unexpected with regard to increases in costs and that we might have to reduce allocations, despite the fact that, hitherto, bids have tended to exceed the ability to spend the money allocated. That reflects overbidding or inaccurate budgeting — or a bit of both.

Mr Durkan makes trenchant remarks about the need for hard choices and tough and unavoidable decisions but then reminds us that someone else will have to make them. With that job description, I hope he will indeed be able to find a successor before too long.

Following Mr Durkan's elevation to the post of Deputy First Minister, does he expect that the Executive, in not shirking their responsibilities, will be able to reach consensual decisions on these tough and unavoidable hard choices that he assures us are coming up in the future?

Mr Durkan: The Executive can have a consensual approach in ensuring that our priorities are translated more firmly into Budget plans. It will not be easy if people approach budget-setting on the basis of assuming automatically that Departments will receive incremental increases on all existing budget lines. We will be entering a spending review next year and will have to examine not only our case to the Treasury but our own plans and patterns. The needs and effectiveness evaluation work is part of that review, which has been commissioned on behalf of the Executive. I hope that the Executive will be able to look at future plans in the light of the outcome of that evaluation work.

I hope that the Assembly and its departmental Committees will help the Executive and will also

challenge and press not only Departments but the Executive.

Mr Byrne: I welcome the Minister's statement and recognise the merit of having better matching of Budget spending plans against Departments' actual spending, so that fewer funds are being recycled out of monitoring rounds. However, money available for redistribution is always welcome, even though difficult choices have to be made about which bids should be considered.

Given that spending bids are always in excess of the public funds available, will the Minister advise what actions, if any, each Department is taking to generate extra resources? Finally, given that an extra £200,000 was allocated to the 2001 census exercise, and in view of the importance of the results in forward planning of public services — health, education and social housing in particular — when will they be published?

Mr Durkan: The indications always were that it would be 2003 before we would have the full range of information from the census. Partial information will be available before that.

As far as strategic priorities are concerned, we need to work together to make sure that they translate cogently into our budgetary arrangements. In the debate last week, I was encouraged by the focus on priorities. I hope that we are moving away from the bid-chasing approach to these issues. There is a growing recognition that we face hard choices and that an automatic assumption that all expenditure goes up should not be made. We need to have a more mature approach than the "Does my budget look big in this?" mentality that all Departments must receive increases just because another Department receives increases.

The needs and effectiveness evaluation follows through on the Programme for Government. Committees should be locked into work on public service agreements and service delivery agreements in relation to departmental operations and plans. That will help us to achieve what Joe Byrne has suggested. Similarly, when dealing with Executive programme funds, the Executive must ensure that decisions are less incidental and that they are compatible with the wholesale priorities that have been proclaimed in the Programme for Government.

1.15 pm

Mrs Nelis: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. I congratulate the Minister on his appointment as Deputy First Minister of the Assembly and leader of his party.

First, regarding the job evaluation of library staff, I believe that it is untenable that the Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure should have to meet the costs of the evaluation exercise. The Department should not have to pick up the tab for something that occurred

before devolution, which should have been paid for by the British Exchequer. Direct rule debt should not be a matter for the Assembly. It is a disgrace that the Assembly should have to pick up that tab when money is being siphoned off from an already declining pot. The Assembly is being held responsible for pre-devolution debt. What is its legal position in that respect? Members were informed that the Assembly would not address pre-devolution matters.

Secondly, given the surrender of significant sums from the Department for Employment and Learning — and the consequent reduction in student loan subsidies — to ease pressure on the Health Service, does the Minister agree that additional money should be directed towards alleviating student debt?

Finally, as one of the unknowing on the “Good Ship Lollipop”, may I ask the Minister to give details of the significance of the peace dividend since devolution?

Mr Durkan: I thank Mary Nelis for her compliments, though she moved more quickly into the “buts” than did Mr McElduff.

First, I want to address her question about the peace dividend. In monitoring rounds, the Executive deal with those services that fall to the devolved Departments. The Executive have a fixed block, so in monitoring rounds the exigencies of security costs and similar pressures do not eat into the money that allows us room to manoeuvre.

Under direct rule, incidental security costs arising from difficult circumstances had to be met from the monitoring rounds. Security matters are now in a separate block, and the Executive are able to make choices without feeling the draught of extra security costs. That is what is meant by the relative peace dividend.

Secondly, regarding the question asked about the Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure and the £10 million, those decisions and issues were dealt with by the Departments that are now devolved, albeit larger. It is not a decision that was imposed by the British Treasury or the Exchequer. Those were issues regarding services in Northern Ireland that had implications for future spending. It is as unrealistic to say that that is a liability stemming from a decision that was made before devolution as it is to say that we are not obliged to meet public spending commitments that were made before devolution.

That is a serious issue for the Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure. If the obligation is not met, some people may take the view that when the Department was set up, it was “set up”. The bid must be met or it will have an adverse effect on the Department’s work. The Executive are determined to ensure that the priorities that have been reflected and stated in the House are carried through.

Mr O'Neill: I welcome the Minister’s statement and congratulate him on another job well done. I am particularly pleased that £11.9 million has been earmarked to ease pressures within the Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure. Despite what we might hear from some Committee members, we welcome that. Does the Minister agree that the reduction of that money from the Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure’s budget would have such an impact that it would impinge directly on areas such as leisure and sport? My understanding of medicine and health, little as it is, is that prevention is better than cure and that every pound spent on activities such as sport benefits the health budget.

Although I appreciate that work must be done with that money, will the Minister assure us that he will provide as much assistance as possible to enable the Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure to resolve those issues quickly?

Mr Durkan: The Member has welcomed the pending allocation of money for the Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure that I announced this morning. That allocation is beneficial because it not only offers that Department the basis from which to meet an outstanding liability but it protects the scope of the rest of the Department’s budget. I hope that the Committee will be able to work with the Department to ensure that its plans, and the work that it undertakes in a variety of fields, will fulfil the ambitions of the Committee’s Chairperson.

Ms Hanna: Although I appreciate that there are diverse demands on the Budget, will the Minister assure us that resources for health are a priority? The Health Service is in crisis. I acknowledge that the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety must make her case to the Executive, but does the Minister of Finance and Personnel agree that the case might be strengthened by an audit of health services? An audit would indicate more clearly what the needs are and where there is duplication and poor management. I am acutely aware of the many health needs, but without an audit it is difficult to get a clear picture of the whole service. After an audit, the Minister would have a very clear case, which would have to be addressed.

Mr Durkan: The current work on evaluating health needs is aimed at ensuring that we see all the issues to do with need, management, efficiency and effectiveness being dealt with together — as they must be. The Executive, the House and the Health, Social Services and Public Safety Committee need to know more fully what should be done on a range of difficult and complicated issues that affect the Health Service in many ways. That is the approach we are taking. The Executive are undertaking these evaluations precisely because we attach such importance to health services

and because the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety is as determined as anyone on this issue. We hope to proceed early next year with the benefit of those evaluations.

Dr Hendron: I appreciate that the Minister is aware of the state of the Health Service in Northern Ireland, and other Members have spoken about it. Certain aspects of the Health Service are slowly disintegrating. However, I welcome the Minister's announcement of an extra £14.3 million for the service and in particular the £3.8 million to replace cardiac surgery equipment at the Royal Group of Hospitals and the two linear accelerators at Belvoir Park Hospital. We all understand the major problems there.

Many people in Northern Ireland have relatives waiting for the development of, or an announcement about, the proposed new cancer centre at Belfast City Hospital. Are there any plans to include initial funding for the regional cancer centre in future monitoring rounds?

Mr Durkan: Getting cancer services up to standard is a top priority for the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety. It is also a top priority for the Health Committee. That has been reflected in some of its recent deliberations. Work is urgently continuing to ensure that plans for the regional cancer centre are taken forward as quickly and competently as possible. The costs are not yet totally clear, but it will receive attention as soon as possible.

The issues involved are both immense and immensely important. In committing resources for future developments, the Executive must examine issues other than the monitoring rounds. Given everything that I have said about monitoring rounds and the health warning that I gave about them, I would not imply, for the sake of giving a positive response to Dr Hendron, that the question of cancer services will be answered through future monitoring rounds alone. The issue must be given a more strategic consideration. The Committee has put forward some ideas.

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

NORTH/SOUTH MINISTERIAL COUNCIL

Foyle, Carlingford and Irish Lights Commission

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development (Ms Rodgers): The sixth meeting of the North/South Ministerial Council (NSMC) for the Foyle, Carlingford and Irish Lights sector took place on Friday 26 October 2001 at the Great Northern Hotel in Bundoran. Following nomination by Sir Reg Empey and Mr Mallon, Mr Dermot Nesbitt and I represented Northern Ireland. Mr Frank Fahey, Minister for the Marine and Natural Resources, represented the Irish Government.

The meeting opened with updates from the vice-chairman of the board of the Foyle, Carlingford and Irish Lights Commission (FCILC), Lord Cooke of Islandreagh, and the chief executive of the Loughs Agency, Mr Derick Anderson.

Lord Cooke discussed the progress on the development of the Loughs Agency's marine tourism strategy. The board decided that the agency's role should be to facilitate and stimulate marine tourism through the development of recreation and leisure aspects of the fisheries of the catchments, rather than to provide direct funding. Research has shown that there is already adequate funding available for the development of marine tourism, from various sources, and it is not therefore necessary for the agency to provide additional funding. Work is progressing towards the delivery of that strategy.

Lord Cooke also updated the NSMC on progress made on filling posts on the agency's proposed advisory forum. The agency has appointed consultants, who are currently recruiting members to the forum with a view to ensuring that it is fully representative. That work is progressing well.

Mr Anderson informed the NSMC that the agency hopes to have its equality scheme approved by the Equality Commission shortly. In anticipation of approval being granted, the agency has commenced a period of public consultation on the screening of its existing policies. That process will end on 21 December and includes three days of open consultation in Belfast, Newry and the agency's Prehen headquarters. Mr Anderson further advised the NSMC that the agency's new targeting social need draft action plan is also currently undergoing a public consultation.

Mr Anderson also informed the NSMC of the agency's plans to review its entire staffing structure in the near future. That will be carried out by independent human resource consultants.

1.30 pm

The chief executive also provided the Council with details of the agency's day-to-day operations, including the positive contribution made by the introduction of the salmon carcass tagging scheme in the Foyle and Carlingford areas. There has been a huge reduction in illegal fishing, matched by a drop in the seizure of illegal equipment and in prosecutions. The Council received a presentation on the agency's work in monitoring shellfish in Lough Foyle and Carlingford Lough and the potential for future development of the resource. With good management, the loughs have the potential to support a vibrant shellfish industry, particularly in native and Pacific oysters and in mussels.

Following those updates the Council considered several papers. First, the Council approved the making of the Foyle Area and Carlingford Area (Licensing of Fishing Engines) Regulations 2001, which will come into operation on 1 January 2002. The Regulations provide for the introduction of a coarse angling licence in the Foyle and Carlingford areas. Prior to devolution, coarse angling licences were available only in the Carlingford area.

The Regulations also provide for the harmonisation of licence fees throughout the Foyle and Carlingford areas. That is required as a result of the introduction of the euro in the Merville and Lough areas. Previously, the cost of a licence has been that of the face value of the licence in the currency of the jurisdiction in which the purchase was made. Licences therefore cost less in the South in real terms because of the exchange rate between the currencies of the two jurisdictions. The regulations provide for the cost of a licence to be similar in both jurisdictions from 1 January 2002.

The Council also considered the agency's proposals for fitting out its interpretive centre. Expenditure of £370,000 was approved, which will be met from the agency's existing approved funding for 2001 and 2002. That expenditure will enable the agency to complete its interpretive centre using interactive audio-visual displays, and it will provide it with an important facility for educating people on the value of the fisheries resources of the Foyle and Carlingford areas.

A presentation was made to the Council on the agency's proposals to engage in a two-year genetic study of salmon populations of the Foyle system in association with the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development, the Queen's University of Belfast and the Marine Institute, Dublin. The study will provide the agency with the management information necessary to ensure the future sustainability of salmon stocks in the Foyle system.

The Council was also updated on the position regarding the making of legislation to enhance the functions of the Loughs Agency of FCILC in line with

the North/South Co-operation (Implementation Bodies) (Northern Ireland) Order 1999. Officials from my Department and the Department of the Marine and Natural Resources continue to work together to progress that legislation, and I hope to be in a position to introduce a Bill to the Assembly early next year, subject to parallel progress being made in the South.

Ministers were also updated on progress in transferring the functions of the Commissioners of Irish Lights to the FCILC. The Council learnt that a series of meetings had been held involving the Department of the Taoiseach, the Department of Foreign Affairs, the Office of the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister, the Department of the Marine and Natural Resources, the UK Department of Transport, Local Government and the Regions and the Foreign and Commonwealth Office to address the considerable legislative, corporate and financial complexities inherent in transferring the functions of the Commissioners of Irish Lights to the FCILC. The challenge for the parties concerned is to reconcile the legal responsibilities and traditional lines of accountability to the UK Secretary of State for Transport, Local Government and the Regions and the role envisaged for the North/South Ministerial Council under the North/South Co-operation (Implementation Bodies) Order 1999. Discussions at official level, with a view to resolving those issues, are ongoing among the parties concerned.

The Council discussed the difficulties arising from an aquaculture site in Carlingford Lough licensed by the Department of the Marine and Natural Resources. Mr Fahey agreed to pursue the matter with the Office of the Attorney General as a matter of priority.

The Council also agreed that better co-operation among all operators in Carlingford Lough should be encouraged through a CLAMS-style initiative. CLAMS is an acronym for co-ordinated local aquaculture management system. This is a system designed to develop an aquaculture management plan for a bay or a lough with the involvement of all interested parties. CLAMS is separate from licensing issues.

Finally, the Council agreed to meet again in February 2002, and it approved the issue of a joint communiqué, a copy of which has been placed in the Assembly Library.

I am making this statement on behalf of Mr Nesbitt and myself.

Lord Kilclooney: I thank the Minister for her statement and congratulate her on her election as deputy leader of the SDLP.

As the Minister will know, the Foyle Fisheries Commission was somewhat naughty and has not produced annual reports for three years. When will we get those overdue reports? Can the Minister assure us that the new Loughs Agency will not follow the same

bad practice and that we will receive its annual reports annually? I understand that the 2000 annual report is still outstanding; we are almost at the end of 2001.

My second question relates to fishing licences. As the Minister pointed out, there are two different currencies on the island — sterling and the punt. The punt is pegged to the euro, and the euro will replace the punt on 1 January. Why is it necessary to have new Regulations for the price of licences when the punt is already pegged to the euro? Can the Minister confirm that the price of licences in Northern Ireland will be in sterling, while in the Republic of Ireland it will be in euros? Does she acknowledge that the euro and the sterling price of licences will continue to float and change throughout the year, as did the prices in sterling and punts?

Ms Rodgers: I thank the Member for his congratulatory remarks and his questions. At its meeting in June the Council approved the Foyle, Carlingford and Irish Lights Commission's first annual report, which covered the period from its foundation in December 1999 to the end of December 2000. The Foyle, Carlingford and Irish Lights Commission is in the process of finalising its accounts for that period, and, following the completion of the audit of those accounts, the annual report and accounts will be published jointly. I look forward to the completion of the accounts as soon as the audit is carried out. I hope that, as the Member stated, the reports will be published annually. I have no reason to believe that that will not happen.

The decision to charge licence fees in punts and in euros was made to ensure harmonisation, so that licences would cost the same on both sides of the border.

Lord Kilclooney: How is that the case?

Ms Rodgers: The value of the punt is indexed to the euro. If, for example, a licence cost £1 sterling, and that was the equivalent of 60 euros, the price in euros would have to be increased to create an equal cost.

Mrs Courtney: I thank the Minister for her statement and congratulate her on being elevated to the post of deputy leader. What action has the Loughs Agency taken to counteract poaching in its area?

Ms Rodgers: With regard to the previous question, I would have thought that Lord Kilclooney would have been interested in harmony and harmonisation.

I thank Mrs Courtney for her remarks about my recent appointment and for her question. The Loughs Agency's predecessor, the Foyle Fisheries Commission, had an effective track record in dealing with poaching in the Foyle area, and the agency's commitment to tackling all illegal fishing activity in its areas continues.

So far this season, the agency has seized over 224 illegal nets, 24 boats and a number of salmon in the Foyle area. However, the agency's enforcement activities

were curtailed for a time, due to the foot-and-mouth disease outbreak, when there was a need to minimise the crossing of agricultural land by the agency's officers. The introduction of carcass tagging for salmon has had a major — and beneficial — impact on illegal fishing.

Mr Shannon: In her statement, the Minister referred to a significant drop in illegal fishing. How many people have been caught; how many court cases are pending; and when will the cases come to court? Will there be a restriction on the number of salmon that people are allowed to catch in the Foyle and Carlingford areas? How will the system work — will people be allowed to catch one salmon per day or one salmon per licence, for example?

Ms Rodgers: I do not have the details that the Member requested, but I can provide the figures in writing. In a sense, carcass tagging sets limits for the number of salmon that are caught, because everything must now be documented and accounted for.

Mr McHugh: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I congratulate the Minister on her rise to deputy leader of the SDLP at the weekend. I welcome the progress of the North/South Ministerial Council. The Minister said that her officials are continuing to process legislation. At present, people from all over Europe can come here and plunder native oyster and wild mussel along sections of Carlingford Lough. When will the enabling legislation be brought before the Assembly? Why is there such an inexcusable delay in the process? It will be nearly a year before legislation will be brought before the Assembly, and those areas will be at risk during that time.

Ms Rodgers: I thank Mr McHugh for his remarks about my appointment.

I understand his frustration at the delay with the legislation. Progress is being made with drafting, and I intend to introduce the Bill to the Assembly as soon as possible. I am disappointed by the delay, but it is due to two factors that are outside the control of my Department. My officials are fully committed to processing the Bill as soon as possible. However, progress here is subject to parallel progress being made in the South. Also, the people who draft the legislation were unavailable for some time, and this slowed the process.

Ms McWilliams: I would like to take this opportunity to congratulate Bríd Rodgers on her appointment to the deputy leadership of the SDLP. I am very pleased to see this for a number of reasons, and it is good to see a strong woman in the leadership of a party in Northern Ireland.

Will the Minister elaborate on the difficulty that had to be referred to the Attorney General, in relation to Carlingford Lough and the agriculture site? The Committee for Health, Social Services and Public Safety

recently passed a Statutory Rule on food poisoning and shellfish. We were greatly concerned by the enormous outbreak of gastro-enteritis and other severe illnesses caused by shellfish in Northern Ireland. Can the Minister reassure us that the situation is not related to Carlingford Lough? In other words, were the shellfish in Carlingford Lough and other places unaffected? The shellfish came from the waters of Northern Ireland, so it would be good to be given some reassurance.

1.45 pm

Ms Rodgers: I thank Ms McWilliams for her initial remarks.

The main problems with aquaculture licensing in Carlingford Lough relate to the resolution of a number of policy issues to the satisfaction of legal advisers in both jurisdictions and to the drawing up of a comprehensive plan for a regulatory regime by the Loughs Agency.

The problems that Ms McWilliams referred to relate to a dispute over fishing rights in a mid-section of Carlingford Lough. At the moment, Northern Ireland fishermen are denied the right to fish in that section. The Minister of the Marine and Natural Resources, Mr Fahey, has assured me that officials will examine the issue seriously and are having discussions to resolve the matter.

There was a restriction on shellfishing for a time because of the presence of a poisonous substance. I am pleased to say that that restriction has now been lifted. The Food Standards Agency made that decision and has given us the all-clear. I assure the Member that shellfish are continually monitored. However, health matters are dealt with by the Food Standards Agency and the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety.

Mr Dallat: The Minister will be aware that there are considerable opportunities to develop marine tourism on an all-Ireland basis. Can she tell me what progress the Loughs Agency has made on developing marine tourism in its areas?

Ms Rodgers: Work to develop the agency's marine tourism strategy is ongoing. The Foyle, Carlingford & Irish Lights Commission's board has decided that the agency's role should be to facilitate and stimulate marine tourism through the development of recreation and leisure aspects of the fisheries in the catchment areas rather than provide direct funding for tourism. Research has shown that adequate direct funding is already available for the development of marine tourism through various sources. The agency therefore intends to focus on areas such as promoting coarse angling opportunities and facilities to help marine tourism. It aims to ensure that stocks of fish, particularly unusual fish that attract

tourists, are replenished — in other words, providing the amenity to attract tourists.

Mr M Murphy: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Will the Minister state the criteria for shellfish licensing and harvesting in the Carlingford Lough area? What are the safeguards against illegal harvesting of shellfish in the Carlingford and Foyle areas that would hinder the future development of shellfish resources?

Ms Rodgers: The Carlingford area is regulated by two Departments under the Fisheries Act (Northern Ireland) 1966, and the criteria for shellfish licensing are the same for all operations. I cannot give any further details at this stage, but if I receive more details, I will pass them on to the Member.

The Deputy Chairperson of the Committee for Agriculture and Rural Development (Mr Savage): I too congratulate the Minister on her elevation to high office. I know she is very capable of holding such a position — we come from the same constituency.

I am glad that a study of the salmon population in the Foyle system is taking place. Over several years fish numbers have declined. Is that still the case for the salmon population in the Foyle, or is it increasing?

Ms Rodgers: I thank Mr Savage for his congratulations.

The study will provide management information, which is necessary to ensure the effective management of salmon in the Foyle area and to enable the continued sustainability of the stock. It is an important study, and I am happy to support it.

Mr Bradley: What proposals does the agency have to assist the promotion and development of coarse angling in the Carlingford Lough area?

Ms Rodgers: The agency has commenced a survey of the coarse fisheries in the Carlingford area, initially concentrating on the Newry Canal. Initial results indicate that there is a healthy population of pike. That work is ongoing. The agency has also made regulations for a coarse angling licence to become available in the area in January 2002.

Mr O'Neill: I welcome the investigation into the Foyle salmon stocks. Does the Minister agree that wild salmon stock levels in Northern Ireland are in a precarious state and that we need to gather as much information as possible? Since the Foyle is the premier salmon river in Northern Ireland, is she convinced that this study will give us a benchmark to use when deciding how best to manage other rivers and waterways in Northern Ireland?

Ms Rodgers: As far as I am aware, the overall stock levels are good. We have had some good years and

some bad years. However, the electronic counters are in place now, and the logbooks, particularly from the anglers, will provide another valuable source of information for the agency in order to help manage stocks. We will be able to use the study in the Foyle as a benchmark.

Mr Hussey: I congratulate Ms Rodgers on her elevation.

Following her excursion into West Tyrone, she will be well aware of the complexities of the area and how closely it is associated with the Foyle. With regard to the remarks about the qualities of the Foyle, we must remember that we are talking about the Foyle basin, which involves more rivers than the Foyle.

The statement refers to the progress in the development of the Loughs Agency's marine tourism strategy. What stage is that development at, and what other agencies are involved, both statutory and other? Research has shown that there is adequate funding available for the development of a marine tourism strategy. If that is the case, could it be placed in the Library for the information of Members?

Work is progressing toward the delivery of this strategy. The Minister will surely agree that this will involve more agencies than just the Foyle, Carlingford and Irish Lights Commission? I want to know how other agencies are being involved in the development of the overall strategy.

Ms Rodgers: I thank Mr Hussey for his initial remarks. A draft strategy is being prepared and will be cleared by the board. At this stage, therefore, I cannot comment on it in full. I will give a written answer to the Member when I have the information available to me.

As I have already said, as part of our discussions on the report that I am now presenting, the Foyle, Carlingford and Irish Lights Commission made it clear that it will be concentrating on providing the marine amenity. It will be making sure that the rivers are stocked with fish and that the fish stocks are sustainable. Other agencies and perhaps Departments will be involved. The strategy is being prepared and must be cleared by the board.

COMMITTEE BUSINESS

Change of Committee Membership

Motion made:

That Mr Roger Hutchinson and Mr Maurice Morrow should replace Mr Nigel Dodds MP and Mr Peter Robinson MP on the Committee for Finance and Personnel.— [Mr Paisley Jnr.]

Mr Deputy Speaker: Does anyone wish to speak?

Ms McWilliams: On a point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker. Have you changed the Order Paper? According to our Order Paper, that is the second motion on the change of Committee membership.

Mr Deputy Speaker: The Clerk has read the wrong motion. I am so sorry.

Motion made:

That Mr Gregory Campbell MP should replace Mr Roger Hutchinson on the Committee for Employment and Learning.— [Mr Paisley Jnr.]

Question put.

Ms McWilliams: Mr Deputy Speaker, may I point out to you that a number of Members want to speak on this motion. You may be aware of that, but I am concerned that you have not called any of them to speak.

Mr Paisley Jnr: Further to that point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker, as you have moved to a vote, can the business be concluded please?

Mr Deputy Speaker: I have no —. There is one Member who wishes to speak.

Ms McWilliams: I want to say at the outset that the debate in no way reflects upon Mr Roger Hutchinson. It is simply a point of procedure that we are concerned about here.

I chaired the group of smaller parties when allocations were being made to Committees. At that time a number of smaller parties chose not to be represented on them, including the parties led by Mr Cedric Wilson and Mr Bob McCartney. There were other smaller parties led by Denis Watson and David Ervine, the Alliance Party, now David Ford's party, and myself. It took us some considerable time to ensure that all those parties were represented on the Committees. We then put names forward, and Mr Roger Hutchinson was represented by me when I did that.

At that time he was an independent. We ensured that he got the seats on the Committees that he chose.

2.00 pm

We are concerned that the seats that were allocated then are now to be taken from the group known in this

Assembly as “the smaller parties”; that is, those parties outside the Executive. If this motion were to go through, then the group of smaller parties would have lost a seat, and our numbers would be reduced from 18 to 17. I have consulted with a number of smaller parties this morning, all of which have issues with this. I emphasise that this is not about Mr Roger Hutchinson; it is about the position. We want to put on record our concern that if this motion were to go through, the smaller parties, as a group, would be reduced. For that reason, we oppose the motion.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Three Members have indicated a wish to speak. I will call all three, and then ask Mr Paisley to wind up.

Mr A Maginness: I support Ms McWilliams in her opposition to this motion.

Normally, changes of membership on Committees are simply internal housekeeping arrangements for the parties involved. Unfortunately this is more complex. It does not involve any opposition to Mr Hutchinson or Mr Morrow. It is an issue of the proper representation of the smaller parties in the House. Therefore the SDLP will be opposing this motion. We do so on a without prejudice basis. In other words, although we are opposing this motion today, we are only opposing it only until the Business Committee can examine the issue of the representation of smaller parties in the House. Although we oppose this motion today, if it were to be relaid in two weeks’ time when the Business Committee has looked at the issue, it might well be that we would support it. However, for the time being we are opposing the motion.

We are concerned that smaller parties should have proper representation. The decision by Mr Roger Hutchinson to accept the DUP Whip has caused a change in the House, and that has to be addressed. It will also be helpful where there are other numerical changes in parties in the future. The issue today will help to resolve and clarify those issues in future. I refer to Standing Order 47(6), which says:

“The Business Committee shall review the representation of the different political parties as soon as may be following any numerical changes to party memberships in the Assembly.”

I hope that if this motion were to be defeated, the Business Committee would subsequently examine and review the representation of the different political parties. We are not opposed to this motion per se, or to its merits; we are opposed to it as a procedural device to have the whole issue of the smaller parties, and the change of representation, looked at in depth.

Mr McNamee: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Ba mhaith liom labhairt i gcoinne an rúin seo, cé go bhfuil leisce ar Shinn Féin sin a dhéanamh.

I speak against the motion on behalf of Sinn Féin, even though we are reluctant to speak against it. As Alban Maginness said, in the normal course of events such a motion would be merely a matter of a party’s internal procedure and arrangements. We do not wish to impede any party from nominating individuals to represent that party, according to the d’Hondt principles. However, as Ms McWilliams has pointed out, if the motion were to be accepted that would create an imbalance in the representation of smaller parties. That is not in line with the d’Hondt principles. The matter has arisen because of the party re-designation of an individual Member. For those reasons, we oppose the motion.

Mr Paisley Jnr: Members from other parties protest that their comments are not personal, but they are very personal. They are directed against Mr Roger Hutchinson because he changed his party Whip. That is very clear. I did not hear a substantive argument from any Members who spoke. What I did hear was their desire to hear themselves speak, rather than present any particular argument.

Mr Deputy Speaker, you called for a vote. I still wish to have your ruling on whether the vote was passed or not passed. You had gone into a voting situation, and only then did you allow a debate to commence. If ever there was a breach of Standing Orders, or a change in the running order of the House, it took place at that point. Mr Deputy Speaker, you should reflect on that.

Someone who shares the same views and holds the same position would replace Mr Roger Hutchinson. He would not be replaced by someone from a different party, or by someone who would express a different view. Mr Alban Maginness appeared to be speaking on the second motion, which indicates that he was rather confused. Mr Roger Hutchinson will be replacing another DUP Member. That should not cause Mr Maginness any concern whatsoever. Those positions on the Committee for Finance and Personnel are held by the DUP, as opposed to positions held by an independent Member of the House or by smaller parties.

In all other votes concerning membership of Committees, the House has been happy to allow parties to allocate their own Members to those Committees.

Mr A Maginness: Will the Member give way?

Mr Paisley Jnr: No, I will not give way.

We should continue to allow parties to allocate their own Members to Committees.

Mr Deputy Speaker: The suggestion was made that this might go to the Business Committee. Would you prefer that I put the Question?

Mr Paisley Jnr: You did put the Question, Mr Deputy Speaker, and a voice vote was taken. I cannot understand — *[Interruption]*. I am on my feet.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Let us hear what Mr Paisley Jnr has to say.

Mr Tierney: On a point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Please sit down. I will hear what Mr Paisley Jnr has to say.

Mr Paisley Jnr: Thank you, Mr Deputy Speaker. You had already called for a vote, and a voice vote had taken place. Hansard will show that you were in the middle of winding up a voting situation. We then moved straight into a debate. There may have been an oversight in allowing Members to speak in that debate, but the fact of the matter is that there was a vote in the House. To move to a debate after a vote has been taken, or after 75% of a vote has been taken, is something that should be reflected on. We are turning procedure on its head if we take a vote and then allow a debate to take place after that.

Mr Tierney: I thought that I was entitled to make a point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker.

Mr Deputy Speaker: You used the first point.

Mr Tierney: I used it twice.

Mr Deputy Speaker: I am in the Chair in this Chamber.

Mr Tierney: OK. We shall not argue over it. My point is that you accepted that the wrong motion was read out the first time, and there was no vote, because the wrong motion had been read out. That is why I asked to make a point of order. There was no vote because the wrong motion was read out. You accepted that; the correct motion was read out, and the debate was started. No vote took place.

Mr Deputy Speaker: So the House is prepared to wipe out all the activity of the past 20 minutes?

Question put and negatived.

ASSEMBLY

Finance and Personnel Committee

Resolved:

That Mr Roger Hutchinson and Mr Maurice Morrow should replace Mr Nigel Dodds MP and Mr Peter Robinson MP on the Committee for Finance and Personnel. — *[Mr Paisley Jnr.]*

ASSEMBLY

Regional Development Committee

Resolved:

That Mr Mark Robinson should replace Mr Jim Wells on the Committee for Regional Development. — *[Mr Paisley Jnr.]*

ASSEMBLY

Committee on Procedures

Resolved:

That Mr Maurice Morrow should replace Mr Nigel Dodds MP on the Committee on Procedures. — *[Mr Paisley Jnr.]*

The sitting was suspended at 2.13 pm.

On resuming (Mr Speaker in the Chair) —

2.30 pm

Oral Answers to Questions

FIRST MINISTER AND DEPUTY FIRST MINISTER

Mr Speaker: Question 4, in the name of Mrs E Bell, has been withdrawn and will receive a written answer. Question 5, in the name of Mr McGrady, has been transferred to the Department of the Environment and will receive a written answer.

Human Rights

1. **Mr Byrne** asked the Office of the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister what plans it has to consult with the Northern Ireland Human Rights Commission on the conformity of its policies to international human rights standards. (AQO 366/01)

The First Minister (Mr Trimble): In keeping with the commitment in the draft Programme for Government, a protocol between the 11 Departments of the Executive and the Northern Ireland Human Rights Commission (NIHRC) is being considered currently by the Departments. Such a protocol would set out arrangements under which Departments would obtain input from the commission on the compatibility of proposals with the European Convention on Human Rights and other relevant human rights standards, in the early stages of the development of policy and legislation.

Mr Byrne: Does the First Minister agree that NIHRC has an important role in Northern Ireland, given the situation here? Does he agree that the commission's recent review points to its lack of power and that it requires more? Does he accept that the Secretary of State should seriously consider granting NIHRC full investigative powers and the power to intervene in court proceedings if necessary?

The First Minister: I thank the Member for his question. My thanks are more heartfelt than usual, as we seem to be facing a boycott of our proceedings at present, judging by the empty Benches at the end of the Chamber. I hope that that is not the case.

The Member is correct: human rights are important. Human rights were an important part of the agreement, and, with the incorporation of the European Convention on Human Rights into the United Kingdom domestic law, human rights will play a significant role in society here. They also have a significant impact on how the Administration operate. We are anxious to ensure that

we keep strictly within the requirements of the European Convention on Human Rights and other relevant human rights standards, and that is why a section of the Office of the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister is dedicated specifically to it.

What powers NIHRC should have is a complex question, and it is not for us, but for the Secretary of State and others, to decide. I understand the desire to see an effective and powerful commission, but we must be cautious about the specific powers that are granted to it, particularly if it will be allowed to interfere with the operation of the legal process in any way. That matter must be approached with great sensitivity.

It is most important that, in the operation of the Administration — whether in the Office of the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister, or in the Departments — we do our best to ensure that we are acting wholly within the spirit of the Convention and other appropriate human rights standards. That is our intention.

Mr McNamee: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. The original question referred to the conformity of the policies of the Office of the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister in its consultation with the Human Rights Commission. The First Minister said that he was considering a protocol for consultation with the Human Rights Commission on issues of policy and legislation. What practice has been applied in consulting with the Human Rights Commission on matters of legislation to date? What is the existing procedure for consultation? In considering a protocol for consultation on legislation, does the Office of the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister consider that each piece of legislation will be referred to the Human Rights Commission for comment before its passage through the House, once that protocol is established?

Mr Speaker: Before I call the First Minister to respond, I remind the Member of the requirement of the Northern Ireland Act 1998 that all legislation that receives a First Stage in the Assembly is sent by the Speaker to the Northern Ireland Human Rights Commission. Under the terms of the Act, the commission is already consulted.

The First Minister: I thank the Member for the question and the Speaker for the answer. The Speaker made the important point that there is an existing procedure under the Northern Ireland Act 1998 whereby legislation is examined to see if it is in danger of infringing human rights standards.

As I said in reply to the previous question, I understand the desire to ensure that we are fully consistent with human rights standards, and we certainly intend to be so. At the same time, we must preserve the rights of the electorate, Assembly Members and Ministers in the Executive. Policy is a matter for the Executive and the Assembly. While we must ensure that, in framing

and carrying out our policies, human rights standards are observed, it would not be appropriate for us to subcontract policy-making to any commission. At the end of the day, responsibility must rest here or else there is not the appropriate accountability to the electorate.

The protocol that has been referred to would, if set in place, enable the NIHRC to give a suitable input on human rights standards, but we will decide on policy. People talk about getting a commission to vet a policy; that does not mean that a commission sits in judgement on a policy, but simply that it is asked to look at the human rights aspects of it.

Mr Davis: Do the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister share my concern that the Northern Ireland Human Rights Commission has no representatives from the Unionist community and is perceived as unbalanced and unrepresentative by the majority of the community in Northern Ireland?

The First Minister: I am aware of the perception, and I may even have contributed to it on different occasions. Appointments to the commission are made by the Secretary of State, who is under a clear legal obligation to ensure that it represents the community in Northern Ireland as a whole. The Secretary of State may soon make some appointments to the commission. I hope that, in doing so, he complies with his statutory obligations.

Disability Rights Task Force

2. **Ms Lewsley** asked the Office of the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister what steps have been taken to respond to the report of the Disability Rights Task Force 'From Exclusion to Inclusion'. (AQO 361/01)

The Deputy First Minister (Mr Durkan): The Executive issued their detailed response to the report's recommendations on 18 September. Over 1,000 copies of the response, entitled 'Improving Civil Rights for Disabled People', have been distributed to individuals and organisations for consultation. The document is available in a variety of accessible formats, including Braille, audio, disk and a version for people with learning difficulties. It is also available to download from our web site. The consultation period ends on 14 December. We are anxious to hear the views of the public, especially people with disabilities.

Ms Lewsley: I congratulate Mark Durkan on his elevation to the post of Deputy First Minister. I wish him and the First Minister well for the future.

What measures do the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister intend to take to improve protection against discrimination for those with HIV, cancer or blindness?

The Deputy First Minister: I thank the Member for her kind sentiments.

To answer the substantive question, the Disability Rights Task Force made recommendations on widening the definition of disability under the Disability Discrimination Act 1995. We are acting on those recommendations and are bringing forward proposals that will make a real difference to the lives of disabled people.

We propose to provide protection for people with HIV by recognising that they are disabled from the moment their condition is diagnosed. We intend that people with cancer should count as disabled under the 1995 Act when their conditions are likely to require substantial treatment.

Furthermore, we want to make it easier for blind people to have their condition properly recognised. We propose that registration with a health and social services trust, or certification with an ophthalmologist, will mean that they will be automatically covered by the Disability Discrimination Act 1995. We are currently consulting on these and other proposals.

Hate Crimes

3. **Mr A Maginness** asked the Office of the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister to make a statement on hate crimes. (AQO 360/01)

The First Minister: We deplore all racially motivated and sectarian attacks. They have no place in a civilised society. The responsibility for criminal justice, however, including criminal law and racially motivated and sectarian crime is a reserved matter. Junior Ministers Haughey and Nesbitt have had discussions with Northern Ireland Office Ministers on the scope for strengthening legislation in that area, and the Secretary of State recently announced his intention to consult on the way forward. We understand that proposals will be published in the near future.

Mr A Maginness: I thank the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister for their response, and I welcome the proposed consultation. I speak as a Member for North Belfast, an area in which we have witnessed the worst excesses of sectarianism and hatred in the community for quite some time. Frankly, there is an urgent need for strong hate crime legislation to deal effectively and practically with the mischief of hatred and sectarianism in our society. I look forward to the consultation. The need to deal with this problem as soon as possible should be emphasised by the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister.

The First Minister: I understand the Member's point, and he is quite right to refer to the circumstances in North Belfast and to the fairly widespread demonstrations there of sectarian hatred and bigotry over the last few months. Those resulted in the death last night of Glen Branagh, and one is shocked and saddened by the

senseless waste of yet another life. We hope that the situation can be brought under control before more lives are lost and more damage is done, not only to buildings and people but to the life of society there.

The question then is whether legislation along the lines mentioned is the appropriate way to deal with the situation. That may be so. It may be appropriate to give the courts greater powers with regard to sentencing in such cases. I suspect, however, that the most important thing is for people who have committed crimes to be made amenable and for the police to be supported. Legislation takes time, and the situation in North Belfast needs to be dealt with urgently and effectively.

Mr McHugh: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. What has been done by the Office of the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister to try to end the hate crimes that are being committed against the children of Holy Cross Primary School? What can be done to alleviate the adverse impact that those crimes will have on the educational well-being of those children?

The First Minister: We are very concerned about the impact on children who are prevented from, or have difficulty in, attending their schools. That is particularly a problem for the pupils of Holy Cross Primary School and, to a certain extent, those who attend Wheatfield Primary School. That was demonstrated this morning. All those children should be able to go to school without any intimidation, let or hindrance.

2.45 pm

We all find it appalling that people — whatever the circumstances may be — visit such harm on young children. The Member will be aware that the Minister of Education has made additional resources available to the schools in question.

The Secretary of State is responsible for issues such as public order and policing. We are responsible for other appropriate social and economic issues and, with that in mind, Sir Reg Empey and Séamus Mallon launched a joint initiative with the Northern Ireland Office in the summer. A senior liaison officer from the devolved side has been appointed and has met with people in the locality. We are anxious to do what we can to resolve the issue, and we have a particular responsibility for social, economic and community issues that we hope to discharge.

Mr McFarland: Does the First Minister agree that the media have an important role to play in their presentation of news affairs? Does he accept that the hype that the media adds to local tensions, when reporting interface disputes, is unhelpful to community relations and can lead to public performances of hatred in front of the camera?

The First Minister: It is a trite observation that the introduction of a television camera can affect and transform a situation. There is also the question of what

impact the images have on viewers and how they reproduce and amplify the outrage that is felt. However, I am sure that the news reporters and programme editors in Northern Ireland want to act responsibly in such a situation and want to ensure that their reports fairly represent the situation in a way that does not exacerbate the problem.

Mr Speaker: The House will know that in the normal course of events I allow only two supplementary questions. On this occasion, we are only half way through Question Time, and there is only one question left. As this matter is a subject of serious concern, I propose to take two further supplementary questions.

Mr B Hutchinson: Questions were asked about hate law; I am concerned about its implementation. The people who live in Glenbryn have hate for the people who travel up the road, and that must be recognised. Unfortunately Sinn Féin has refused to recognise the hate in that community. It also refused to recognise the disgraceful scenes involving Cliftonville fans during the minute's silence for Remembrance Sunday at Windsor Park on Saturday. It was surprising that Sinn Féin did not raise that issue. The Cliftonville football team and the management board have distanced themselves from the supporters' display of hatred.

The First Minister: I am not in a position to comment on the matters that the Member raised; I have not been briefed on the incidents to which he referred. It would not surprise me that in a situation such as this, there are a series of actions that interrelate; the actions of one party provoke reactions from others, resulting in a situation that spirals and develops. We must hope that measures and actions can be taken to help to de-escalate the sectarian tensions that clearly exist. In that context, I welcomed last week's scaling down of the protest by Glenbryn residents. It is a matter of regret that events happened at the weekend that enflamed the situation.

Mr McCarthy: I welcome the First Minister back to the Dispatch Box. I also welcome the new Deputy First Minister, Mr Durkan. Do the Ministers agree that the Executive, and all Members, should examine ways to educate the whole community so that it accepts a truly multicultural society, thereby eradicating hate in our community once and for all?

The First Minister: The sentiments expressed by the Member are admirable — and I am referring to the substance of his question, rather than his congratulations. These issues must be addressed, and the Administration have been addressing them over the years through initiatives such as the education for mutual understanding programme and the work of the community relations branch of the Office of the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister. This Department is directly responsible for the matter, and a review of community relations policy is under way.

The Office of the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister will do what it can to improve the situation, but the most important way in which change can be brought about is through the agreement, which provides a basis on which people can live and work together despite their different identities and aspirations. The Assembly is the most clearly visible representation of the agreement. The most significant achievement of the Assembly is that it contains representatives of nearly all the shades of opinion in society, and I am happy to say that those representatives are present in the Chamber. There are occasional moments when voices are raised and less edifying things occur. However, we can work together, and 99% of the time the Assembly functions smoothly. I hope that that shows people that we can work together as a society and leave behind the type of baggage that the Member spoke of.

Civic Forum

6. **Mr Fee** asked the Office of the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister to give an update on the work of the Civic Forum. (AQO 359/01)

The Deputy First Minister: The Civic Forum continues to operate and has met in plenary session on seven occasions at locations throughout Northern Ireland. The most recent plenary meeting was held on Saturday, 6 October, in the Whitla Hall at Queen's University. A number of subcommittees and project teams meet on a regular basis. In July, the Forum made a positive and constructive response to the Executive's position report on developing the Programme for Government and the Budget for 2002-03. The junior Ministers, Denis Haughey and Dermot Nesbitt, have written to the Civic Forum to seek its views on the draft Programme for Government and the Executive's Budget proposals.

The Forum is currently considering three consultation documents: the Department for Employment and Learning's consultation paper, 'Employability and Long-term Unemployment'; our own Department's paper on the review of community relations policy; and the draft bill of rights that was published recently by the Human Rights Commission. In addition to this work, the Forum has five other major projects at different stages of development. These projects are on lifelong learning, combating poverty, progress towards a pluralist society, entrepreneurship and creativity and the creation of a sustainable Northern Ireland.

Mr Fee: I congratulate the Minister on his election to this post and to the leadership of our party.

I will not put anyone in a difficult position, but we must realise that, as we speak, a terrible tragedy is unfolding in America. We do not know the extent of that, but I am sure that our hearts and prayers go out to people there.

How important are the Civic Forum and the role of all sections of our citizenry? Will the Minister confirm

that while recent political events have overshadowed the work of the Forum, we should be supporting it as it improves its profile? Perhaps information about its work should be published regularly.

The Deputy First Minister: The Member referred to news from America. We all have very limited information, but obviously the news is cruel, and our thoughts and prayers are with anyone who has been touched by this event.

We agree that more information about the work of the Civic Forum should be in the public domain to promote its worthwhile activities and encourage further work. The Forum has given this some attention and aims to raise the profile of its work. A recent initiative was the launch of the Forum's first newsletter, which contained updates of work carried out as well as plans for the future. About 4,500 copies were circulated, to MLAs and elected representatives among others. The Forum will issue further newsletters, initially every quarter.

The Forum also intends to improve the design and content of its Internet site to ensure that it provides better information about its work. A motion was passed in the House that allows Committees, as well as Ministers and the Executive at large, to look to the Forum for insight.

Mr McClarty: Do the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister agree that the work of the Civic Forum must be brought further into the public domain and that regular information updates would help to promote its activity?

Mr Durkan: We agree and have already noted some of the initiatives that the Forum has taken, such as publication of a newsletter, which it plans to revise and adapt. It is also important that work on its Internet site continues. Members, and particularly Committee members, should consider the facility that the Civic Forum provides. We should support its undertaking to explore issues and recognise the insight it can offer, given that several specific policy communities are represented on it who can bring their focus to bear on a range of issues.

Mr Speaker: That brings to an end questions to the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister.

The sitting was suspended at 2.57 pm.

On resuming —

3.00 pm

REGIONAL DEVELOPMENT

Major Road Schemes (Fermanagh)

1. **Mr Gallagher** asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail spending on major road schemes

in Fermanagh over the past five years and to outline his plans for the next five years. (AQO 362/01)

The Minister for Regional Development (Mr P Robinson): In the past five years, the Roads Service carried out a major road scheme in County Fermanagh which involved the realignment of six kilometres of road that spanned the border between Aghalane and Belturbet, and the construction of a new bridge. That was completed in 1999, and Northern Ireland's share of the cost was some £3 million.

The Department does not have a category that corresponds directly to the five-year period, about which the Member asks. The Department has a priority preparation pool and is compiling a 10-year forward planning schedule. In reviewing that schedule, the Department has written to all Members of the Assembly, to Members of Parliament and to our Members of the European Parliament, as well as to each district council. It has invited them to put forward schemes that they believe should be considered as part of that process. The closing date for replies is 30 November.

Mr Gallagher: The road to which the Minister refers — he can confirm this — is the A509. Does the Minister accept that, for many decades, that road was impassable, having been closed because of the British Government's security policy? The money for reopening and restoring such roads was a special package and did not come out of his Department's programme. It seems that Fermanagh was excluded from the normal large schemes in the past five years and has been excluded for the next five years.

There is a pressing need to improve access to County Fermanagh, not least because of the economic repercussions of poor access, and there are two forums in which that could be remedied most speedily — the Executive and the North/South Ministerial Council. Does the Minister accept that those opportunities should be maximised?

Mr Speaker: Order. The Member has an opportunity to ask a supplementary question, not to read out a dissertation on roads in Fermanagh.

Mr Gallagher: Does the Minister agree that the opportunities should be maximised, and will he attend those two forums?

Mr P Robinson: I do not accept the basic premise of the many questions that were asked. First, it is not only schemes in Fermanagh that affect Fermanagh. Other schemes, which are part of the overall schedule for the coming years, are on the periphery of Fermanagh, but will relieve greatly the problems faced by the people there. Also, the Member is not right to say that the schedule has been set, or to conclude that there are no schemes in Fermanagh. As I said, the Department has written to Members, and although the closing date is 30 November, it has not received any response from

the Member asking it to consider schemes in Fermanagh. The Department is inviting submissions from the Member and others so that in the future some smart-alec Minister cannot say that the Member did not respond within the given period.

As far as discrimination against Fermanagh is concerned, the Member will know that he has a duty not just to the people of Fermanagh, but to the people of Fermanagh and South Tyrone. When one takes the whole of that constituency, one will see that about one ninth of the capital programme in the past five years has gone into that constituency, which is one eighteenth of the constituencies in the Assembly.

Mr Morrow: The Minister has directed our thoughts to the constituency of Fermanagh and South Tyrone. As one who has an interest in both areas, I ask the Minister to indicate which major road schemes in Fermanagh and South Tyrone will be considered for inclusion in the 10-year forward planning schedule.

Mr P Robinson: I will not limit the consideration that the Department gives to the schemes it is presently looking at. If Members ask the Department to consider other schemes, it will look at those too. However, the Department is already considering the Enniskillen southern bypass and the second stage of the Cherry-mount link road in Fermanagh.

In addition, the Roads Service is considering several schemes to widen sections of the A4 Dungannon to Enniskillen route and the A5 Londonderry to Ballygawley route to provide three lanes with improved overtaking opportunities.

Mrs Carson: Does the Minister agree that Fermanagh's tourist industry could be better serviced by the continued upgrading of its road network?

Mr P Robinson: Many industries, including the tourist industry, would be greatly improved if more finance were available to improve the road network. I am grateful to the Members of the Assembly for highlighting the need for increased funds to the Department to improve roads across the Province.

Mr Speaker: Question 2, in the name of Mrs Eileen Bell, has been transferred to the Department of the Environment and will receive a written answer. Question 4, in the name of Mr Eddie McGrady, has been withdrawn. This leaves a limited number of questions to the Minister, so I will take a further supplementary on this question.

Mr McHugh: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. Schemes quite often have a tendency to fall considerably behind schedule. The Enniskillen bypass is presently seen as a road to Enniskillen or to the west of Fermanagh. Could it be given higher priority if it

were seen as a major transport link to areas such as Sligo, Donegal and Leitrim?

Mr P Robinson: The Department might have priorities, but the difficulty is in getting schemes to move quickly. For that reason I recommended, and the Department initiated, the process of the preparation pool during my previous period in office. Under the preparation pool, those statutory and preliminary processes can proceed so that a scheme can be lifted out quickly and get under way as soon as money becomes available.

The new procedures in the Department mean that it can respond quickly when it receives money. We are not proud in the Department. I do not really care what mechanism provides the Department with money for roads. I am happy to use the money to the advantage of the road network in Northern Ireland.

In the Department's consideration of the Enniskillen southern bypass, it is up to Members to put a case which the Department can consider fully when looking at the 10-year forward planning schedule.

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

Winter Storms (Kilkeel)

3. **Mr Bradley** asked the Minister for Regional Development what contingency plans are in place to address winter storms in the Kilkeel area.

(AQO 356/01)

Mr P Robinson: Contingency plans in my Department are under constant review. In the past year, the Department for Regional Development has completed major reviews covering both its responses to flooding and to ice and snow conditions. An inter-agency approach to flooding response has been agreed between the three agencies with a responsibility in that area. Those are my Department's Roads Service, Water Service and the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development.

A major part of that approach is the dissemination of information to the public about whom to call in the event of flooding. Adverts are being run today in the three major newspapers, and similar details have been included in the new issue of the British Telecom (BT) telephone directory and Yellow Pages. A leaflet giving emergency numbers, as well as some advice on what to do if premises are at risk or have been flooded, will be distributed to all homes and business premises in the near future.

The Member will recall my predecessor's statement to the Assembly on 3 July 2001 about the review of my Department's winter service operations following the heavy snowfalls of last winter. As a result of that review, a number of improvements have been agreed, including in particular the development of a snow-clearance plan for use in extreme snow conditions. When

Kilkeel was closed off for some time last winter, snowfalls were accompanied by high winds, resulting in fallen trees and electricity poles, and blocked roads. At that time a range of public services such as electricity supplies, social services and ambulance services were at risk.

It is now recognised that a co-ordinated response by service providers would produce faster results. In conjunction with the central emergency planning unit, the Department is working closely with other Government bodies, public service providers and district councils. They are reviewing the co-ordination of public service responses and the co-operation and assistance that might be available from those bodies during severe storms. It is anticipated that district councils may take a more active role in such co-ordination and in providing resources to assist in clearing routes.

There is still much work to be done, but networks have been established and co-operation is being encouraged by all. While snow- or flood-free roads can never be guaranteed, the measures recently agreed and under development should benefit all communities, including Kilkeel, in the event of further winter storms.

Mr Bradley: I welcome the Minister's reply, and I am sure that the people of the Kilkeel area will welcome it even more. As recognised by the Minister, the storms last year were more or less freak in nature. Is the Minister completely satisfied that freak storms will not cause a repeat of last year's problems in the Kilkeel area? I want complete assurance that even freak storms are allowed for at this stage.

Mr P Robinson: It is very difficult for anybody to anticipate what the weather might do. I take responsibility for many things, but especially in Northern Ireland I would not like to take any responsibility for what the weather might throw at the Department. I am convinced, and can assure the Member, that the Department has recognised that under the extreme conditions faced by people in Kilkeel and elsewhere in the Province last winter, a more co-ordinated approach was needed. The steps that the Department has taken set a trend that I suspect will be followed by many others in other democracies.

For instance, one of the great difficulties faced last year was that snow-clearing operations are much more time consuming and, therefore, vehicle consuming than regular gritting for frost or ice. Twice the amount of grit is probably used, and it is also necessary to take out snow-ploughs.

3.15 pm

Under the new procedures, other vehicles that would not have been used in the past will be equipped with a "bucket", or whatever the blade on the front of the vehicle that sweeps the snow to the side is called. Also, the

drivers are doing practice runs. I hope that the Member will not question me too much on how they practise without snow. Nonetheless, this means that when the elements provide us with snow, the drivers will not only be equipped but will also know the procedures to adopt.

It is vital to get early information to the public about closed roads and any difficulties that they might face. The Department is better prepared in all those areas than it was before.

Mr Kennedy: I welcome the Minister's reply and congratulate him on the recommencement of his ministerial duties.

Has any work been done by his Department in reassessing the winter gritting schedules, particularly for minor rural roads in the Newry and Mourne area, which includes Kilkeel, but more especially in the Newry and Armagh constituency that I represent, which is part of the Newry and Mourne area?

Mr P Robinson: I thank the Member for his kind remarks. In relation to the question, I feel a sense of déjà vu. The issues have not changed too much during my absence. This is a conundrum that is not easily solved, nor is it likely that all Members will agree on it.

At present, the Department grits about 28% of the roads in Northern Ireland. That covers about 80% of the vehicles moving on our roads and costs about £5 million. To increase coverage from 80% to 90% would mean doubling that cost. If the Department were to extend it to the entire network, it would be somewhere in the region of £17 million to £20 million.

As far as safety is concerned, several projects would add more value to the safety of road users than spending the money in that way. About 1% of the accidents recorded by the RUC are on ungritted roads during times of frost and ice. The Department has slightly amended the gritting areas, but if it were to move away from the present 28% of the roads that are gritted, it would face resource difficulties. That would mean it would be taking away money from other areas where safety is more greatly prejudiced.

Mr McElduff: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Some areas are not covered by the winter gritting schedule. Keeping traffic on the move on the majority of rural roads in the North requires a joint approach with farmers. What is being done with farmers and farming unions to ensure that they can provide a back-up, where necessary, to clear rural roads of snow and ice?

Mr Deputy Speaker: I remind Members that supplementary questions should be relevant to the question. The Minister has responded on some occasions in general terms, not specifically to this geographical area. I am prepared to be lenient in this case if the Minister is happy to respond. I ask Members to bear that in mind.

Mr P Robinson: I did not understand the first part of the Member's question. I must assume that there was no question contained in it. The second part dealt with the roads network and gritting.

Every Member of the House will recognise that it is imperative for the Roads Service to reduce the dangers on our roads as far as possible. It has finite resources to do that.

The task for the Roads Service is to use those resources in the best possible way, not only to improve the network, but to ensure maximum safety on the roads. The Department feels that it has got its gritting schedule right. I recognise that people will be unhappy that certain roads are not contained in that schedule. However, the topographical criteria for gritting roads that take more than 1,000 and 1,500 vehicles per day, or if safety measures are involved, are objective. That may cause grievance to some Members, but roads are not chosen at random. I believe that the Department has got it right, but I am always ready to listen to any recommendations that Members may wish to make to the Department.

Horse Park, Lisburn (Traffic Impact Study)

5. **Ms Lewsley** asked the Minister for Regional Development if he will commission a traffic impact study on homes in Horse Park, Lisburn, following a planning application for a business in that area. (AQO 365/01)

Mr P Robinson: The Roads Service normally needs developers to carry out traffic impact assessments in support of planning applications for large-scale developments, such as businesses in excess of 5,000 square metres gross floor area or residential developments of more than 200 units. Those assessments are required to evaluate the traffic impact of the development proposals and to determine whether roads infrastructure improvements are necessary to support the developments.

In the case of the planning application to use redundant farm buildings at Horse Park, Lisburn, for storage, and as a small office for a tree and hedge maintenance business, the proposal did not meet the criteria to warrant the application to submit a traffic impact assessment. Therefore, I have no plans to ask that such an assessment be carried out.

Ms Lewsley: Will the Minister ask his Department to look into the matter further? The road that that business is using is barely wide enough to take two cars passing each other. I do not think that it can even take that. Young children live in the vicinity of that road, which is being used by heavy vehicles. When traffic is busy in the area, the road is being used as an alternative route. There has been a huge increase in the amount of traffic, and there is a question mark over the safety of the residents who live there.

Mr P Robinson: The Member is a trier, Mr Deputy Speaker. That might be described as a cheeky little number. She has managed to have a question about a Lisburn Borough Council planning application asked on the Floor of the House.

To the extent that my Department co-operates with the Planning Service in those matters, it is essential that the Department look at them using objective criteria. The objective criteria set out in relation to traffic impact assessments require us to have a threshold, which is set at 5,000 square metres floor area. My Department has a difficulty with the differential that there may be between the former and the existing use of premises. Although the Department could go out and make an assessment of the existing traffic use, it does not have any statistics with which to compare it to its former use. It cannot therefore provide the Planning Service with a proper comparison.

Mr Hussey: I join with Mr Kennedy in welcoming the Minister back to the Department for Regional Development. With your permission, Mr Deputy Speaker, I pay tribute to the Minister's predecessor, who was very competent and pleasant to work with.

Will the Minister confirm that the Department is working to a policy that will lean heavily on encouraging inducements proffered by developers for the financial aid of road and motorway transport systems designed to enhance particular development schemes?

Mr P Robinson: I thank the Member for his kind comments about my predecessor. I will ensure that they are passed on.

Given my background in local government, I believe that developers should contribute to the infrastructure that their development will use. That is a vital part of the planning process. However, not only should the developers who require new infrastructure contribute to it, so should the developers who use existing or new infrastructure. Those are matters of a wider policy importance that will be considered in part during the Assembly's discussions on the regional transportation strategy. I look forward to hearing the Member's contributions on the subject at that time.

Mr Deputy Speaker: That ends the questions to the Minister for Regional Development.

The sitting was suspended at 3.26 pm.

On resuming —

3.30 pm

THE ENVIRONMENT

Mr Deputy Speaker: I wish to inform Members that questions 1, 2, 7 and 9, in the name, respectively, of Mrs E Bell, Mr McGrady, Lord Kilclooney and Mr Ford, have been withdrawn and will receive written answers. Question 5, in the name of Mr Gallagher, has

been transferred to the Department for Regional Development and will receive a written answer.

Road Accidents

3. **Mr McHugh** asked the Minister of the Environment to detail the number of serious or fatal road accidents caused by the failure of motorists to use dipped headlights, over the past year. (AQO 358/01)

The Minister of the Environment (Mr Foster): The police are responsible for collecting road traffic collision statistics in Northern Ireland. The failure of drivers to use dipped headlights is not one of the 99 categories under which the police record the principal factors in road traffic collisions. Therefore it is not possible to say how many serious or fatal road traffic collisions were caused because a vehicle was less visible through the failure to use dipped headlights.

There are, of course, legal requirements for drivers to use dipped headlights when daytime visibility is seriously reduced. Generally, that applies to occasions on which a driver cannot see for more than 100 metres. Those requirements are set out in the 'Highway Code', along with other advice on the use of lights. With the darker days of winter upon us, I encourage all drivers and riders to familiarise themselves with those provisions. Drivers and riders should also ensure that they do not use any lights in a way that would dazzle or cause discomfort to other road users. I urge all drivers and riders to follow the valuable practical advice and guidance contained in the 'Highway Code' on driving in adverse weather conditions. Drivers, riders and pedestrians should take greater care on the roads, particularly during the winter.

Mr McHugh: Every week, I drive considerable distances at all times and in all weather. It is dreadful to see the number of vehicles out in bad conditions — fog or even driving snow — with no lights on. Can the failure to use dipped headlights in bad conditions be considered an indicator of the driving ability of a motorist? Perhaps, we need a carrot-and-stick method of making people use lights in the proper conditions.

Mr Foster: There are so many accidents and deaths on the roads, and the greatest care should always be taken. The use of headlights during daylight hours has been considered, and the Transport Research Laboratory in Great Britain has carried out research into the effectiveness of daytime lights on vehicles. That work indicated that daytime lights could be of benefit in certain weather conditions, but that, in clear weather, no obvious safety benefits were apparent. The important thing is that motorists should always make sure that they are seen by others.

The European Commission is considering the merits of using lights during daytime hours, including automatic

daytime running lamps. The UK is unable unilaterally to require the fitting of automatic daytime running lamps. As a vehicle construction requirement, that would have to be agreed by the member states of the European Union, so as not to create a barrier to trade.

There is some concern among UK road safety officials that any road casualty reductions arising from the use of dipped headlights during daylight hours could be offset by increased casualties among less conspicuous pedal cyclists and pedestrians. I take the Member's point: it is important for road users to be careful and to ensure, as I have emphasised, that, as well as being able to see, they can be seen.

Mr Dallat: The Minister will recall that he increased the number of road safety education officers from 11 to 18. When will he report on their work, so that the Assembly can be reassured that the money was well spent and will lead to a reduction in the number of serious or fatal road accidents?

Mr Foster: We are pleased to have additional road safety education officers. Their key objective is to improve the attitudes and behaviour of road users, particularly children and young people, to develop a new generation of more responsible drivers and pedestrians. The contribution of that work to the reduction of road casualties can be assessed over the long term only. Progress will be reflected in the casualty statistics that are reported during the regular monitoring being carried out as part of the Northern Ireland road safety plan, which is due to be published next year, after the recent round of consultation. The road safety education officers play a vital role, but it is too soon to assess their impact.

Local Government Reorganisation

4. **Mr McCarthy** asked the Minister of the Environment if he will give an update on his Department's plans to reorganise local government in Northern Ireland.

(AQO 370/01)

Mr Foster: The draft Programme for Government, presently out for consultation, includes a commitment by the Executive to launch a comprehensive review of public administration by spring 2002. The organisation of local government services will be considered in the context of that review, and there will be widespread consultation with the local government sector. It is important to understand that the review is likely to cover functions over and above those administered by local government at present, or which might potentially be transferred to local government. The Office of the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister will lead the review on behalf of the Executive.

Mr McCarthy: Does the Minister agree that the greater the delay in the Department's presentation of

concrete proposals the more uncertainty there will be? Does he further agree that that could lead to irrational decisions being taken by councils, which might suspect that they would not survive the reorganisation? Will the Minister consider adopting a Cabinet structure for local government and the introduction of directly elected mayors or chairs of council?

Mr Deputy Speaker: Mr McCarthy, you are straying from the subject of debate. Does the Minister care to answer?

Mr Foster: The Member is thinking further ahead than I am. I assure him that we have not yet considered the introduction of mayors and deputy mayors. As an ex-councillor I am familiar with the important decisions that district councils take in their forward planning and resource management. It is therefore no surprise that councillors should express their concerns about the uncertainty created by the review of public administration. I appreciate councils' difficulties in making progress on major investment projects — there is uncertainty.

The effect on human resources is also of serious concern, because uncertainty must create uneasiness throughout the local government workforce. Securing new recruits for local government is a real problem, and I sympathise with the councils in that regard. I have been probing the Executive to resolve that problem, and developments will be made shortly. It is necessary to give councils confidence, because they have provided a tremendous service during the many years of a democratic deficit.

Mr Shannon: Does the Minister have any draft proposals on the future responsibilities of local government? Will those proposals include planning, roads or water provision?

Mr Foster: Although many issues have been presented to me, Mr Shannon's question is premature, and it is too soon to make any major decisions.

Mrs Courtney: I listened to the Minister's comments carefully. The matters he mentioned were debated at length at the recent Society of Local Authority Chief Executives (SOLACE) conference, which involves all local authorities. Local councillors are concerned about the situation, and I agree that the continued uncertainty is having a detrimental effect on councillors and council officers. I ask the Minister to do everything that he can to speed up the process.

Mr Foster: I assure the Member that it is important to make progress so that the public can feel comfortable about the future. I addressed an evening session of the SOLACE conference last week. The society is putting together a package based on its views on the matter. We will consider carefully every submission that we

receive, but we want to complete the exercise as soon as possible.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Normally, I would not accept a further supplementary question. However, because there are few questions on the Order Paper, I shall, by leave of the House, allow Mr Ivan Davis to pose a question.

A Member: In other words, you are desperate, Mr Deputy Speaker.

Mr Davis: I have listened attentively to the Minister. How and when will he engage local government in the review of public administration?

Mr Foster: As I said, important decisions on the time-scale and modalities of the review of public administration have to be agreed by the Executive before I can determine plans for engaging local government in the review process. However, I have stated publicly that I propose to engage local government fully in that process at the earliest opportunity. Local government officials have considered the matter independently through SOLACE. I welcome the initiative, and I look forward to receiving SOLACE's report.

Local Government Funding Formula

6. **Mr Bradley** asked the Minister of the Environment how the proposed reduction in grants and the revision of the local government funding formula will relate in monetary and percentage terms to Newry and Mourne District Council. (AQO 357/01)

Mr Foster: The reduction to which the Member refers is included in the Executive's draft Budget, which was published for consultation on 25 September 2001 and debated by the Assembly on 5 November. Several Members expressed concern about that aspect of the draft Budget during the debate. I am sure that the Executive will carefully consider the matter. An approximate spread of the £2 million reduction in the previous indicative allocation of the resources element of the general Exchequer grant for 2002-03 has been determined. For Newry and Mourne District Council, that would represent a cut of approximately £236,000, or 8% less than the allocation for the current financial year.

The proposed new formula for distribution of this element of the grant has no implication for next year. Any new formula would require primary legislation and could not be operational before 1 April 2003.

Mr Bradley: Since I come from the Newry and Mourne constituency, I do not welcome fully the content of the Minister's response. What assurance can the Minister give that the policies and guidelines of TSN that have already been adopted have been considered fully in advance of reducing grant aid and in making changes to the local government funding formula?

Mr Foster: The Department is examining different formulae, and a new formula for the allocation of local government grants may be introduced next year. Total grant provision can be difficult to achieve.

The indicative allocation for 2002-03 is £47.2 million, with a derating element of £27.7 million and a resources element of £19.5 million. The allocation under the Executive's draft Budget is £45.2 million. The derating element will remain at £27.7 million, and the resources element will be £17.5 million. As a former councillor, I know that there is a big reduction of funding in my own council area and throughout the Province. Some 16 to 19 district councils will be affected detrimentally this year.

I cannot make any promises today, but I assure the Member that I will make further representations to the Executive to ask that changes be made to alleviate the difficult situation in which councils will find themselves as a result of the reduction in grant aid.

Planning Applications

8. **Ms Lewsley** asked the Minister of the Environment what time limits, if any, there are on the processing of a planning application for a business in a residential area and can that business operate without planning permission for an indefinite period. (AQO 364/01)

Mr Foster: There are no statutory time limits for the processing of a planning application. However, the legislation provides that my Department has two months in which to decide whether it should apply the article 31 procedure to an application.

If an application is to be accompanied by an environmental statement, the time limit for making an article 31 determination is extended to 16 weeks, starting from the date that the environmental statement is received.

For applications where the article 31 procedure is not applied, an application that is not determined within two months — or within a time agreed between the applicant and the Department — may be appealed with the Planning Appeals Commission on the grounds of non-determination. In such cases, where an environmental statement is required, an appeal on non-determination grounds can only be made after 16 weeks from the date of receipt of the environmental statement.

3.45 pm

Where my Department is aware of a business operating without planning permission, enforcement action can be taken against unauthorised development — provided that the action is taken within the statutory time limits. Therefore, in general terms, where the unauthorised development concerns a material change of use, enforcement action can be taken only where the change of use occurred on, or after, 26 August 1974.

Enforcement action against other unauthorised development — for example, the erection of a building — can only be taken within four years of the building having been substantially completed. Enforcement action may include seeking the voluntary correction of the breach by the developer.

Ultimately, my Department may issue an enforcement notice seeking to remedy the breach. As a last resort, the Department may consider issuing a stop notice, or it may serve an injunction that requires the operation to cease. Both actions can result in prosecution through the courts. I am currently consulting with the Committee for the Environment on certain policy proposals that would strengthen the Department's enforcement powers.

Alternatively, my Department may seek to regularise the development through encouraging the submission of a planning application, which would then receive full and substantive consideration.

Ms Lewsley: In January this year, a planning application was made in my constituency for a business to be operated from a residential area. No decision has been made on that as yet. In June, I asked the Department of the Environment to serve an enforcement notice on this business, but that has still not been done. Will the Minister tell us how many other outstanding planning applications concerning residential areas there are?

Mr Foster: I cannot tell the Member, off the top of my head, the number of outstanding applications that exist at present, but I will reply in writing.

With reference to the application that she mentioned, a reply was received from the developer's agents on 25 October 2000, which stated that an application would be lodged in the near future. A planning application was received on 15 January 2001. It was advertised in the local press on 1 February 2001, and neighbour notification was also carried out. No written objections were received at that time, and the application is still under consideration. The delay in bringing that case to a conclusion has resulted from a dispute over the levels of traffic using the site. Additional information regarding traffic levels was sought from the agent in May 2001, and it was not received until 27 July 2001. Further information about traffic levels was sent to the divisional planning office towards the end of October. The Department for Regional Development's Road Service advises my Department on such matters, and we are currently waiting for their final advice on the reason for the delay.

Mr S Wilson: Does the Minister not agree that the whole issue of planning is one that causes general concern? I cannot think of any Question Time where a Member from some party has not expressed concern at the frustration experienced by objectors, or by applicants, at the delay in dealing with planning applications. First, will the Minister tell us whether the planning

process and the process of dealing with an application has sped up or slowed down, on average, since the ending of direct rule?

Secondly, what plans are there to improve the performance of the Planning Service in dealing with planning applications, which is one of the chief impediments to promoting economic growth in Northern Ireland?

Mr Foster: I assure the Member that, as an ex-councillor, I am au fait with the trouble that people seem to have. I was then on the outside looking in, but now that I am poacher-turned-gamekeeper I realise that being on the inside is not particularly easy. We were under-resourced and under-financed in different ways. Some improvements have been made in that direction. Things are beginning to move, and the backlog has been considerably reduced. However, many planning applications issues are not black and white, as I am sure the Member is aware.

Different addressees must be contended with and different issues must be looked at. I assure the Member and the House that our planning department looks at those issues conscientiously, because the planning department's decisions must be objective and be able to stand up to future scrutiny, whether from the Public Accounts Committee or judicial review. We are not resting on our laurels.

I propose to strengthen my Department's enforcement powers via the forthcoming planning amendment Bill, which will include breach of condition notices to streamline the enforcement procedure for breaches of conditions attached to a planning permission. There are many issues with which to contend. As I have said, we are working on the planning amendment Bill. Other issues will be addressed, but I assure the Member that the Department is doing its best under difficult circumstances. Many issues flood into the Department that slow up, rather than encourage, the pace of the system.

Mr McClarty: Will the planning amendment Bill provide any new enforcement powers?

Mr Foster: As I said in answer to the previous question, I propose to strengthen the Department's enforcement powers in the planning amendment Bill. Those powers will include breach of condition notices to streamline the enforcement procedure for breaches of conditions attached to a planning permission.

I also propose to address penalties imposed by the courts and the need for the courts to have regard to the financial gain from any offence. I also propose to amend the law to enable the Department to apply directly to the High Court to serve an injunction, rather than through the Attorney-General, as is the present case. That would simplify and streamline the process of serving an injunction.

I assure the House that the Department wants to service the community — it does not want to inhibit, stultify or stifle development. My Department deals very well with the many parameters with which it must contend. I compliment my staff on their tremendous work.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Question 10 stands in the name of Mr Douglas. As he is not in the Chamber, we shall move on.

(Madam Deputy Speaker [Ms Morrice] in the Chair)

FIRST REPORT OF THE INQUIRY INTO HOUSING IN NORTHERN IRELAND

The Chairperson of the Committee for Social Development (Mr Cobain): I beg to move

That this Assembly takes note of the report prepared by the Committee for Social Development 'First Report of the Inquiry into Housing in Northern Ireland' (2/01R).

As Chairperson of the Committee for Social Development, I am pleased to bring the report to the Assembly's attention. Members will agree that to have somewhere decent to live is one of the most basic human rights in society. We must uphold and respect that right. As elected representatives, we cannot and should not simply pay lip service to it. We must ensure that there continues to be an adequate supply of social housing.

I shall begin by explaining why the Committee felt it necessary to conduct the inquiry. I shall then outline how the Committee went about its work, before turning to the main body of the report and its recommendations.

Members will know that the present and former Ministers for Social Development have long signalled their intentions to bring a housing Bill before the Assembly. Indeed, a housing Bill was in the legislative programme for the previous Assembly session of 2000-01, but it was not brought forward.

As far back as September 2000 the Committee for Social Development was told by the former Minister and his officials that the legislative proposals would be based on a comprehensive policy review which was carried out in 1996. The Committee was led to understand that the Minister would bring forward legislative provisions to cover such matters as travellers' sites, houses in multiple occupation, regulation of the private rented sector, appointments to the board of the Housing Executive, the private sector renewal grant scheme, rights of housing association tenants, qualifying shorthold tenancies, the sale of housing association land portfolio, housing association rents, the rights of Housing Executive tenants, homelessness, the house allocation scheme, antisocial behaviour, large-scale voluntary transfer, land acquisition for amenity purposes, emergency grants and the home insulation grant scheme.

No one could disagree that the list was impressive, but the Committee wondered if the Department was up to the challenge or if it had perhaps been a little too ambitious. With no sign of the Bill by January 2001, the Committee took the initiative and conducted an inquiry on the understanding that Members would get

a deeper insight into the complexities of housing issues and a broader understanding of the views of interested groups and that there would be a sound basis on which to carry out the Committee Stage of the Bill if and when it did arrive.

The Committee decided on a three-phase approach, concentrating on six main issues. Members agreed that private sector renewal, houses in multiple occupation, regulation of the private rented sector, large-scale voluntary transfer, the role of the Housing Executive and the right to buy for housing association tenants should form the basis of its first report. There will be two further reports on antisocial behaviour in public sector housing estates and homelessness.

The report before Members is a product of the combined efforts of the Committee, its special adviser Paddy Gray of the University of Ulster and the Committee staff, all of whom stuck to the task despite interruptions by the local and general elections and an enforced but very welcome summer break. Our sessions were conducted professionally but with a wry good humour and a sense that we were dealing with matters which affect people who rely on us as politicians to reach the best decisions to ensure that they can enjoy a decent, affordable and safe standard of housing.

However, that does not tell the whole story. For a long time housing has been an emotive and highly politicised issue in Northern Ireland. Everyone has a view on it. I want it put on record that the Committee was unanimous in its praise of the work of the Housing Executive since its establishment in 1971. The Housing Executive has been a dominant force in Northern Ireland over the last 30 years, and it is right that its achievements during that unstable period should be celebrated. However, it would be the first to recognise the need to consider change.

One question before the Committee was whether it is right to change for change's sake or because things have changed elsewhere. The Committee decided to make a comparative analysis with other regions as well as to examine what was happening here. We looked at the direction taken recently by housing in England, Wales, Scotland and the Republic of Ireland. We also consulted widely. Written submissions and oral evidence reinforced the need to learn from others without necessarily following in their footsteps. For that reason the Committee is grateful to everyone who took time to make submissions. Members found the comments received extremely helpful and felt it right to recognise the importance of that evidence by publishing it as part of the report.

Before I turn to our recommendations, I want to make it clear that the views expressed are those of the whole Committee and based on the premise that there should be local solutions to local problems.

4.00 pm

I also want to stress that the report does not pretend to offer definitive answers to the housing problems or the difficulties that we face. It is more about stimulating debate and offering potential ideas, some of which will need further investigation. For that reason, the Committee will pay a great deal of attention to reactions to the report. The views expressed will further inform and influence the Committee when it scrutinises the housing Bill.

It is right, at this stage, to say that the Committee is encouraged by the fact that the Minister for Social Development has decided that it would be unwise to proceed solely on the basis of a policy review that is more than five years old. His intention to consult on the proposed housing Bill before it is brought to the Assembly is welcome. I hope that, later in the debate, he will tell the House how he proposes to go about that task.

Section 1 of the report lists the Committee's four principal recommendations. The first relates to the renewal of private sector housing, which is dealt with in greater detail in section 4. Essentially, the Committee favours the introduction of a largely discretionary grant scheme to allow for finer targeting to help people who live in poor housing conditions. The Committee also lists further ideas that might merit consideration, and other Members may want to comment on them.

The second recommendation focuses on the regulation of the private rented sector and houses of multiple occupation. An estimated 30,000 people live in houses of multiple occupation in Northern Ireland. Most of those properties are associated with student use and are located in close proximity to the main centres of third-level education in Belfast, Londonderry, Portrush and Portstewart. They fulfil a vital role in the housing market by offering affordable, flexible accommodation. It is the Committee's view that that sector should be managed by the Northern Ireland Housing Executive and that a licensing scheme should be introduced and operated by it. The Committee favours a mandatory licensing scheme but accepts that a voluntary arrangement should proceed as soon as possible.

The Committee also welcomes the review of the Rent (Northern Ireland) Order 1978. Section 5 of the report includes further suggestions about how regulation of the private rented sector may operate in practice.

The Committee's third recommendation concerns the right of housing association tenants to buy their homes. It believes that the statutory right to buy should be extended to include housing association tenants. It is strongly in favour of a review of the scheme and welcomes the action already undertaken by the Housing Executive. Section 6 of the report highlights the importance of a fair scheme and discusses some ground rules that might apply.

The fourth and main recommendation addresses what many regard to be the biggest housing question facing Northern Ireland. I have already made reference to the future role of the Housing Executive and some of the functions that it may carry out. What does the future hold for it? A large-scale voluntary transfer, and some might say the disposal, of the public sector housing stock to an existing or newly registered social landlord would bring Northern Ireland into line with the rest of the United Kingdom. Is that what we need or want? The Minister for Social Development indicated that large-scale voluntary transfer, and by implication the future of the Housing Executive, is on the menu for the housing Bill. The Committee welcomes that.

Decisions must be taken about the role that the Housing Executive should have, but do we need to pursue a policy of large-scale voluntary transfer? The Committee thinks not. It is the Committee's view that there should be a single, strong, strategic housing authority which builds on the successes of the past 30 years, an authority that invested public money wisely and is held in high regard in Europe for its unprecedented achievements. It should be allowed to secure that investment so that it is not lost to Northern Ireland and especially to those who rely on social housing for the well-being of their families. It should be able to rely on future funding to cement the investment that was made in the past.

The Committee thinks that the forthcoming housing Bill must be clear about the future role of the Housing Executive. It must not be ignored, overlooked, or put on the long finger. The Bill represents the opportunity to plot a way forward for social housing provision for this and future generations.

Like any politician, I will not pass on the opportunity to stray from the issue at hand. I stray slightly, but the matter is relevant to the subject before us. Any homeowner knows about the value of regular maintenance and the need for regular investment. We do not need to be reminded that years of neglect and underinvestment in public transport have resulted in the need for a massive injection of public sector funding. It would be to our eternal shame, if we were to allow our social housing stock to go the same way. For that reason, I cannot lose the opportunity to remind Ministers from all parties that they must be clear about the continuing need for funding of our social housing stock. I commend the report to the Assembly and look forward to contributions from other Members.

Madam Deputy Speaker: Many Members wish to speak in the debate, so the time for presentations will be restricted to five minutes.

Mr O'Neill: The Chairperson of the Social Development Committee has clearly outlined the work that it undertook. Housing is one of those issues with a

dynamic of its own — it changes, and in some cases it changes rapidly. In order to manage the issue and provide the best-quality housing, procedures and policies must be reviewed constantly and changed. With that in mind, the Committee examined all the issues involved and gathered information from different areas of experience.

There was debate about the merits of mandatory, as opposed to discretionary, grants. Many people were fearful that, by opting for discretionary grants, the mandatory quality in the grants system would be lost and that discretionary grants might mean discretionary funding for grants. That caused the Committee concern, but there was a wealth of evidence as to the value of the Housing Executive being given the freedom to target the stubborn areas that have continually resisted reform in the housing market, such as rural housing and housing for the elderly and the disabled. Those areas must be targeted, and discretionary grants give the Executive more freedom and flexibility to do that. That kind of argument eventually swayed the Committee to unanimously support this dramatic change.

No one on the Committee had any doubt that allowing for the right to buy was the right thing to do. More than anything, the private market needs a regulatory system — a licensing system that will allow the Housing Executive to regulate directly. The Committee made that recommendation very clear. The Chairperson also referred to the Rent (Northern Ireland) Order 1978. That order has been around for a long time, and it has become difficult to operate. There is a real need to review that Order, and I am glad that the Committee unanimously supported that suggestion in the report. The right to buy was supported by everyone, and the Committee had no difficulty agreeing on that issue.

I reserve my last few comments for the biggest and most important issue of all — large-scale voluntary transfer. Since the housing review began five years ago, in 1996, there has been uncertainty about where certain roles in public and social housing would fall. The review recommended that the Housing Executive should become the strategic authority that would regulate all housing. That provision was included in the 1998 Bill, which Lord Dubs put on the shelf, pending deliberation in the Assembly. We still await that Bill.

That recommendation was put forward to allow housing associations to maximise their funding arrangements by bringing in private money to help subsidise the housing new build. However, that creates a problem. If the Housing Executive has no statutory power to operate as a strategic authority, how can the housing association issue be managed?

That matter can no longer be avoided. It is a major disappointment to myself and others that the proposed contents of the new Bill contain no reference to that

area. Once again it has been left aside. The Minister and the Department must grasp this nettle courageously and decide the future of the Housing Executive, its relationship with the housing associations and put it into a sensible strategic framework that we can work with to provide better housing for everyone. We can no longer dodge that issue. The longer we wait, the worse the situation will become.

Mr M Robinson: I would like to begin by welcoming this debate today, and I would also like to pay tribute to the staff of the Committee for Social Development for the many hours of work which went into producing this report. It is also important that we recognise the contribution that the Northern Ireland Housing Executive has made to housing since its establishment in 1971, particularly since this contribution was played out against a unique backdrop of 30 years of terrorism in Northern Ireland.

Housing policy must be relative to the people and to the locality in its targeting, and it must be responsive to local needs, aiming at all times to help those who are most in need. Good housing provided well is crucial and should be a fundamental objective. A good home is a basic human right, and no one in the twenty-first century should have to live in sub-standard housing. Unfortunately, this is a reality for many people. Statistics indicate that there are around 44,000 unfit properties in Northern Ireland, 14,000 properties without central heating and 10,000 in urgent need of major repairs and improvements. The main aim, therefore, when drafting housing policy should be to target those who are socially excluded and the most vulnerable in our society. This objective must not get lost in amongst pointless red tape and bureaucracy.

The Housing Executive must be aware that change needs to happen from within the organisation itself, and this is where the role of the Northern Ireland Housing Executive comes into question. There is a potential conflict of interest in that the Housing Executive plays the role of both provider and regulator, which is effectively a gamekeeper and poacher scenario. How can the Housing Executive remain objective and unbiased? This is an area which will require in-depth examination in order to bring about a resolution.

I would like to turn my attention to the right-to-buy scheme which has successfully supported homeownership in that it has provided the opportunity for thousands of families to enter the housing market and become homeowners who otherwise would not have had the resources to contemplate ever owning their own home. There is no doubt that the scheme has been highly successful, but it must not be allowed to spiral out of control. The Housing Executive must take into account that there will always be those who cannot afford to enter the housing market and therefore must seek to

strike a balance between the housing stock which it is intending to sell off and the building of social housing.

4.15 pm

In effect, the Housing Executive must ensure that it has examined the supply-and-demand chain. Current levels have indicated that there are less than 2,000 new social housing units being built by housing associations each year, whilst there is an annual loss of over 4,000 Housing Executive properties each year. It is therefore obvious that supply is falling short of demand, and urgent changes need to be made in order to accommodate the demand for social housing. The Housing Executive and the associations must have the ability to cope with rising housing need, and demand for social housing must never be found wanting.

I would like to conclude by stating that the future housing policy in Northern Ireland must be reflective of the particular features of the Northern Ireland housing scene and must be designed to consider the needs of the local population.

Mr McElduff: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Cuirim fáilte roimh an tuairisc. I note and welcome the report, and I agree with the Chairperson of the Committee for Social Development that the right to shelter, and to affordable, quality accommodation, is a basic, inalienable right. I would support the establishment of a constitutional right to proper housing for all. In the pyramid of needs — food, accommodation and heating — accommodation is central.

There is a need for a more focused housing strategy to deal with the many housing problems that afflict various communities throughout Ireland, North and South. I feel strongly about the lack of protection for the private rented sector. While private homeownership is the most common form of housing provision, a significant section of the population lives in private rented accommodation. More protection under the law must be offered to tenants in such circumstances — quality of accommodation, length of leases and rent increases.

As a rural-based Assembly Member, I am conscious of the need to address high levels of unfit rural housing, not least those homes in isolated rural areas that are not connected to public water mains. That is an important issue. In relation to waiting lists for Housing Executive homes, there should be targets in place to supply suitable accommodation within a maximum of two years, for 70% of applicants. I am also aware of the backlog of repairs that the Housing Executive is trying to address.

I support the development of the right-to-buy principle, and I join with other Members in acknowledging the continuing efforts by the Housing Executive to consult tenants on issues that affect them. In the western area,

the Omagh-based officials of the Housing Executive do great work in seeking the views of tenants and homeowners. Strides are being made towards greater tenant empowerment and involvement, and that can only be a positive measure to secure greater participation of residents in estate strategy and management.

I am also conscious of special needs groups, such as travellers, people with disabilities, refugees, asylum seekers, women at risk, the elderly, the homeless and students. They all need, and have a right to, suitably tailored housing provision. The notion of having a housing ombudsman to protect the rights of homeowners has also been mentioned. That would ensure, for example, that hidden costs of auctioneers' and solicitors' fees are monitored. The report is a significant piece of work that will contribute to the wider housing debate.

Mr McCarthy: I welcome the report because it gives the Assembly the opportunity to highlight many of the problems facing the people of Northern Ireland in relation to good-quality housing.

First, the report simply confirms what many of us already know: too much of our housing stock is still unfit. Throughout Northern Ireland 7·3% of houses are unfit, with Fermanagh, in particular, suffering badly. Fermanagh has an unfit rate of 17·5%, Cookstown has an unfit rate of 13%, and Down has an unfit rate of 10·6%. That is unacceptable.

It is no wonder that the report recommends that discretionary grant aid should be made available to ensure the promotion of high standards and that it should be targeted on an area basis.

Of course, the report does not comment on the unfitness of certain dwellings and neighbourhoods — unfitness brought on by sectarian graffiti, kerbstone painting, flying of paramilitary flags and the use of illegal and territorial symbols. Many people have to live with those trappings, and intimidation seems to be the norm. Complaints often bring on retaliatory action.

The Housing Executive, the Department for Social Development and the Assembly must do more to remove the blight that affects far too many homes and people. It is disappointing that the report makes no mention of that. I hope that that omission will not recur in the subsequent reports on antisocial behaviour and homelessness that the Chairman mentioned earlier.

The report highlights the poor provision of housing for students. There are 13,000 students in rented accommodation in Northern Ireland. However, under an anomaly in the law their residences are not considered to be houses in multiple occupancy, and they do not have the minimum protection currently provided under the law.

I am not alone in my concerns regarding the provision of stock for the rental sector. I fear that we are doing

more than selling off the family silver. Two hundred and fourteen housing association dwellings and 91,000 Housing Executive homes have been sold. While we all welcome the growth of homeownership, we must also recognise that not all members of society want, or are able, to buy.

Mr Kennedy: Are you against people owning their own homes?

Mr McCarthy: Not at all. Listen to what I am saying.

Madam Deputy Speaker: The Member should address the Chair.

Mr McCarthy: The man does not understand what has been said. Nearly 30% of dwellings are rented. The selling of stock to tenants has led to a decline in stock and in the standard of the housing held in stock, and we must ensure that no section of the population is discriminated against over Housing Executive sales.

There is still a need for social housing in almost every area for local people. Good, warm, affordable housing must be made available to those who need it. It is our responsibility to help those in our society who need it. We must help to facilitate that kind of housing and tackle homelessness. I am not yet convinced that the report goes far enough in recognising that need, but I am sure that it will start to tackle some of our housing problems sooner rather than later.

Sir John Gorman: It would appear from listening to Mr McCarthy that he does not realise that the key reason for the Housing Executive's existence is social housing. If we do not recognise that, or try to confuse the issue by making it sound as though the Housing Executive is related to middle- and upper-class people, then we completely misunderstand the situation — *[Interruption]*.

Madam Deputy Speaker: Order.

Sir John Gorman: The Housing Executive is celebrating its thirtieth anniversary. However, it is hard to celebrate when rain is coming through ceilings, or there is an outside toilet and no bath, or if one is homeless and on a waiting list, or an older person waiting for adaptations, or there is inadequate heating or none at all. Mr McCarthy should concentrate on those things.

Let me talk about what that brilliant thing, the housing association, has done for us. The Government, in their wisdom, took the responsibility for social housing away from the Housing Executive, possibly because they had to listen to speeches such as Mr McCarthy's. However, 1,500 houses were allocated.

Mr S Wilson: On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. I am sorry for interrupting the Member's train of thought. Is it in order for a Member to stand up and

make a contribution in the House and then, when the next Member gets up, to show him the error of his ways, to scuttle for the door? Should a Member not be required to stay for the next Member's speech?

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

Mr Neeson: On a further point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. Is it in order for an attack to be made on my Colleague who is now belatedly going to a council meeting?

Madam Deputy Speaker: These are not points of order.

Sir John Gorman: I hope that I will be getting a little credited time for that interlude.

The social side of housing is of key importance, and if we do not concentrate on that we will not fulfil our obligation. The Housing Executive has built 90,000 houses in the past 22 years. It was the first housing body in the United Kingdom to take the initiative to sell houses through the right-to-buy scheme, which has produced around £1,000 million for Northern Ireland, chiefly in housing.

However, a few years ago the Minister at the time decided not to bother with the Housing Executive, saying that it was only a local authority and that the funds from housing should be absorbed by Government and given back drip by drip to well-behaving local authorities. That was wrong for Northern Ireland. To repeat what I said earlier: 370 houses that should have been built last year by housing associations were not built, and that additional 370 must come from this year's budget. That will not be achieved.

I will suggest a couple of initiatives that might be comparable to the initiative that Northern Ireland took when the right-to-buy scheme came on the stocks at the beginning of the Thatcher reign. We must think laterally. For example, I want to talk about deteriorating housing conditions in the private sector. Although I have emphasised the need in the social sector, we must not forget that many in the private sector are not well off; many are far worse off than those in the social sector. They live in houses that they cannot afford to repair, and they wait a long time for rehabilitation schemes. However, building societies and banks are now making available, at reasonable rates, advances on the residual value of houses that go on the market, especially after someone has died. They are prepared to put money into putting those houses into good condition.

Many people in the private sector paid off their mortgages years ago, and many are unaware that they have an asset that can be used for repairing their houses and putting them into good shape. Building societies and banks offer this to people whose houses are quite valuable. However, I think that situation could be improved.

Madam Deputy Speaker: The Member's time is up.

Sir John Gorman: There was a lot of disturbance during my speech.

The Housing Executive goes in for housing action areas. It would be possible to encourage banks and building societies to sponsor them to enable people living in such areas to have better houses.

4.30 pm

Madam Deputy Speaker: The Member's time is up.

Mr Tierney: At the end of that there was a relationship between the Deputy Speakers. They went over the time.

I agree with the Chairperson's opening remarks in complimenting the role of the Northern Ireland Housing Executive.

The report outlines a number of points. It shows that we think that the Northern Ireland Housing Executive should be the major player. There have been problems with the delay of the housing Bill. There are rumours of what is likely to happen in housing, and morale in the Housing Executive is low. It believes that it is going to lose out and, because of that, staff will lose out. It is important to bring in the Bill as quickly as possible.

The Committee totally supports the right to buy. In all areas of the report we have made an argument for the right to buy, except for old-age pensioners. That caused a great deal of debate and a vote in the Committee. Votes are not normally taken in Committees. The Chairperson has already said that we get on well with one another, and we normally have an agreed solution at the end of the day. However, there was a vote on this occasion.

If we have a report that says that there is a right to buy in all areas, and we then discriminate against one particular sector, that will come back to haunt us in the form of human rights and equality problems. That should be considered. I believe that old-age pensioners should have the right to buy. At the time, I voted with Sammy Wilson. However, when the Committee agreed to put it forward as a recommendation, I voted with the Committee.

There are a number of areas in housing that we have not touched on yet, including homelessness and antisocial behaviour. That will be the subject of a separate report. People will be wondering why we did not deal with the homeless first, because to most people, that is one of the major problems in housing at the moment. We recognise that it is a major problem, and we recognise that it should be the subject of a report on its own, and we should be coming forward with recommendations to try to solve the problems of the homeless.

With most of these recommendations, if not all of them, we are aware that when the Minister for Social Development first occupied the post, he was totally in favour and put the case to the Department on most of these points.

The majority of reports that are brought forward have a problem with funding, and I compliment the Chairperson on making those remarks. It is a major problem in housing. We have gone down the pecking order. A number of years ago we were at the top of the list for funding, but now we are well down the list. Given the comments in the Assembly from other Departments, we may well slip again.

This may be classed as a political point, but it is sincere: given the arguments that the Minister has put to us in the past, the Social Development Committee feels that it is losing out because he is not attending Executive meetings and putting the case on its behalf. Will the Minister not reconsider his position and make the case that he is capable of making for proper funding for all that is recommended in the report?

I support the report and commend it to the Assembly.

Mr S Wilson: It is fortuitous that the housing Bill was delayed, as the delay gave the Committee the opportunity to consider some of the issues that we knew would be in the Bill and some that we were not so sure would be included. The Minister and the Department should look through the recommendations. It could be argued, after studying the four main recommendations in the report, that it is a fairly lightweight document. We looked at the four aspects of housing, and if the Minister and the Department examine the responses that we got, they will form a good idea of the matters that the Bill should deal with. I am not unhappy that the Bill has been delayed; that has given us an opportunity to ensure that there is a much more forceful input into what happens.

I am sorry that Mr McCarthy has left us. Perhaps Mr Neeson can tell us whether the Alliance Party believes that we should not give people the right to buy their houses. The right to buy has received widespread support. I am only sorry that some members of the Committee have not abided by one of our recommendations on the right to buy, namely that

“It is important, however, not to have differentials on how individuals are treated in the scheme and there should be one rule for all housing tenants”.

Having agreed that, several Committee members decided to treat old-age pensioners differently from everyone else. I will not name them; they can confess later if they wish.

It is good that the Minister is here to listen to the matters that have been raised. There was considerable debate on discretionary grants, and many of us still

have fears about their use. The Minister has already informed us that they will be included in the housing Bill. It is important, given the experiences elsewhere, that the Bill require the Housing Executive to monitor expenditure on discretionary grants. First, we must ensure that we do not have the underspend that happened in other parts of the United Kingdom when discretionary grants were introduced. Secondly, we must ensure that if discretionary grants are used to target an area or a problem, that discretion is effective in tackling the problem.

People should move to what the report calls “the recyclable use of grants” if having equity in their property enables them to do so. This is a grant that is given in the form of a loan so that when the property is sold on the grant can be repaid and used again to improve housing conditions. I am convinced that there is a need to tackle some of those problems in the middle of Belfast and in rural areas.

Student accommodation should be included under houses in multiple occupation. This is not the case in many other parts of the United Kingdom, and we have some of the worst student housing conditions. We must also have a clear definition of houses in multiple occupation, because that too has been a failing elsewhere.

The degree of regulation must be tight enough to improve standards to ensure that appropriate rents are paid for houses that are not up to the highest standard. However, we must not return to the over-regulation that killed the private rented sector and left tenants much worse off. That was not the intention of those who drafted the Bill.

Ms McWilliams: I am not a member of the Committee for Social Development, but I am pleased with the report. However, it has been difficult to read its two huge volumes so late in the day. I appeal to the Business Committee to ensure that literature and reports from Committees that are to be debated arrive in Members’ houses a little more than one day before the debate.

There are some excellent recommendations in the report, and I am pleased at the wide-ranging number of submissions that the Committee took time to consider. I represent South Belfast, and I agree with Sammy Wilson’s comments about houses in multiple occupation. South Belfast was a mixed community, but it is becoming predominantly a community of houses in multiple occupation, and matters pertaining to that probably take up most of my time. Families in particular in that mixed housing setting feel that there has been little interaction between the Department of the Environment and the Department for Social Development on decisions about planning, planning control and the spread of houses in multiple occupation. It appears that landlords decide that a property will be suitable for multiple occupation and develop it accordingly.

I am pleased with some of the recommendations in the report that take on board what has already happened in England. I am aware that the differences between a simple notification scheme and a scheme with special control provisions, depending on the area, are complicated. It is good that the housing Bill that Members have so long awaited will take on board what has happened in England and note where the gaps exist.

A submission from Paddy Hillyard, Paddy Gray and Ursula McAnulty points out some of the problems experienced with voluntary licensing schemes in Great Britain, and they argue that Members here should take some of those concerns on board. Ultimately, one must realise that some landlords are reluctant to participate in those schemes. I have called meetings of landlords in my area. It is always the better landlords who attend, and it will be those landlords who will be prepared to enter the voluntary licensing scheme. Questions will remain about those who refuse to do so. The Assembly must be vigilant when enacting any piece of legislation and attempt to make it as corporate and wide ranging as possible. I am pleased with the thorough work that has been carried out on houses in multiple occupation for the report.

It is important that the Housing Executive can be flexible about grants and whether they should be mandatory or discretionary. However, surely the question should be about their maximum effectiveness and whether they are reaching the remaining unfit houses. Points are constantly made about the numbers of unfit houses in rural areas. One of the concerns expressed to me by residents in a mixed community is about the number of grants that are given to private landlords to improve their properties and turn them into houses for multiple occupation. Many argue that during the summer their area turns into a building site because builders descend to renovate houses at exactly the same time. Consequently the neighbours get little peace. They can almost see a pattern in who receives grants and when they can move in and upgrade the properties. The private rented sector has grown.

Clearly there are issues about the standard of stock and management and whether some type of control over the housing benefits that are given to tenants to move into those properties can be maintained. Again, I am aware that sub-standard housing is allocated to people in receipt of housing benefit, and that creates other problems.

4.45pm

Mr Davis: As someone who has been involved in local government for almost 30 years, I have seen many changes, good and bad. However, the greatest change for good has taken place in the area of housing.

Before the Northern Ireland Housing Executive was set up, the housing situation was managed in a piecemeal fashion. Local authorities managed housing without

any central control, and there were allegations of unfairness, which blighted local government. The Housing Executive has, on the whole, been a success over the past three decades, and I concur with the Committee's positive statement about that. That does not mean that I will not criticise the Housing Executive in the future, if it falls below its own high standards.

The Committee for Social Development has put a great deal of hard work into a comprehensive report, which deals with four main issues. I note that the Committee believes that the grant system should be discretionary, rather than mandatory, to allow for finer targeting. Grants have played a significant part in raising the standard of private housing. The prevailing system is somewhat ad hoc. If there are sufficient funds, the system operates effectively; if there is a shortfall in funding, the grants will dry up.

As the Committee has correctly noted, there is still an unacceptable volume of unfit housing in Northern Ireland, in the public and private sectors. The private sector is diverse, and targeting is necessary. The purpose of the new system should not be to allow owner-occupiers to make a profit on their properties, but to ensure a necessary standard of fitness and provide comfortable living accommodation. We need a transparent, discretionary system. In the circumstances, the recommendations relating to the grants system are to be welcomed, and the system should be rationalised as soon as possible.

Multiple occupation in the private rented sector has always been a controversial issue. The image of the *Rachman* landlord may be fading, but there is still room for abuse. Multiple occupancy can arise for various reasons: students often share facilities; a transient population can move rapidly between properties; and there are those who have fallen on hard times. Whatever the case, it is necessary that basic standards be laid down and enforced. The Housing Executive, with its experience and expertise, should have appropriate responsibility for that area.

The right-to-buy system has been a success over the past 20 years. Many tenants have taken the opportunity to move into the private housing sector. Many have seen the purchase of their previous Housing Executive property as a first step on the housing ladder. Many others have found that remaining in their original home has suited them just as well. The recommendation to extend the right to buy to housing association tenants is logical. The importance of such associations is increasing, and I fear that we could have a two-speed system, if the Housing Executive could sell properties and the housing associations could not.

Strict criteria should be laid down to prevent profiteering. Tenants should not be restricted to buying only their rented properties. In all cases involving the

Housing Executive or the housing associations it should be ensured that the right to buy is for the benefit of the tenant and not a means for someone else to make a quick profit.

The final recommendation dealing with the transfer of property to social landlords raises interesting questions in a Northern Ireland context. In Great Britain there is a diversity of local authorities, while here there is only the Housing Executive.

I commenced by praising the Housing Executive, and it was pleasant to note that the Committee also has a high opinion of its capabilities. The more we can concentrate on the concerns of our constituents, the fabric of our society and its improvement, the greater will be the strength of the Assembly.

Mr Gallagher: I welcome the report, and I note that the Committee for Social Development has put a great deal of effort into it. On grants, the report poses the question as to whether we should continue with the mandatory grants system or move to the discretionary system. I am not sure which is the best way to go. I have listened to the contributions, and I understand that a detailed investigation has been carried out into discretionary systems for housing grants. There seems to be a body of opinion in favour of a discretionary system.

In the responses from district councils, I noted submissions from Fermanagh District Council and Cookstown District Council. Those two district councils represent rural communities, and they both favoured the retention of the mandatory system and pointed up what they believe to be shortcomings in the discretionary system. The point was made that a grant under the discretionary system is more vulnerable when budgetary pressures come into play. There were concerns about the long delays in processing that were experienced when the discretionary system was introduced in England. Such concerns are not surprising in Fermanagh, which has a higher incidence of housing unfitness in its rural areas than anywhere else in these islands. The present rate of housing unfitness is 17.5%, and three years ago it was 21%. We were told by the then Minister — the Member for Fermanagh and South Tyrone, Mr Morrow — that unfitness in that area was dropping at a faster rate than anywhere else. I have no reason to doubt that. The levels, however, are still far too high.

Whatever system we end up with, I am in favour of a system that directs the money towards those who are most in need. We await the outcome of the further deliberations on the best way to go.

The closing order issue affects the Fermanagh area particularly badly. Two out of every three closing orders issued by the Housing Executive across Northern Ireland are for buildings in County Fermanagh. There is a problem there, and some needy cases are being severely penalised. Some of the most deserving cases

are then deprived of grant aid under the replacement grant initiative. I ask the members of the Committee for Social Development to revisit the area of closing orders.

There is an interesting argument in relation to the human rights aspect, because closing orders are pretty much telling individuals that they do not have a right to live in their own homes any more.

Against that is the fundamental right of every individual to have a decent standard of living in their own home. Considered in detail, the matter may not be simple, but there are finely balanced judgements to be made. I urge that they be considered again, and I ask the Committee to seek a submission from the Human Rights Commission on the matter of closing orders. I have asked both Members who have held the post of Minister for Social Development to have the system of closing orders reviewed, and I hope that the current Minister is working on that.

Mr Shannon: I commend the Committee for the work that it has done. It has highlighted some salutary points for Members to consider, involving matters that each of us deal with every week as elected representatives. Members will have some knowledge of what the Committee is trying to do.

I commend the Northern Ireland Housing Executive for the admirable work that it does throughout the Province. It plays a constructive role, trying to chart a way forward for its tenants and for those who need social housing. Housing associations have taken on part of that role for the new build programme. The recommendation states that the Housing Executive should have overall responsibility for commissioning and carrying out research, drawing up district plans and regulating and scrutinising housing providers. The Housing Executive is the key organisation concerned with the provision of houses. It may not build, but it has the necessary knowledge and the necessary people. Meanwhile, housing associations are doing their best to adapt to their responsibilities for the new build programme.

I would like the Committee to take on board one issue that has not been addressed. In the Strangford constituency and Ards Borough Council area, housing associations are keen to build houses, but land is unavailable. When the housing associations seek to buy land, they find that private housing developers are able to gazump them. Housing associations are, therefore, unable to meet the demand for social housing. Given the content of recommendation 7.5 on page 20 of the report, I would like the Minister or the Chairperson of the Committee for Social Development to explain how that issue could be addressed. We need co-ordination between the Department for Regional Development, the Department of the Environment and the Department for Social Development. Without that

co-operation and mutual assistance, the way forward will be difficult to find.

The recommendation about the right-to-buy scheme is welcome, and it is important that those who wish to buy a house should have that opportunity. I do not accept that every tenant who buys a house from the housing association or from the Housing Executive does so primarily to make money. They do so because it makes sound economic sense, they like the house that they live in and they want to take advantage of the scheme. People who have had long tenancies should have the right to purchase their house.

The valuation of houses is an issue that is often raised by my constituents. It usually involves the district valuer with the Housing Executive or housing association.

They do not look only at the house; they look at its potential. Many houses in the area that I represent, especially in the rural community, have large gardens. Often, the district valuer, along with the Housing Executive, decides that there is potential for building another house in the garden. I counsel caution on that, because the opportunity to build a house may not always be there, as we are aware from past examples.

5.00 pm

The criteria that we are drawing up ought to consider that. Should the situation arise where a person tries to take advantage of a large garden to build another dwelling, then, and only then, would the extra money be taken into consideration. The person may not get planning permission for the house because of lines of sight and other planning considerations. I urge the Committee to look again at those two issues.

Dr Birnie: I congratulate the Chairperson and the Committee on the report. I am not a member of that Committee, but, like others who are not, I would like to comment on one of the issues that has a bearing on many constituencies, including mine, and that is houses in multiple occupation, which Sammy Wilson and Monica McWilliams have referred to.

Until comparatively recently houses in the multiple occupation section of the private rented sector were largely unregulated, and that was bad for the individuals and families who lived in them. In 2000 the Housing Executive estimated that roughly one third did not reach adequate fire and amenities standards. At that time, as the Chairman said, around 30,000 people lived, and presumably still live, in houses in multiple occupation.

The previous approach to this matter may also have had a negative implication for certain areas of our major cities and towns. That is because it implied an uncontrolled and unplanned expansion of population density, with its attendant problems for the residents in the areas, such as insufficient car-parking space and an insufficient provision of cleansing services. According

to Housing Executive publications, that is a problem in many parts of Greater Belfast — for example, in the Antrim Road, Lisburn Road, and in the Queen's University and Ormeau Road areas. However, it is also a matter of concern in other parts of the Province.

As the Committee's report notes, and as some Members have noted, a fundamental issue with respect to houses in multiple occupation is that of definition. That is inherently difficult. In English case law, as the report notes, up to nine criteria have been listed as relevant in identifying whether or not a house is in multiple occupation.

Belfast City Council, in its submission to the inquiry, proposed using a definition that was suggested in 1999 by the Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions in Great Britain. A house in multiple occupation is defined as

"A house occupied by persons who are not all members either of the same family or of one or other of two families."

We should consider whether that definition could be adopted here. It would be simpler than what we do at present.

I support the Committee in urging the mandatory regulation of houses in multiple occupation, but I leave open the question of whether registration should be enforced by the Housing Executive or some other agency. I support the motion.

Mr Neeson: I welcome the report. It shows the importance of devolution in Northern Ireland, and it clearly reflects the views of people who have been elected to represent the people of Northern Ireland directly.

I endorse some of Monica McWilliams's remarks about the late receipt of the report. Although it has nothing to do with the staff or the Committee, the late issuing of reports seems to have become adopted procedure. The Committee should consider the matter when it next meets.

Like Sir John Gorman, I praise the work of the Northern Ireland Housing Executive. Some may not agree, but I firmly believe that Northern Ireland has the highest standards of public sector housing not only in the United Kingdom but throughout Europe. It has been widely acclaimed, largely due to the Housing Executive's work.

Some Members misunderstood Mr McCarthy when he spoke on the controversial issue of the right to buy. The Alliance Party fully supports it. — *[Interruption]*.

Madam Deputy Speaker: Order.

Mr Neeson: All Members, if they are dedicated public representatives, should realise that the bulk of houses that are bought are in what may be termed

“good” housing areas. That has reduced the housing stock in those areas.

Those of us who were members of the Northern Ireland Forum for Political Dialogue will remember when it debated housing. At the time, we expressed our concerns that responsibilities for new build would be passed from the Housing Executive to housing associations. Those concerns have now more or less come to fruition because there are not enough new builds in Northern Ireland.

Formerly, budgets for new builds came directly from the Department; today housing associations largely depend on private finance. There are not as many new builds as are needed. The involvement of private finance also means that the homes that are being built are more expensive. I support the recommendation that those who live in housing association houses should, like their counterparts in Housing Executive houses, have the right to buy. I hope that that clarifies matters.

I share many of the concerns that were expressed about standards in the private sector. Monica McWilliams and Esmond Birnie mentioned houses in multiple occupancy. We must ensure that there are strong regulations on safety and facilities in private sector houses. I am also concerned about value for money. There must be some form of monitoring. We must ensure that there is a high standard of housing in rural areas, as I strongly believe in the ethos of the level playing field. I hope that the Department will give serious consideration to the issues that were raised in the report. The new urban area plan must introduce much greater use of brownfield sites.

Mr B Bell: I am not a member of the Committee but I have been involved in housing matters with Mr O'Neill in the Northern Ireland Housing Council and on the board of the Northern Ireland Housing Executive. I welcome the Committee's report, and I congratulate the Committee and the Chairperson, Mr Cobain, on it.

The Housing Executive has been a huge success, but even it would agree with the Committee that a fundamental review is necessary. I support the principle that every citizen has the fundamental human right to good, affordable housing. I also support the right of all — not just some — tenants to buy. At present, some tenants may have the right to buy and others may not.

Mr S Wilson: Do you disagree with party policy?

Mr B Bell: I was unaware that my party had a policy on this.

I support the right of all tenants to buy, because owning a house contributes to stability.

The present policy is that if a bungalow is allocated to a tenant over the age of 60 he or she may not buy it; if it is allocated to a tenant under the age of 60 he or she may buy it. That must be changed, because everyone

should have the same rights. If they do not, equality issues may be raised. All tenants must have that right.

Housing associations have a voluntary scheme that gives their tenants the right to buy. However, that should be introduced into the legislation. One voluntary housing association, the Northern Ireland Co-Ownership Housing Association, operates a fifty-fifty policy — buy 50% and rent 50%. I hope that the Minister considers whether the 50% balance qualifies for the normal Housing Executive discount or whether co-owners must pay the full amount when they decide to buy their part of the balance. I hope that the Minister tackles some of those issues when he deals with the Bill.

The sale of houses brings in a huge amount of money to the Executive. Earlier, the Minister of Finance and Personnel said that he is using this major source of savings — the receipts from Housing Executive sales — to boost capital funds. Would it not be better to use those savings to reduce the huge debt that has been a millstone about the Housing Executive's neck for several years? I want the Minister to take on board some of those points. I support the Committee's report, at least in principle.

5.15 pm

Mr Kennedy: I am pleased to have the opportunity to contribute to today's important debate. I warmly commend the Committee for Social Development for completing the report. I agree with Billy Bell about the right-to-buy issue, and I seek further clarification on that from the Chairperson of the Committee for Social Development and from the Minister for Social Development. There is an anomaly in the current legislation, and that is a matter that I am attempting to deal with and expedite in my constituency.

I know of two relatively young constituents who live in adjoining properties that were built as older persons' dwellings. One of the young people inherited his tenancy from his late grandmother and, therefore, is prevented from purchasing the house. The second person was let the house through the normal allocation process and wisely bought the property. I draw the Minister's attention to the anomaly in the legislation. It is unfair, and I ask him to take account of that when he considers the legislation. It is important, on the basis of equity and fairness, that a scheme be introduced that provides all tenants with the right to purchase a house. That is a personal view.

I am interested in the logic of the current legislation and in the view that restrictions should be in place for older persons' dwellings. The equality argument outweighs the considerations that I have heard. I would be grateful if the Chairperson of the Committee and the Minister for Social Development could address those aspects of the report.

The Minister for Social Development (Mr Dodds):

The debate has been interesting, and I thank all Members who participated in such a constructive and positive way. I welcome the Committee for Social Development's interest in the issue; I commend its efforts to ensure that the policies that are being pursued meet housing need and provide good housing services. That is the thrust of the legislative proposals that form the backdrop to the Committee's review and report.

Many individuals, organisations and groups have a range of views on how best to advance housing policy. That is a healthy situation, and I am pleased to note the number of organisations and groups that responded to the Committee's request for submissions. The fact that those people took the time and interest to contribute to the consultation exercise demonstrates the issue's importance. I welcome the fact that the principal recommendations of the report and the review are in line with the current policy and legislative proposals of the Department for Social Development.

Members will appreciate that my officials and I wish to take the time to consider the report fully and discuss its detail. The issue of the time that Members have had to consider the report was raised. I will look at the report in detail and carefully note comments Members have made. My officials and I will begin to consider immediately the full content of the report and the comments and questions raised today, and I will make my views known in due course.

The Chairperson of the Committee, Mr Cobain, raised the issue of the timing of the legislation. As Members are aware, the draft Bill is almost ready, and I envisage that full consultation will begin early in the new year and proceed rapidly. I expect the draft Bill to be put before the Executive in the next couple of weeks.

First, with regard to the private sector renewal recommendation, the Committee considers that the introduction of a grants system based on a largely discretionary approach, rather than a mandatory approach, should facilitate better targeting and offer more options when helping those in poor housing conditions. I am pleased to note the Committee's positive view on this matter. The potential for being able to target those most in need in a better way is the purpose behind my current proposal.

The issue of equality was raised with particular concern in the review. Equality considerations will be a prerequisite to any new targeting proposals, in the event of a discretionary scheme being introduced and the Housing Executive considering using that discretion to target the scheme in a different manner than at present.

Mr Sammy Wilson mentioned the issue of ensuring proper monitoring, and that monitoring should ensure that problems were properly addressed. The Department will take that important point on board.

Mr Gallagher referred to closing orders. Closing orders are almost exclusively used on vacant properties. A recent legal opinion suggests that the Housing Executive may have some latitude on the use of closing orders, to the extent that they may be used less frequently in the future. When Mr Gallagher reads Hansard he will be interested in that point I have made about the issue.

The second main recommendation concerned houses in multiple occupation and the regulation of the private rented sector. In line with my proposal, the Committee thought that the responsibility for this function should be transferred from the Department for Social Development to the Northern Ireland Housing Executive and that the Housing Executive should be responsible for introducing and operating a licensing scheme. This sector had been in decline and suffered from poor management and condition standards. There is evidence, however, that the sector is growing and has a valuable role to play in meeting housing needs. The current proposals are welcome, therefore, as we try to ensure that an increase in size does not bring an increase in traditional problems. The current proposals will give the Housing Executive the authority to design and operate a statutory licensing scheme for houses in multiple occupation. I note the Committee's endorsement of the proposal to transfer regulation of the private rented sector to the Housing Executive.

Several Members, including Mr Sammy Wilson, Dr Birnie and others, raised the issue of the definition of a house in multiple occupation, with particular reference to the matter of student accommodation. Under the proposed definition, any house that is not occupied by blood relatives would constitute a house in multiple occupation. That would include, for example, semi-detached houses that are now used for multiple occupation. Mr McCarthy raised that issue, and I assure him that the proposed revised definition of a house in multiple occupation would bring the types of properties that he mentioned into the purview of the Housing Executive and other agencies.

The third main recommendation of the report relates to the right of housing association tenants to buy. The Committee believes that, although the extension of a housing association tenant's right to buy should proceed at this stage, a complete review of the scheme should be initiated, along the lines suggested by the Chartered Institute of Housing, Northern Ireland. The proposed right to buy of housing association tenants cannot be regarded in isolation from that of other tenants. Unless it is essential to do otherwise, the design of the scheme for housing associations will mirror that of the Housing Executive's scheme.

I was interested in the "debate within a debate" — if you could call it that — between Mr McCarthy and Mr Neeson, neither of whom is in the Chamber now. I am not sure whether that debate represented a conflict

between the Unionist and Nationalist wings of the Alliance Party — but they themselves will have to resolve that issue in due course. Presumably, one of them will re-designate as a homeowner and the other as a social housing tenant.

Madam Deputy Speaker: Order.

Mr Dodds: A comprehensive review of the Housing Executive's house sale scheme, which involves wide consultation, is under way. As part of that review my Department will bring to the attention of the Housing Executive the findings of the Committee and the comments of the organisations that contributed. That includes the comments that were made by Mr Kennedy and others in the "debate within a debate" on older persons' dwellings and other issues by party Colleagues and other Members. That will form part of the review, and Members may want to draw that to the attention of the Housing Executive and the Department.

Mr Kennedy: Where does the Minister stand?

Mr Dodds: I, of course, await the outcome of the review. I am sure that Members would wish me to engage in a proper consultation process to consider the issue properly before I reach any conclusions rather than preclude any outcomes — *[Interruption]*.

Madam Deputy Speaker: Order.

Mr Dodds: That would be entirely in line with all the previous recommendations by the Committee.

The Committee believes that there needs to be a body that can take a strategic role in respect of housing provision in Northern Ireland. The Committee recommends that the Housing Executive should have an enhanced strategic role and that the proposed Bill should address the conflict between such a role and the current role of the Housing Executive as the largest social landlord in Northern Ireland.

I recognise, as does the Committee in its report, that large-scale voluntary transfers are just one means of helping to attract more resources to the housing business. I am keen to explore any other suggestions or approaches that could help in that regard, including those that will be offered during the Committee's review.

The current proposals in the housing Bill are designed to facilitate only the easier exercise of a large-scale voluntary transfer policy by the Housing Executive in the event of such a future policy decision being made. Under current legislation, if a single tenant is not in favour of a large-scale voluntary transfer scheme by which he is affected, his objections are sufficient to frustrate the scheme entirely. The proposals would allow a large-scale voluntary transfer scheme to proceed if a majority of tenants were in favour of it. That is the purpose of the legislative proposals.

I will consider the potential for conflict of interests if the Housing Executive is given a more strategic role while it retains landlord responsibilities.

The Committee itself points out that dilemma in paragraph 7.5 on page 20 of the report. It recommends that

"the Northern Ireland Housing Executive should have an enhanced strategic role and that the proposed Housing Bill should address the conflict between such a role and the part the Housing Executive plays as the largest social landlord in Northern Ireland."

It does not say how that should be addressed, but it points out the issue. It is a difficult one, and I look forward to exploring how we can address it in due course.

5.30 pm

Mr O'Neill mentioned regulation of housing associations. As he knows, associations have been regulated and monitored by the Department and by central Government for over 25 years. The Committee recognises that there remains a concern about the conflict of interest because the Housing Executive is still a major landlord.

There were some other points raised in the course of the debate in relation to funding issues generally, and to targeting of resources. Mark Robinson mentioned that, and I can assure him that resources are targeted. New build meets the needs of those who must access social housing. The grant scheme targets those in unfit housing and the disabled, who cannot afford to make necessary improvements. There are other examples of targeting of resources, such as the warm homes scheme and the scheme for travellers. It is clear that resources are being targeted, as he said.

The issue of funding in general was mentioned by the Chairperson, Mr Cobain, and by Mr Tierney and others. I readily acknowledge Members' concerns, and, indeed, share their concerns about future funding for housing in Northern Ireland. I will make my position absolutely clear. I will be doing everything in my power to secure maximum funding for housing against a backdrop of competing priorities. I know the importance of housing, which many Members have mentioned, and its role — not just in providing homes for people, but in promoting social inclusion and in tackling a range of issues that are of immediate importance to people living in communities.

I will continue to argue strongly for funding to meet our objectives under the Programme for Government, and I look forward to, and know I will have, the support of Members in dealing with this issue. There are pressures and concerns, which Members will be aware of. Some have been flagged up in the House in relation to how some people might view the way in which the housing budget has received funding in the past and how it might be affected in the future.

However, I believe, with Members, that housing is still a major priority for people in this society.

Yes, we have invested heavily over the years — and rightly so. In the rest of the UK they are now pumping in billions of pounds because of gross underinvestment over many years. In no way should we in Northern Ireland be penalised because we have taken a sensible approach to investment year on year. That investment has to continue, and I look forward to the support of Members on all sides who share my concern about getting the necessary funding to maintain the budget.

Once again I want to place on record my appreciation for the work carried out by the Committee and its members, and the contribution of other Members as well.

Mr Cobain: I am grateful for the chance to wind up this debate. It is clear from this afternoon's proceedings that Members continue to regard housing as an important matter; the contributions from various Members are testament to that. I was especially encouraged to hear views from Members who sit on the Committee, and I will now try to respond to the issues raised. I cannot talk about housing without mentioning Larne, and let me say to Danny O'Connor that Larne has been mentioned as far as housing is concerned.

Mr S Wilson: Neglecting his constituents today.

Madam Deputy Speaker: Order.

Mr Cobain: I may need his vote later on. Mr O'Connor is not well at the moment, and I am sure that the House will join me in sending him hopes for a speedy recovery.

I agree with Eamonn O'Neill that the housing situation is in constant change, and the housing Bill will give us time to review that. Sammy Wilson and several other Members talked about the right-to-buy scheme and the over 60s. If we could solve the problems with the right-to-buy scheme by simply extending it to all tenants, I would be in favour, but it is not as simple as that.

There are older people in urban areas in my constituency and in the Minister's constituency who live in accommodation that clearly does not suit their needs and who have to wait for a long time, sometimes for five to seven years, for a suitable house. Selling off all of those properties might mean that people living in unsuitable conditions might never be rehoused. However, the next time I deal with a constituent on that matter I will be able to say that Sammy Wilson believes that his house is bright and proper and that the most important issue is not his quality of life but his right to buy.

I cannot recall anyone disagreeing with the report. It will be interesting to see how many people in the

House support the Committee and the Minister in the Budget debate when we look for additional funds for housing.

Prof McWilliams remarked on the licensing scheme, which will bring benefits for tenants and landlords. John Tierney raised the issue of homelessness, which, together with antisocial behaviour in Housing Executive estates, will be the subject of the Committee's next inquiry.

Other people touched on the future of the Housing Executive, one of the major issues the Committee has dealt with. We cannot have gamekeeper and poacher, and the role of the Housing Executive has to be balanced with that of major landlord. I hope the Bill will deal with that.

In my opening remarks I talked about local solutions to local problems. Tommy Gallagher drew attention to rural areas in the Province, and he provided us with a flexible response to the needs of the people in those areas. Jim Shannon raised interesting points about joined-up government, and the Committee will need to look at that again. Dr Birnie made a valid point about the definition of houses in multiple occupation, which the Minister has dealt with in detail.

Ivan Davis talked about the right to buy and said that it should not be seen as profiteering, but that it has enabled tenants to buy their homes. Northern Ireland has the highest number of owner-occupiers, and it is beneficial to the Province. In the rest of the United Kingdom there are approximately 70% owner-occupiers.

Mr Neeson talked about brownfield sites. The Social Development Committee led the charge in pressing the Minister for Regional Development to set a more challenging brownfield target, and our views did prevail somewhat on that.

As regards the issue of accommodation, we are all concerned that people here have accommodation that meets their needs. We have had discussions, and we listened today to the Minister of Finance and Personnel talking about budgets for the future. The Housing Executive is once again facing a problem with funding. We are talking about targeting social need, which begins with proper housing for people in rural and urban areas.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That this Assembly takes note of the report prepared by the Committee for Social Development 'First Report of the Inquiry into Housing in Northern Ireland' (2/01R).

Adjourned at 5.40 pm.

NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

Tuesday 13 November 2001

The Assembly met at 10.30 am (Madam Deputy Speaker [Ms Morrice] in the Chair).

Members observed two minutes' silence.

NORTH/SOUTH MINISTERIAL COUNCIL

Special European Union Programmes

The Minister of Finance and Personnel (Mr Durkan): The fifth meeting of the North/South Ministerial Council in the special European Union programmes sector was held in Dublin on 30 October 2001. Mr Dermot Nesbitt and I attended the meeting. This report has been approved by Mr Nesbitt and is also made on his behalf. Mr Charlie McCreevy TD, Minister for Finance, represented the Irish Government.

The chief executive of the Special EU Programmes Body (SEUPB) gave an oral report to the Council on progress made since the last meeting in this sector on 20 June. The report covered a range of topics, including the development of the body's managing authority role, the body's central co-ordination role for EU funding, the creation of effective relationships between the delivery mechanisms for Peace II, and the role of the SEUPB in relation to the common chapter of the Northern Ireland structural funds plan and the national development plan for Ireland.

The Council underlined, as it had done at previous meetings, the importance of the role of the body, and the EU programmes under its remit in contributing to the development of peace and reconciliation and the maximising of social and economic benefits on the island, particularly in the border areas. The Council welcomed the progress made on several important issues since the last meeting but also noted that a significant number of key issues remained to be addressed in the coming months.

The first paper tabled at the meeting provided an overview of the progress on spend and on the closure of the current Peace I and INTERREG II programmes. Under EU regulations, all funding for both programmes must be fully expended by 31 December 2001. The Council noted that overall expenditure currently stood

at 93% for Peace I and 94% for INTERREG II. The Council noted that the final expenditure for Peace I was expected to reach 99% in the North and 98% in the South. For INTERREG II, the position was expected to be 98% in the North and 99% in the South. The Council welcomed the progress made on ensuring a high proportion of expenditure under both programmes.

The Council also noted the significant recent progress in implementing the Peace II programme. The Special EU Programmes Body had completed contract negotiations with all the intermediary funding bodies, and their appointment had been formally announced on 11 October. Work on establishing the 26 local strategy partnerships was also progressing well, and an application web site and database is now available. The Council commended that work and underlined the important role that the new Peace II programme could play in promoting peace and reconciliation and securing the economic and social opportunities available in a new climate of peace and stability.

The Council received a report on progress on negotiations on the INTERREG III programme involving the two Finance Departments, the Special EU Programmes Body, and the European Commission. The Council was advised that those had led to revisions of the draft programme in order to take account of issues raised by the Commission and to clarify the role to be played by the three border corridor groups in implementing the programme. The Council welcomed the developments but urged a speedy conclusion to the negotiations, with a view to ensuring early implementation of the programme. The Council also recorded that it expected to hear of significant progress on the programme at its next meeting in sectoral format.

The Council also received a report on the progress of the other community initiatives — EQUAL, LEADER+ and URBAN II. EQUAL and LEADER+ have issued calls for projects in Northern Ireland. The initial programme proposals for URBAN II in Northern Ireland had been welcomed by the Commission, and, following consultation, a revised operational programme was submitted to the Commission on 13 September. Given the number and range of structural funds programmes involved, the Council attached details of the projects and their values to the joint communiqué issued at the end of the meeting.

The next item considered by the Council was a report from a working group established to review progress on implementing the common chapter. That chapter of agreed text, relating to North and South, has been included in the Northern Ireland structural funds plan and in the national development plan for Ireland. It sets out a strategic framework for mutually beneficial North/South — and wider — co-operation in a range of sectors and activities.

The report from the working group highlighted the roles identified for several organisations in implementing the common chapter, including the North/South Ministerial Council itself, the Special EU Programmes Body and Government Departments, North and South. The Council approved the recommendations in the report for better co-ordination, measurement and monitoring of the benefits of North/South and wider co-operation. Those included a recommendation that a joint steering group be established, chaired by the two Finance Departments and including the Special EU Programmes Body and representatives from the central Departments, North and South. That group would oversee and co-ordinate work on implementing the common chapter in both parts of the island.

The Council also approved a recommendation that a joint common chapter working group be established with representatives from the Northern Ireland community support framework (CSF) monitoring committee and the Irish community support framework/national development plan (CSF/NDP) monitoring committee to oversee implementation of the common chapter in the context of the European structural funds. That recommendation has already been agreed by the Northern Ireland CSF monitoring committee, but remains to be considered by the Irish CSF/NDP monitoring committee.

The Council received a report from the body on progress towards implementing its corporate plan. It noted the progress made and urged the body to continue to focus on achieving the aims and objectives specified in its plan. The Council also agreed that the body should prepare an updated and revised corporate business plan for approval at the next meeting of the North/South Ministerial Council in the special EU programmes sectoral format.

When I announced a proposed increase in the body's budget allocation to the Assembly on 2 July as part of the Executive's decisions in the June monitoring round, I pointed out that it would be subject to North/South Ministerial Council approval. At the meeting on 30 October, the Council approved that increase in the 2001 budget for the body, which is needed to enable it to meet its in-year commitments. The increased funding requirements arose from costs associated with the provision of office accommodation for the body in Belfast, Omagh and Monaghan. Additional costs had also been incurred in connection with the body's recruitment and secondment of staff.

The Council noted with satisfaction the progress on the recruitment of staff to the body. The Council also considered and approved a senior staffing structure for the body, which will now move to recruit permanent staff to fill its senior posts. The management team will work with the chief executive to ensure that the body fulfils the important role envisaged for it under the establishing legislation.

It was agreed that the Council should meet again in this sectoral format in Northern Ireland in January or February 2002. The venue for the meeting will be confirmed in due course. The Council agreed the text of a joint communiqué, which was issued following the meeting. A copy of the communiqué has been placed in the Assembly Library.

Dr Birnie: What is the Minister's assessment of the adequacy and effectiveness of staffing in the body? There is a perception that there is slippage arising from various administrative and bureaucratic bottlenecks.

Mr Durkan: As I said, progress on staffing arrangements was reviewed. The body is new and has to establish itself and bring together a variety of tasks within a novel structure. The programmes are also new, and there are many issues of communication, expectation and interpretation. We welcomed the progress that had been made on the recruitment that had already been undertaken, and we reviewed proposals to develop the senior staffing structure of the body. We hope that those steps will resolve the difficulties to which Dr Birnie referred.

Mrs Courtney: Can the Minister update the House on the local strategy partnerships under Peace II?

Mr Durkan: The local strategy partnerships will, in many ways, succeed the district partnerships that worked so successfully for Peace I. They will concentrate on the two main measures in priority 3. However, they will also, by virtue of the new composition for the local strategy partnerships, have the task of ensuring that those models will be sustainable beyond the life of this Peace programme. We are trying to use the local strategy partnerships to develop the partnership models and encourage them into the mainstream, so that they are not confined to European programmes, especially as that European money will be removed.

10.45 am

We want the local strategy partnerships to be truly inclusive and broadly based. The basis on which we have proposed the establishment of the local strategy partnerships allows for the four pillars of social partnership to be involved. It allows local government and central Government, because of its statutory role, to be properly involved and engaged in, and influenced by, what develops there. All of that depends on local agreement. In most districts, agreement and progress have been made, but, in other areas, there is work still outstanding. However, there must be local agreement, and we will encourage that.

Mr Neeson: I thank the Minister for his upbeat and encouraging statement. I particularly welcome the projected uptake of funds for Peace I and INTERREG II. I do not wish to put the Minister on the spot, but it would be helpful if, early in the new year, the

Assembly were given a report on the geographical spread of allocations, particularly under INTERREG II. When does the Minister expect the joint steering group on the common chapter to be established?

Mr Durkan: The joint steering group will be established forthwith. It will be the mechanism within Government for trying to maximise the commitment to — and the good operation of — the common chapter. It is envisaged that there will also be a joint working group involving the community support framework monitoring committee in the North and the community support framework/national development plan monitoring committee in the South.

As Mr Neeson is aware, the Northern community support framework monitoring committee has already agreed in principle to join that joint working group, but the Southern monitoring committee has yet to agree. We have tried not to rely on only one mechanism within Government, chaired by the two Finance Departments, or on the mechanism of the joint working group of the monitoring committees. We want to have both mechanisms, because that is how the programmes are managed and monitored in their respective jurisdictions. A dual approach is also required for the common chapter.

Mr J Wilson: What arrangements are in place — or are likely to be put in place in coming days — to make the information contained in that comprehensive report understandable. I have previously used the word “gobbledegook” in the House, and, looking back, I think that it was slightly unfair to do so. However, I will try it again. Every day, I am asked by constituents about how and where they can gain access to funding. They know that the funding is here, there and everywhere, but gaining access to those funds — and understandable information on them — is difficult. I hope that the Minister will pardon me for using the word “gobbledegook” again, but we must remove the jargon from such statements. What is the Minister doing to ensure that the valuable citizens who are doing voluntary work can get access to the information and understand it?

Mr Durkan: There are several initiatives under way. Members may be aware that the Special EU Programmes Body recently held a roadshow in several locations. The roadshow sets out, in an open and understandable way, the measures that are available, what they entail and what their main focus will be. That is one way in which they have helped.

The body also has a Freefone helpline that can give advice to applicants. I said that there was a web site providing information and able to assist with applications, which can be made in electronic format. We are trying to make sure that more information is available and understandable, and the body will try to ensure that information is available to a wide range of interests. The body will look to the local strategy partnerships to

assist, so that local groups will be able to approach them for advice and assistance on issues beyond the priority 3 measure that falls to the local strategy partnerships.

The intermediary funding bodies have been appointed; that announcement has been made. Some calls for projects have already been issued, and more will follow. As the calls for projects issue, each intermediary funding body will make further information available about the scope and emphasis of particular measures. The same will follow for the Government Departments as well, as they start to issue their calls for projects.

Ms Lewsley: What arrangements has the Minister put in place under Peace II to ensure that funds for community and voluntary sector projects will be protected? Such projects are vital to the process of peace building.

Mr Durkan: Following their effective contribution to Peace I, the contribution that the community and voluntary sectors can make to Peace II relates to several areas of the programme. Again, intermediary funding bodies will play an important role in ensuring the good use and good distribution of the funds. The bodies have already proven themselves to be a good means of working with the community and voluntary sectors at regional and local level.

The local strategy partnerships will also be able to respond locally to initiatives from the community and voluntary sectors in each district. Government Departments responsible for managing measures are being encouraged to work closely with the community and voluntary sectors. The Executive have already decided to monitor the work of Departments in the programme, with an eye to creating good working partnerships and promoting equality in applications and cross-border co-operation between Departments.

Mr Byrne: I thank the Minister for his comprehensive statement and congratulate him and his colleague, Mr Nesbitt.

Can the Minister clarify the role of the cross-border development groups in the delivery of INTERREG III? Does he agree that those groups are important, not only as a delivery mechanism, but as a means of widening the partnership that is at the centre of our approach?

Mr Durkan: First, I want to express appreciation of the Member’s kind compliments.

The cross-border corridor groups have played a significant role, and that has been recognised by Ministers, North and South. We know that some of the border corridor groups have been working for a long time and are not a novelty trip. They have seen what has worked in their own operations and where the gaps have been.

Mr McCreevy and I agreed last year to establish an action team to ensure that the proposals being drawn

up for INTERREG III would make best use of the potential of the border corridor groups. We need to make sure that the groups playing that role are not composed only of councillors. We want them to broaden their work and be vehicles for the sort of partnership that we want to see. The groups will be reconfigured into INTERREG III partnerships. They will be implementation bodies for a significant part of the INTERREG III programme. That delivers on the commitment that Mr McCreevy and I made when we met, individually and collectively, the border corridor groups.

Mr McHugh: Go raibh maith agat, A LeasCheann Comhairle. Public access to funding is the key to the success of the Peace programmes. Local councils have insufficient staff in the local strategy partnerships, and that could pose a difficulty for partnerships at local level. Reasonable accountability and feedback are necessary for local councils. The last time around, councils suffered from lack of feedback from the partnerships. Has the Minister considered that, as it could be a bigger issue this time?

(Mr Deputy Speaker [Mr Mc Clelland] in the Chair)

Mr Durkan: The involvement of councils and partnerships has received much attention, and there are various views about what happened in the past and about the best way to handle the matter in the future. In the past, councillors were represented on, or were members of, the district partnerships, but that was often an incidental thing. It was the councillors who ran the partnerships, rather than being corporately involved. The work of the partnerships should influence the corporate plans and activities of the council and make sure that councils' distinctive spheres of responsibility were complementary to and consistent with the partnerships' endeavours.

That is one reason why we have moved to local strategy partnerships. Councils and statutory agencies will account for 50%, which will be agreed locally between them. The social partners, also by local agreement between them, will make up the other 50%. The aim is not only that councils and statutory agencies will bring their knowledge and interests into the partnerships, but that those bodies will be informed and influenced by the strategic thinking of the partnerships. It is important not only to maximise the benefits of the two priority 3 measures that the local strategy partnerships will manage, but to develop models of partnership for wider, longer-term use.

Mr O'Neill: The work of the body and the quality of the report have impressed me, among others. I am especially interested in Peace II and am glad to note the progress that has been made.

What sort of system is in place, and when will people be able to apply for funding?

11.00 am

Mr Durkan: The programme for rolling out access to Peace II is under way in many respects. As I said, the intermediary funding bodies have already been announced, and some have already begun to call for projects. Some Government Departments have also called for projects, and others will follow. We look forward to Peace II applications being made in the coming months.

Gap funding arrangements will be extended for three months — from October until the end of next January — because we believe that applications for Peace II funds will take off then. There will be different timetables for different measures, because the programme involves different Departments and intermediary funding bodies, and different structural and management issues. However, broadly speaking, most of the measures should open for application in the next quarter.

DRAFT PROGRAMME FOR GOVERNMENT

Mr Deputy Speaker: Before we proceed, I shall outline how I intend to facilitate the debate on the draft Programme for Government. The Business Committee has agreed that this should not be a time-limited debate, therefore all Members who wish to speak may do so. The debate will provide an opportunity for Back-Bench Members and Committee Chairpersons to speak. Ministers may speak in their ministerial capacity, but they will be called towards the end of the debate, before the winding-up speech, to give them an opportunity to respond to issues raised by Members. I call the First Minister, the Rev — sorry — the Rt Hon Mr David Trimble. I must remember to put on my glasses.

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

That this Assembly takes note of the draft Programme for Government.

Thank you, Mr Deputy Speaker, for that rapid promotion.

Exactly one year ago today, the Assembly had its first opportunity to debate the Executive's first draft Programme for Government. I said then that the debate was a milestone. It was the first time in three decades that an Assembly of Members elected by the people of Northern Ireland had been able to debate a programme of policies that affected the vital interests of their constituents.

This time last year, we were able to demonstrate to the world that the different parties that make up the Executive could work together constructively to agree a Programme for Government that could make a positive difference to the lives of everyone.

It is sometimes easy to forget the significance of our milestones. However, last year's Programme for Government was the most tangible sign that all the major parties in the Assembly — and I do mean all — wanted devolved government to work.

One year on, we can see that the devolved Government is delivering open and accountable government for the people of Northern Ireland. Despite the difficulties of the past few weeks and months, we have shown that we can make a difference, and that we are responsive to our community's needs.

The first draft programme, which was announced last March, contained some 200 pledges, of which 37 had already been fully implemented by the time the second draft programme was published in September. Rapid progress continues to be made. For example, the Administration have worked to agree and implement a new student support package, funding new university places and providing financial help to encourage many more young people who would not previously have

been able to continue into higher education to do so. In the first Programme for Government, a commitment of 850 additional higher education places was given. In today's draft programme, we are proposing action that will lead to a total enrolment of 35,500 full-time students in higher education. That will be an increase of over 2,500 from 1999-2000.

We are also well on the way to fulfilling the pledge to provide a free year of pre-school education for every child whose parents wish it. The draft Programme for Government reiterates that pledge, which is on target for delivery by the end of the financial year 2002-03. Free public transport has been introduced for older people. We will now seek to improve opportunities for the mobility of others who are socially excluded and in greatest need.

The devolved Administration have also been aware of the pressing need to improve health care. By next March, spending on health and personal social services will have been increased by no less than £400 million. That will be an increase of 23% in the first two years of devolved government. Furthermore, the draft Budget that was recently presented to the Assembly proposes additional increases of £186 million in the next financial year for health and personal social services. That constitutes a further rise of 8.5%. Over the three years, that represents an accumulated increase of over £500 million. That is a tremendous financial increase, and we must ensure that that money is well used.

The pace of improvement of the health sector must not slacken. To ensure that it does not, we have reviewed the organisation of acute hospital services. Crucially, the Administration are carrying out an examination of needs and levels of effectiveness in the health sector to consider how needs can be met, effectiveness maximised and to ensure that we get the best value from the money that has been provided. Clearly, much still needs to be achieved, as waiting lists are still longer than those in other UK regions — despite higher per capita spending and a younger population.

The Programme for Government also sets out the Executive's commitment to protect and conserve our environment. That commitment was demonstrated last year by the allocation of additional resources for air-quality management, biodiversity, conservation, water pollution control and waste management. We have already made good progress in tackling the results of previous underfunding in those areas and remain committed to a sustainable approach to government.

We have also agreed to invest more to develop the infrastructure that supports the economy. The draft programme includes important proposals in that area. We will proceed with plans for two new major gas pipelines: one from Belfast to the north-west and the other from south Antrim to Dublin, with the potential

to give three quarters of the population access to the national North Sea gas network.

We have also allocated £40 million to improving the route from Larne, through Belfast, to the border. That major investment will strengthen the competitiveness of Belfast, Larne and Warrenpoint and help to facilitate external trade.

A key challenge for the Executive will be to build on the economic success of the past few years. The draft Programme for Government recommit us to the goal of securing a competitive and sustainable economy. The events of 11 September and their aftermath present a real challenge. Their impact on a global economy that was, in many respects, slowing, is still uncertain as regards severity and duration. Some of that impact has already been felt in the local economy. There have been job losses following the axing of the British Airways route from London to Belfast. There are also possible redundancies at Bombardier Shorts. Other firms are also affected, particularly in the service and tourism sectors.

However, on the positive side, there is evidence that Northern Ireland should be able to weather an economic downturn. As part of the UK, Northern Ireland is within what is widely regarded as the most buoyant of the major national economies.

The sometimes painful national reforms of the last two decades have resulted in a competitive national economy, strong public finances, and low inflation. Northern Ireland shares in those advantages. At the same time, the relative importance of our public sector and the buoyancy of our local labour market should stand us in good stead. That view is supported by most UK regional economic forecasters. According to their forecasts, which we fervently hope are to be accurate, Northern Ireland rates among the top half of UK regions in respect of regional growth prospects.

Our draft Programme for Government commits us to taking new action to promote enterprise and innovation. By 2005 we hope to secure 6,000 new business starts under the business start programme, and by 2004 we hope to stimulate a 25% increase in private sector investment in research and development. We will also take action to promote exports and encourage inward investment, particularly in high value-added sectors.

Those are some of our achievements over the past year. We have made progress, perhaps not as much as we hoped to, since we addressed the Assembly this time last year. However, some parties were slow to honour their responsibilities in the agreement, and that has come at some cost. I hope that the distractions of recent weeks will detain us no longer. The full implementation of the agreement must be pursued vigorously by those with direct responsibility and without further large-scale commitment of ministerial time. The people of Northern

Ireland have every right to expect that their elected representatives will be fully and exclusively engaged in the task of making Northern Ireland a better place to live, a place at ease with itself, with a successful economy and first-class public services.

The important point is that we should continue to move forward. Northern Ireland needs and deserves peace and political stability to allow us all to work collectively and responsibly to identify and address the challenges that we face. Clearly, the public desires a successful, local Administration. It is incumbent on everyone who accepts a ministerial office to respect that desire and to work together to develop and deliver effective public services that meet the needs of the people of Northern Ireland.

Despite distractions, work has continued in recent months to revise the Programme for Government, as we are required to do annually under the agreement. Six weeks ago we presented a revised draft to the Assembly for scrutiny. The programme commits us to a vision of a peaceful, cohesive, inclusive, prosperous, stable and fair society, and the draft sets out how we intend to achieve that. It has been developed collectively, with detailed and constructive contributions from all Departments, including those headed by Ministers who do not currently attend Executive meetings. Consequently, it reflects the contribution of all of those who participate and share in this Administration.

The Deputy First Minister will highlight further key developments that have been made since the publication of the first Programme for Government and will set out how we plan to deliver our commitments, but first I will reiterate the importance of a locally accountable Administration to develop policies and programmes that address people's needs. Our great strength as an Administration is that we are locally elected and accountable to that electorate.

However, that privileged position brings with it a responsibility to govern openly, to produce a Programme for Government and subject it to the scrutiny of the Assembly and society. The new openness in government lets people see and comment on our plans and proposals.

In our first Programme for Government we committed ourselves to building an accessible, accountable and responsible Administration, and the Executive remain firmly committed to those principles. We have also revisited and improved our public service agreements. They should be contracts between the Departments — which make up the Executive —, the Assembly and the public. They will set out the outcomes that Departments will work to achieve, with the resources voted by the Assembly. Public service agreements are therefore an integral part of the Programme for Government. Our commitments to precise targets enables the Assembly

and the public to see precisely where we have succeeded and where there is still work to be done.

The Programme for Government will be supported by new service delivery agreements for every Department for 2002 and 2003. These will link the higher level targets in the public service agreements with actions, targets and budgets for improving service delivery. The service delivery agreements will focus on meeting customer needs and will be provided to the Assembly Committees for consideration in draft form before their publication next year.

11.15 am

Additionally, the Executive plan to enhance openness and accountability by publishing after the end of each financial year a report on the progress of the commitments made in the Programme for Government and in the public service agreements. That will inform the Assembly and the public of how much progress the Executive have made on their commitments.

I look forward to Members' contributions to the debate. Their views will help to influence the final shape of the programme, which will be submitted to the Assembly for approval in a few weeks' time.

The Deputy First Minister (Mr Durkan): The First Minister emphasised the importance of the Programme for Government and that the responsibility for its implementation lies with the Executive. Now that we have witnessed defining progress in decommissioning and in the solidarity and effectiveness of the pro-agreement parties, we can look forward to a period when we can focus, in an uninterrupted way, on developing and delivering policies to address the needs of the people.

In spite of difficulties in recent months, considerable progress was made on the Programme for Government by our predecessors, Sir Reg Empey and Séamus Mallon. That gave us a good basis for today's debate and for further work until the programme's final adoption on 10 December.

I will add to the First Minister's assessment of the progress that the Executive have made and our plans for building on that progress as set out in the Programme for Government. I will detail how the Executive plan to develop their work and the partnerships that they hope to build with the Assembly, the Civic Forum and the public.

The Executive's relationship with the Assembly is fundamental. The Assembly has a key role in scrutinising and approving the Programme for Government. Today's debate plays an important part in that scrutiny process, and I look forward to listening to Members' points and to the Committee submissions. The work of Committees is an important part of the scrutiny process, and the Executive are grateful to the Committees for the time that they take to consider and respond to the proposals

contained in the draft Programme for Government. The Executive have received initial responses from some Committees and look forward to receiving the rest in the days ahead.

The Executive are ready to listen to, and consider, the Assembly's ideas and suggestions. The Executive are ready to respond to the issues raised today or when the Programme for Government is finalised, which, as the First Minister indicated, will be in early December. The Assembly's views will help to determine the final document. The Good Friday Agreement requires the Executive to propose and implement Programmes for Government, and it requires the Assembly to approve such programmes and their accompanying Budgets. The Executive particularly want to hear the Assembly's views on the priorities and sub-priorities identified and on the actions that the Executive plan to take in support of those priorities.

The Executive highlighted, among other issues, the need for an appropriate approach to services for older people. We also want to hear the Assembly's views on the equality aspects of the draft Programme for Government and the public service agreements.

The Programme for Government and the Budget are linked. The Programme for Government informs and influences the Executive's decisions on budgetary allocations. We must work with the resources that are available to deliver our policies and our programmes. The Programme for Government and the Budget are therefore developed in tandem, and the Executive presented both documents to the Assembly in draft form in the same week. The Executive will do this again when next month they present to the House the revised Programme for Government and revised Budget. I hope that my retention of the Finance and Personnel portfolio for a short period will facilitate coherence between the Budget and the Programme for Government processes. I will be in trouble if that is not the case.

Joint public consultation covering both documents has been initiated. That has included the broad circulation of copies of the documents and newspaper adverts to encourage people to make their views known. The process also involves a series of consultation seminars at which Ministers and officials from the Office of the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister and the Department of Finance and Personnel are available to present details of the contents of the documents and to seek views on them.

The Assembly has already debated the draft Budget. Committees have given their views on it to the Committee for Finance and Personnel. However, today's debate and the comments provided on the draft Programme for Government will also influence the Executive's final Budget proposals.

The First Minister highlighted the role of the Programme for Government in identifying the priorities and programmes that reflect the needs of people here. A locally elected, accountable Administration is a real strength. We must build on the progress that has already been made, as outlined by the First Minister, if we are to realise our vision and make a positive difference. In this draft programme we continue to identify and develop approaches that respond to local need, and that work will continue in the Executive.

We are engaging others in the process by consulting openly in several key policy areas in a way that should ensure that we gain a full understanding of the views of local people before taking decisions that will fundamentally affect them.

With regard to health, a consultation process is under way on the report of the acute hospitals review group. Decisions are expected to be taken next year on the way forward. On education, consultation is in progress on the review of post-primary education, and proposals will be made next autumn.

With regard to agriculture, the vision group has published a comprehensive report on the future of the agrifood sector, with wide ranging recommendations on the structure and future direction of the sector. Again, the Executive are seeking views on that.

We plan to launch a comprehensive review of public administration by the spring, which will recognise the need for different structures under devolution and enable resources to be used in the best way to serve the public.

Earlier this year, the Executive agreed to initiate a programme of needs and effectiveness evaluations on the spending programmes. Evaluations are being carried out for health, education, housing, training and vocational education and financial assistance to industry. These five areas account for 70% of planned public spending in Northern Ireland. The evaluations are major pieces of work, involving this Department, the Department of Finance and Personnel and the relevant spending Departments. Their findings will be used to support our arguments to the Treasury about the Barnett formula. They should also help to provide us with a better understanding of how effective these major areas of spending are in supporting the priorities that the Executive set out in the Programme for Government.

The focus of the evaluation so far has been on identifying the levels of need for public spending here compared with levels for comparable services in England. The evaluations should be completed next spring so the results will be available in time to influence next year's work on the Programme for Government and the Budget.

We are developing new approaches in other areas to meet local needs. The Executive are reviewing current rating policy and consulting on the role of the commissioner for children. We will shortly be making proposals on promoting sustainable development and producing new strategies for the regeneration of the most disadvantaged urban and rural areas. The key difference under devolution is that local politicians are taking the decisions on the issues that matter after full consultation with local people. The draft programme comprehensively sets out the plans of the Executive for the future government of Northern Ireland. Our challenge is to set aside politicking and focus on good and stable government.

The first challenge in the delivery of good and stable government is to ensure that the institutions provided for in the Belfast Agreement are given the opportunity to work effectively. We have seen their value. For example, the benefits of the structures for improving east/west and North/South co-operation were demonstrated during the foot-and-mouth disease outbreaks earlier in the year. Those structures helped us to control the situation.

There have been recent meetings of the joint ministerial councils on health and Europe. North/South implementation bodies have been set up to launch the crucial tourism company. We can now move to ensure that the North/South Ministerial Council delivers all the functions that were envisaged for it.

We must develop and focus our presence in Europe and North America and ensure that our interests are represented and protected and that our policies have communicated effectively. Good government should be provided in partnership with others. A top-down approach is not desirable.

During the Depression of the 1930s, Franklin Delano Roosevelt said:

"These unhappy times call for the building of plans that....build from the bottom up".

I hope that we are leaving behind the unhappy times, but I agree with the rest of that sentiment. We must ensure that our plans build from the bottom up, not simply from the top down. That means that we must work in partnership with others.

We can turn our political structures, our permanent coalition Government, to our advantage. Those structures can provide stable policies that will encourage other stakeholders and players to recognise the Programme for Government, with its public service agreements and the service delivery agreements, as reliable long-term documents in which they can have confidence. Our form of coalition Government can become a guarantee of stability and allow others, whether investors or voluntary groups, to plan with some certainty of the continuity and steady development of Government

policy. They can enjoy such confidence because they have been involved in policy development.

The Executive position report on the Programme for Government and Budget was presented to the Assembly in June, within days of Ministers receiving it. The draft Programme for Government and the public service agreements have also been with the Assembly for consideration. It is a transparent process that is open to all.

Furthermore, there can be confidence in the future because we have proved, in a short period, that four parties, responsible for as many as 11 Departments, can produce an agreed programme that can be developed as a planning tool to help us to agree, to set priorities and to work together.

I have already outlined the Assembly's important role as a key partner. However, we must ensure that other partners, actual and potential, play their part too. We must work more closely with local government and the wider public sector, sharing our vision and aspirations, and ensuring that their programmes and services support and complement the Programme for Government. We must also work with our social partners in business, the trade unions and the voluntary sector, playing our part where it is our job to do so, but also ensuring that others have an opportunity to influence and contribute to the development of policies and the delivery of services. The Civic Forum will have an important role to play in that.

The establishment of local strategy partnerships at council level provides a unique opportunity for a new approach that will ensure that the partnership ethos becomes a key element of local and regional administration in the delivery of the Programme for Government.

11.30 am

The draft Programme for Government has been prepared by the Executive, and they stand ready to take responsibility for its delivery and for the important Budget decisions that will be taken to support it. We look to Assembly Members to help to finalise the document and to guide its annual development. I return to the words of Franklin D Roosevelt, who said:

"The only limit to our realisation of tomorrow will be our doubts of today."

I hope that we can put aside the doubts of today and move forward to realise the vision for tomorrow that is set out in the Programme for Government.

With the agreement, we have changed the form of government here. In the Assembly and elsewhere, we can change the face of government in ways that are radical but practicable, innovative but stable, and both responsible and responsive.

The Deputy Chairperson of the Committee for Agriculture and Rural Development (Mr Savage): The Committee for Agriculture and Rural Development, at its meeting on 9 November, agreed the contents of my contribution.

When the Committee responded to the Executive's position report in July 2001, one of its main recommendations was that a new sub-priority should be established under the "Securing a Competitive Economy" heading, outlining an action plan for the short-term recovery of the rural economy. What has been included in the draft Programme for Government, in sub-priority 8, is a commitment to develop an action plan for the agrifood industry only. That goes part of the way towards what the Committee believes is necessary. There are other references, within the sub-priority, to the fair provision of public services, to conservation of the built heritage and natural resources and to the improvement of the management and co-ordination of local economic development initiatives in rural areas.

The Committee welcomes those intentions but remains convinced that a rural economy action plan, incorporating specific actions by specific Departments and agencies, would be the best way in which to ensure that good intentions are translated into tangible results. For example, LEDU — or, rather, the new Invest Northern Ireland agency — could make a specific commitment and set targets for rural areas. The Committee believes that such an action plan would be consistent with, and would complement, the longer-term objective of rural proofing, which will consider all significant new policies and actions being proposed by Northern Ireland Departments.

Seven months on from the target date for the establishment of the ministerially led group for rural proofing, the group has not met. Indeed, to our knowledge, it has not been formed. The four months spent fighting foot-and-mouth disease accounts for much of that delay, but rural proofing was heralded as being of vital importance to giving rural areas a fair deal. It must begin to work — and be seen to work — and make a difference to the life of rural people.

The Committee is due to meet the Minister at the end of this week, and I am sure that we will question her on implementation. Until then, Committee members can rely only on the working definition of rural proofing provided by the Department this year:

"A process to ensure that Government policies are examined carefully and objectively to determine whether or not there is a bias against rural dwellers, and in particular to make public services accessible on a fair basis to people wherever they live in Northern Ireland."

It is not described as clearly in the draft Programme for Government that we are debating today. The draft refers to rural proofing as a way of ensuring

“that the rural dimension is routinely considered as part of the making and implementation of policy.”

Pending the receipt of further information from the Minister, the Committee suggests that the Programme for Government reference be strengthened from “routine consideration” to something that reflects the intention to have an active examination of policies and describes better the objectives of that examination.

Rural proofing must also be demonstrably effective. It is by definition, a negative procedure, attempting to ensure that policies are not harmful to rural interests. Would it not be better to have a positive procedure, running in tandem with rural proofing? For example, there could be a plan of positive actions to benefit those rural interests.

The Chairperson of the Agriculture Committee, Dr Paisley, drew attention last week to the plight of the fishing industry and of the communities depending on that industry; I must do so again. In July, the Committee felt that there should be a specific mention of the sea fisheries fleet and those who rely on it in any economic priorities. That position is unchanged.

Sub-priority 8 refers to participation at European level to ensure the recovery of Irish Sea cod stocks. The draft public service agreement (PSA) for the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development also refers to the viability of the industry, relating it to the recovery of cod stocks and the value of fish landings. There is no reference to fisheries, however, in the policy analysis in sub-priority 8, and the Committee believes that that omission must be corrected before the final version is published.

There are other omissions from sub-priority 8 of the draft Programme for Government. Although strategic development of the agrifood industry is covered, the Committee considers that previous references to modernising and diversifying the structures of farming should be reinstated. That would allow for consideration of an early retirement scheme for farmers, should that be shown to be a viable possibility. People should be given the choice as to whether they want to use such a scheme.

In sub-priority 9 of ‘Securing a Competitive Economy’, there are references to farming about which the Committee has concerns. The third paragraph begins with the welcome recognition that farmers are “custodians of our countryside”. People should not forget that. However, the paragraph also refers to a plan

“to introduce regulations covering the storage of silage, slurry and agricultural fuel oils on farms as well as regulations that will require work to be undertaken to prevent or deal with pollution.”

We understand that the Department of the Environment recently issued proposals to introduce those regulations. The Ulster Farmers’ Union recognises the need to reduce the number of pollution incidents attributable to agriculture, but it is unhappy about the way in

which the Department of the Environment proposes to do that. One of its concerns is the prohibitive cost for farmers.

The Committee notes that there is to be a farm waste management scheme, one of the small-scale schemes being carried out by the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development with Executive programme funds. It is doubtful, however, that that scheme will assist all those affected by the new regulations. The Committee therefore calls for close co-operation between the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development and the Department of the Environment to allow for sensitive and proportionate action, with adequate financial support for farmers, rather than draconian measures that farmers cannot afford to implement.

In attempting to concentrate on outputs, as recommended by the Executive’s position report, the Committee has tried to judge progress against the current PSA. We found that the level of detail in it was insufficient to enable the Committee to assess the outputs fully. We are told that the new PSAs will contain even less detail and that service delivery agreements will record the detailed actions. In that context, the Committee accepts that the new draft PSA probably reflects the main targets, although objective 2 includes targets at a much more operational level than objective 1. The Committee is more likely to obtain a better picture of the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development’s performance by measuring progress against the service delivery agreement targets. We look forward to receiving the draft agreement in the near future.

The Committee feels strongly about those points. The Deputy First Minister this morning quoted President Roosevelt. I shall repeat a proverb: any man can make money, but it takes a wise man to spend it.

Mr McGrady: I want to compliment the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister on their introduction of the Programme for Government this morning. It is the *vade mecum* of political life in Northern Ireland, touching on every aspect of how we live, sustain and enjoy ourselves and, eventually, on how we die — in the comfort and company of our families, thanks to care in the community.

The report also suggests that there is increasing co-operation between the parties in the coalition. Despite much of what we see in daily headlines, that coalition has brought together the Programme for Government. We are on the threshold of a new, more settled political situation.

The First Minister and the Deputy First Minister this morning showed the clarity with which they intend to proceed and the openness with which they intend to be assessed on their delivery of a complex and detailed programme. I am glad to hear them reiterate their commitment to full consultation with the

community at all levels — elected, sectoral, almost individual. Only in that way can we understand the feelings and needs of the community and bring it along with us.

The essential element of any programme of good government is that we have peace in the community and international peace, though that is slightly beyond our remit. We have peace here, compared to what we had several years ago, but we do not have peace everywhere. Violence is more localised than before. We must try to address the underlying sense of injustice, be it social or economic, that propels such intercommunal violence. At the same time, we must isolate the remnant paramilitaries who exploit that sense of grievance.

We do not have total autonomy in how we raise funding, so we cannot fund all the areas that we would like. There are two aggravating points relating to UK taxation that I must mention at the start. Those points have the constant attention of the Office of the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister and the other relevant Departments. First, there is the ongoing impact of excessive fuel duties, which are particularly devastating to family industries and economic life along the border. Then, there is the aggregates tax, which, it is estimated, will cost around 3,500 jobs, if, as threatened, it is fully put into operation from April 2002. I give full support to the First Minister, the Deputy First Minister and the Minister of Finance and Personnel in their endeavours to ensure that there is a revision of that tax.

11.45 am

The impact of the increase in supply and use of drugs in our community is a major social problem that must be tackled. It must be provided for in the greatest possible way. Unfortunately, at this stage, it is beyond the devolved powers of the Administration and remains in the reserved powers area. Not only do drugs have a detrimental effect on people, they have an ongoing effect on the life of the community and general social and economic well-being. Drug use is often promoted by paramilitaries, and, along with the smuggling connected with the aggregates tax and fuel duties, creates an additional lawlessness that we must address urgently, if we are to establish the society that is envisaged in the Programme for Government and which we desire.

I have no departmental axe to grind, and no departmental axe to wield. I want to refer to some departmental aspects of the Programme for Government, which also dictates the Budget. Mr Savage referred to the concerns of the agricultural community. I have a great fear for the future of that community, in the broadest sense of the word. The BSE crisis, the foot-and-mouth disease crisis and the exchange rate difficulties have taken up the headlines and disguised the underlying

dramatic fall in farmers' income. That will have an impact on the structure of farming.

We must consider how we see farming evolving as our basic industry. We talk about revitalisation, and we can do a certain amount through diversification, value-added programmes and schemes and creating additional outside jobs in the rural community. Although I have not yet read the full details, I welcome the additional £100 million announced this morning for revitalisation. We must also consider the basic structure of farming. We must allow the older farmer and the non-viable farmer to leave the industry in an honourable, voluntary and secure fashion. At the other end of the age spectrum, we must make it easier for young men and women to enter a viable farming industry. One of the criteria should be that it must be viable. Nonetheless, we must give farmers assistance. That could mean additional funding, by way of soft loans or interest-free loans, or ensuring that they have the technical knowledge of modern farming to compete in world markets and specialise in what they do. That is the only way in which we can survive.

I am a strong supporter of the land management scheme proposal. It treats farming as a holistic industry that provides not only a livelihood but a rural social fabric. It enhances and safeguards the environmental assets of which we are so proud. All those matters should be managed as one idea, and the proposal for land management should be given a new impetus. It is already being applied in France and has been proposed in Scotland. We must move faster to assess its value for Northern Ireland.

Two of the fishing ports are in South Down. The structure of the fishing industry must be examined. The £5 million decommissioning fund was introduced this year. Its purpose is to diminish the industry on the back of the conservation of stocks. I submit that the Northern Ireland fishing industry has contributed more than its fair share towards the conservation of stocks in the Irish seas. It is difficult for our fishermen, tied up in port as they were from January to February last year, to watch other fleets fishing the common fishing grounds, especially in the Irish Sea. Restrictions are based on scientific information that often proves to be wrong, which calls its validity into question. A critical mass must be maintained, not only for the farming of the sea but for the onshore added values that sustain the communities of the Down coastline and further afield.

The issue of flood plains is another farming and environmental matter that has not been given adequate attention. We are still building on areas that are liable to flood. There must be assessment and new ideas on that issue. We need an interdepartmental approach to helping rural communities. Certain communities in Northern Ireland cannot be helped by single-departmental approaches. Cross-departmental teams must work with

them. Those communities are important; they are socially deprived and, in theory, they are priorities for support. That support is not being delivered.

I accept with joy the news that we are to create up to 35,500 new places in tertiary education. I hope that many of those will be in the new technologies that are so important to industry in Northern Ireland.

The Programme for Government is a broad canvas. Just a few brush-strokes can be put to it in the time available. However, there are some general issues. One of those is infrastructural commitment. In the past 50 or 60 years, many areas suffered from gross under-investment. There are many reasons for that. Some are palatable and others are not, but I will not go into them now. There is no point in pursuing a grand design unless we have an infrastructure that reaches out to areas that were not provided for in the past. So much depends on that, including inward investment, farming, tourism and the general well-being of rural areas. I ask that the regional development plan be considered in that context. There are many areas that do not have a proper share of the cake, although I know that there are restrictions. I hope that the regional development plan will be audited financially and politically in order to ensure equity.

Leaving the need for inward industrial investment and expansion aside, health is our single greatest problem. We read about it every day and there have been debates in the Chamber about how to improve the situation. However, all we see is an increase in the number of people on waiting lists and decreasing facilities for care in the community. That is not about levels of income, or enjoyed leisure time; it is about pain and human suffering, and we must concentrate on that.

We have limited finances. The allocations to the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety have been substantial, as have the subsequent add-ons over the past 18 months. Indeed, the February 2001 allocations were approximately £18 million. However, we need to examine how that money is spent. We should audit the systems, under which considerable sums are not being properly applied and do not reach the point of delivery of alleviation of pain and suffering. That is what our Health Service should concentrate on.

At the weekend, I talked to some prominent cancer specialists. We have a deplorable history of provision when it comes to cancer. We fall behind the whole of Western Europe and North America. Our techniques and our standards of diagnosis and treatment are woefully low. We have all had experience of cancer among our families, friends and acquaintances. There was to be a cancer centre of excellence four years ago, but there has been no progress. The machines used to treat cancer break down every day. A machine was ordered some months ago, but now it has been discovered that two machines are required. Procrastination, bureaucracy

and red tape prevent us from moving forward. Correcting that state of affairs must be a high priority.

We are running into difficult times with regard to inward investment. The tragedy of 11 September has put tourism on the back foot. However, it would be appropriate if grant aid to industry were structured in such a way that communities that did not previously benefit, or suffered from a lack of investment, could be given an advantage by receiving structured grants to encourage them to set up and develop jobs locally.

There is a finite amount of money to spend, and all of our ambitions are restricted by that. I hope that the Minister of Finance and Personnel and the Office of the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister will accelerate the re-negotiation of the Barnett formula to give us additional funding.

Ministers from every Department indicated in their statements that over the past 30 or 40 years a disproportionately small amount of money was invested in our infrastructure, the Health Service and education by comparison with the rest of the UK. A hidden injustice has been done.

12.00

Not only do we need a restructuring of the funding devolved for the current year from the Treasury at Whitehall; we urgently need a clawback of money from past years so that we can rectify underfunding and underrenewal and revitalise our basic services. If that does not happen, it will be an enormous uphill struggle to maintain our current provision, let alone catch up with modern provision. It is to be hoped that this matter will be treated urgently otherwise we will be unable to provide adequate, modern services for the environment and for people.

I compliment the First Minister, the Deputy First Minister and other Ministers on their presentation of the Programme for Government and the resultant funding. As a parting shot, this is a coalition programme, and it is the responsibility of all the Ministers severally and jointly. In future, I do not want to hear Ministers blaming other Departments by innuendo or inference. They are in it together. They must deliver together, and I hope that that will be the way in which this community will work.

The Chairperson of the Committee for the Environment (Rev Dr William McCrea): I will speak first as the Chairperson of the Committee for the Environment and then comment as a constituency representative. I trust that Members have noted the important paragraph entitled 'Promoting sustainable living', on page 8 of the draft Programme for Government. It states:

"We want to achieve effective protection of the environment and the prudent use of natural resources, and high and stable levels of economic growth. We need therefore to consider the environmental

impact of all key policies. We will seek to do so in an increasingly integrated way, that will embed the principles of sustainable development in the rural and urban economy.”

The Committee for the Environment will note the designation of sustainable development as a key theme to cut across the five priority areas.

Those are fine words. However, the draft Programme for Government falls short of reflecting the Executive’s commitments in their priorities and sub-priorities. Sustainable development is not the old environmental agenda dressed up in new language. It is about going back to the most basic assumptions about the workings of the economy. Sustainable development is about learning to live once again within ecological and social limits. All of the challenges will require innovation in policy-making and new mechanisms for cross-departmental implementation.

The final paragraph on page 39 states:

“As we take forward our work to develop a competitive economy we are conscious also of the need to develop sustainably [sic] as a region. We will work to protect and enhance our natural and built environment, following the fundamental principles of sustainable development including the “precautionary principle”, the “polluter pays” principle and will promote the conservation of biodiversity.”

Those are laudable phrases, but what do they mean? In regard to the Department of the Environment, little information is to be found on the conservation and protection of the built heritage. That is due to the meagre finances that are made available to ensure that our built heritage is protected. That paragraph indicates that the Executive will continue to view the environment primarily as a constraint, rather than an opportunity to enter and develop new economic activities.

Last October the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry told a conference that the global market for environmental goods and services is currently estimated at \$335 billion — comparable to the world’s market for pharmaceuticals — with a forecast that it will grow to \$640 billion by 2010. Progressive European, particularly Scandinavian, economies now recognise that the embedding of environmental protection and eco-efficiency in their approach to production and consumption is integral to their competitiveness, given the emergence of multi-billion dollar markets for environmentally sound products.

Let us look at some of the recommendations in the draft Programme for Government. On the sub-priority of energy on page 41, the reference to renewable energy sources should be expanded to highlight the importance of research and development and the development of the local renewable energy sector. In considering energy in the context of sustainable development, the question of domestic consumption must be addressed. We also need to embed energy efficiency in our thinking on the overall efficiency of the economy, including opportunities to develop and export new technology.

On the sub-priority of planning, the current text fails to adequately acknowledge and address the major interest and concern about the lack of accountability, transparency and grass-roots access to affordable or free technical and legal assistance to engage effectively with the planning authorities, notably the Planning Appeals Commission.

Under the sub-priority of the promotion of entrepreneurship, innovation and creativity, there is a need to include more concrete commitments, involving our economic development agencies, to explore research and development for the promotion of new markets for recycled products and new approaches to production and ecological design. That is essential to implement the important shift in our approach to resource use, as set out in the Northern Ireland waste management strategy, to which I will return.

I note that the specific support actions listed under the sub-priority relating to the environment are restricted mainly to traditional pollution abatement and environment protection measures. In other words, they are all “end-of-pipe” solutions.

My Committee views the ‘Working Together’ section as an area where the Executive have a prime opportunity to “walk the talk” and to stimulate practical support for sustainable development in Northern Ireland. The Executive should demonstrate leadership by giving commitments to improve their own environmental performance and develop environmentally sustainable Government procurement policies across the Departments. That single action could dramatically impact on markets for recycled and recovered materials.

The development of such markets is one of the crucial foundation stones for the success of the Northern Ireland waste management strategy. Public procurement policy can play an important part in stimulating and supporting developing markets for recycled products. Resource efficiency can also play a role in the drive to reduce departmental costs. That is a laudable desire and would free moneys for the development of new services.

The Northern Ireland waste management strategy commits all Departments to set targets towards the recovery of a minimum of 40% of total office waste, with at least 25% of that recovery coming from recycling or composting in 2000-01. The strategy specifically states:

“In leading by example, Departments will also agree targets for other waste streams.”

It is time to include these commitments in the Programme for Government so that those in authority can take a credible position on promoting a sustainable society among other stakeholders. Lead, therefore, by example. According to figures released by the Environment and Heritage Service, public administration, health and social services and education account for

33% of the commercial and industrial waste generated in the Province each year.

The draft Programme for Government states that we need to consider the environmental impact of all key policies. That should be strengthened by a time-bound commitment to develop a methodology and implementation plan for sustainability impact assessments for all Government policies and objectives. Executive programme funds should be used to bring that about.

A commitment to, and understanding of, sustainable development is not measured by the rigour of environmental policies alone, but by an ability fully to integrate environmental considerations and opportunities across all Departments and policy objectives.

The Committee for the Environment had invited the UK Sustainable Development Commission to a lunchtime seminar in Parliament Buildings on 20 November. Unfortunately, the seminar has been postponed by the commission until March 2002. That will allow Members to be brought up to speed on sustainable development by leading experts in the field.

I have many points that I wish to raise, but other members of the Committee will address some of the environmental issues. As a constituency Member I will now raise some other matters.

The draft Programme for Government on page five states:

“We also want to improve the quality of treatment and health and social care available to those who need it. We are committed to looking at ways of improving standards of care and maximising the effectiveness of our health and social services.”

Everyone is horrified at the state of our health and the Health Service. People are lying on trolleys in hospitals; people are lying at home; our elderly are forsaken. They believed that they would be cared for by the Health Service, having worked and paid for it all the days of their lives. Now we find that home helps’ hours are to be cut, and many of our elderly are left on waiting lists for home helps. We have 90-year-olds waiting for home helps to help them out of bed, to dress them or to light a fire. Is such a service appropriate in any age, never mind in the year 2001? We hear fancy terms like “care in the community”, but where is that care? The Department decided to put people out of hospital into the community and promised them care packages.

I support care in the community, but it is not being provided. Care in the community was an easy way for the Department to get people out of hospital, to get them off its hands and then to forget about them. This was done in the hope that someone else, especially family members, would look after the elderly in their later days.

12.15 pm

It is a tragedy that some sick and elderly people in the community might die before they receive care. They cannot even get a scan or the basic attention that they ought to receive in any vibrant Health Service. I do not believe that we will get an appropriate Health Service simply by throwing money at it. There must be a proper approach. Many in the Department do not have a clue about how to deal with the present crisis, let alone prepare for the winter months.

In my constituency of Mid Ulster, there is a great difference between the spending of the different education sectors. For example, in Mid Ulster or the district of Magherafelt, there is massive spending on maintained schools. I have no objection to that. However, because there are limited resources, what has happened to the controlled schools? Children from the Protestant community go to state-provided, controlled-sector buildings that are dilapidated, depressing and deteriorating. What do they see in the maintained schools in the same towns? They see new buildings and millions of pounds being spent. Surely, if money is limited, as we are told, the resources ought to be spread across the community. The delivery of resources to only one section of the community drives a coach and horses through all the phrases about community that are contained in the document that is being presented today.

Finally, I want to speak about the farming community. I come from a rural area, where farming is still a major industry. We do not have any of the multinational companies found in many other regions. Perhaps that will spare us from the effects of the multinationals pulling out, if the present economic trends continue.

I note that the events of 11 September are being blamed in this debate for all of our ills. For example, it was suggested that British Airways pulled out of Antrim as a result of the events of 11 September. Nothing could be further from the truth. British Airways intended to pull out long before 11 September. It is our national carrier, but it has turned its back on the people of Northern Ireland. It ought to be condemned for that decision. Let us not blame all failures on the tragic events of 11 September.

We face economic difficulties, none more severe than those affecting the farming community. Farmers are told, “Diversify, diversify, diversify.” However, little or nothing has been done to ensure that they can diversify. The farming sector has faced BSE, foot-and-mouth disease and many other problems. However, we have no details of a retirement scheme for those farmers who wish to retire, nor of young entrants’ schemes. We talk about ensuring that young people enter the farming industry. Young people with a vision for the future of farming should be encouraged to stay in the

rural community. However, the burden of diversification is placed solely upon the farmers.

Imaginative action is needed from the Department to ensure that the countryside is not left derelict, that those farmers who are able to diversify can do so, and that those farmers who put food on the table can continue to do so for the betterment of our people.

Mr Deputy Speaker: As I have said, I intend to suspend the sitting at 12.30 pm to allow Members to attend other meetings.

The Chairperson of the Committee for Finance and Personnel (Mr Molloy): A LeasCheann Comhairle. I will speak now, because I have other meetings to attend this evening. I will speak first as Chairperson of the Finance and Personnel Committee.

Last week the Deputy Chairperson, James Leslie, spoke in the Budget debate. The Programme for Government and the Budget are the most important items to come before the Assembly. Each is dependent on the success of the other. To have a view on one, you must be aware of the other issues involved. On behalf of the Finance and Personnel Committee, I call on the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister to take on board the views and concerns of Committees before the Programme for Government is finalised.

I congratulate Mark Durkan, who is currently absent from the Chamber, on his appointments as Deputy First Minister and as leader of his party. The Committee found him to be an effective and popular Minister in its dealings with him. I am sure that he will prove to be just as effective in his new roles.

The Committee for Finance and Personnel welcomed the opportunity to comment on the Programme for Government and the Budget that will fund it. The Committee first did so after the Executive position report was issued in June. The Committee issued a report on its findings. Since then, the Committee has reported on each departmental Committee's response to the Executive programme funds. The Committee found that some bids had little to recommend them as regards cross-cutting initiatives and, as such, the rationale for the funds. That raises questions about the funds' effectiveness. There must be new ideas and cross-departmental roles and programmes in order to maximise those funds in the future.

The Committee's latest report on the draft Budget will be finalised by the Committee today and published this week. I recommend that the First Minister, the Deputy First Minister and the Executive read all of these reports and deal with the recommendations in them before finalising their own commitments.

Today we are looking at the Assembly's priorities and how far they will meet the public's needs. The challenge in the Programme for Government was first set out in

the Belfast Agreement, but it remains relevant today: to create a peaceful, cohesive, inclusive and prosperous society that will be stable and fair to all. The Programme for Government and the Budget can put in place the means to achieve that goal. We must decide whether the Programme for Government, and the priorities in it, will produce that society. The decisions made in the coming days will determine how we spend the many billions of pounds that the programmes will need. It is vital that those decisions impact on how the Budget is spent in the next year and the years to come.

There is a chance today to call for effective programmes that can make a real and positive difference. The Committee for Finance and Personnel looked at the key priorities set out by the Executive for the Department of Finance and Personnel in the Programme for Government. Committee members examined, and were generally content with, the thrust of the five key priorities.

I warmly welcome the Executive's work in setting out the strategic framework for each Department and the priorities that can be set. The public service here has been working in individual departmental boxes for far too long. Little effort has been made to co-ordinate and deliver cross-cutting services. We need to develop that in the future so that there are cross-cutting themes. The public has suffered from the boxing-in of the past. Each Department dealt with its own work and did not examine how effective cross-cutting roles could be achieved. Spending plans must reflect the change in priorities, and will be informed by an objective analysis of those priorities.

Questions were asked about the sub-priorities. I wrote to the Minister of Finance and Personnel and to the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister about those matters. Issues addressed included the work to reform the public administration in areas of public procurement. Members were concerned that the reforms should give value for money. Financing the programmes is the most important issue, and the Committee considered Section 7, sub-priority 4 of the draft Programme for Government, which deals with new ways of financing public services. It states:

"Additional sources of finance will be secured, including partnerships with the private sector".

We all know that money is very tight and that it is not available for the programmes that we would want, but we must ensure that the correct priorities are in place. How we obtain additional sources of finance is important, and that will determine our success in meeting the public's needs. Members will recall the Committee's recent examination of the use of public-private partnerships to finance public services. One of the key findings of the report, which was published in July, was that public-private partnerships were not always the best answer and should not be seen as the saviour of all

public services. Alternatives are public money and other sources of finance such as bonds.

On page 63 of the draft Programme for Government the Executive appear confident that additional sources of finance, including partnerships, will be secured — not just that they “may” be secured, but that they “will” be. How will that money — hundreds of millions of pounds — be made available? I have asked the Department of Finance and Personnel to confirm the sources and extent of the additional finance. Public-private partnerships may help in some situations, but they are not a panacea for all ills. The events of 11 September reinforced that opinion. The world economy suffered, and it is no longer in its healthy position of six months ago. As a result of the downturn in the economy the private sector may not be willing to invest in our relatively small market, nor is the British Treasury likely to be so liberal. Obviously, the war chest has been opened and its contents spent. We may have missed opportunities for a peace dividend in our new situation.

The Executive also say in the draft programme that arrangements will be put in place to ensure that the contribution made by rates towards public expenditure will be at an appropriate level. My Committee has commented in the past on the use of rates to finance public service. The Deputy First Minister, as Minister of Finance and Personnel, is well aware of our views, but it is perhaps premature to expect a significant contribution prior to the review of the rating system.

We must discuss with the Treasury underinvestment and the role of the Barnett formula in determining changes to the block grant. It is often pointed out that public spending per head is higher here than in England, Scotland and Wales, but we must compare like with like. We must ensure that there is an increase in direct payments, for example towards health and the infrastructure. Direct payments have been made in England, Scotland and Wales, and our allocation has not been fair. We need to look at the block grant as an add-on, and we may have missed out on it. Mr McGrady pointed out the need to rectify the lack of money spent in the last few years. We must ensure that we get the money that we should have had in the past.

From the evidence that was revealed in a debate last week in the House of Lords, it does not appear that the Barnett formula will be reviewed quickly. In responding to the debate, the Government spokesperson, Lord McIntosh of Haringey, said that the formula had stood the test and was as relevant now as it was in 1978. It had been updated in different spending reviews, but that was of no benefit to us. The Barnett formula does not meet our need.

My Committee supports the general thrust of the draft Programme for Government —

Mr Deputy Speaker : Mr Molloy, this is perhaps a good time to interrupt. The sitting is by leave suspended and will resume at 2.00 pm.

The sitting was suspended at 12.30 pm.

On resuming (Mr Speaker in the Chair) —

2.00 pm

The Minister of the Environment (Mr Foster): I wish to acknowledge the references that Members made to environmental issues. Mr McGrady referred to flood claims and to building in areas that are liable to flooding. I take that point on board; my officials are aware of that issue and will watch out for it, especially after the debacle in England a couple of years ago.

Dr McCrea referred to sustainable development. What we do today should be valuable for tomorrow; what we do for today’s children should be valuable for tomorrow’s children. He referred to the fact that finances were not available for built heritage. I am aware of our financial constraints, which make it difficult for us to maintain built heritage. He also noted that new technology was required for energy efficiency. He mentioned that there was not enough transparency and speed in planning. I was pleased to hear Dr McCrea advocate transparency, because we recently had a difference of opinion about transparency in other matters. Planning is a difficult issue. People are often dissatisfied with it — if someone is successful, it is fine; if someone is unsuccessful, it is not.

Several Members mentioned markets for recycled products. It will be difficult to create such markets because the size of Northern Ireland means that it cannot compete in large markets. However, the cross-border bodies may provide us with the opportunity to open markets on an all-Ireland basis. The waste management strategy is a big issue and will be a learning process. However, councils’ waste management strategy plans are at an advanced stage. Those strategies constitute the Department of the Environment’s aim. It is neither intended to be a wasted effort nor an effort in waste. Members said that the draft Programme for Government contained a lot of rhetoric. However, a lot of us are filled with rhetoric, not merely one or two of us.

I welcome the challenge. The environment was the poor relation under direct rule, and, unfortunately, I inherited massive backlogs in the planning system and in environmental legislation, as well as a depleted road safety organisation. The situation that I inherited shocked me. My first priority was to obtain more resources for the Department of the Environment, and I was pleased to secure an extra 26% for the Department’s budget. That was the second largest increase achieved by a Minister. However, we must remember that that came from a small base. The staffing of the Planning Service has increased from 450 to 500 and continues to rise.

Staff at the Environment and Heritage Service will number more than 320 in 2002, compared with 260 in 2000. The number of road safety education officers has almost doubled from 11 to 21.

Resources are only a means to an end. Although the Department of the Environment does not build roads, hospitals or schools, which one can see and touch, it delivers a range of services that touch on the interests of every citizen in Northern Ireland. Since I have been Minister, the Planning Service has dealt with an ever increasing number of applications. There were 20,000 per year when I took office; that number now runs at around 24,000. This year, the Planning Service is preparing 11 development plans. For the first time, the Planning Service is on course to achieve full plan coverage for Northern Ireland by 2005. That includes the Belfast metropolitan area plan. Planning is controversial. We could scour the world and not find a planning system that does not attract criticism. That is because, in the small minority of controversial cases, someone is always disappointed with the decision, and the disappointed often make the most noise.

If the environment does not work, nothing will work. Northern Ireland's clean, green image is central to what makes it a desirable location for visitors and business. We are blessed with good air, river quality and an appealing and varied landscape. However, we must be vigilant in protecting those assets and improve them where necessary. In particular, the amount of river pollution incidents, which do so much damage to fish stocks, habitats, leisure and tourism, has disappointed me. To meet that threat — and others — I have accelerated plans for local air quality management; increased the monitoring of rivers; introduced enhanced powers to prevent and remedy pollution; and brought forward plans to improve the protection and monitoring of our most important environmental sites. In addition, steady progress is being made towards bringing Northern Ireland's environmental legislation into line with EU requirements — a huge task that was seriously neglected under direct rule.

Perhaps the greatest environmental challenge is that posed by the radical changes needed in waste management. Put simply, to protect our environment, we must reduce, reuse and recycle. We must ask ourselves what right we have to pollute, litter, waste and destroy our biggest asset — the planet itself. There is not much point building houses if we have no planet to live on. What is the economic sense of putting valuable materials into holes in the ground? I am pleased to have helped to put the flesh on the bones of the waste management strategy. District councils, under guidance from the Department of the Environment, are now well advanced in the preparation of waste management plans.

I pay tribute to Driver and Vehicle Licensing Northern Ireland and the Driver and Vehicle Testing Agency. I was pleased to oversee a £57 million contract that will

transform all our MOT centres into state-of-the-art, high-tech arenas. I also welcome the value for money and care for the environment achieved in the delivery of cheaper motor tax for smaller cars. It is a rare pleasure in government to be able to return money to people's pockets.

The issue closest to my heart is road safety — a big issue. The hard-hitting publicity campaigns that I have introduced on drink-driving, speed and seat belts are changing public attitudes. The doubling of the number of road safety education officers creates a brighter prospect for road users. While one death is too many — we have had 123 deaths this year so far — this year has, thankfully, seen some improvement on the previous year. We are finalising a road safety plan that should allow us to continue the downward trend in deaths and serious injuries.

Devolution has been a success — it has certainly been better than direct rule. However, the fact that Ministers are drawn from Northern Ireland's elected representatives does not mean that they have magic wands. The successes that I spoke of required a massive amount of hard work by my staff. The same applies to all Ministers and Departments. We must recognise that our devolution system reflects our historic and current divisions. The system contains all sorts of checks and balances, and, as a result, it is not built for speed.

I am pleased to have the opportunity to speak on the environmental aspects of the Programme for Government. We do work hard and the Department of the Environment exists to serve people. It is more of a service agency than a providing agency. I am pleased to be part of that.

Mr Ford: I echo the words of Mr Foster: there is no magic wand in the current devolution system. However, expectations are higher than they were under direct rule, and there is a need to satisfy those expectations.

Last year, the first phase of the Programme for Government was said to be ambitious. It now seems to be overambitious. A member of our research staff gave me six pages of unfulfilled commitments. Many of those could be expected to be achieved only by the end of the year, but there were many commitments in last year's Programme for Government that had completion dates in June, August, September, October, autumn and summer: they have disappeared from sight.

The Executive must explain not only their Programme for Government next year, but how they are achieving what was set out in the Programme for Government this year. The introduction to this year's programme says:

"Since March, we have made good progress under each of the five priorities we identified."

That is at variance with the figures that we have, which suggest that there is much lacking in many areas. I set

that in the context of the words of the First Minister on 5 March in proposing the adoption of the Programme for Government:

“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.” — *[Official Report, Bound Volume 9, p.391]*

If the programme was realistic, organised and costed, and the Executive have apparently failed to deliver, our ambitions have not been proven, but neither have theirs. Something must be at fault if nothing has been achieved. Members trust that the Executive are not only writing a programme for next year, but are devoting energy to achieving the targets that they set for this year.

There appears to be some woolly thinking about the future programme. This time last year, it was said that public service agreements would make sense of the Programme for Government and apply it within Departments. I refer Ministers to section 5.10 on pages 48 and 49, which is predominantly about agriculture. Thirteen aspirations that are set out in the early paragraphs are reduced to six specific bullet points, only four of which appear in the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development’s public service agreement. How can there be coherence when woolly ideas become a limited number of bullet points and do not appear in the relevant Department’s plans? The talk was of joined-up government, but the Executive are failing to meet their own standards.

The Department of the Environment’s public service agreement on page 96 of the programme refers specifically to best value for district councils. The Minister can be assured that I am not attempting to recreate last Thursday’s row over the Department’s best value proposals and the Committee’s concerns. However, there is a reference to section 7.5 of the Programme for Government, which does not comment on best value for district councils. It seems that the Department’s agreement is not endorsed by the Executive. It does not appear to flow from the Programme for Government to the Department, which seems to be creating items that have not been thought of by the Executive. Where is the coherence? Where is the joined-up government?

The current plans lack credibility. There was an admission in the Budget debate that health and social services needs, considered by many to be main priorities, cannot be met by the budget that has been allocated to that Department. What is the point of a Programme for Government that will create difficulties when it is not achieved, especially if it has already been admitted that it cannot be achieved? If the Executive cannot allay public concerns about health and social services and cannot deal with concerns about acute hospital

services, community care, childcare and psychiatric services, what is the point of the programme?

Last year, Members were concerned about community relations and tackling divisions. The Executive took no notice of Members this time last year or during the debate in March 2001. I welcome the fact that, since then, they have addressed some of those concerns. Some references have been strengthened. If the Executive are going to put in place a cross-departmental strategy during 2002, has that plan started with the cross-departmental working group that my Colleague Mr Kieran McCarthy proposed in the House some time ago? Can the Executive be sure that they will deliver a strategy that they have not begun to think about? The Executive have not given us the impression that they move so fast that only a short time is needed between early consideration of an issue and having a strategy in place to deal with it.

Ministers will have to explain the meaning of the formulation in paragraph 2.4 on page 12:

“Of particular importance is the need to support the capacity of local communities to deal with the matters of dispute and division including the proliferation of sectarian graffiti, unauthorised flag flying, the erection of memorials and other issues that can lead to community tensions”.

It seems that when they refer to the “capacity of communities”, it is an excuse for public authorities to do nothing about offensive graffiti, murals, paramilitary flags until the local hard men allow it. I would like to hear Ministers say that they will allow 95% of the community to tackle the problem, in conjunction with public agencies, rather than waiting until the local hard men allow them to do so.

2.15 pm

Integrated education is another issue that falls into the important category of promoting sharing. Page 32 states:

“integrated and Irish-medium education have grown in response to the wishes of parents.”

Provision of integrated education has certainly grown. However, a few weeks ago, the Minister told me that there was an excess of demand for places in integrated schools in comparison with other schools. Clearly, provision of such education has not grown in response to the wishes of parents. Had it done so, there would be sufficient capacity to satisfy the desire of parents. It is time to tidy up the language a little. No doubt, by the time that Mrs Eileen Bell has further explored that point, Ministers will be able to assure me that my fears that their language does not convey what they wish are utterly unfounded, and that they will move forward when they revise the programme.

Last year, I said that the test would be how well the Programme for Government dealt with the specific problems of Northern Ireland and its divided society

— which are not those of other regions of the United Kingdom — in order to promote sharing over separation. There have been some small steps forward in this year's draft, compared to last year's. However, the Executive have much to do to convince us that they are tackling those problems.

Ms Morrice: I agree with the remarks of the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister, particularly Mr Durkan's observation that we have reached a defining moment in the operation of the Assembly. We have spent a great deal of time concentrating on the political nature of our intertwining and interlocking relationships and on the establishment of what we hope will be good government. It is time to concentrate on proving to the people that we can deliver good government. That is what the programme should be about. For three years, we have promised change. I do not deny that huge political change has occurred. However, our duty is to now ensure that that change filters down to the streets, so that people can not only see, but touch, feel, hear and smell change for the better in our society.

The first overall objective must be the eradication of poverty from Northern Ireland. It is an indictment of our society that one child in three lives in poverty. We must tackle that problem and reduce the ever-widening gap between the haves and the have-nots.

The second priority is to tackle divisions in society — an issue referred to by Mr Ford. We must make real change and tackle the disease of sectarianism that stalks our streets at its root. We cannot afford to ignore it. However, we need help from churches and schools. Integrated education is an important instrument, as Mr Ford said, but we also need help from other groups that work in the cross-community field, for example, the youth organisations and community groups and leaders who do such wonderful work. Furthermore, we must recognise and reward them for that work, in the form of solid financial backing. It is all right to commend workers for their efforts to end strife in the community, but grand words are not enough — they need money and support. There is superb funding available in the European peace and reconciliation programme to help community groups with that type of work, but we as a Government, as an Assembly, must do much more to support the tremendous work that is being done on the street.

The terrible state of the Health Service is plain to see, and we have heard that many times in the Assembly. We have heard how waiting lists have grown in the past two years. The Executive seriously need to get their heads and their money around that. We need support for our hospitals. Patients are dissatisfied; nurses are seriously concerned about their own health because of the pressure that they are under and worry about their professionalism being compromised because of lack of funding and resources. The situation must

be addressed immediately, and funding must be made available for that purpose.

Free nursing care for the elderly was to be in the programme, but funding has been withdrawn. I would appreciate an explanation and possibly a commitment to reinstate it.

Ms Ramsey: Does the Member agree that some of the crises in the health sector are due to a lack of funding over the past 30 years? That is a test for the Executive. The Health Committee requested that Ministers look at their own budgets and that the Executive consider additional money for the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety.

Ms Morrice: I am not necessarily in the business of blame, but it is necessary to find money. It does not matter where the money comes from, but it must come fast.

Cancer services is another area of vital importance. I can recall a serious incident from personal experience. My father died of cancer two years ago. A month after he died, we received a letter from his consultant asking him to come for an appointment. What does that say about the Health Service? A consultant who never saw my father asked a dead man to come for an appointment and was not even aware that he had died.

I am glad that we are starting to get to grips with what I can only describe as a Dickensian education system, which puts children, teachers and parents through the trauma of the 11-plus. I must admit to the House that I am going through that trauma at present, along with my son, his teachers and our family. Leaving my son to do his first 11-plus exam last Friday was possibly worse than facing the wrath from certain quarters of the Assembly when I changed designation. We cannot put children through the 11-plus any longer, and it is good that there is now a commitment to change. I am sorry that it is not happening faster. Two years is too long.

I want to pinpoint two transport issues — trains and road safety. I was glad to hear the Minister of the Environment talk about his plans for road safety. That is well and good, but it is not enough. The Minister quoted the figures — 120 or more have already died this year on the roads. Much more must be done, in a totally concerted effort. We need traffic-calming systems, home safety zones and reductions in speed limits. Is there not something called a governor that can cap the speed that a car can do? Lorries have them at a limit of 50 miles per hour. Why cannot cars be governed — I am talking about those driven by young men who persistently break speed limits — so that they cannot be driven over a certain speed? Creative thinking is needed, and it is vital that we do something.

Our train service is a shame and a disgrace. Good commitments have been made, and money is coming in, but we are impatient. We want to get on a train and sit in a clean carriage in comfort. We want to be told where we can get off, why the train has stopped or even that it will not be delayed any longer. We need a first-class service in everything here — I am not just talking about trains.

The importance of the social economy is being examined by the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment, Sir Reg Empey. It is essential that we build on the important work that is done in that area — the voluntary sector — and adopt the same business-like approach. I also underline the importance of social responsibility in business. Groups such as Business in the Community must be commended for the work that they do to encourage businesses to get involved in the community and realise that the bottom line is not always profit; it can also be about people and contributing to the community.

Another issue related to the economy is energy, and renewable energy is something in which I take a keen interest. It was mentioned earlier and covers energy sources such as wind — offshore or onshore — solar, biomass and agriculture. We passed a motion at our annual conference that we should aim at drawing 30% of our energy from renewable energy sources by 2020. That is a long way off. If we are to get there, we must start providing incentives for pilot and demonstration projects. We must encourage the use of renewable energy, because, as we well know, fossil fuel energy will not last forever: renewable energy will.

My final point on the economy is one that is obviously close to my heart — the euro. There are 50 days to go, and we act as though we are in an isolation box and will not be affected by the single currency. It is good that there are euro preparation forums up and down the country telling businesses what to do, but if I were to walk into the Canteen here with euros in my pocket, would the staff say, “Sorry, I cannot take those”? The public and businesses want to know what they are to do when someone from Dublin arrives and says that he wants to spend euros? We must get to grips with what will happen.

I want to compliment the Office of the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister and the Executive for progress on the post of children’s commissioner. It has been said that the commissioner will be in place by next April. Let us hope so; it is important. The finance for the post is important. The establishment of the post of children’s commissioner is not about handing over responsibility for children to one office and removing it from our jurisdiction. That must not be the case.

2.30 pm

As I said earlier, one child in every three in Northern Ireland is born into poverty. Per capita spending on

children’s services in Northern Ireland is £143; that is £74 less than in England. More children live in poverty here, yet we are spending less money on children’s services. That must be recognised, and something must be done about it. This issue is connected to the Department for Regional Development’s publication, ‘Shaping our Future’. Play strategies are important, but I do not see them anywhere. Local councils and other bodies need play strategies, not just playgrounds and street corners. The important issue is child care and the way in which we interact with children — *[Interruption]*.

Mr Speaker: Order. The Member is keen to promote family-friendly hours. By my calculation, if all the other Members whose names are currently on the speaking list speak for only the length of time that Ms Morrice has been on her feet, we shall not leave the House before 10.00 pm. Can the Member bring her remarks to a close?

Ms Morrice: I appreciate the need for family-friendly hours. Perhaps we could have play strategies in the Assembly — *[Interruption]*.

A Member: I thought that we had them already.

Mr Speaker: In view of recent events, I am not so sure. Perhaps the playground out there should be declared as being out of bounds for a while.

Ms Morrice: Twelve months down the line, when we examine what has been achieved by the Programme for Government, we will want to see results. We should be able to go to every man, woman and child in the street and ask what devolved government has done for them, and they should have a positive response.

The Chairperson of the Committee for Employment and Learning (Dr Birnie): I welcome this second draft Programme for Government. I would like to focus on public service agreements.

There are some general issues concerning public service agreements. If used properly, they are a useful innovation in governance. However, there is a danger that if the goalposts are shifted, they could become less meaningful. That may be happening in the Department for Employment and Learning. In the draft Programme for Government of February 2001, a target of attaining 550 Investors in People awards was set for March 2002. However, the current draft Programme for Government does not refer to such a target. The Department’s business plan for 2000-01 implies that the March 2002 target has been reduced from 550 to 535. Unfortunately, that change and the shifting of the goalposts in respect of public service agreements is not explicit in the current draft Programme for Government. That may seem like a quibble on my part, and, although a decrease in Investors in People awards by 15 will hardly revolutionise the Northern Ireland

economy or society, the principle of transparency in respect of public service agreements applies. I hope that other public service agreements that have been altered in an attempt to make them more attainable are not scattered throughout the draft programme.

There are many welcome references to the Department for Employment and Learning. In the First Minister's introduction, he rightly heralded the major increase in the number of study places in further and higher education. The Committee welcomes that increase. On page 17 of the draft programme it is recognised that there are some non-transferred areas of policy that have an impact on the vital cross-cutting issue of employability — for example, the United Kingdom Government's proposals for the integrated child credit and employment tax credits.

The horrendous problem of poor performance in respect of basic adult literacy and numeracy is highlighted on pages 30 to 31 elsewhere in the draft. As Chairperson of the Committee for Employment and Learning, I must ask whether the resources allocated to tackling these problems are adequate.

I want now to broaden my comments, no longer speaking as the Chairperson of the Committee for Employment and Learning. Mr Ford mentioned community relations, and few issues are more pressing for the Executive and the Assembly. I am pleased that the Executive aim to complete a review of community relations policy next year, which is indicated on page 13 of the draft.

As was revealed in the recent deliberations of the Committee of the Centre on a community relations strategy, £100 million of public money has been spent over the last 10 years in an attempt to improve community relations. That prompts me to ask what actual improvements were achieved by the £10 million per annum being spent on something that is clearly desirable. I hope that in the concluding deliberations of the review the right vision for a community relations policy will be borne in mind.

Of the Arab-Israeli problem, Amos Oz wrote that "rivers of coffee will not solve problems of land". The same is true here. Worthy initiatives in which children are taken to Portrush, or sent to France or the United States, may have a certain degree of benefit. However, it is unclear whether those schemes tackle the roots of poor community relations. Our conflict is not simply driven by a lack of knowledge of the "other" community, although it might be determined in part by that.

Mr B Hutchinson: Does the Member agree that the difficulty with community relations in this society has been that providing cucumber sandwiches and tea has been seen as the way forward? Does he agree that what we need before we have community relations is a community development base on which to build?

Furthermore, does he agree that we need to implement conflict resolution policies and that the Office of the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister should consider all of those matters and produce a report on the subject?

Dr Birnie: I thank the Member for his mini-speech. He has raised many points that are worthy of attention. The wrong vision for community relations would be one driven by a socially engineered attempt to assimilate differences. It should be about the toleration and management of difference, and some of the points made by Mr Hutchinson would help to advance those.

On page 15 of the document, the Executive undertake to consult by next year on the question of physical punishment of children in the home. Cruelty to children is possibly the worst form of cruelty. However, at this point, Northern Ireland is likely, in view of the general attitude here, to be closer to the approach that the Government in England and Wales have taken than the recent policy development in Scotland. The Scottish Parliament seems determined to introduce a politically correct ban on smacking.

Finally I will comment on the modernisation of public administration, the removal of unnecessary and duplicate layers of bureaucracy and finding new sources of funding. Those issues are covered from page 62 onwards of the draft Programme for Government. Ideally, we could do with a bonfire of the quangos, although that would have to be well considered.

Page 64 of the draft Programme for Government states that we should

"ensure that the rates" —

that is, the regional rates —

"provide an appropriate level of contribution towards funding for public expenditure and that there is an equitable distribution of the rate burden on households and businesses."

That is a noble aspiration, but it would prove difficult to achieve.

Keeping an up-to-date valuation for the rates is an issue that must be considered. In previous debates many Members expressed the feeling that there was an inequity on the commercial rating side. For instance, the perceived low level of rates paid by some of the newest and, presumably, highly profitable shopping centres are not relative to the levels paid by traditional shops on arterial routes such as those in the city of Belfast. There should be a low rate of tax but a wide base from which that tax is collected, and the two are related.

Do any of the rates exemptions need to be re-examined? Being in the teeth of a possible economic recession, this is probably not the right time to collect the possible £50 million to £60 million per annum of rates

from the industrial sector — which is currently exempt. However, the Executive should perhaps think of what may be possible in two or three years' time, when it is hoped that we will be moving into a cyclical upswing. Blanket rate exemptions have been a blunt instrument for improving industrial competitiveness. That applies to all firms, be they immense, multinational branch plants or small, entrepreneurial, rapidly growing companies. That incentive to industrial development was introduced several decades ago under conditions that are less applicable today.

I welcome the second draft Programme for Government; it is a significant achievement. Regional government is something to be cherished. Mistakes will continue to be made — that is only human — but at least they will now be made by local politicians.

The Chairperson of the Committee for Culture, Arts and Leisure (Mr O'Neill): I will confine myself to commenting in my role as Chairperson of the Committee on Culture, Arts and Leisure. As will be clear to any observer, the Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure has a significant contribution to make to each of the Executive's priorities. In that regard, the Committee for Culture, Arts and Leisure welcomes the fact that the revised draft Programme for Government highlights — in much greater detail than before — the role that the Department will play in the delivery of those policies. Almost all of the priorities refer in some way to the Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure's activities.

The Committee revised the presentation and content of the document, and, in particular, it included a section setting out the actions completed since the first Programme for Government. However, the Committee feels that it would have been helpful to have also included a brief summary of progress on some actions and of those that may have slipped.

The Committee welcomes the recognition given to the Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure's responsibilities by the inclusion in 'Growing as a Community' of a new sub-priority relating to cultural and linguistic diversity and maximising the benefits of culture, arts and leisure activities. We are concerned, however, that the draft Budget proposals for 2002-03 do not appear to support that important commitment through the allocation of additional resources to address clearly identified pressures in those areas.

2.45 pm

The chapter 'Working for a Healthier People' in the draft Programme for Government has obvious implications for the work of the Department, and the Sports Council in particular, in promoting the benefits of sport and physical activity. Comments in the debate on the Budget left me feeling that we would be foolish to suggest large cuts in the funding for Departments such

as the Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure. While that might result in immediate help to the health budget, in the longer term there would be disastrous consequences for the prevention of ill health. All modern research shows that one pound spent on prevention is worth hundreds of pounds to the future health budget. I draw Members' attention to a document produced by the Sports Council entitled 'The Value of Sport', which highlights the contribution that increased participation in physical activities can make to the health of our community and, consequently, to the health budget.

The Committee welcomes the reworking of the sub-priorities in the chapter entitled 'Investing in Education and Skills' in the Programme for Government. It notes that 50% of the sub-priorities now include a focus for the Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure. They recognise the Department's broad partnership role in promoting a culture of tolerance, developing creative potential and providing lifelong learning opportunities. I am glad to see the commitment to begin implementation of the unlocking creativity strategy.

We must recognise that the Department faces significant infrastructural challenges in respect of sub-priority 6, 'We will preserve our cultural and information resources and make them available to the widest possible audience'. The Committee is glad that the draft document makes specific reference to the rich cultural and information resources in our museums, the Public Record Office of Northern Ireland (PRONI) and our 126 public libraries.

We are, however, concerned that while some additional moneys have been made available for the electronic library project and for PRONI, funding for the National Museums and Galleries of Northern Ireland (MAGNI) continues to be based on an annual battle for inadequate baseline allocations. I have raised this critical issue before. It is resulting in the continuing neglect of the fabric of our museums and the accumulation of an operating deficit of some £2 million this year in MAGNI.

The Committee has agreed that if the draft Programme for Government sets out a commitment to developing electronic access to archives, libraries and museums, the draft Budget proposals must ensure that these valuable resources do not continue to suffer from the effects of pre-devolution cuts and years of underfunding.

Chapter 5, 'Securing a Competitive Economy', has implications for the Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure in respect of creative industries. The commitment to a programme of research on the potential development of creative industries and the production of a related action plan is noted. However, significant work has already been done in that area — for example, the unlocking creativity strategy, the future search process

and the recent production of the Arts Council's five-year arts plan.

The Committee hopes that the additional research required will be completed quickly and that the production of the action plan will be undertaken without undue delay, to avoid putting at risk the goodwill and support of the creative sector. The Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure also has an important role to play in increasing Northern Ireland's attractiveness to visitors. The Committee welcomes the recognition given to its activities by sub-priority 6.

The Committee is particularly pleased that sub-priority 9 reflects the recommendations made in its report on inland fisheries — which, incidentally, was unanimously accepted by the Assembly — on agricultural and industrial water pollution incidents and the need to protect wild salmon stocks.

Chapter 6 deals with the development of North/South, east-west and international relations. The Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure has an important contribution to make. The Committee notes that six of the seven sub-priorities relate directly to the Department's area of responsibility. In particular — and I cannot emphasise this strongly enough — the Committee hopes that the broad support indicated under sub-priority 5 for Imagine Belfast's bid to be named European Capital of Culture 2008 will be reflected in the final Budget proposals and Executive programme fund allocations for next year.

Mr J Kelly: Thank you, a Cheann Comhairle. I will be as brief as possible, given that so many Members are waiting to speak.

The development of an agreed Programme for Government and Budget by the Executive represents an important milestone in the peace process and the process of conflict resolution. Ultimately, the success of the peace process and the Good Friday Agreement will be judged by the changes delivered to those living in disadvantaged communities across the North, and in other parts of Ireland. This programme will address the social and economic needs of our people, as opposed to the conflict that has been addressed for the past 30 years. The Programme for Government is very important in that context.

The programme is not a socialist document, nor a radical agenda for change, but it points to a better future. It is not a static document, like the Good Friday Agreement, but a transitional programme for the future. One cannot be blinded to the programme's shortcomings, which stem from how the Budget is determined and allocated. Even the architect of the formula for determining the Budget allocation, Joel Barnett, has criticised its use because it does not reflect need and, in our case, has never done so. The present system is untenable, and its replacement must be a priority for the Executive in the days and months ahead. The Budget and the

limitations of the Programme for Government are a direct consequence of our being chained to the Barnett formula and the British Exchequer.

I share the concerns of others about the inadequate financial support of the Exchequer, which has inevitably set limits on what we, and our partners in Government, would have liked to do. The Irish Government should also provide additional funding because they, as well as the British Government, have a responsibility to this part of Ireland. We must also be responsible for gathering taxes, and determining how they are spent. That is another important element of the notion of sovereignty. Economic sovereignty must be a key goal for the immediate future.

It is also critical that the Executive have the power to target resources and investment to those areas and people at the greatest disadvantage. There is a great deal of inequality and poverty in our society, and both must be eradicated. That means that the Assembly — and it is notable that not too many of those Members who protest are here — must be able to channel investment to specific areas. Unless measures are put in place that actively encourage investors and investment into areas that have suffered disinvestment, discrimination and disadvantage, people will justifiably ask where the benefit and the peace dividend are.

In the weeks ahead, therefore, there will be an opportunity to discuss the programme, to identify its merits and, perhaps, to advocate change. We need an open and constructive debate on all those matters. Above all, the Programme for Government reflects the widespread desire for change throughout society on this island. We must make that change a reality. That means building a society based on justice and equality, where we are all committed to good, honest and transparent government that defends, protects and assertively advocates political, civic, social, economic and cultural rights for all as we move into this new era.

Health is mentioned time and time again. It is perhaps one of the most critical areas in our society. We all know from personal experience and from the experience of Committees that health is, to use a cliché, on a life-support machine. One of the key priorities of the document 'Well Into 2000' was to ensure that the policies of all Departments contribute fully to improving people's health, well-being and quality of life. That document recognised that health and well-being are not the sole responsibility of the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety. Many of the factors that have the greatest impact on health lie outside the control of the Department. In attempting to reach a consensus, each Department, especially the revolving Departments, has the onerous responsibility of ensuring that people's health and well-being — the bedrock — are prioritised, and that mechanisms are in

place to ensure that the health of the community is protected, guided and guarded.

The Ministerial Group on Public Health (MGPH), chaired by Tony Worthington, drew its membership from across Departments such as Education and Environment and was charged with the development of an interdepartmental public health programme. That group is now in abeyance. We ought to bring it together again. Structures and mechanisms should be put in place to monitor and health-proof the policies and strategies of Departments and their agencies to ensure that they contribute to the health and well-being of the population. There is a collective responsibility on the Executive to ensure that.

It is important that it should not be simply a paper exercise whereby recommendations for policy alteration by the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety can later be ignored. Any Department not complying with the audit requirements or adopting its recommendations must seek a resolution of the issue with the full Executive in collective mode.

Several options could achieve that integrated approach. One is the reconstruction of the MGPH. A priority, however, should be the establishment of an audit unit in the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety and mechanisms to deal with interdepartmental co-operation on health in the Six Counties. Once functioning effectively, interdepartmental public health could become an area for cross-border co-operation within the remit of the Council of Ministers.

Does the Minister agree — and this is not a political point — the expansion of North/South co-operation could aid economic development? I refer, for instance, to the fuel crisis. It could give significant benefits in savings and service delivery. Will the Minister make a statement on the actions, measures, targets and commitments in the Programme for Government that build on the contribution that North/South co-operation can make to our economic and social well-being?

Does the Minister agree that concerted action is needed to eliminate the unequal distribution of resources and investment west of the Bann? That area was shamefully neglected over the last 30 years. Will he make a statement on specific actions, measures and commitments in the programme aimed at directing investors to areas such as my constituency of Mid Ulster?

I recognise the restrictions on a more ambitious Programme for Government that are created by the insufficient block grant from the British Exchequer. However, there is a collective commitment to press the British Government for a fairer allocation of funds, and it is the collective responsibility of the Executive to address that forcefully with the British Exchequer.

3.00 pm

Due to the financial restrictions that are placed on the Executive by the block grant, there are clear limits on our ambition to make a difference. If we are to address the legacy of underfunding and poor comparison with our neighbours, a substantial increase in the money that is available to the Executive is urgently needed. I ask the Executive, and the Minister, to address that as urgently and as comprehensively as they can.

Mr Beggs: I welcome today's democratic debate, and I hope that our Ministers will continue to listen to constructive criticism from Members.

Section 4.7, sub-priority 5, of the draft Programme for Government recognises that there are financial, cultural and geographical barriers that discourage many people from taking up education and training opportunities. Those are fine words, but my constituents and I will judge them on outcomes. Once again, I remind Members that my constituency has no further education campus. The technical college in Larne was closed and demolished, and the sale of the excess land has not been completed. The people of Larne do not have a permanent focus for further education. If educational opportunities are to be improved, that difficulty must be overcome. Consultants for the CORE group of district councils have highlighted the unacceptably high proportion of the population in Larne and Carrickfergus who have NVQ level 4 qualifications or lower. I have no doubt that that is a result of the lack of further education opportunities in my constituency.

There has been little expenditure by the Educational Guidance Service for Adults in East Antrim, despite the absence of a further education college. If we are to improve education and training opportunities, the Programme for Government must provide practical outcomes. The Programme for Government acknowledges that 24% of adults fail to reach the basic international standards for numeracy and literacy. That happens in East Antrim, as it does in other constituencies. At present, the system fails to provide educational opportunities in my constituency. I would like to see clear action to follow the fine words and improvements in opportunities for basic and intermediate level education in East Antrim. Such action would target social need and would be an important factor in improving the economic competitiveness of Northern Ireland plc. Many people included in the 24% figure may be in work, and others may be seeking employment in a diminishing pool. I hope that the number of people with poor numeracy and literacy levels will decrease. We must improve the quality of our workforce to remain competitive internationally.

I welcome the Programme for Government's commitment to revising the school support programme, improving performance in low-achieving schools and revising the literacy and numeracy strategies and the

Northern Ireland curriculum. Parts of the educational system that fail our children must be addressed. Education must motivate children; it must be appropriate. Children must be switched on to it. Many children pass through our schools and do not get as much as they should from the system.

Section 4.3, sub-priority 1, outlines the commitment to provide, by March 2003, one year of pre-school education for every child whose parents wish it. Again, I am pleased with the commitment to increase provision from 85%, but that must not be simply a grand statement from Government; it must be realised practically. I have highlighted the difficulties that small pre-school playgroups face because of the Department of Education's current policy. If a plan such as that highlighted in the Programme for Government is to work, creating opportunities for everyone in Northern Ireland, the current criteria must be reassessed. Geographical distances must be practical for the childminders, grannies and granddads who look after children, but who may not have a car.

It is inappropriate to require that there must be eight children in the immediate pre-school year for playgroups to qualify for funding, irrespective of the recent report by the Education and Training Inspectorate and irrespective of the long-term sustainability of a particular group. I know of playgroups with high quality assessments and numbers that are sustainable in the long-term that were about to be dropped because they did not have eight children. Fortunately, because of the closure of another group, the playgroup that I was involved with was able to continue. However, the questions about the process affect the rural community in particular. Why should the criteria cut people in such areas off from that opportunity? It is not always possible for children to travel from outlying villages into towns to get to pre-school playgroups. If we are to offer the service to everyone, we must follow the Scottish example — that system offers flexibility in areas where parents have little choice.

Paragraph 3.6 addresses the modernisation and improvement of hospitals and primary care services. Why have Health Service quangos and bureaucracy not been tackled before? There are no public representatives on the health boards and trusts as of right. The members are all appointees — it is a quangoland. I do not understand why a review must be delayed until an overall review of public administration begins. I see the benefit to be gained from removing a layer of bureaucracy as soon as possible, and I see even more benefit in shortening lines of communication and increasing transparency.

When money is put into the system, we should be able to see what the output is, who is delivering the service and how effectively they do it. At present, no one has a clue about what happens to the money that

goes into the system. I have limited experience in the world of private business — I do not claim to be a business guru — but I know that basic business principles require short chains of command and clear lines of responsibility. People should know what happens to the money, who is making mistakes, how to correct them, and whether value for money is being achieved. None of those questions can be answered by the current system. We will not save huge amounts of money only by reforming the boards. The benefits to the citizens of Northern Ireland of transparency, accountability and an understanding of how effectively the system works will be huge. I hope that that will proceed as soon as possible.

Other areas of the Health Service, such as occupational therapy, are failing badly. We are talking about providing effective care and treatment of patients, but I have been shocked to learn from recent constituency enquiries that priority-assessment occupational therapy cases were referred in May. What sort of priority is that? The idea of a two-week priority system, which is in the detail of the Programme for Government, is a million miles from what is happening. We are not delivering what should be delivered. From my knowledge of the current structure of the board, I can see that we are witnessing an outworking of the inequality in the funding of the community care sector in different parts of Northern Ireland. That board structure must be reformed. Irrespective of how many hospitals there are in an area, people should be entitled to the same level of community care as people elsewhere. My constituents did not decide what form of hospital service would exist in their area; central Government determined that. Likewise, the community care service in my area should be equal to the service in other areas. I was recently informed of a shortage of basic wheelchairs, even though statements are made about the availability of electrically operated wheelchairs. Those who need a basic wheelchair ought to get it without delay.

Has there been any assessment of the value for money of each part of the system? The current convoluted system does not allow such assessment. There are too many chains of command and bureaucracy, little power bases and empires. We are not getting the value for money that allows us to do more for patients. There must be reform.

There is a poor standard of community care in my area. I have been advised that services could be cut next year because there is less money than before, despite the fact that my area has the lowest level of per capita funding. There is something badly wrong with that. We must deliver timely and effective care and treatment for all patients and not just talk about it.

Those are the challenges that face Ministers, Committees, and Members. I assure the House that I will continue to harass and embarrass when necessary

to get value for money. In my work with the Committee for Employment and Learning and the Public Accounts Committee, I will do my bit to improve the quality of life for all our citizens, and I hope that we will be successful.

Ms Lewsley: I apologise to Members for my absence at the beginning of the sitting. I had to attend a Committee that otherwise would have been inquorate. I may have to leave after my contribution, and I also apologise if my remarks duplicate anything that has been said.

I have read the draft Programme for Government with interest. The additional commitments are welcome, particularly on disability, education and equality. I welcome the commitment to improved co-ordination between Departments, agencies and local government. That is an important aspect of policy and programme development and will provide vital links and partnerships between the statutory, voluntary, and private sectors and local communities.

The pledge to implement improvements to the delivery of social security services for people with disabilities and the elderly is a step towards promoting social inclusion for the most vulnerable people. It is commendable that there is a commitment to tackling inequalities in healthcare that recognises the particular problems faced by those with a disability, a mental health difficulty, or a chronic or terminal illness. That will enable such people to achieve a reasonable standard of living and integration in society.

We must give recognition, support and funding to hidden and rare diseases. Carers play a vital role and deserve a level of support that reflects their invaluable work. Without them, the pressures on an already overburdened system would be impossible to cope with. Carers are often left with the sole responsibility for the care of an ill or disabled person, and they can become isolated and suffer from low self-esteem and low self-confidence. Caring should be recognised as a profession and not taken for granted as a family responsibility. Carers often give up their careers — or put them on hold — in order to care for a sick relative or friend in need. There must be a cross-departmental initiative to address some of the issues relating to carers. Such people deserve our respect, recognition and support for their invaluable contribution to society.

3.15 pm

The right to choose is also vital. People with disabilities and their carers should have as many choices available to them as possible. They must be allowed to take control of their life and achieve a level of independence commensurate with their condition. Every individual is a part of the community and has the right to develop a social network within that community. I welcome the commitment to equality and choice for people with disabilities and their families or carers. Choice in

matters such as direct payments, day-centres, respite care and employment is vital to decisions about what is best for an individual's needs. We must ensure that people with disabilities, and their carers or families, have a good quality of life. In order to achieve that, people with disabilities and their families should have as many options as possible available to them. That allows them to take control of their life rather than having others decide what is best for them.

The joint initiative by the Department for Employment and Learning and the Department of Education to provide disabled access in schools and colleges of further education illustrates the positive effects of interdepartmental co-operation on such issues. I welcome the improved access to public services, but it is not simply a question of physical access to a building through the front door. The key issue is access to all the facilities and services inside that building.

The review of school funding is an important measure that will ensure equality of opportunity between school types and will better target social and educational need. I welcome the holistic approach to education, with the assurance of a continued increase in pre-school provision and out-of-school learning opportunities. The review of the 11-plus, local management of schools funding and the curriculum will promote a broader-based approach to our children's education and will include their social and educational needs. To ensure a high standard of education for all pupils, we must consider the state of the schools estate. Too many schools depend on sub-standard mobile accommodation, which has a detrimental effect on pupils and staff.

The problem of underachievement — especially among socially disadvantaged children — must still be tackled. That issue has been given a high level of priority, but we must work pro-actively to maintain the support programmes for underachieving schools. I welcome the pledge to continue with the reading recovery programme and the support for small primary schools.

Teachers are one of our most precious resources. They are an intrinsic part of the education system, and they are entitled to equality. Our teaching force is of the highest quality. I have said previously that entrants to higher education institutions for teachers in Northern Ireland require 21 points at A level, while the English equivalent is only 13 points. The teaching force is highly trained and motivated, and the slavish duplication of English solutions to English problems merely exacerbates the problems faced by Northern Ireland teachers. The Department of Education argues that it must maintain parity with teachers' pay in England and Wales. Teachers in Northern Ireland should have financial parity and be given the equivalent resources on a pro rata basis. Surely the point of devolution is to allow us to use our wit and intelligence to spend the resources better, without sacrificing the parity-at-least

principle espoused by the General Teaching Council for Northern Ireland.

In pursuit of providing a safe learning environment, attempts to eliminate bullying and disruptive behaviour continue to be high on the agenda. We need a policy to deal with the issue fairly and ensure that schools have guidelines for dealing with problems as they arise, if we are to safeguard the rights of all our children.

The progress on the appointment of a commissioner for children and on the children's fund is laudable. It reflects the general opinion that it is important to involve children in decisions that affect them, if we are to promote social inclusion. It also shows children that their opinions and beliefs are respected and will be taken into consideration in the planning of Government policy and legislation, thus giving them parity of esteem. We need a strong, visionary children's strategy, alongside the work of the commissioner for children.

I am concerned about the lack of care places for children, especially those under 16 years of age who have had to leave home because of family breakdowns. Many of those vulnerable children end up living rough on the streets or they become involved in antisocial activities. The lack of suitable accommodation contributes to the cycle of poverty and social exclusion.

The Promoting Social Inclusion report has opened up the debate on travellers. The report itself has several flaws, the main one being a lack of true statistical data. The working group also neglected to include representatives of local government who have delivered traveller services for many years and who have a wealth of experience in travellers' issues.

The Programme for Government has committed the Assembly to introducing a single equality Bill by 2002. The initial consultation was conducted recently. Issues such as race relations — taking account of the Equality Commission's proposals for changes to Northern Ireland's existing race relations legislation — sex discrimination, equal pay and recommendations by the disability rights task force should be included in the Bill. That will put Northern Ireland ahead of Great Britain in equality legislation, and, although there cannot be total harmonisation of all issues, there is scope to look at features unique to each kind of discrimination.

The commitments made in the Programme for Government demonstrate the Executive's willingness to promote a socially inclusive society in Northern Ireland and to reflect that inclusion in future policy-making.

The Chairperson of the Committee of the Centre (Mr Poots): The Committee of the Centre sent its initial views on the Programme for Government to the Office of the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister in July, and the Committee's detailed response to that office's element in the draft programme was sent on 10

October. In July, the Committee agreed that the priorities set out in the Programme for Government were relevant and should not be changed.

The sub-priorities most relevant to the Committee of the Centre are: promoting equality of opportunity and human rights; improving community relations and tackling the divisions in our society; addressing the needs of victims; protecting children's rights, meeting children's needs and including children's voices; tackling social need and social inclusion; developing effective links in Europe; and developing effective representation in, and relations with, North America. Members will be aware of the importance that the Committee attaches to those areas.

The Committee is about to undertake an inquiry into our EU policy, and it hopes to give some direction to the Assembly's current EU policy. There appears to be a great deal of confusion about which Departments have EU responsibilities, and because of that we may be losing out. The Committee is determined to get to the bottom of those issues and, where possible, to assist in the development of a more strategic EU policy.

The Committee of the Centre is committed to ensuring that the Office of the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister delivers on its promise to vulnerable groups such as children and victims. Chapter 7 of the draft Programme for Government, 'Working Together', is not categorised as one of the five priority areas. The sub-priorities most relevant to the Committee in that area are modernising government, making government more accessible, and the reform of public administration. The Committee has already registered its concerns about the ability of the Office of the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister to deliver on its Programme for Government targets, particularly those relating to the children's commissioner. Funding has not been set aside for the children's commissioner — a post due to be established in June 2002. The argument coming from the Office of the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister about the children's commissioner is that it is unable to say what the appropriate level of funding should be. Nevertheless, we have not sought to have funding at this stage, and only marker bids have been put down. There is serious concern in the Committee about that issue.

The reform of public administration was promised three years ago. When the Assembly was set up, the people of Northern Ireland were promised that quangos would get the chop and that there would be a major reform of public administration. We were supposed to examine local authorities and consider whether we really needed 26 local councils, with 26 chief executives and all the related personnel.

Yesterday, the Minister of the Environment told Mr Shannon that some of the things that he was asking for

were premature. Perhaps the Minister was premature when he announced at his party conference one and a half years ago that there would be a review of public administration. We have not had a description of what the review should be about, and no finance has been put in place for it. It will take a lot of money to conduct the review. Such matters must be considered.

The implementation date for the cross-departmental community relations strategy is given as the end of 2002. That date has already slipped considerably from the original target for implementation, which was given as "by 2002". The Committee asked whether that should not be taken forward more quickly, given the ongoing tensions and difficulties in many communities. The junior Ministers have stated that every effort will be made to complete the work as soon as possible. We remain to be convinced. We will wait and see.

The date for the implementation of the victims' strategy is shown as the end of 2001. The Committee asked how likely that was, given that consultation on the strategy closed only on 9 November. The junior Ministers told the Committee that they still hoped to have it in place by the end of the year. The Committee hopes that that will be the case, because the expectations of victims' groups have been raised by the Office of the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister. The Committee is concerned about the implications for victims if the cross-departmental strategy is delayed.

In a letter to the junior Ministers on 10 October, the Committee commented on the lack of specific or measurable targets for several areas within the Office of the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister. The Committee was also concerned about how performance would be monitored against targets. In reply, the junior Ministers advised that the draft public service agreements were strategic documents and that the service delivery agreements would set out how the objectives and targets would be achieved. We were told in February that the annual service delivery agreements would be published for all Departments and agencies, setting out the levels of service that the public could expect. Where are they? When will the Committees see them? Is the Assembly expected to sign off the Programme for Government without seeing those key documents?

I am sure that Members will be surprised to learn of the junior Ministers' response to the Committee's question about measurable targets. They advised that, given the nature of the work of the Office of the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister, it might not be possible to have quantifiable, time-bounded targets in every case. Members will have their own view on that approach to planning. One of the objectives set out in the draft Programme for Government for the Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister includes a commitment to improving public services. Perhaps that approach to planning helps to explain why even

the most fundamental aspects of the review of public administration have not been sorted out.

3.30 pm

I hope that OFMDFM does not apply the same approach to other aspects of public service that affect its own planning. The Committee sent its detailed response on the draft Programme for Government to OFMDFM on 10 October. On 5 November, the junior Ministers wrote to the Committee about today's debate. On 6 November, the junior Ministers responded to the Committee's detailed letter. On 7 November, a few hours before the weekly Committee meeting, the Committee was sent an invitation to a seminar on the Programme for Government to be run jointly by OFMDFM and the Department of Finance and Personnel on 14 November in Armagh. The Office of the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister may consider that submitting a response to the Committee four working days before such an important debate is sufficient. I do not. Perhaps OFMDFM and the Department of Finance and Personnel consider that five working days' notice is sufficient for Committee members. I do not. If this is indicative of OFMDFM's approach to organisation and planning, that will do little to increase the Committee's confidence in the ability of that office to meet its objectives and to deliver its targets.

I will discuss briefly a few other matters in the Programme for Government, as a constituency representative rather than as Committee Chairperson.

The first is a health issue, which several Members have covered. Sub-priority 4 states:

"We will modernise and improve hospital and primary care services to ensure more timely and effective care and treatment for patients".

Many Members tell the public that things have improved dramatically since devolution, and that if it were not for devolution, things would be much worse. I will raise a few issues about what has happened in regard to health since devolution.

Hospital wards have been closed in my area. Old people have been removed from hospital wards as a result of cutbacks, and some have been put in homes. Others have been put out of homes to accommodate those who were put out of hospital wards. That has not improved our Health Service.

We have a new casualty unit that was paid for by property that was sold off in Lisburn, and the Chairman of the Finance and Personnel Committee objected to that. It is common for people to wait for four to five hours for treatment in that casualty unit. That is not satisfactory and the situation has not improved since devolution.

Constituents have contacted me recently to say that their parents in nursing homes have been asked to come up with £15 per week to supplement the service, because

the homes do not have enough finance. One individual who came to me is on social security, living on the minimum wage, and cannot afford £15. She is concerned that her mother could be dumped on the street because she has not got £15 to pay the nursing home. The Health Service has not improved in that regard.

The Programme for Government refers to reducing waiting lists, and has attempted to do that by directing additional resources towards the Health Service. What has happened? The latest reports show that waiting lists have increased. I spoke to the Province's leading cancer surgeon who said that he was having tremendous difficulty in carrying out operations because there were not enough intensive care beds. He had to go to patients, after they were prepared for surgery, apologise, and tell them that their operations were being cancelled because no intensive care beds were available.

We have a growing list of patients who require heart treatment. What has happened since devolution? One of the Province's leading heart surgeons has left the Province because of the incompetent way in which the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety is run, and the fact that nursing staff are not available to treat and care for heart surgery patients. Heart surgeons in Northern Ireland cannot conduct their work to full capacity because nursing staff is inadequate to deliver on the ground. No nurses are available, because some people in management thought that it was a good idea to not accord nurses the grades that reflected their responsibilities in the belief that management would keep the grades down and still get the nursing staff. However, the nurses looked to other careers with the result that a crisis in nursing has arisen. Young people are looking elsewhere. The people of Northern Ireland have had a raw deal since devolution as regards healthcare.

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development spoke on Sunday about the benefits of having a local Agriculture Minister. She expanded on how well the foot-and-mouth disease situation was handled. However, considerable credit for the handling of the foot-and-mouth disease crisis has to go to the Chief Veterinary Officer for Northern Ireland who advised the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development throughout that crisis. Northern Ireland benefits from having someone of his ability, who is recognised as an expert in his field, not only in the farming community but in the veterinary world and further afield.

Mr Byrne: Will the Member give way?

Mr Poots: Yes.

Mr Byrne: Does the Member accept that the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development took a strategic decision when she decided to close the ports at the start of the foot-and-mouth disease crisis?

Mr Poots: I accept that that was a strategic decision taken on the basis of the advice that the Minister received from her Chief Veterinary Officer. She would have been foolish not to accept that advice. Similarly, a direct-rule Minister would have been foolish not to heed the advice of the Chief Veterinary Officer. However, the political punch was required this time last year when the opportunity — *[Interruption]*.

Mr Speaker: Order. I ask the Member, as I have done with other Members who have spoken for a similar length of time, if he would draw his remarks to a close. The number of Members that are due to speak means that we shall be sitting late this evening.

Mr Poots: Thank you, Mr Speaker. I shall draw my remarks to a close.

When the Minister had the opportunity to have the BSE ban lifted, she really needed to move and she did not. This time last year, there was an opportunity to have the BSE ban lifted. Farmers are still suffering as a consequence.

Dr O'Hagan: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. I shall be as brief as possible. I apologise that due to previous engagements I shall be unable to stay until the end of the debate.

The draft Programme for Government is, in the round, a well-intentioned document. The constraints imposed on it are budgetary, and the House is aware of those constraints. There is no point in continually restating the obvious. Our challenge is to work together to create stronger cross-cutting initiatives and to prioritise effectively.

The draft Programme for Government can be described as modest in many areas. However, the fact that, in ways, the Executive have not worked together cohesively, or have not worked at all, points to the DUP's failure to involve itself in the Executive. My party looks forward to the consolidation of the Executive, because our society needs fundamental change. As we now bed down the process, there is a responsibility to improve and build on the foundations, not least in improving the level of financial resources at our disposal.

Chapter 5 of the draft Programme for Government is, entitled 'Securing a Competitive Economy'. The Committee for Enterprise, Trade and Investment held an inquiry into 'Strategy 2010', at which many related issues arose. There should be greater emphasis in chapter 5 on the depth and extent of current economic problems. There is a need to outline the poor performance and the fundamentally flawed, heavily subsidised and uncompetitive nature of the Northern economy with its associated poverty and disadvantage. The failure of past policies and bodies and the detrimental effect of partition must also be highlighted. That is reflected by the large subvention that is required to keep the North's economy afloat.

The difference between what is spent by the Government and what is raised in revenue is around 30% to 40% of GDP.

Sub-priorities in this chapter should also state that the Government are working to create higher, more sustainable rates of economic development involving a more equitable distribution of the fruits of greater economic growth, and to fundamentally restructure the economic base that is the legacy of decades of political and military conflict. That will involve a fundamental shift in economic resources from conflict-related to useful, social and productive economics.

In the chapter that deals with the need to create employment, there should be greater emphasis on the need for good wages and working conditions. There is a need to counter low pay and poor and exploitative working conditions and arrangements. The role of trade unions in the workplace must also be recognised explicitly. We do not want to be a low-wage economy with the erosion of workers' rights.

Greater emphasis must be placed on the Government's commitment to adequately deal with and eradicate long-term unemployment, to seriously tackle the unemployment differential that adversely affects young Catholic males, and to ensure that TSN and policy appraisal and fair treatment (PAFT) policies are implemented. There is a need to recognise the involvement of local communities in economic policy formulation, given that they should be the beneficiaries of economic policy. That would be in line with the opening sentence of chapter 5, which outlines the Executive's aim of achieving a cohesive, inclusive and just society — an aspiration that receives no further mention.

There is also a need to emphasise that the creation of a more competitive economy must promote a more equal, just economy and society. People's lives should be improved through economic development.

Only passing reference is made in the draft Programme for Government to the work of InterTradeIreland. That body's work must be explicitly recognised, as must the benefits of an all-Ireland economy.

The new investment agency must be fully accountable, and must be an improvement on bodies such as the IDB and LEDU, which, it was widely accepted, failed. There must be a shift in industrial policy away from the failings of the past. In that regard, I look to the recent loss of the manufacturing base in my constituency of Upper Bann. Factories and companies that had been in business for a long time and that were accepted to be "good payers" have been affected. Companies such as Courtaulds, NACCO Materials Handling (NI) Ltd — which used to be Hyster (NI) Ltd — Interface Europe Ltd and Glendennings, a textile factory, face redundancies and closure. Inward investment policies and the granting of large amounts of public money to

large companies must be closely scrutinised and monitored.

The draft Programme for Government does not place enough emphasis on energy. The Committee for Enterprise, Trade and Investment is reaching the end of an energy inquiry. One of the big issues for a competitive economy is high energy costs, particularly those relating to electricity. Issues such as the creation of an all-Ireland energy strategy, the promotion of renewable energy, how to eradicate fuel poverty and how to ensure that there is fuel diversity need to be examined.

I am concerned by the Programme for Government's general thrust in favour of privatisation, or, in more user-friendly terms, PFI and PPP. The Executive need to look seriously at the Committee for Finance and Personnel's report on PPP and PFI, and especially at its agreed conclusion that the preferred option for financing public services is through public funding. Go raibh maith agat.

Mr McCarthy: Many aspects of the Programme for Government are encouraging. However, the sole subject on which I wish to speak fills me with horror and dismay. Every Member who has spoken has mentioned it — the Health Service. I was disappointed by last year's Programme for Government, so it will come as no surprise that I am equally disappointed by the latest document.

3.45 pm

Once again the Executive have failed some of the most vulnerable in our society. They failed the ill, the elderly, people with learning difficulties, those with mental health problems — the list goes on. The health proposals are inadequate to address the problems that our system faces annually and the problems posed by diseases that are far too prevalent, especially during the winter months.

The draft Programme for Government does not promise to tackle the waiting lists. Instead it includes a commitment to contain waiting lists at current levels, by maintaining levels of nursing and other front-line staff. Nurses, doctors and ancillary staff are at breaking point and can take no more. Is that the message that the Executive want to send out to the people of Northern Ireland? I certainly hope not.

In his statement yesterday on the September monitoring round, Mr Durkan stated that

"In considering those issues, we came to the view that health, education and roads were among the services facing the most acute difficulties, and they would have to be given some priority." — [*Official Report, Bound Volume 13, p.3*].

I agree with those priorities; at least we are making slight progress. In his concluding remarks, the Minister said that

“we must face up to the hard choices that lie ahead and take the tough and unavoidable decisions that confront us”. — [*Official Report, Bound Volume 13, p.5*].

He continued:

“The Executive will not shirk this responsibility”. — [*Official Report, Bound Volume 13, p.5*].

I hope that the Minister will adhere to that statement.

This morning, the First Minister spoke of the vast sums of money being pumped into the Health Service. Why are we still so far behind in many aspects of delivering a decent health provision to our community? We should be ashamed of the degrading treatment that so many patients receive. First, we had waiting lists for beds. We then had people waiting on trolleys, and then people waiting on chairs. What will be next? People waiting for bare floors? We see such images from war-torn Afghanistan on our television screens. That is inexcusable. The First Minister stated that millions of pounds will be allocated to the Health Service, but drastic action is needed, and it is needed now.

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety said not so long ago that she did not want to be a Minister of a service that could only provide trolley-waits. I implore the Executive and health administrators to overcome the crisis without delay and to give the Minister the support that she needs. We need more staff throughout all areas of the Health Service.

The Royal Victoria Hospital’s anaesthetics department is currently undermanned by six, and shortages are occurring in all our hospitals. Is it any wonder that waiting lists for surgery and hospital beds stretch for months and years. That is an unacceptable situation for any right-thinking person.

The much-loved Jubilee Maternity Hospital was closed with the promise that a new cancer centre would be built, thus offering the people of Northern Ireland the kind of services that are taken for granted across the Western World. However, our cancer services lag woefully behind. The Executive must take immediate steps to provide that facility without delay.

Like many others, I am disappointed and unable to accept the decision to defer free nursing care for our elderly. The policy is iniquitous and plain wrong, yet it is also short-sighted and contradicts the decision taken unanimously in the House earlier this year.

We face the problem of bed-blocking in which elderly patients are kept in beds because the necessary care is unavailable should they be released from hospital. With proper nursing care, we could overcome that problem and free up many more acute beds, thus helping to contain and even reduce waiting lists.

Scotland and England have agreed to provide free nursing and personal care for the elderly. The elderly in Northern Ireland surely deserve the same rights.

The Northern Ireland Human Rights Commission has published ‘Enhancing the Rights of Older People’, a document that focuses on the human rights of the elderly. I appeal to the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister to read it and take on board all the human rights issues that affect elderly people.

While I am disappointed and angry at the minimal aims for the health sector in the draft Programme for Government, I have little faith in any Executive promise — I hope that I am proved wrong. As a result of the lack of sufficient funding and poor resource management, many of the aims of the last Programme for Government will be unfulfilled. Perhaps the Executive do not want to raise my hopes that change will occur in the Health Service or that healthcare will improve.

I am disappointed by the Executive’s performance on its commitments in the last Programme for Government and by the budget for health and the elderly. I am also disappointed that the current Programme for Government does not go nearly far enough towards tackling some of the major health issues in Northern Ireland. The Assembly and Executive must lead and deliver a decent Health Service now. According to Minister Durkan’s speech yesterday, health is our number-one priority. Let us provide that service without delay.

The Chairperson of the Committee for Education (Mr Kennedy): I speak first as Chairperson of the Education Committee, but I will make comments of my own on several important issues.

Unfortunately, due to unavoidable circumstances, the Education Committee has not had the opportunity to question the Minister of Education on the draft Programme for Government prior to this debate. The Committee looks forward to rectifying that situation when it meets on Thursday. I will highlight several relevant education issues. I am sorry that the Minister of Education is not in his place.

The importance of education to our children cannot and must not be underestimated. It is critical to improving self-confidence and social exclusion and to securing a competitive economy in Northern Ireland. I make no apology for reiterating that investment in education is an investment in this country’s future.

I welcome the statement in the draft Programme for Government that education and training at all levels have a central role, not only because of their social impact, but as major engines of the economy. Education, therefore, must remain a priority. We must focus on the provision of high-quality education for all. The ongoing major reviews of post-primary education, local management of schools (LMS) funding, and the curriculum will help to achieve that. Account must be taken of the results of the consultation exercises and the wide range of views that will undoubtedly be expressed. A consensus must be reached on the way forward. The

necessary funding must also be found if we are to make progress.

The Education Committee believes that investment in early-years learning and early intervention initiatives will result in savings in the longer term. The Committee welcomes the programme's objective of providing, by March 2003, one year of pre-school education for every child whose parents wish it. We are pleased that that is on course for achievement. However, we need to examine the provision itself and decide whether it is the most appropriate and effective means. It is not enough to just provide the places.

The emphasis placed on such initiatives as reading recovery projects and support to underachieving schools is necessary and welcome. However, at current levels some schools have a continual struggle to provide the core curriculum for their pupils. Those schools have had to make teachers redundant, either to stay within their budget or to reduce their deficits. That results in larger or composite classes. I appreciate that, because of limited resources, hard decisions must be made, but our priority must be to provide a core education and to ensure that schools can educate all pupils to an appropriate level.

The Education Committee was alarmed that the new targets for numeracy and literacy set in the Department of Education's public service agreement earlier this year were lower than those outlined in the strategy for numeracy and literacy. While the Education Committee appreciated the Department's claim that the targets needed to be achievable, we argued that they also had to stretch pupils and justify the resources being spent. I am concerned that the target for the percentage of 14-year-olds at or above the expected standard of literacy and numeracy for their age has been reduced in the draft Programme for Government from 75% to 72% in both English and maths.

According to the Department of Education, the targets have been revised in the light of trends emerging from the Key Stage 3 assessments in 2000. It appears that if we are not on course to achieve the targets, we simply reduce them. That is not good enough. Surely we have a fundamental responsibility to provide all children with an appropriate level of numeracy and literacy to enable them to make a real contribution to our society. Is that not the basic aim of education?

I have no doubt that the Education Committee will pursue that issue with the Minister and his Department. I am aware that numeracy and literacy strategies are currently under review, and my Committee will wish to consider closely the results to establish how well the programmes are working and to assess what improvements can be made.

I am pleased that a new target date of spring 2002 has been set for the launch of a comprehensive review

of public administration. The Education Committee believes that it is necessary to improve the efficiency and effectiveness of public services and to maximise output. In view of the large amount that is currently spent on education administration, any review should assess the role of non-departmental public bodies and make that a top priority. I would welcome more detail on the proposed timescale for the completion of the review and the issues that it will cover.

The Programme for Government will be judged according to what is achieved and whether the public believes that it has made a difference to the services provided.

Although it is essential to ensure that the priorities are the right ones, it is equally important to have objectives and targets in place to enable us to monitor and measure progress, and to ensure that results are achieved.

4.00 pm

I was pleased to note the commitment given by Sir Reg Empey and Mr Mallon, in their joint statement to the Assembly on 24 September, that quarterly reports would be available in order to help us monitor progress. Given that public service agreements now focus on high-level targets, it is essential that the draft service delivery agreements be made available to the Committees for consideration and consultation, so that they can be published without delay.

On a personal note, I welcome the fact that the Department for Regional Development will find additional funding to upgrade and maintain rural and minor roads. As a representative of a largely rural constituency, I consider that to be a priority.

I agree with the Members who expressed concern about the long delays in the Health Service. We need urgent action from the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to reduce the waiting lists for small, yet necessary, operations.

I also welcome the commitment to examine the effect of rating on properties in Northern Ireland. I ask the Minister for Social Development to give due and urgent consideration to the measure that will abolish the payment of rates on community halls. Facilities such as Orange halls and Irish National Foresters' halls provide an essential service to local communities and should not have to face the high charges and overheads that rates involve. Those halls contribute greatly to the local community, and such a measure would be comparatively cheap to implement and would have real meaning for people in Northern Ireland.

I implore the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to consider creating a good-causes fund that would be unconnected to lottery funding. I understand that such a fund exists in the Republic of Ireland, and central

Government or local government administers it. It enables church bodies and groups that conscientiously object to gambling to avail themselves of much needed public funds. I hope that the Minister will consider that.

Mrs Courtney: I apologise for not being here for the whole debate. I have followed it. I welcome the opportunity to speak on the draft Programme for Government. It is a comprehensive document, which provides many challenges in the fields of health, education, infrastructure, environment and the review of public administration. We also face the challenge of the global slow-down that has begun adversely to affect Northern Ireland's foreign and direct investment, trade and tourism. Yesterday's plane crash in New York, and the events of 11 September, might ensure that American tourists do not travel this year.

The Committee for Enterprise, Trade and Investment considered the draft Programme for Government, but I shall not comment in my capacity as a member. The Committee feels that it would be appropriate to have a template for a three-year programme, to commence on 1 April 2002, with a corporate plan for the same period. An action plan and a summary to declare what has been achieved and what is still needed would also help, and it would make Committee business easier. Adopting either the Welsh or Scottish model might also be beneficial, as they both offer greater transparency.

It is important to note that, owing to the economic slow-down, other budgets, such as social services, will require more expenditure. That will have a significant effect on some regions. For example, in the north-west, industrial structures are more heavily committed to manufacturing. In the north-west, there is also a higher proportion of job-shedding industries, such as clothing. That should also be monitored.

The economic development strategy has not achieved its objective of closing the unemployment gap. That is at odds with the Government's determination to secure equality of opportunity. Clearly, social and economic development, in the north-west in particular, was hindered by the troubles. Unemployment levels must be examined in conjunction with investment. The result of a lack of investment can be seen in the Noble index's relative deprivation rates. Strabane and Derry are top of the list of areas suffering from multiple deprivation. Further examination of the index figures shows that lack of access to employment is the chief problem in Derry and the north-west, while access to skills is more relevant to Belfast and the east.

Studies have also shown that the placement of industry in high unemployment areas in the east does not necessarily ensure jobs for local people. Conversely, the location of jobs, or the infrastructural support for jobs, in the east does not promote jobs in the north-west. There is no trickle-down effect across the Sperrins. If

we are to close the unemployment gap between Derry and the Northern Ireland average, a centre of excellence incorporating a high level of research and development must be created in the north-west to attract new investment and consolidate the existing industrial base.

Peace II offers us an opportunity to address the deep-seated problems that beset the economy in the north-west. That programme is distinctive because it focuses on the groups, sectors and areas that have been most affected by the troubles. When I spoke about the draft Budget last week, I noted that paragraph 5·7 welcomed the involvement of councils in inward development. I also noted that universities, further education colleges, councils and the private sector would secure investment in 20 knowledge-based industries each year. It did not say where those would be located, which is why I ask the Executive to give priority to sub-regions with high unemployment levels. An important element in the programme is the regional development strategy. Resources must be put into road, rail and sea access. The north-west has lagged behind for many years, and if its economy is to grow, Derry's role as a second city must be acknowledged.

I welcome the commitment to energy — particularly the gas pipeline — which will ensure that the north-west does not become an economic black spot and can compete on a level playing field. It is important that Invest Northern Ireland has a strong presence in Derry, and I ask that a regional office be located in the city. It is also important that, under the draft programme, broadband technology be available if Derry and the north-west are to deliver effectively on the Executive's aspiration for e-government. Decentralisation of Government offices is a priority for my council, and I ask the Executive to consider locating a Department in Derry.

Much has been said about health this afternoon, and, like everyone else, I know about the problems, so I do not intend to dwell on them. However, I acknowledge that the health sector has been given a £400 million increase, with a further £186 million increase, which is a rise of 8·5%. That must be welcomed, but waiting lists are rising, departments, such as cancer services, have inadequate resources, and there is bed blocking in acute hospitals because of insufficient money for community care. Those issues must be highlighted.

The Federation of Small Businesses issued a press release today asking the Minister, Bairbre de Brún, and the Committee for Health, Social Services and Public Safety to meet immediately with the Registered Homes Confederation. The average cost of maintaining an elderly person in an acute hospital is £1,500 per week, while the average cost of maintaining him in the independent sector is £400 per week.

The recent Department of Health review of the fee structure in residential and nursing homes established

that they were underfunded by approximately £750 per week. As I said in the Budget debate last week, I regret that free nursing care in the nursing home sector will not be introduced from April 2002, as previously planned.

The chapter 'Working for a Healthier People' sets targets for health improvements in all walks of life, through emphasis on the dangers of smoking, excess alcohol and drugs. There must be more research into health promotion if we are ever to have a healthy lifestyle. That section also promotes the benefits of sport. Research into the value of sport in creating a healthier lifestyle would benefit the entire community. The Scottish Executive have carried out extensive research into the role of sport in regenerating deprived areas. Northern Ireland would benefit from similar research.

I welcome the review of public administration. It has been discussed *ad infinitum* in local government for many years. It will allow real decisions to be taken at local level.

There is much more in the fields of primary and secondary education, culture and arts. I do not begrudge Belfast's application to be European City of Culture 2008. However, I hope that resources will be evenly distributed and that all areas of Northern Ireland will benefit from that application. I support the Programme for Government and commend all those involved in its delivery.

Mrs Nelis: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. I welcome the draft Programme for Government. Members could be forgiven for thinking that today was "knock the Health Service" day. However, none of us will disagree with the Executive's assessment of what must be done to make the vision of a peaceful, inclusive, prosperous, stable and fair society a reality, or deny that we must overcome social, economic, environmental and political challenges if we are to make a difference.

The key challenge is to make peace work and to demand the financial peace dividend — the savings from dismantling the security infrastructure that the Deputy First Minister referred to yesterday, which ate up a considerable chunk of the Budget before devolution, to the detriment of health and education infrastructure. The devolved Administration are entitled to additional funding, independent of the block grant, to address pre-devolution underfunding.

The key challenge in the 'Growing as a Community' priority area is to develop a society in which all citizens can fully and freely participate. Given our history, that is a challenge, but one that we must deliver on if we are to meet the expectations of the community and build on the commitments that we made in March.

Section 2.4, sub-priority 2, deals with improving community relations. There must be recognition that sectarian and racial divisions in our communities are not just a historical, political legacy, but are rooted in poverty and class inequality and in the fear and insecurity that those generate. Youth unemployment in the North stands at 10% and is increasing. Community relations policies have not addressed that. There must be a radical rethink, independent of the review, of those policies. Could it be said that those policies have delivered best value, given the huge budget?

Section 2.5, sub-priority 3, deals with the needs of victims. Any action taken in relation to that priority must be done on a level playing field. That is not the case at present. The Programme for Government must ensure the development of policy-makers' understanding of victims' issues. Victims' groups should be encouraged to develop their own role in reconciliation and healing. There must be a reconstitution of an interdepartmental working group that can reflect the breadth of experience of those in the community who have been affected by the conflict.

4.15 pm

The analysis of victims' needs must not be predicated solely on the Bloomfield report, which is not inclusive and which lends itself to the concept of a hierarchy of victims. Must I again raise the matter of the confusion in the community? Do we really need a Victims Liaison Unit and a Victims Unit, not to mention a plethora of other groups? The prevalent thinking in the Victims Liaison Unit must not be transferred to the Programme for Government. All victims, including victims of state violence, must receive equal recognition and service provision.

In the chapter 'Working for a Healthier People', it states:

"We will focus on....enabling those with.....chronic illness or terminal illness to achieve the highest possible standard of living".

How can the Assembly meet that priority while the chronically sick and disabled are made to jump through hoops in an all-work test in order to access entitlement to incapacity benefit and are forced to endure a process of humiliation by medical interrogation for entitlement to disability living allowance? The sick and disabled cannot live independently without financial and social support. It is already difficult for the sick to get access to benefits to enable them to live and — in some instances — die with dignity, as they must complete complicated forms that amount to an A-level examination in illness. A more simplified means of medical assessment of the needs of the chronically sick and disabled should be a priority for the Minister for Social Development.

On page 45, sub-priority 5 of the chapter entitled 'Securing a Competitive Economy' states that

"We also recognise the important role of local councils in this area and will work with regional groupings...for inward investment."

Unemployment in the Foyle constituency stands at 13.5% — twice the average for the North. If that priority is to contribute to employment opportunities, the new single economic development agency must have a regional focus in the north-west and a regional presence in general. We should not have to campaign for a regional office. The Foyle constituency should be given that as its right.

On page 63, in the chapter 'Working Together', sub- priority 3 states that, with regard to the reform of public administration, the Executive

"recognise the need for different structures under devolution, taking account of new relationships between local and regional government".

That must be addressed through a progressive policy of decentralisation, in which strong regional offices would service business and develop cross-border initiatives.

In Chapter 2, 'Growing as a Community', of the Programme for Government, February 2001, it states that the Executive seek to increase training and employment support and that New Deal for disabled people will be extended to the whole of the North from April 2001. Have those targets been achieved? Have we discussed with organisations that represent the disabled whether those training and employment support schemes meet their needs? In particular, we must examine New Deal to see whether that is the appropriate programme for those with disabilities.

The Programme for Government commits the Executive to the appointment of additional chairpersons to the fair employment and industrial tribunals. We must identify whether that has been achieved. A major review of employment law in the North is necessary. Much of the current employment legislation is a legacy of the Thatcher Government and represents a fundamental attack on the rights of employees and trade unions.

There are also major differences in employment law between the South and the North. I welcome the idea of a pilot scheme to develop foundation degrees in the North, but I also want to validate the contribution of further education colleges to delivering higher education. We need to challenge publicly the fact that many students have to leave this country to continue their studies because the universities, especially Queen's and the University of Ulster, do not give HNDs and HNCs proper recognition.

The Programme for Government commits the Executive to achieving 35,000 further and higher education places by the coming academic year. That must be carefully monitored to see whether that target is achievable. Current Department for Employment and Learning policy leaves it to the universities to decide where

additional full-time places should be located. We want to see Derry developed as a major alternative site to Belfast for higher education.

The effectiveness and suitability of the New Deal as a scheme for tackling unemployment and the educational needs of the unemployed must be monitored carefully. The Executive should propose schemes that reflect the needs of the North. The Programme for Government commits the Executive to increasing further education and training provision for priority skills and to securing investment by 25 knowledge-based businesses. The universities and further education colleges must evaluate that strategy.

Finally, the Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure and the Sports Council should contribute to the promotion of a healthier lifestyle in disadvantaged areas that have long-term unemployment. A regional office of the Sports Council in the north-west would address the level of ill health and poverty, which is generational. That constituency has the highest number of young people under 25, and we need to ensure that the next generation will adopt a health-and-fitness attitude to life. Go raibh mile maith agat.

Mrs Carson: I welcome the opportunity to speak about the draft Programme of Government, although it is regrettable that not all the Ministers are present.

It is good to know that the Assembly is making a difference to the people of Northern Ireland, but the Committees should have more say on the programme before it reaches this stage. I compliment the Department of the Environment on the road safety television campaign. The advertisements were recognised as being in a world league at the recent conference organised by TISPOL, the European traffic police network, and the money was well spent.

As a former primary school principal, I welcomed the commitment in the last Budget to recruit more road safety officers. That has happened; their training has been completed, and I look forward to their deployment. It is to be hoped that there will be a reduction in the number of children involved in road accidents. I am sorry that the additional officers are not in post this year. I hope that the new target date for their employment will be achieved.

I note that the last target, relating to waste disposal, has not been met. I trust that the Department of the Environment will liaise with the councils in time to ensure that no more money will have to be returned to the central fund. As a member of the Committee for the Environment, I am concerned about some of the proposals coming from the Department, which does not seem to be fully aware of the increased burden being placed on local government. There are several proposals in the document for which consideration should have been given to a Northern Ireland strategy.

A Bill to regulate the keeping of wild animals and a response to the air quality strategy could have been included. I welcome the target for maintaining or improving river water quality, with no deterioration. I am most concerned to see what reduction can be made in the infestation of zebra mussels in the Erne system, and in the eutrophication of the Erne system and Lough Neagh. Those are serious problems.

On page 96, it is stated in 4.2 and 4.3 that the Department of the Environment is

“To develop a Best Value framework for improving transparency and accountability of district council services” —

and —

“To introduce a new Code of Conduct for councillors, working together with Local Government.”

In 4.4, it states that the Department is

“To deliver an audit programme”.

That programme relates, among others, to the Local Government Staff Commission for Northern Ireland and the Northern Ireland Local Government Officers Superannuation Committee. Would it not have been possible to include those proposals in the reform of public administration, as set out in page 63? Such an inclusion would be natural, as sub-priority 3 states:

“We recognise the need for different structures under devolution, taking account of new relationships between local and regional government, as well as the full range of other bodies that function within the wider public sector.”

That priority is to be supported by the launch of a comprehensive review of public administration by the spring of 2002.

As I said, I am a former primary school principal, and I therefore commend the following statement:

“We will also aim to ensure that all children leave school with the highest standards of literacy and numeracy which they can achieve.”

That is contained in paragraph 4.3, sub-priority 1, on page 31. That issue should be placed first on the focus list and not treated as a sub-priority. Our children’s literacy and numeracy skills are vital. Children should not reach secondary school without basic skills. If they have not got those skills, they should not clog up the further education colleges and industry — those areas should not be clogged up with adults and potential workers unable to perform basic tasks. Pouring extra cash into adult literacy will not solve our problem. That would provide only temporary relief. It is clear that the problem lies in the primary sector. I am not blaming the teachers or the principals, because they are deprived of teaching time in school by increased bureaucracy. That is something that we must deal with.

Health has been well and truly covered in the debate today. On page 27, it is stated that we must

“ensure more timely and effective care and treatment for patients.”

I look forward to that happening. I have a young constituent who two years ago was given a date of March 2002 for orthopaedic treatment. That is not good enough. On page 28, it says:

“We need to support those with chronic and mental illness, disability or terminal illness” —

and —

“To meet the needs of the 21st Century, we plan to bring forward new mental health policies and legislation”.

4.30 pm

Those are great words, but after listening to a lobby session yesterday, I know that we not only need to voice them, we also need practical help and funding.

I emphasise the challenge outlined in the first three pages of the document. It says that the electorate here must see the benefits of the local Assembly filtering down through locally elected and accountable Members. It is not perfect, but our challenge as Members is to turn the vision in this document —our second one only— into reality by delivering the benefits to all.

Perhaps in the next draft document the front page could show part of the General Confession:

“We have left undone those things which we ought to have done; And we have done those things which we ought not to have done”.

I support the motion.

Ms Hanna: The Programme for Government offers great opportunities to make fundamental changes for the good of society. I hope that Departments and Ministers will not be timid but will grasp the full potential for implementing radical initiatives. It is a broad programme, and I will limit myself to commenting on health and the environment.

Many public health indicators show that we control some lifestyle factors that determine our health, such as alcohol, tobacco, obesity and poor diet. As we are in a healing process, politically speaking, and recovering from conflict — some of it self-inflicted —we can concentrate on doing what we must to improve public and private health industries.

We need financial resources for the Health Service. However, among the changes we could make would be to ensure that we have no duplication and better management of resources. I have been asking for an audit of health services for some time, because we need to know the cost of everything before we can take remedial action. I read with interest in the Public Expenditure Statistical Analysis for October 2001 that, while we have approximately the same spending per person on health as Scotland, its waiting list for 12 months or more per head of population is 1.3%; ours is 21.8%. The Scots are very lucky, and we could learn something from other places.

We must put a price tag on treatments, including those for illnesses caused by inappropriate lifestyles. We have a demand-led service, and hard decisions must be made. Indecision is the curse of the new cancer unit. However, without immediate action, more people will wait and will die waiting. They are waiting for diagnoses, for machines to be repaired, and for beds, treatment, more trained staff, doctors and nurses and support services. Another example of the crisis is that neurology services at the Royal Victoria Hospital have been cut severely. Because of a lack of staff, non-urgent theatre sessions have been cancelled, and there is a nine-month waiting list to get an MRI scan. Consultants are admitting their outpatients to acute beds to get them up the waiting list. Against this cutback in services, we run the risk of losing at least two registrars in neurology at the Royal because funding cannot be found for consultancy posts. Years of training will be lost. Those are just two examples of wasteful and counterproductive practice.

It is regrettable that we have not been able to implement the recommendations of the Royal Commission on care of the elderly. It is unfortunate that we are selective when deciding which conditions should be treated free at the point of delivery for elderly people. We must strengthen the family unit by respecting the dignity and independence of older people. That is no reflection on the dedicated people who battle against the odds to give the best possible care to their patients. Can you imagine how difficult and demoralising it is for staff who feel that no one is listening to their concerns? They are the ones who have to deal with patients and relatives when illness strikes. They have to deal with the disappointments when appointments are cancelled, with the grim reality of death and the grief and frustration that accompanies it.

We want healthy people, living in a sustainable environment. We are fortunate to have a relatively clean, green environment, which we must protect. To protect it, we need to concentrate on the principles of sustainable development. This has been defined as development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs. I am glad that it has been identified as a key priority in the Programme for Government. I encourage the Department of the Environment and the Minister to be far more proactive and imaginative in an area that presents so many opportunities to improve our living conditions.

I was pleased to hear the Deputy First Minister indicate that the strategy for sustainable development has been taken on board. The principles that underpin it demonstrate the cross-cutting nature of those themes. These include the effective protection of the environment, social progress that recognises everyone's needs, prudent use of natural resources and the maintenance of high

and stable levels of economic growth and employment. We urgently need to develop and implement the strategy. It will impact on all five areas of priority. Even before we have the strategy in place, I would like to see some of the principles of sustainable development implemented.

It is essential that the actions we take today do not jeopardise tomorrow's environment. I want to see the precautionary principle applied rigorously in all situations, whether in relation to the erection of telecommunications masts or to the proposed MOX plant at Sellafield. I want our natural habitats, our built heritage and our natural resources to be carefully looked after and preserved for future generations, rather than squandered for short-term gains.

I want the Executive to show leadership on the issue of sustainable development and to ensure that it sets the standard for environmental performance by developing green purchasing policies that will stimulate and support developing markets for recycled produce. The amount of paper that is produced in this building alone should be a clear reminder of our wastefulness. I would be satisfied with a list of publications that would be available on request and in the library, particularly for some of the weightier tomes.

As chairperson of the all-party group on international development, I want to see greater development of Northern Ireland's role in international affairs. Mention is made of presenting a positive international image of Northern Ireland. I want to see this aspect strengthened. As a community, we have gained immensely from international goodwill and have a reputation for generosity when responding to humanitarian crises around the world. I want the Assembly to take a lead role in harnessing the efforts of groups and individuals, and in highlighting the needs of developing countries.

Mr McHugh: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. The various Committee meetings that we have been trying to fit in around the plenary sitting have made it difficult to follow the debate. People will probably have expected us to attend the debate rather than be elsewhere. I spoke on the draft Budget last week, so to some extent I am reinforcing what I have already said. I note that quite a number of Ministers have not been sitting in on the debate.

As a member of the Education Committee, I reiterate earlier comments by the Chairperson of the Committee. Education is probably not as high a priority as health, but we still have to have priorities. It seems that the number one priority of a Department is its own survival. The Departments must look at that. For instance, the amount of administration in any of the Departments — the Department of Education or otherwise — is a contributory factor to their inability to carry out their core operations. The Executive must examine that rather than focus on what extra funding can be provided for

the small, if important, functions that Members want or the new functions that have to be implemented.

The areas of education and health are closely related. In some areas, it is impossible to separate them. The health of the population and how the education system has treated them since childhood is there for all to see. Some Members mentioned that people's lifestyles can affect the costs and budgets of the hospitals, healthcare and everything else in later life.

People are unable to take up further education or lifelong learning, and that is an indicator of the deficit in education for some people. Many wished to access the individual learning accounts (ILAs) recently, but that scheme has been set aside; it is an unfortunate situation. Many who need to move into lifelong learning do not do so because of the negative experiences they endured at various school levels. The Department of Education and the Minister must examine closely that deficit.

Current priorities in education are the local management of schools (LMS), the 11-plus, the Burns review and the curriculum review — all of which are important. However, the implementation of those proposals for the future direction of schools will depend on the available budget.

Sometimes students find themselves with a small voice, and often they have no voice with which to air their concerns. People refer to the Youth Service, for example, and the amount of effort or money that is put into implementing that. Although the economy is buoyant, some students experience great difficulty in repaying loans or dealing with spiralling debts.

The price of student accommodation and property remained at quite low levels a few years ago, but now the rates are astronomical. Students find that they cannot get proper accommodation. Some landlords are insensitive to living conditions that students have to endure. Students have to pay heating bills and maintain their lifestyles. They have to live in and around the city or area of their further education college or university.

It is increasingly difficult for students to live in an environment that is conducive to their continuing study, without burdening their parents. That is a serious issue in which I urge the Education Minister to get involved. Departments with responsibility for student accommodation, student lifestyle and the environment in which students live when they are not in the colleges must also get involved.

Not enough money has been invested in lifelong learning, and both Departments must examine that more closely. Equality of opportunity and TSN also impact on that. We must enable people to move from areas of deprivation. The system that allowed the haves

and the have-nots to persist because education failed to advance the agenda in those areas must be abolished.

Free school meals entitlement can affect schools' budgets in a big way — for some schools more than others. However, I know from my work in the Agriculture Committee that some areas were in serious difficulties as a result of the recent foot-and-mouth disease crisis. It was plain for all to see that people in those areas had suffered a loss of income and should have been entitled to claim free school meals but were not doing so.

4.45 pm

People who were entitled to claim free school meals were not doing so in some small schools in the Glens of Antrim, for example, and that is an indication of the difficulties some people were facing. The Department must consider another method of financial help and try to remove the stigma associated with the entitlement to free school meals. The provision of decent meals to all pupils — not just those entitled to free school meals — is an important element of the school process, and the situation may become untenable if the take-up of free school meals is avoided because of the stigma attached. Some money needs to be spent on finding out the reasons for that view.

The Committee has also considered special needs in schools and has found that there is little money to meet that problem — in fact, the budgetary allocation hardly moves the scales at all. Money must be invested in special needs — perhaps not much money is needed but it necessitates a hands-on approach to learning in schools, rather than spending on books or other aspects which the Department thinks require funding. That is a big issue for parents, and it must be considered soon.

The problem of fees and costs for pupils moving into third-level education has not been addressed by the relevant Department. Those who wish to take a Masters degree in certain subjects, outside the Six Counties, must fund themselves. We need to accommodate at least some of those people and address their costs. If we do not, the rich will be educated, and those who are at the lower end of the spectrum will not.

Many points have been made about agriculture, and the vision group document has tried to grapple with those. It addresses some of these issues very well, and it might be worth taking a second look to see what can be implemented. There does not seem to be a budget to implement the recommendations of the vision document, and the funding, which should be allocated to agriculture in the next few years, will not be allocated. The vision document will then gather dust, and that should not and cannot be allowed to happen. It would be a serious omission to ignore the prioritised recommendations, and, as a matter of urgency, there

must be a budget to implement those and to provide for a growing and competitive economy.

Considerable amounts of money have been directed at disease eradication and control. My difficulty is that year-on-year money is spent on that, but we need to successfully eradicate diseases. That would save our budget in the long term, because the resultant savings could be directed towards areas such as education or health programmes. Much of that money has been the subject of fraud recently, and the fraud is not necessarily confined to those areas to which the DUP often points.

The health issue is of interest to me, and the recent moves on waiting lists are welcome. Winter pressures also create waiting lists, and in my own area those lists have been alleviated.

Community care is also tied closely to waiting lists. The blockage of beds at hospitals in the Southern Board area and parts of the Western Board area has led to budget difficulties. Many in the Western Board area consider the implementation of the Hayes review to be the most important factor in the siting of hospitals there. It has massive implications for the future budget. The Minister should consider taking an early decision — perhaps before deciding on the overall implementation of Hayes — on the issue of hospitals in the west. It has been suggested that that will be the greatest contribution of the Hayes review. I urge the Minister to do that as quickly as possible.

Top-slicing and removing parts of the budget before it is drawn down is another question. We would be happy enough if it were drawn down to the Western Board area, but that has not happened. Last time, £3 million of the budget went to two different areas, for whatever reasons. The budget should be distributed equitably and top-slicing should be stopped, if that is the intended approach in the future.

There has been a considerable increase in the number of elderly patients, certainly in areas such as Fermanagh. There will be considerable extra spending this year on flu immunisation for the over 60s. That must be considered and accounted for. I support the points made about the sickness benefit system. One could almost imagine that that system operates without the Minister's knowledge. People must go through a very severe system to get the money that they are entitled to. Many have obvious chronic illnesses, and it is not necessary to use Special Branch tactics against such claimants, who need money and support to live in their homes. That should be examined.

I support the point by Members from all parties that the administration of Government, local government and quangos must be looked at urgently. Administration is top-heavy: perhaps more so since the establishment of the Assembly. All other bodies are still operating. Go raibh maith agat.

The Deputy Chairperson of the Committee for Enterprise, Trade and Investment (Mr Neeson): Devolution has revealed, if anything, the problems that developed during direct rule, when many public services were grossly underfunded. One of the big challenges that lies ahead for the Assembly is to deal positively with those issues.

In recent months, the Committee has been carrying out an inquiry into energy matters in Northern Ireland. It is a very complex matter. Significantly, one of the first issues that the Committee dealt with was the development of the natural gas pipeline to the north-west. I welcome the First Minister's statement this morning reiterating the Executive's commitment to the development of the North/South pipeline and the one from Belfast to the north-west. The Committee has always been unanimous in its support for that project.

The First Minister also made reference to the terrible events of 11 September and how they will impact on the situation here. Northern Ireland is very much part of the global economy, and, even before 11 September, there were signs of a downward trend in industry, particularly in the IT sector. Unfortunately, that has been exacerbated by the events in New York, Pennsylvania and Washington.

The most recent report by the Recruitment and Employment Confederation shows that in the matter of those who are registered as unemployed, Northern Ireland was eleventh out of 12 regions in the United Kingdom. We were beaten only by the north-east of England. Our rate of unemployment in September was 4.9%; the figure for the north-east was 5.3%; and the top of the league — the south-east — had an unemployment rate of 1.5%. There is no room for complacency.

I draw the Assembly's attention to sub-priority 5 on working to attract inward investment. I quote:

"In support of this sub-priority we will: work with universities, further education colleges, local councils and the private sector to secure investments by 20 knowledge based businesses each year."

However, the target in the February 2001 Programme for Government was 25 knowledge-based businesses each year. In many ways that shows a great weakness on the part of the Executive. It is important that we hold our nerve in these very difficult times.

The Committee recognises that the attraction of inward investment involves ups and downs. The budget must be flexible. It is important to adhere to that flexibility, particularly with the new difficulties that have emerged in recent months.

In the present session, the Committee addressed the dilemma faced by quarry owners in Northern Ireland, and the development of the aggregates tax. In the Committee's response to the document 'Strategy 2010' it recommended that the Assembly be given tax-varying

powers. Bearing in mind the difficulties in various sectors, that issue should be addressed by the Executive.

I also draw the Assembly's attention to sub-priority 4 on promoting entrepreneurship, innovation and creativity. It states:

"We will: through the Business Start Programme, achieve 600 new business starts over the period to March 2005".

The Programme for Government of February 2001 refers to the creation of more sustainable businesses. While sustainability is implied, the Committee recommends that it be expressed with a firm commitment to ensuring that Northern Ireland's poor record of business failure for start-ups is addressed. We also recognise the important role played by small businesses in the Northern Ireland economy. Given the present situation, their role will probably be even more important. Therefore, the Executive should take up that issue.

5.00 pm

The Departments faced restructuring following the creation of Invest Northern Ireland (INI). It is an important initiative, and I hope that INI will be a more effective organisation than LEDU, the IDB and the Industrial Research Technology Unit (IRTU), which it has replaced. A new drive is needed to attract inward investment and to create employment opportunities in Northern Ireland in the new situation in which we find ourselves.

I welcome the fact that that is happening. However, I alert the Minister to the Committee's strong feeling that INI should have a regional presence in the Province, similar to that of the LEDU offices. The Minister has taken that on board, but it is important to stress it again.

It is important that the Assembly creates joined-up government. I am pleased with the close co-operation between the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment and the Minister for Employment and Learning, particularly in the development of the skills that are required. We had an excellent debate on that issue. However, when we discussed the Programme for Government with departmental officials, we questioned them about the delay in setting up a science park at the Titanic Quarter. I was astonished by the response of a senior official. He said:

"The planning process seems to be quite impossible."

If there is to be joined-up government, it is important that all Departments work in partnership to ensure that there is understanding and collaboration. I have raised the issue of planning delays several times in the House. I referred in particular to a planning application to develop a major business park in my constituency. I was informed today that at long last, subject to the approval of the Minister, planning permission should be granted in the near future.

The role of the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment, and the strategy that it will pursue, was reflected in 'Strategy 2010'. It is important that if the Assembly is to move forward, the Department takes on board the Committee's lengthy and detailed inquiry into Strategy 2010.

The Deputy Chairperson of the Committee for Regional Development (Mr McFarland): The Chairperson is unavailable today, but, as Deputy Chairperson of the Committee for Regional Development, I welcome the opportunity to debate the draft Programme for Government. I register the Committee for Regional Development's gratitude to the officials from the Department for Regional Development for their co-operation and assistance during the Committee's deliberations on the draft Programme for Government and the draft Budget.

The Committee for Regional Development was gratified to see a strong commitment in the Programme for Government to improving our infrastructure. It states on page 39 that

"The provision of infrastructure and major public services such as public transport, roads, water and sewerage is essential for the well-being of the region."

I fully endorse that statement, and it should be a priority for the Government. Failure to address the deficiencies in the infrastructure and public transport has had, and will continue to have, serious repercussions across many aspects of society, and particularly to the economy. For example, 99% of all Northern Ireland goods are transported by road. A well maintained road network would help to reduce the time and cost of transporting freight, which, in turn, would help to improve business profitability and competitiveness. Other areas, such as tourism, the environment and health, would benefit from a properly funded and maintained infrastructure.

The Government are beginning to appreciate the seriousness of the situation and have started to address the years of underfunding in our infrastructure. The Committee for Regional Development was heartened by the increase in the Department's budget of £42 million, which represents an 8% increase on 2001-02. This will enable additional funding to be targeted at roads and public transport improvements, such as the purchase of new trains, which is long overdue.

The Committee for Regional Development also welcomed the announcement on 24 September, by the Acting First Minister, that an additional £40 million is to be made available for the trans-European Network route from Larne to Belfast and from Newry to Dundalk. It also referred to a significant contribution to be made available for the upgrading of the Westlink. These increases are indeed roundly to be welcomed. However, it is important to view this additional funding in its

overall context. The impact of the additional expenditure will allow only a few small holes in the dyke to be repaired. There is a £100 million backlog of road maintenance work to be done, so there is clearly a long way to go before we have a modern, reliable, and safe road network.

It is also important not to forget the pressures that the water infrastructure has been under. The lack of major capital investment has manifested itself in a number of ways over the past few years. There have been several health scares, such as outbreaks of cryptosporidium. On top of this, an antiquated and crumbling sewerage system has shown its inability to cope with heavy periods of rainfall, resulting in flooding.

The Committee for Regional Development welcomes the provision of £48 million in the 2002-03 Budget for the purchase of new train sets. As with the road and water infrastructures, investment in the public transport system is in a catch-up situation because of years of underinvestment. New trains will undoubtedly make train travel more appealing, and the proposed Railway Safety Bill will ensure a high standard of rail travel safety. However, there is still much to be done if rail travel is to become a major form of commuter transport. Considerably more money will have to be invested not only in train sets, but in improving access and facilities.

A similar situation exists with the age and standard of Northern Ireland's buses. Additional funding should be made available to reduce the average age of the bus fleet. I noted that in the Programme for Government in October 2000, although it was removed from the final version of the programme in February 2001, there was a commitment

"to assist Translink to replace its buses after 18 years of service and its coaches after 12 years service".

The Committee believes that consideration should be given to reinstating this commitment.

Achieving a shift in commuter attitudes to the buses can be realised only by major up-front investment to enable the provision of quality, efficient bus services. Getting commuters out of their cars and into trains and buses would alleviate congestion, particularly in the Belfast metropolitan area, and make a positive contribution to the economy and the environment.

A reliable, efficient bus network, particularly in rural areas where up to 30% of households do not have access to a car, would also make a positive contribution to promoting social inclusion, which is a key Government priority. There are genuine, growing concerns that rural bus services may be significantly reduced if private operators continue to target the more profitable routes, forcing Translink to reduce services on the less profitable rural routes. The Regional Development Committee will encourage the Government to give priority to public transport, to provide additional funding for improving

Northern Ireland's bus fleet, and to keep the average age of buses in line with those of GB.

The Committee, conscious of funding pressures right across the Northern Ireland block, believes that new approaches to funding should be considered. It welcomes the decision by the Department of Regional Development to set up a unit to look at new and innovative ways of funding. One specific measure that should be considered is leasing, rather than purchasing, new trains. The Committee is aware that leasing arrangements are in place in GB. If leasing were introduced, it would release funds for investment on other infrastructure improvements.

Regarding public service agreements, the Committee is content with the targets set by the Department of Regional Development. However, paragraph 1.6b of the PSA refers to resurfacing 350 lane kilometres in each of the next three years. The February 2001 Programme for Government referred to a target of resurfacing 500 kilometres in each of the next three years. The Committee sought clarification from the Department and was advised that, due to the assistance provided for roads in the draft Budget, the figure of 500 kilometres would be reinstated. I should be grateful if the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister could reassure the Committee on that point.

The Committee noted that the action section had been removed from the public sector agreement. It is the Committee's understanding that this detailed information will be reproduced in the service delivery agreements that will be available later in the year.

The Committee will be unsure whether the removal of the action section has been an improvement until it has had an opportunity to examine the contents of the service delivery agreements. The old format allowed immediate examination of the Department's work programme in relation to the overall targets. I suggest that the service delivery agreements be made available, in draft form at least, at the same time as the public service agreements.

Pages 42 and 107 of the Programme for Government state that a target of 60% of urban housing growth is to be provided within urban limits, without town cramming, by 2010. This does not reflect the wording of the regional development strategy document. However, the Department assured the Committee that the regional development strategy is the authoritative document. Therefore, the Committee would welcome the exact wording used in the regional development strategy being used in the Programme for Government. That would avoid confusion.

The Department for Regional Development has finalised its regional development strategy and is due to finalise its regional transportation strategy shortly. The regional development strategy would provide a planning framework for tackling the deficiencies in

our infrastructure and helping the development of our economy and society. The regional transportation strategy aims to produce a transport system which reduces adverse economic impacts, improves safety, contributes to economic growth, promotes accessibility and social inclusion, and provides integrated transport.

Those key targets, if properly implemented, will address many of my concerns and the priorities outlined in the draft Programme for Government. However, both the regional development strategy and the regional transportation strategy will impact on other Departments and will require cross-departmental co-operation for their successful implementation. Adequate funding is crucial to their success. There must be speedy progress in determining alternative funding that is appropriate and available, so that there is no further deterioration in the roads and water infrastructure, and so that the proposals contained in the strategies and Programme for Government can be successfully implemented. That ends my contribution as Deputy Chairperson of the Regional Development Committee.

My Colleagues on the Health Committee have highlighted detailed problems. However, I must issue a dire warning.

5.15 pm

Such is the crisis in the Health Service that the Executive must set up a task force to help the Department take strong and immediate action before the service implodes. The crisis should be a top priority, and must be addressed immediately.

The Chairperson of the Committee for Health, Social Services and Public Safety (Dr Hendron): I apologise for having missed many of the earlier contributions. I am aware that health has been a major subject in today's debate on the draft Programme for Government.

Many important aspects of the Health Service in Northern Ireland are slowly disintegrating, at all levels — including primary care, hospital care, secondary care and care of the elderly.

An article from the 'The Economist' of 27 October quotes remarks made by the then First Minister of Scotland, Mr Henry McLeish, on the issue of healthcare. He said:

"Old people in care homes can get £65 a week for nursing care costs and up to £90 a week for personal care costs."

He continues:

"The Scots can afford this because Scotland gets from the Treasury about 22 % more money per head than England does for the health service...So the Scots can afford to employ more doctors and have more hospital beds, resulting in shorter waiting lists, than the rest of Britain."

The key point is that there is more spending on health in England and Wales than in Scotland. There are

more beds in England and Wales and more doctors in those territories. Therefore, there is a greater number of people on waiting lists in Northern Ireland than in England, Wales or Scotland.

The five priorities set out in the Programme for Government are still relevant and should continue to directly influence public expenditure. Poverty and social disadvantage, including poor housing, are directly linked to ill health. Many of the actions detailed in the Programme for Government should already have been implemented. There is an ongoing crisis in the health service, and the main cause of that is gross under-funding. I in no way point the finger at the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety. The crisis was imminent before she took over. However, now that the Assembly seems bedded down again, the Health Service in Northern Ireland should be its number one priority — and that includes the Minister, her Department, the Executive, and the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister.

Paragraph 3-6, sub-priority 4 of the Programme for Government, page 27 states that

"We will modernise and improve hospital and primary care services to ensure more timely and effective care and treatment for patients. We will work to contain waiting lists at current levels."

However, I do not agree that our target should be to maintain waiting lists at the March 2002 level, as it is not possible to determine what that figure might be. In the Programme for Government of February 2001, the target was to reduce the waiting lists by a quarter by March 2004 — that is by 51,000 to 39,000 — with the immediate aim of a reduction to 41,000 by March 2002. However, the most recent waiting list figure is 54,000, and it continues to rise.

I am sure Members are aware of the issue of cancellation of out-patient clinics. In Northern Ireland, between nine and ten per cent of all waiting lists are cancelled. Therefore, thousands of people in Northern Ireland are grossly disadvantaged each day. Our Committee has written to the relevant trusts to find out why that happens. I am sure many of the reasons are perfectly genuine — nonetheless we are entitled to know them.

Many Members, including Carmel Hanna, have spoken about cancer. In this decade, cancer is expected to surpass heart disease as Northern Ireland's leading cause of death — if it has not already done so. Statistics show that one in three will be diagnosed with cancer, and one in four or five will die from it. Thus cancer is a major clinical problem that will confront our society in the future.

Many Members referred to the City Hospital. The present chief medical officer, a person for whom I have great respect, produced the Campbell report in 1995, which stated that the City Hospital was to be the

main cancer centre, with units located at various other hospitals. We now know that many people who go to Belvoir Park Hospital for treatment suffer because machines there break down. I know that the Minister has allotted money for new equipment recently, but the people responsible for building the new cancer centre, and patients across Northern Ireland, are frustrated. Prof Paddy Johnston, a world authority on cancer, and Prof Roy Spence, a senior cancer surgeon, are anxious to know whether the finance has been agreed, so that building can start as soon as possible, for it will take approximately three years. In fairness, the Minister and her people came before our Committee recently and we put those points to them, but they were already aware of them.

I would like some indication from the Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister — in the Executive programme funds, I think that it is the infrastructure fund for 2002-03 which has £51 million — that a large portion of that money could be used to build the new cancer centre at the City Hospital. I am sure that many people would think that reasonable.

Objective 2 in the document is to ensure the delivery of effective, high-quality health and social care, and it is hoped that plans for the modernisation and improvement of hospital services to make them more responsive to people's needs will be published by December 2002. That is a long time to wait; there is a major crisis in our hospitals now.

We are familiar with the Hayes Report, and consultation on it finished at the end of October, but what I presume will be definitive proposals for the future of our hospitals will not be made until December 2002. Will they be put out for consultation then? We have waited for years for decisions to be made here. John McFall, a former direct rule Minister for Health and Social Services for Northern Ireland, produced a document in 1998, called 'Putting it Right', and he made specific proposals in respect of hospitals here for the years to come, but we cannot wait. The Assembly, the Health Minister, the First Minister, the Deputy First Minister, as well as the Secretary of State, must be deeply concerned.

Monica McWilliams and I recently visited the intensive care unit and the accident and emergency unit in the Ulster Hospital, and I was very shaken by what I saw. We read every day about patients lying on trolleys, but there was the reality — in fact they had run out of trolleys, and people were on chairs. One sister was in tears because of her inability to cope. There are major problems with accident and emergency units in hospitals across Northern Ireland.

I received a letter from a senior orthopaedic surgeon in the Royal Victoria Hospital, which, as everyone knows, is the main trauma hospital for Northern Ireland —

and it is important that we all are aware of that. He states that the Royal Victoria Hospital is the level-one trauma centre for Northern Ireland, but the truth is that it is capable of looking after severely injured patients only on alternate days.

The function of dealing with fractures was transferred from the City Hospital to the Royal Victoria Hospital, along with all the trauma work which came with that, but the accident and emergency unit did not transfer as had been planned, so no resources to deal with that came with it. High-energy trauma work at the Royal Victoria Hospital has increased greatly, and the accident and emergency staff are on their knees. Staffing levels are still based on alternate take-in nights with the City Hospital, but for trauma, every night is take-in night. The situation is very serious. The good man is saying that it is time that this was made public. I received this letter only recently. Members of the Health, Social Services and Public Safety Committee have received a copy of that letter. So there is no way we can wait until December 2002 and then have further consultations on that.

Carmel Hanna and probably others have made reference to neurology, but I missed part of the debate earlier. In relation to that topic, a letter was sent out to every GP in the North of Ireland by the medical director of the Royal Victoria Hospital, Dr Ian Carson. He said that

"there are over 500 patients with non-urgent conditions awaiting operation and some of these, particularly chronic spinal disorders and peripheral nerve conditions have been on the waiting list for a lengthy period of time. Given that we are concentrating our surgical efforts on emergency and clinically more urgent cases there is little prospect of these elective patients being seen in the foreseeable future."

That is a serious situation.

I want to finish by speaking on primary care. The Prime Minister, Tony Blair, said a few years ago that the whole National Health Service in these islands should be based on primary care. It should be based on the patient, who is the only important person in the Health Service. The Health Service should operate from the ground up. That is how it was to be.

Over 90% of people who are ill in Northern Ireland go through primary care; by primary care I am referring to all the professional people who are involved in primary care. We have received serial documentation of that. One example was 'Fit for the Future — A New Approach'. Again, under direct rule, the Minister John McFall brought out a document that was for this Assembly. That has been ignored, despite its massive consultation input.

Then we had further consultation. The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety brought out a document last Christmas called 'Building the Way Forward in Primary Care'. I have here a document that

contains a summary of responses to that. All over that summary of responses is the word “respondents”. It states that a majority of respondents felt this, some respondents felt the other, et cetera. However there is no mention of organisations such as the Royal College of Nursing, the GP committee of the British Medical Association, and our own Health, Social Services and Public Safety Committee. All of those organisations, and especially our Health, Social Services and Public Safety Committee through its appointment to this Assembly, are representing the people out there — the people who are the only important ones in the Health Service, the patients themselves. Generally those points have been ignored. There were 190 responses to that document; the document is merely a summary which lumps everyone together.

Decisions must be made. I tabled an amendment on behalf of our Committee around nine or ten months ago, regarding the fact that we wanted a seamless transition into primary care services. The Minister announced her intentions separately from this document of responses. She stated that she was going to go for primary care groupings which would be committees of the four boards. I do not want to get into the whole argument of non-fundholders versus fundholders, but that is a top-down proposition; it is not bottom-up. The people of Northern Ireland deserve the best Health Service that they can get, and work must start at primary care, working with babies, children, elderly people and everyone. If we get it wrong at primary care, we will get it wrong in secondary care, in hospitals and all the way through.

I continue to make this appeal. The Minister has chosen again 1 April for the transition into the new primary care services. I have no idea how she is going to do that, but I have made my point and I will leave it at that.

Earlier, Carmel Hanna mentioned an audit of the Health Service. That came before our Committee recently, and I will be speaking on behalf of our Committee to the Comptroller and Auditor General shortly. I will finish by asking that this Assembly, the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety, the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister, and the Ministers in all the Departments recognise that there is a crisis going on in the Health Service daily. Action is needed now, not two years from now.

5.30 pm

Mr Paisley Jnr: I welcome the opportunity to speak on the draft Programme for Government and to discuss issues that directly or indirectly affect my constituents.

I have watched most of the debate on the monitor in my office, and I noted criticism being levelled at various Benches across the House that were empty. Mrs Carson said that everyone was absent, and now Mrs Carson is absent. Most Members have used this

debate to flag up issues that are of concern to them — rightly or wrongly, as the case may be — and they have followed the very extensive debate from their offices. If a Member is going to criticise other Members, she should do the House the courtesy of remaining here for everyone’s speech, not just her own.

I have followed several contributions, and I wish to comment on some of them, which were outstanding and gave fair criticism of the draft Programme for Government. Do not think that I am going to re-designate, but I refer to the speeches by the Member for South Belfast, Carmel Hanna, and the Member for South Down, Eddie McGrady. Both Members brought genuine criticism to the debate, with expertise in the matters that they addressed. I will focus on some of the issues they raised shortly.

The Executive should recognise that good government is not measured by the amount of promises that they make, but by the amount of promises that they keep. The draft programme, like the last document that was produced, makes a lot of promises. The public can pass a final judgement on whether those promises are kept or not.

In the foreword, the then acting First Minister, Sir Reg Empey, and Mr Séamus Mallon, MP said:

“We have worked within the Executive and with others to start to deliver on the commitments we have made.”

People would welcome their starting to deliver on over 200 of those promises. To date, 10 have been kept. The Executive have a long way to go to keep their promises, otherwise they will be condemned as being a Government by cliché — as making promises in politically correct phraseology but failing to deliver on them, when it is their duty to do so.

They say that they intend to make a difference: people do not see that difference yet. They have a vision: people say that the vision is blurred. They say that they have a programme: I do not think that a start has been made on the programme, so there is no prospect of a conclusion. Those in charge of implementing this draft Programme for Government need to bring legislation to the House. As many Members know, we do not deal with much primary legislation, yet according to the draft Programme for Government primary legislation is needed.

Mr Durkan said that the House has a duty to govern responsibly. It is fair criticism to say that it must make up for its lack of credibility. David Trimble said that an Administration founded as this one is founded lacks credibility. Having read the draft programme I do not know how they are going to do that, but they should tell us.

The draft programme refers to common themes, and the Executive say that they want to establish a coherent,

modern Government. Many of the comments from across the House, SDLP, Ulster Unionists, and others — whether they are designated or not — show that the underlying strategy is not coherent. Indeed, there is much criticism of the lack of a coherent, modern Government. Those who have signed up to the draft Programme for Government should recognise that their remarks on the Administration's lack of coherence and the legislation that flows from it will be challenged later.

Ms Hanna was correct when she said that an audit of the Health Service is essential. That is very important. It appears that the Health Service is becoming the black hole ministry. We have seen the major problems that exist in health funding. One simply has to pick up a newspaper and look at what has happened to the Royal Victoria Hospital. It is a shame and an indictment of the Government that a modern building in great demand should be padlocked and its new wing not used. That is a sad indictment of departmental policy and of the use of departmental resources. The fact that a promised new maternity unit for Northern Ireland has not yet materialised is also an indictment of the Government. That issue must be seriously addressed if the credibility gap is to be reduced.

Another indictment of the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety appears in this evening's 'Belfast Telegraph', in which the Department claims to be working for a healthier people. To achieve healthier people and a healthier community, it has to perform the operations that are required by those people. A parliamentary answer that my Colleague, Mr Shannon, received this morning from the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety has found its way onto the front pages of the 'Belfast Telegraph'. According to that answer, more than 4,000 patients in Northern Ireland have been waiting for operations for more than two years. A further 8,000 people have been waiting for 12 months, of which 34 are heart patients. The extra £8 million allocated this morning by the Minister of Finance and Personnel will not go towards addressing the particular needs of the 12,000 people on a one-year or two-year waiting list. In fact, just over 49,000 people were waiting for a wide range of surgical procedures to be carried out by the Department.

If the Government and the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety are working for a healthier nation and healthier people, they must address the serious situation in which money appears to be pumped into the Department at every opportunity. I would not deny it a penny, but if that money is not used accurately and effectively, not only the waiting lists, but their gestation period, will grow longer. The Government must face up to that important issue. If one Minister is not up to it, we all have a responsibility to insist that the job be done properly.

Many Members have mentioned the long waiting lists and the lack of resources. I am aware that Dr

Hendron has already touched on those issues. However, the new Causeway Hospital in my own constituency faces many problems. That state-of-the-art hospital has insufficient resources. The Minister continues to waste money on other pet projects instead of ensuring that our first-class hospitals are properly funded and allowed to function.

I shall cite the example of the dermatology departments in the Antrim Area Hospital and the Causeway Hospital. I received a letter from a constituent who wanted to continue to receive dermatology treatment. However, the last dermatology appointment at the new Causeway Hospital has taken place and that service is now being withdrawn. The patient can either make the 160-mile round trip from the Causeway area to the Ulster Hospital at Dundonald, or can go private at the North West Independent Clinic, at a cost of between £80 and £85 for a few minutes' consultation each visit. Everyone knows that many appointments are required for the treatment of dermatology and that it can take a long time.

Therefore, the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety, in failing to address the needs of, for instance, dermatology patients, is suggesting that patients opt either for private treatment or travel miles outside their local area for treatment, even though their local hospital could deal with the ailment if it were supplied with the resources. That is an indictment of the Department and the Minister for failing to recognise that those problems exist. The problems must be addressed more effectively than they have been to date.

I am a member of the Agriculture Committee. The Programme for Government contains many promises regarding agriculture, but Mr McGrady made some serious criticisms of the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development, and I echo those points. They are important and go to the heart of the needs of the rural community.

Mr McGrady stated — and I agree — that there is no flagship programme. For instance, for a long time the Agriculture Committee has advocated the need for a farm retirement scheme. The only way to address rural poverty sustainably is to create a farm retirement scheme and a new entrants scheme. However, that has been put on the long finger by way of another inquiry, another investigation, another consultation report. If that issue is not addressed soon, Northern Ireland will not only have an ageing rural population with the lowest wages in Europe but one that will be unable to sustain the beautiful Northern Ireland countryside that everyone remarks on and cries their eyes out about.

The rural and farming community needs practical help. It needs a properly thought-out farm retirement scheme that will allow older generations to get off the land and allow new entrants — their children, other people interested in farming or those wishing to

diversify — to take it over and drive that new agriculture industry forward. It is unfortunate that the Agriculture Minister and the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development appear to be the pet poodle of EU bureaucracy, but they are not the farmers' friend because they do not address that important need.

I know the criticisms. The whole Budget could be used up on farm retirement. However, farm retirement could be the one major issue that would make a difference to farmers' lives in Northern Ireland, and it should be considered seriously. Unfortunately, it cannot be addressed by the resources identified in the Programme for Government because they have been directed elsewhere.

The Minister, in her comments about agriculture at the weekend, mistakes verbal attacks on the Committee for Agriculture and Rural Development and its Chairperson for good policy. She should instead deal with the major policy issues that have been flagged up. The Department's failure to deal with those crucial issues focuses the Minister on making verbal attacks on the Committee Chairperson.

The vision group's report has been commended from many quarters. It is an interesting project which will also require serious resources. As Mr McGrady rightly identified, the Programme for Government does not appear to have the resources set aside, or even have them in mind, to put into action the proposals outlined by the vision group. I hope that the vision group's report will not be shelved. However, according to the Programme for Government, it is likely that it will be shelved due to the lack of available funding.

Mr Speaker: Will the Member please bring his remarks to a close?

Mr Paisley Jnr: The first Programme for Government promised to find a definition for rural proofing that would affect every Department and would allow all Departments to reflect seriously on the needs of the rural community. It is a scandal that the Programme for Government and the Administration have yet to find a meaningful definition, working title and working commitment towards rural proofing across every Department.

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure (Mr McGimpsey): I appreciate the opportunity to respond on behalf of the Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure to many of the comments that have been made on the Programme for Government.

The programme is an earnest statement of our commitment to devolved government in Northern Ireland. It also highlights the concept that the people of Northern Ireland are best served by representatives from the Province who know the issues; who know the people's needs; who are accountable to the people for delivering those needs; and who speak the people's language. It

is important that we all play a full role in agreeing and implementing the Programme for Government.

5.45 pm

I met with the Committee for Culture, Arts and Leisure last week to discuss my Department's commitments, and I am grateful for its input and views. A Programme for Government will only be meaningful and achievable if Departments, Committees and the Assembly all play their part in shaping the document and ensuring that it is fully implemented.

My Department is committed to delivering the community's needs, and we punch above our weight, in contrast to Mr Paisley Jnr's remarks about not delivering. In the first Programme for Government, the Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure, with less than 1% of the available funding, accounted for 10% of the total 257 actions. It was signature to 28 actions, of which 14 were completed. Twelve are still ongoing, but they are on time because it is envisaged that they will run for more than one year. Two are incomplete — they are inland fisheries matters awaiting clearance from Brussels. This was no fluke. This year, of 164 actions in the Programme for Government, my Department accounts for 21. The extent of our remit demonstrates just how much the Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure can contribute to improving the lot of everyone in the Province. Our remit is central to the aim of building a better life for all our people.

To give some examples, under the first Programme for Government we extended the interim safe sports grounds scheme to improve the infrastructure of sports facilities. Anyone who is involved in local football, Gaelic sports or rugby will see the tangible results of those improvements. In partnership with the Arts Council we developed tailored education and training programmes for individual artists to allow them to develop to their full potential. We offered support and expertise to the emerging creative industries, and took action to ensure the conservation of fish stocks. That is another example of work in partnership with the Committee, whose fishing inquiry played an important part in our work on inland fishing and fish stocks. We implemented a strategy for securing a programme of high-profile international and cultural events.

In the second Programme for Government we are taking several steps — some 21 actions of the 164 identified. These include making tangible improvements to our sporting facilities and working in support of the Belfast bid to become European Capital of Culture in 2008, an issue which the Committee Chairperson, Mr O'Neill, highlighted. Today's presentation of Imagine Belfast will have given a flavour of the importance of the bid for Belfast and the Province. It must be submitted by March 2002 and, while the event is in 2008, the groundwork has to be done long before that. The

Executive have allocated £0.5 million to support the preparation of that bid, and to stand any chance of success the culture and arts infrastructure needs to be improved. A strong bid is being prepared for the next round of Executive programme funds in April, aimed at improving the infrastructure in Belfast, including the Grand Opera House.

We will also work with the Sports Council to implement a code of ethics and good practice for children's sport, which we all agree, is vital. In addition, we will complete the electronic libraries project for Northern Ireland. That is a key part of libraries investment — a large capital programme providing new technologies to deliver information, at the same time allowing us to develop a common electronic gateway, giving access to the resources of archives, libraries and museums.

Those are some of the issues that we want to address through this year's Programme for Government. They give an idea of the range and importance of the Department's work to substantially and tangibly improve the lives of the people of Northern Ireland. They are not simply feel-good factors that do not stand up to economic scrutiny. I will present some hard facts to the contrary. On the sporting front, £800,000 is spent every day in the Northern Irish sports industry. The wealth that is created is equivalent to 2% of the gross domestic product. Crucially, the Northern Irish sports industry supports 12,500 jobs.

One of the cornerstones of the Department's initiatives in partnership with the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment, the Department for Employment and Learning and the Department of Education is the unlocking creativity strategy for the creative industries. That is a new, sunrise sector, but it currently employs 15,000 full-time people in around 3,500 businesses in Northern Ireland. It has a total turnover of £600,000 per annum. Overall employment in that sector has increased by 75% since 1995 and represents 3.5% of the Northern Irish economy. Our target is to raise it to 4% by 2004 — 4% is the average in Great Britain.

Members raised concerns about the lack of resources for culture, arts and leisure. Much of that is a product of historic underfunding. The Department has made some progress in addressing that legacy, but there is still a mountain to climb. Mr O'Neill mentioned the current position of the National Museums and Galleries of Northern Ireland (MAGNI). I share his concern. It is another example of historic underfunding. While we currently face significant deficits across the whole museum sector, I am determined that those problems will be addressed in a strategic way. The Department is engaged in a budget needs assessment of the museums, together with assessments in sports and the arts. Those assessments will identify both the extent of historic

underfunding and the action that must be taken to address it. It applies across the board in several areas.

Mr Kennedy suggested a good causes fund for organisations that will not apply for National Lottery funding. A section of the community has moral objections to money emanating from gambling. I have noted what has been said. It is a matter for more than one Department. Additional funding would need to be made available and I will raise that issue. It is not a unique proposition — other countries have adopted that approach.

Mrs Nelis mentioned the possibility of opening a regional office of the Sports Council for Northern Ireland in the north-west. I do not want the health and well-being of those in the north-west to be in any way disadvantaged compared to the rest of the Province, but the work of the Sports Council throughout Northern Ireland should be acknowledged. It would be difficult to argue that the council's good work would be enhanced if outposts were to be set up in other parts of Northern Ireland — in the north-west or anywhere else. I would be concerned about duplication and wasting precious resources.

The Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure is a small Department, but it has a major contribution to make to the delivery of the Programme for Government. I have fought hard for the funding that it needs. I will continue to do so, because I am aware, as Members and the Committee for Culture, Arts and Leisure are acutely aware, that this is a Department where small investments can create large outputs. Small inputs can lead to big outputs — the Department can make a difference.

Mr Byrne: I support the motion. I welcome the statements from the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister and wish them well in their joint endeavour to lead the Assembly and Executive in implementing an agreed Programme for Government.

People, whether they be students, patients, workers, old-age pensioners or unemployed, want to see devolved Government work effectively to improve the quality of their lives. Naturally, the public are eager to see real, meaningful benefits, and we have seen some examples in free transport for pensioners, more student support, some investment in public transport and more widespread provision of nursery education. All of those are welcome.

The Executive's recent decision on the provision of a North/South gas pipeline and the extension of a gas pipeline across the north-west is welcome. Sadly, Tyrone and Fermanagh will still be gas-free zones.

There is disappointment at the provisions for health-care, community care, the long-term unemployed and the limited investment in and support for the small

business sector. Some want quicker and more effective progress.

The First and Deputy First Ministers outlined the way in which commitments have been delivered and progress made since the first draft Programme for Government a year ago. The second programme signals progress in that 27 of the 250 designated initiatives have been tackled or accomplished. The First and Deputy First Ministers have indicated their willingness to see a Programme for Government that delivers change and an improvement to the public services that affect us directly, such as health, education, job creation and employment.

Political stability and peace are essential if devolution is to work. The political functioning of the Assembly is crucial, and the smooth, collective operation of the Executive is vital. The recent progress on the appointment of the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister is welcome and has given a positive signal to the wider community. The public now look for practical and tangible benefits. Good government is the declared objective of the draft Programme for Government. How do we get that in a region which has had 30 years of direct rule? People want devolution to work and are desperate to benefit from the devolved Administration.

A major question among the public and their representatives, however, is how to get devolved government working effectively and smoothly. There is major concern, and residual doubt, about the capacity and willingness of the entire public administration machine in Northern Ireland to implement a programme of change.

Public service agreements and service delivery agreement initiatives have been highlighted and are welcome. There is, however, a culture of custom and practice in administration in Northern Ireland. How do we as politicians and Members of the Assembly help to get a more dynamic and objectives-led approach on policy implementation? The permanent Government must be reformed by a process of cultural and administrative change. Public service administration is largely cautious and slow to change, and that is even more the case in a region like Northern Ireland. We have had 30 years of direct rule, with virtually no political scrutiny or accountable analysis and evaluation.

The public service agreements and service delivery agreements embarked upon a year ago were a new policy initiative. Public service agreements need to evolve into more strategic high-level statements of outputs and outcomes, so that each Department is working with its allocated resources to deliver. The approach of public service agreements and service delivery agreements is welcome and potentially worthwhile, especially given that Northern Ireland is more dependent on the public sector as a percentage of the gross domestic product than is any other region of the UK. I welcome the

Executive's lead on that initiative. It is to be hoped that good benefits will be realised which will enable a better economic performance by this region. Northern Ireland must become more productive and generate more locally based economic activity.

6.00 pm

During the draft Budget debate, I raised my concern about the fact that the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment's allocation for 2002–03 is roughly the same as that for the previous year. Since then, I have become aware that the Department cannot use all the funds that it was allocated for inward investment projects or to support locally based businesses in the current year.

I note that 600 business start-ups were signalled for the coming year. It is disappointing that the Department did not use all its budget last year because many entrepreneurs and owners of small businesses feel that they do not get adequate support and aid from the client executives who are designated to deal with their cases. I hope that Invest Northern Ireland will be more effective and less cumbersome in processing potential inward investment projects. I would like to see an effective public sector agreement for the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment that delivers more economic activity.

Key targets were outlined in the public sector agreement for the Department for Employment and Learning. I welcome the increased quota of higher education places; it has risen from 800 extra places last year to over 2,500 extra places this year. In total, 35,500 full-time higher education students will attend courses in Northern Ireland. It is important to allow more young people to stay here and realise their dream of doing a degree here. I welcome the increased quota of further education places on vocational courses. I want the further education sector targeted so that students and communities see their colleges as the centres of community and local development. The targets for the individual learning accounts and the Jobskills and Welfare to Work programmes are welcome, as are the NVQ qualification targets for the students or trainees who enrol on those schemes. There should be a stronger commitment to increasing public finance investment in university-based research and development. There should be a qualitative assessment of all publicly funded research projects to give a better evaluation of that investment. Currently, only university-based research is annually assessed by the UK universities research assessment exercise.

Many Members have mentioned the crisis in the Health Service. The public is experiencing a big problem with ever-longer waiting lists for surgery and specialist treatment. There is grave concern in my constituency about the response rate of the Ambulance

Service. Recently, it took five telephone calls from Gortin to Omagh before an ambulance arrived 45 minutes later; in the meantime a patient had died. There is something wrong when an ambulance cannot arrive within eight minutes.

There is a crisis in community care. Home care packages for home helps are inadequate. The review of acute hospital services was delayed, and one of the saddest features of the Health Service has been the consultation after consultation. There is a severe lack of concrete decision making. The concept of equality is being violated by the haphazard and disjointed delivery of patchy health care. There is neither equality nor equity in the system — be it determined by geography or patient category. Many who need hospital or community care feel grossly let down.

There has been a lack of capital investment in regional development for decades. The provision of good infrastructure is vital to the social and economic development of the region. Roads, rail, water and sewerage need major capital investment. I welcome the near 15% increase in this year's allocation. Almost £100 million is needed to counter the severe backlog of roads' maintenance work. That reflects an historical accumulation of neglect, particularly in the more rural and distant areas. The Executive recently allocated £40 million to the road from Larne to Newry, via Belfast, a designated trans-European network, for major upgrading. That, along with the upgrading of the Westlink, is welcome.

Northern Ireland's other trans-European network roads — the two that stretch from Belfast to Derry along the northern route, north of Lough Neagh, and the two southern routes from Belfast to Enniskillen and Ballygawley to Derry — are badly in need of upgrading and investment, particularly the western sections of A5 and the A4. I encourage the junior Ministers to take our remarks on board, and I thank them for being present.

Mr Shannon: There are some efficient parts of the Programme for Government, but there are other deficient aspects, one of which is the section that deals with the fishing industry. Rev Dr Ian Paisley spoke about this issue in a debate last week. The allocation in the Budget is anything but adequate. For a long time, those involved in the Northern Ireland fishing industry have been made to feel like the farmers' poor relations by the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development. If they have felt that way over the past few years, one can only guess how they felt when they found out that their industry had been given an increase of only 1.1%, when the Department's overall budget was increased by 4.3%.

The Government and the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development have constantly failed fishermen

— they have not recognised the industry's needs. The Government's bad management is strangling the fishing industry. The Department has earmarked just 1.1%, or £100,000, for the cod recovery programme. Many will remember the debate in the Chamber earlier this year. The Gallery was full of fishermen from the major ports. They wanted £750,000 for the cod recovery programme, but even after that debate and the hype, only £100,000 has been set aside. If the Department had bothered to ask the two fishing organisations, it would know that £750,000 is needed to develop the programme — not £100,000.

The programme has led to the closure of the waters off the coast of County Down. It sends our fishermen into other countries' territories and leaves some of our white-fish fleet with nowhere to go for several months of the year. This is a big issue in the fishing industry that affects many people.

Some fishermen thought that they could turn to fishing for nephrops or prawns, but limits were then placed on that type of fishing too. The door was closed on their only other option. Scientists have pointed out that a 10% cut in nephrop fishing would result in only a 2% recovery of cod. So men and women lose their jobs, homes and communities for the sake of a paltry 2% increase in the numbers of cod in the Irish Sea. That is hard to understand when we see people on the cold quay of despair.

The scheme for decommissioning fishing boats is probably the only honest and tangible decommissioning scheme that has ever taken place. There is, at least, an inventory of the boats that are decommissioned. You can count which boats have been destroyed, and see them burning and being broken up so that you know that decommissioning has actually happened.

On 2 March 2001, the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development's officials advised that £8 million had been allocated for decommissioning. On 28 March, an announcement was made that £5 million was being allocated. Perhaps the missing £3 million went to the other decommissioning scheme — the other programme that nobody knows about. This is the type of ineptitude that characterises the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development's dealings with the fishing industry. One moment, the Department tells the fishermen to invest in their boats, and even gives them grant assistance, and the next moment it tells them that there are restrictions on where they can go and what they can catch.

A lot of money is being allocated to the North/South implementation bodies. For example, £300,000 is being spent on the Foyle, Carlingford and Irish Lights Commission. One would think that the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development could learn a thing or two from their Dáil counterparts. Fishermen

from the Republic of Ireland do not have to pay a penny towards light dues, whereas fleets from Northern Ireland pay almost £85,000 per year. That is unfair.

The fishing industry is on its knees, and the Department can only allocate £100,000 for the cod recovery programme, which no one can guarantee will make a significant difference to fish stocks. Other factors, such as global warming, may influence the dwindling numbers of fish on the Irish coast. Cod prefer cold waters. However, the seas around the island are heating up, particularly the Irish Sea, and fish are going elsewhere. If this information were made available to the Department, focused decisions could be made.

More than a paltry sum of money is needed to help the industry, which is one of the oldest in the world. A firm commitment from the Minister and the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development is needed — not flannel, not “Yes, we will do that, but Europe comes first.” Focused responses and results are needed. A substantial investment would keep the industry going for the next five, 10 or 20 years. We must look beyond the short-term future.

The Minister could talk to the Dáil and to such Administrations as the Dutch Government and the Spanish Government. Those Governments gave their fishing industries adequate compensation and investment to rebuild after the crisis resulting from the introduction of closures associated with the North Sea cod recovery plan.

The North Sea is our local pond. The Dutch and Spanish Governments, which are some distance away, have helped their fishing fleets through the crisis, while the Government next door are snubbing the problem. It is scandalous that every Assembly debate about the fishing industry centres on complaints that the Government are fobbing the industry off with a derisory sum of money.

The months-old demands and requests of fishing fleets have not changed. They request that they should receive a weekly subsidy for all vessels that are required to remain in ports. If the cod recovery plan stood at £750,000 rather than £100,000, that would help. A percentage of that financial assistance should be used to compensate fish vendors, the Northern Ireland Fishery Harbour Authority and producer organisations for their inevitable loss of income, should vessels be forced to tie up.

Financial assistance would allow trawler owners to maintain repayments of bank loans, insurance and equipment hire costs, as well as providing crew members with a weekly wage. Crew members cannot afford to sit around for three or four months; they need an income. Training schemes should be developed that could run when the fisheries are closed, and the Department should have in place a strategy. Those proposals must

be implemented in order to address the long-term problems that have been caused by the neglect of the fishing industry.

It is essential that the fishing industry be brought in from the cold so that it can be a key contender in Europe. The fishing industry wants to play its part but is unable to do so. The Department seems painfully unaware of that, although the industry generates millions of pounds for the economy each year. Of the fish caught, some 70% is exported. If the Department considered that information, more money would be forthcoming from the Programme for Government.

If the Minister or the Department does not grapple with the fishing industry crisis, perhaps someone else could re-designate for the purpose of signing that piece of paper to ensure that the fishing industry receives its £750,000? If neither the Minister nor the Department can do it, let someone else do it. I would love to have one week to sign the papers needed to give fishermen the industry that they deserve. They need assistance. Once again the Programme for Government has failed to deliver. I record my concern and annoyance on behalf of the fishing industry.

Mrs E Bell: Many important issues such as health, the environment and the fishing industry have been highlighted. I shall comment briefly on three areas of the Programme for Government. Progress has been made by the locally devolved Administration, and there has been consultation on the way forward. However, the Alliance Party feels that there are still shortcomings in the addressing of the deep divisions and inequality in Northern Ireland. The new beginning that everyone hoped for cannot be achieved until we begin to understand, tolerate and accept one another's traditions, perceptions and beliefs. The Programme for Government must go much further if it is to help us even to like each other.

6.15 pm

Integrated education has still not been given the opportunity to develop sufficiently to cope with the parents and children who want to be become part of that system. That is illustrated by the many children who cannot be admitted to integrated schools. The Programme for Government does not state clearly how it can live up to the recommendation that a more pro-active policy is likely to accelerate the growth of integrated education, which was made in the report, ‘Towards a Culture of Tolerance: Education for Diversity’.

Furthermore, the education and library boards' policies are not consistent. The programme should have encouraged a strategy, for example, that could enable all education and library boards, organisations such as the Northern Ireland Council for Integrated Education and the Council for Catholic Maintained Schools to develop an integrated section and a more realistic

transformation process that would involve all interested groups, particularly those in the maintained sector — as yet no schools from there have been involved in that process. There should be more community audits of new schools to ensure that an integrated option is included. That would show people that integrated education is a viable and necessary part of education.

The incidents at Holy Cross Primary School, and their repercussions, show how bad relations have become between the communities in north Belfast. The review of community relations suggests that there should be more basic and relevant projects that have a direct impact on and in communities, so resources must be made available to set up projects to tackle the divisions and concerns of all sections of people and foster mutual understanding and respect for diversity. That must be done in a cohesive rather than an ad hoc manner by all sections of society to enable community groups, the Police Service and the social services to bring people together.

We must put an end to the sort of statement that was printed in 'The Times' today after the killing of the young 16-year old Protestant, Glen Branagh. There was a quote from one of his friends, I think. He declined to be identified, but he said:

"He was a good fellow. He just hated Fenians. We could do with hundreds more of his kind around here."

That is the sort of attitude that we must get rid of.

The cross-cutting strategy detailed in the Programme for Government must be implemented as quickly as possible. The Executive must show strong leadership and directly and completely address issues such as flag flying and racial and sectarian intimidation. Communities' efforts to increase tolerance and respect for all people, regardless of their background, must be supported. The Mediation Network for Northern Ireland has said that community relations must no longer be seen as the indulgence of moderately minded people on the margins of society.

The debate about human rights in the Chamber some weeks ago illustrated clearly the many misconceptions and concerns about guaranteeing human rights for all. I wholeheartedly welcome the appointment of a children's commissioner and would encourage the appointment of a victim's commissioner. I pay tribute to the Human Rights Commission's efforts to draw up an effective, relevant and equitable human rights Act. The ill-conceived ideas about human rights for all and the prejudices of some people who would restrict human rights for other citizens must be dealt with. Again, the Executive should encourage pluralism and equal treatment for society as a whole.

One of the main weaknesses of the Programme for Government is the continued assumption that we live in a two-community society and that diversity should

still be regarded as the difference between Unionists and Nationalists, Catholics and Protestants. That might mean, for example, that the expanding ethnic community here would feel marginalised. It is for that reason that we put forward our paper on hate crimes legislation, which I am glad to say the Secretary of State appears to have taken up. However, there is no mention of it in the Executive's programme. There is also a weakness in the language and the many definitions of terms such as "sectarianism", "community relations", "integrated education" and "equality". The Assembly must start to think in a pluralist and diverse fashion, so that all our citizens will feel included and looked after by the Executive.

The programme is a start, but it must expand its vision of a peaceful, cohesive society to include all communities in Northern Ireland rather than just the usual two. As Albert Einstein said:

"We cannot solve our problems with the same thinking we used when we created them".

The Chairperson of the Committee for Social Development (Mr Cobain): The Committee for Social Development met the Minister for Social Development in early October to discuss the draft Programme for Government and the associated draft budgets. On 12 October, the Committee made a detailed submission to the Office of the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister. The Committee was keenly interested in section 2 'Growing as a Community' and section 7 'Working Together'.

The Committee was content to endorse the priorities and sub-priorities in those two sections, and it was broadly satisfied with the associated actions and commitments. However, we expressed reservations about the precise way in which social need is to be tackled and how the needs of those in poverty will be addressed in practice.

The Committee was deeply concerned to discover that the format and content of the public service agreements had been changed, apparently without consultation. We have still to be convinced that it was necessary to take such an early decision to make the targets in the public service agreements high-level. The Programme for Government is supposed to provide a more open and accountable programme.

Mr Mark Durkan acknowledged that part of the role of Statutory Committees is to scrutinise the work of Departments. The details in the original Programme for Government helped to inform us about the actions that Departments would take to deliver the programme, but we now find that it is impossible to compare performances year on year because the format has changed. We have heard that the service delivery agreements will show the details, but we are having the debate today without having seen those details —

details that should influence the strategic objectives of the Assembly. We have been told that the Department would consult us about the service delivery agreements — but not until next month.

The Committee favours a bold “bottom-up” approach for calculating the Budget, based on the cost of funding particular priority programmes, rather than setting a broad-based agenda and then facing the dilemma of assigning resources to a range of programmes that is far too broad. Inevitably, the jam is spread too thinly, and we run the risk of underachieving.

The priorities in the Programme for Government are legitimate, but are they too ambitious? Are we in danger of promising much but delivering little? Should we not adopt a more radical approach, whereby we eradicate fuel poverty once and for all and then move on to the next issue on the list? Much is made of our collective determination to tackle social need and poverty. My Committee accepts the cross-cutting nature of those issues and the role that the Office of the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister, along with other Departments, has to play. The Department for Social Development is particularly well placed to make an effective contribution to the resolution of those issues, and it should be given a greater opportunity, and the funding, to do so.

It is the Committee’s view that, with some re-ordering of priorities by the Executive and the Department, the eradication of fuel poverty could be achieved more quickly. The Committee has urged the Minister for Social Development to extend the scope of the scheme in order to accelerate progress. We recognise the cost implications and the competition for funding, but the costs associated with warm homes schemes are indisputably one-off capital payments, rather than a recurring drain on public resources. It is also evident that the effects of poverty result in recurring demands on, for example, the health budget. The early eradication of fuel poverty would not only ease the recurring financial problems on the health budget, but would contribute positively to the health and well-being of people who are among the most marginalised in this society.

The Social Development Committee also welcomes the inclusion of a reference to “Supporting People”, a new scheme for funding housing support from 2003. However, we have concerns about how that is likely to be financed, as there appears to be no reference to it in the draft Budget.

I want to make some concluding remarks specific to the Department for Social Development’s objectives. The Committee welcomes the performance targets for the Social Security Agency and the Child Support Agency. However, we have voiced concerns that the investment in systems, which was aimed at improving efficiency, has not yet produced the promised substantial

savings in running costs. We intend to monitor that situation carefully.

We had a positive and constructive debate on housing yesterday. Without exception, Members from all parts of the House acknowledged the continuing importance that social housing plays and that it deserves to be properly funded. The Committee considers that housing is an area in which tangible targets can be introduced to good effect. We are disappointed that the draft Programme for Government now includes only three high-level targets, compared with six targets in last year’s programme.

The first target is as follows:

“By December 2004, reduce by 20,000 the numbers of fuel poor households”.

That is fine in itself, but there are no interim targets that would enable the Committee to monitor progress. The second target relates to housing unfitness. The current Programme for Government has a target of reducing unfitness by providing grant aid to 7,500 homes in 2001-02. The draft programme contains an altogether different, immeasurable, wishy-washy target:

“Over the period 2002 to 2004 ensure that the housing occupied by tenants of the NIHE is kept at recommended standards of fitness.”

I challenge anyone to tell me how the Social Development Committee, or anyone else, could say how, when and to what extent the Department had met that target.

The Social Development Committee recognises that many of the policies for tackling disadvantage and community development are under review. It will be necessary to await the outcomes of those reviews before establishing meaningful targets. However, the Committee would welcome stronger references to the relevance of, and scope for, improved efficiencies. We have suggested to the Department that the commitment to introducing a target aimed at avoiding the duplication of services and running costs for the provision of those services might usefully have been included.

The Junior Minister (Office of the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister) (Mr Haughey): Mr Nesbitt and I have listened with great interest to the debate, which has ranged widely over most of the issues covered in the draft Programme for Government.

Since the document was launched on 24 September, the Office of the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister, in conjunction with colleagues in the Department of Finance and Personnel, has been involved in consultation on the draft programme and the draft Budget with representatives of all sections of the community. It has been a thorough consultation, and it is through consultation that we will build on all the good work that has been done.

It is important that we consult on the programme and the Budget, and that we consult on them together,

because, obviously, they are directly linked. Budget allocations support the programme's policies and activities. We should not, as a prudent Administration, commit ourselves to actions that we cannot afford to resource.

It is a question of priorities, and we must explain the hard choices that must be made.

6.30 pm

Promoting equality of opportunity cuts across the five priorities and all 11 Departments. That has been a core element of the discussions in the consultation. In the draft Programme, we have set out to produce a strategic forward-looking document that includes fewer, better focused and higher-level actions than before. We have also set out narratives that explain more fully the policies from which those actions come.

The debate and the responses to consultations on the draft Budget and the draft Programme for Government will lead to a better focused set of policies and actions that will address the key issues and challenges that we face as a community. It has already been stated that it is all about trying to make a difference. The benefit of having a locally elected Administration in charge of its own affairs is that we decide how to make the best use of the resources available in order to address the needs of the community.

Members have raised a wide range of points, because of the detail in the draft Programme. I will deal with as many as possible. However, in a debate involving 20 or more people, it is not possible to deal with every point, and I do not propose to do that.

If Members have made observations on judgements made or priorities set in the draft Programme for Government, I will take note of those observations and comments, and they will be input into the final draft. If Members have asked specific questions or raised specific points that must be addressed, I will try to do that as well as I can. However, if I miss a few or do not have the information available to answer some of them, Members will get a written reply.

I will comment on a point made by David Ford, the leader of the Alliance Party, who referred to difficulties such as sectarian flag-flying, graffiti and so on. In the draft Programme for Government, we have made clear our commitment to supporting local communities in addressing these matters. That does not mean, as David Ford has suggested, that we are simply standing about waiting for local communities to solve their own problems. David Ford and most Members know that simply removing flags and graffiti is not a long-term answer to the problem, unless there is local community agreement. The graffiti and flags are replaced, and therefore simply responding to every situation where graffiti — *[Interruption]*.

Mr Ford: Since the Minister is specifically referring to the point that I made, it seems that he is to some extent answering the concerns that I had by saying that he does not take them seriously. If the situation arises where nothing can be done by the community without the agreement of the hard men, the agreement of 95% will be overruled. The Minister has restated my point about that. It will create the fears that I expressed about community agreement, meaning that nothing will be done by the Executive.

Mr Haughey: I am not saying that nothing should be done until the hard men permit it — quite the reverse. I am saying that the only approach that can achieve a long-term solution to sectarian tension and related territorial activities is the creation of capacity in those communities to resolve the differences that lead to those symptomatic activities. The illnesses of society are not resolved by simply addressing the symptoms. We must do much more than that. We must cure the illness that gives rise to those problems. That is my point.

Mr Ford also said that integrated education was growing in response to demand. The criteria for primary schools in the integrated sector were revised in December 2000. The criteria for new post-primary schools have been revised from a year 8 intake of 80 pupils to an intake of 50. Those revisions followed discussions with interested parties; they were based on professional educational advice from the inspectorate and others, and they took account of the fact that the previous criteria acted as a barrier to the growth of both sectors. The change reflects the statutory duty of the Department of Education to encourage and facilitate integrated and Irish-medium education, and the commitments in the Good Friday Agreement to support the Irish language and integrated education as ways of embedding parity of esteem and reconciliation. The revised criteria represent a balance between the real facilitation of parental choice and the need to ensure that public funds are used to best effect. I will come back to that later, when I will refer to points made by Mr Beggs and Mr Kennedy about pre-school education. Similar considerations arose in that sector.

Mr Ford also asked about the commitments made in the first Programme for Government. Some 250 targets were set, or specific actions promised, in that first programme. Thirty-six of those were completed in the first six months. More have been completed since. Many of the others, which were more than one-year commitments, are under way. Mr O'Neill made the important point that we could do with more information not just on actions completed, but on actions that were under way and whether they were near to completion.

Mr John Kelly said that expanding North/South co-operation would improve social and economic well-being in Northern Ireland, and I agree with him. Chapter 6 of the draft programme covers several areas

in which mutual benefits should flow from enhanced co-operation in education, the competitiveness of the two economies, health promotion and tourism. Apart from the implementation bodies, there is a great deal of scope for beneficial North/South co-operation in the areas specified in the agreement for such co-operation, but without any structures other than the interaction of the two Administrations.

Mr Beggs and Mr Kennedy referred to the pledge that there should be one year's free pre-school education for every child whose parents wish it. The pre-school education expansion programme is providing — and will provide — places all over Northern Ireland, not just in the conurbations and areas of high density population. We are conscious of the need to ensure that children in rural areas enjoy the same advantages as city children. There is a requirement that any pre-school playgroup that receives funding for free places must have a minimum peer group of eight children. That requirement is based on the professional advice of the inspectorate, and it reflects the need to ensure that funds derived from the taxpayer's pocket are spent efficiently. A line must be drawn somewhere. A pre-school playgroup cannot be provided at every crossroads, where there may be only one or two children able to benefit from it.

Mr Beggs also referred to the low levels of adult literacy and numeracy in Carrickfergus and Larne. The Executive are taking action to improve those levels and regard such action as being at the heart of improving economic performance and competitiveness, and achieving the sort of personal and social development that they wish to see. The Department for Employment and Learning is developing a comprehensive strategy and action plan that will be the subject of extensive consultation towards the end of the year. That is an important issue because it is one for which no quick fix exists. Improving the literacy and numeracy of individuals is a complex issue, especially when those individuals are in work. It requires action at various levels of government. However, its importance in ensuring the economic, community and personal development that the Executive want to see means that it will continue to be a priority.

Ms Lewsley mentioned the flaws in the statistical data in the working group's report on travellers and stated that there was no local government representation on the working group, despite the experience of local authorities in making provision for, and delivering services to, travellers. Consultation on the recommendations in the promoting social inclusion working group's report on travellers has ended. Separate arrangements were made for focused consultation with travellers. Departments are considering responses with the aim of publishing a strategic response by March 2002. I accept Ms Lewsley's point about local government involvement,

but each council was sent the consultation document and given the opportunity to comment on it.

Ms Lewsley also referred to the single equality Bill. The Executive are fully committed to promoting equality of opportunity and to tackling discrimination, and we shall pursue that through strong legislation and effective policies. The Executive will bring forward legislation to harmonise existing anti-discrimination legislation as far as is practicable. We shall improve it wherever practicable and take into account developments in Great Britain and recent European Directives relating to gender, sexual orientation and age. The Executive have consulted on the scope and measures to be included in the legislation, and we shall seek views on the draft Bill early in the new year.

The Chairperson of the Committee of the Centre, Mr Poots, stated that the Executive had made only a marker bid with regard to the appointment of the children's commissioner. That is how things are done. Until one gets an accurate fix on the amount of resources required to establish an office, one cannot make a firm bid. However, the Executive have made a marker bid, to which we shall return. The Minister of Finance and Personnel understands the procedure.

Mr Poots also made a point about the review of public administration. That matter rests with the whole Executive, not with the Office of the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister. It is a complex issue on which differing views are honestly and validly held. Until the Executive resolve those views, the work cannot proceed. However, the Executive are working hard to finalise the draft criteria and methodology for the review of public administration. I am confident that those issues will be resolved soon and that, early in the new year, the Executive will make progress on the matter. Mr Poots and all his DUP Colleagues have left the Chamber, but it would be helpful if that party's Ministers were to participate in the processes that lead to the resolution of those issues.

6.45 pm

I am sure that all Members are suitably chastened by Mr Poots's strictures, specifically on the Office of the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister, more generally on the entire Executive and even more generally on the agreement and devolution. I reject the notion that the success of any Department is down, not to the Minister, but to the advisors, whereas all the failures of that Department may be laid at the door of the Minister. Mr Poots had in his sights the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development, Ms Rodgers, who is at the moment fighting the case for Northern Ireland's farmers in London. She has done that with singular success in recent times. The farming community would take issue with Mr Poots on that matter. Ministers will be dismayed by Mr Poots's criticisms,

but the Civil Service will be greatly cheered to hear that all successes are due to it and all failures are due to the Ministers.

Mr McCarthy referred to the Northern Ireland Human Rights Commission's recent publication on the human rights of the aged. I can assure him that I have read that document thoroughly, that other Members of the Administration have done so and that we are as committed to the rights of elderly people as we are to the rights of any section of the community.

Carmel Hanna made an important point about the need for the Administration — and of Northern Ireland generally — to play a credible role in international development aid. I will recommend to my Colleagues that we reflect on, and perhaps take some initiative on that issue. I cannot commit the Executive at this time.

Joan Carson referred to the need for consultation with Committees. The Programme for Government was launched with the Executive's position report on 18 June, the draft programme was presented to the Assembly on 24 September and the consultation is due to end on 20 November. We hope that the Committees have had sufficient time to make an input into the consultation exercise. The Committees' comments are extremely important to the Administration in developing the Programme for Government. It would be difficult to extend the time for consultations, as there are time constraints involved in any procedure. We hope that we have got it right, or as near to right as we possibly can.

Jane Morrice referred to the relative passivity of our community about the problems that the introduction of the euro will cause. Northern Ireland is likely to see a higher level of euro cash use than other parts of the United Kingdom. When junior Minister Nesbitt and I met the Welsh First Minister, Rhodri Morgan, he was exercised about that point. He made the case that much of the west coast of Wales, especially around the major cross-channel ports, is heavily dependent on the tourist and commercial trade with Ireland, and will have to become a dual-currency zone. That is also the case around our border with our neighbours to the South. Much of south Down and south Armagh and parts of Tyrone, Derry and Fermanagh are dual-currency zones. It will be a little more difficult, but not that much more, for traders in that dual-currency zone to convert their Irish pound accounts into euro accounts. That unfortunate problem will resolve itself, and will reach a level of ease of movement similar to what people have today.

Ian Paisley Jnr alleged that only 10 of the 250 actions in the first Programme for Government had been completed. I must correct him: in fact, 36 actions were completed in the first six months. Many more have since been completed, and more are nearing completion. We are on target to build on that progress

and to complete our commitments. That is not to say that there will be no slippage. We would have to be more than human if there were to be no slippage at all. It is unrealistic to expect 100% effectiveness and perfection from the Administration. However, where slippage occurs, we are determined to identify the reason for it, and we shall ensure that it will be dealt with and that any actions so delayed will be delivered as soon as possible. We shall report to the Assembly and the public at the end of each financial year on progress made on every Programme for Government commitment and action during that year. The first report will be published at the end of the current financial year.

Minister Nesbitt will deal with other points that were raised.

The Junior Minister (Office of the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister) (Mr Nesbitt): I apologise if you thought that you were only getting one address, Mr Speaker, and if you were about to leave. It is not quite like that — you will be here for a few more minutes.

Today's debate was a further stage in the consultation process. It has proved to be valuable and important. Mr Haughey and I sat through most of the debate and listened to the contributions. Members raised issues of particular concern to them. In some cases, Members raised constituency matters, in addition to matters relating to their role as a Chairperson or vice-Chairperson of a Committee. Such debate helps to inform the deliberations that we shall undertake before the Programme for Government is finalised later in the calendar year.

Members and, indeed, some Ministers raised many important points. The Departments will fully consider those points when revising their sections of the draft Programme for Government. Assembly Committees have commented on the priorities, individual actions and policies specific to their remit. Again, we shall carefully consider those comments — and others — in the wider consultation process outside the Assembly. All those comments will feed into the final draft Programme for Government for this year.

Several comments were made, both today and from other sources, about the changes that have been made to the public service agreements (PSAs). Indeed, some Members queried those PSAs and asked why they contain less detail. That is because we are trying to be more publicly accountable, and, to do so, we must be rigorous and disciplined in what we are trying to achieve. We are trying to establish baselines that reflect the position from whence we came and the targets that we wish to achieve. It would be good if there were also a benchmark alongside that to establish good standards and practices that could be accepted as the benchmark to which we wish to move.

The PSAs will be more streamlined this year. The Treasury and others advised us to identify a small number of high-level outcomes and performance measures of targets that we wished to achieve. That could become a collective target, reflecting many aspects of a particular element in a Department's administration. It is hoped that Departments will therefore be more clearly focused on their outcomes. The Executive presented the PSAs to the Assembly earlier this year. The Departments' PSAs set out aims and objectives, together with targets and their associated budgets. The principle of PSAs received broad support from consultees on the wider matter of accountability to the public. There was constructive criticism, as there has been today, on how they might be adapted, modified or improved, but respondents were generally supportive.

We are committed to the further development of PSAs. It is a learning exercise, not just for accountable politics and administration, but for all of us to learn to improve the process by which we are accountable to the electorate for the delivery of services in Northern Ireland. We therefore accept the constructive criticism offered. We constantly seek the improvement of PSAs on those of the previous year, and it is hoped that that improvement will continue.

We are embarking on service delivery agreements (SDAs) that convey actions needed to deliver the target for the performance measure in PSAs. Last year, we saw actions in PSAs, but those were not performance measures. Actions are the means by which the performance or the desired outcome is delivered. We are trying to streamline that and clarify it. We will monitor progress on previously published PSAs and targets, to which Denis Haughey referred, and we welcome the views about PSAs voiced in the debate. The SDAs are more detailed, and they will come through to the respective Committees and then to the Assembly.

Health featured prominently in many contributions, such as those of Mr McGrady, Rev Dr McCrea, Mr J Kelly, Mr Poots, Mr McCarthy, and Ms Hanna. Dr Hendron used the words "a daily crisis". At a meeting of the North/South Ministerial Council that I attended with the Minister for Health, Social Services and Public Safety, Bairbre de Brún, the phrase used was

"not a winter crisis but a constant crisis".

That phrase was used throughout the United Kingdom.

When the National Health Service was set up in the late 1940s, those who set it up assumed that healthcare would become cheaper. All the ills would be cured, and fewer resources would therefore be needed from the public purse. The reverse has happened. People live longer, and more money is needed to keep them. Also, the diseases being treated and dealt with now are more costly, not only in relative but in real terms. More money is needed just for the service to stay still.

Against that background, many of the comments made about health are understandable. For example, waiting lists are at an all-time high. Fifty-four thousand people were waiting for in-patient treatment in June 2001. In the past year, waiting lists have risen by 9.5%. An additional £5 million was allocated non-recurrently for waiting lists last year, and, in the current financial year, a further £3 million was allocated. Last year's £5 million was then rolled forward recurrently into this year's allocation. The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety has made action on waiting lists a priority for her Department. Last September, the framework for action on waiting lists was issued. It set out a comprehensive programme of action aimed at improving the efficiency of all stages in the process, including GP hospital referral and in-patient treatment. We accept that the task is difficult, but work is being done.

Roy Beggs and Carmel Hanna also mentioned evaluations of needs and effectiveness, not just with respect to health. The Executive agreed to initiate a programme of needs and effectiveness evaluation on our spending programmes.

Needs are related to policy, and policy to effectiveness. They are interrelated, and, unless one knows one's policy, one does not know the needs to address. Are we achieving our objectives? Of course, we are. Value for money was mentioned. We try to achieve our objective of effectiveness economically and efficiently.

7.00 pm

All of those evaluations are being carried out on health, education, housing, training, vocational education and financial assistance to industry. The five areas in which we are conducting needs assessment exercises account for 70% of planned public spending in Northern Ireland. They are major pieces of work, involving not only the Office of the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister, but also the Department of Finance and Personnel and other relevant Departments. When the findings are produced, they will be used to support arguments such as those raised earlier about the Barnett formula. They should also help to give us a much better understanding of how effective the services that we provide are, and to prioritise, because, as Members said, money is limited. Nothing crystallises the mind more than knowing that you must live within a budget. That is a difficult thing to do, and that is where the Barnett formula fits in.

The focus of the evaluations has been mainly on identifying the levels of need for public spending. They should be completed in early spring next year. Consultation should then take place, and the evaluations will finally be resolved in September.

Mr J Kelly said that the ministerial group on public health should take a cross-departmental approach. That group is meeting; it is alive and well and meets

regularly under the chairmanship of the Minister — or should that be chairpersonship? I am not sure how it should be phrased, Mr Speaker. Perhaps ‘Erskine May’ has the correct term.

Mr A Maginness: You could say it in Irish.

Mr Nesbitt: Perhaps you can say it in Irish. I may be able to think it, but I am not sure that I can say it. Would you like me to give way so that you can say it in Irish? No? Could the Member say it in Irish? I see that I have called his bluff.

The group comprises senior representatives from all Departments, including the Office of the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister, and it has actively contributed to the Investing for Health strategy that, following consultation, is being finalised.

Jane Morrice and Kieran McCarthy raised the issue of free personal nursing care. Earlier this year, the Executive agreed in principle to the introduction, from April 2002, of free nursing care in nursing homes. Unfortunately, the draft Budget proposals do not provide sufficient resources for that. Therefore, the implementation of that important initiative has been deferred. However, the measure to facilitate free nursing care will be carried in a health and personal social services Bill. With that provision in statute, it should be possible to commence free nursing care when resources permit.

Eddie McGrady and Carmel Hanna raised the issue of radiotherapy services. The radiotherapy equipment at Belvoir Park Hospital is used to its full capacity. It is nearing the end of its useful life and, in the longer term, it will be replaced by new equipment at the new cancer centre on the Belfast City Hospital site.

Residential child care places are another important issue. Phase one of the Children Matter task force regional plan for the development of residential child care sets out a programme of 22 new capital developments that will provide 77 additional places and 70 replacement places by the end of March 2003. Two of those developments, providing 13 extra places, opened before the end of March 2001. There are other aspects to that development. Capital funds that amount to about £8 million and revenue of about £3 million are required for those developments. So far, £1 million capital for this year and £3 million for 2002-03 has been secured through Executive programme funds.

Dr Hendron suggested that Executive programme funds be used for the cancer centre at Belfast City Hospital. The next round of allocations from the Executive programme fund for infrastructure will be considered by the Executive next spring. All I can say at this stage is that the Executive will consider carefully any bids that are made for that fund and the other funds. I am conscious of health provision, and of what Members have said on that topic today. I have dealt with the

subject of health quite extensively, because it kept reoccurring.

We have listened to many comments about agriculture from Mr McGrady, Mr Savage, and Rev Dr William McCrea. The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development commissioned a desk study on the value and effectiveness in Northern Ireland of retirement schemes for farmers. She has commissioned further primary research into the economic, social and environmental aspects of early retirement and new entrants’ schemes. The results will be available in summer 2002.

The Deputy Chairperson of the Agriculture and Rural Development Committee raised the issue of the priority of rural issues in the Programme for Government. Again, that was considered carefully. Our rural population and its economic future is important. We are still a rural community to a great extent, and many people here come from a rural community: “Scratch us all, and we come from the soil” is a phrase sometimes used in Northern Ireland. We are significantly different from England and the rest of the United Kingdom in the importance that we place on the gross domestic product (GDP) and the agriculture sector in Northern Ireland. There is a key need to develop policies to deal with that aspect of the rural economy. We must be more sensitive to rural needs in our attitudes to industrial development, education, training, the location of services, planning, and the environment. We must overcome the many problems that face the agricultural industry, but we must also ensure that there are new business and employment opportunities in the countryside and rural towns.

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development advanced proposals for the implementation of rural proofing, to which the Executive remain fully committed. Rural proofing is essential. It is designed to ensure that the legitimate concerns and aspirations of people who live in our extensive rural areas are fully taken into account when drawing up proposals for policies across the full range of responsibilities.

Ms Rodgers’s proposals, which she plans to discuss with the Agriculture and Rural Development Committee later this week, will include the establishment of an inter-departmental steering group, under her chairmanship. The proposals will also include the creation of a rural proofing unit, the head of which has recently been appointed, within the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development. I hope that we have given an indication of the importance of rural proofing, to which the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development and the Executive are committed.

Some Members raised the issue of the Barnett formula. When Northern Ireland was set up in 1920, it was assumed that it would be self-financing, but that turned out not to be the case. Therefore, Northern

Ireland received deficit funding for many years, from the 1920s to the 1940s, and did not catch up until the 1960s. It required about 30% per cent more spending per head than the rest of the United Kingdom. That was a measurement of spending only — not need. The last major needs assessment exercise was conducted in about 1979.

We face the problem of establishing what is needed for the services that must be provided in Northern Ireland, and, in that respect, we have concerns about the funding that we receive. The draft Programme for Government acknowledges those concerns. We are carefully considering the Barnett mechanism, because, with regard to the allocation of funding, we do not get the same funding pro rata as England and Wales. When an announcement is made in Great Britain, there is an expectation that somehow that will read across to Northern Ireland with the same spend. However, that is not the case, so there is a difficulty.

To secure more funding, we must not only convey the need, but convince Her Majesty's Treasury that there is a need. That process will be ongoing over the coming months. We hope therefore to have reached a view later in the year about the appropriateness of the Barnett formula and to have a carefully argued case for funding to match the needs of the community in Northern Ireland.

Mr Ford and Mr Beggs asked whether we were making a difference. Mr Beggs asked where the money was going and if we were getting value for money. He said that he hoped that the process would progress quickly to demonstrating that we are getting value for money.

Mr Beggs also referred to the problems in the Health Service. The key difference is that all local politicians have a collective responsibility for decisions on policy and actions across a range of local services. The four parties in the Government are working with Committees to deliver better services in Northern Ireland. We have set out our priorities in the Programme for Government. We have set out the resources that are available for improving people's health and education. We have set out the challenges.

We heard Mr McGimpsey, the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure, giving a full account of his funding, for his targets and what he aims to deliver in that important sector. That is an example of local people having responsibility for the spending and allocation of resources. We are trying to make a difference. I emphasise the word "trying". It is not easy, but, as I said earlier, it is a learning process in which we are all putting our hands to the plough.

Dr O'Hagan and Mr Molloy mentioned public-private partnerships. We are considering that again through various mechanisms. We are gathering views, internally

and externally, and considering recommendations. A working group has been established by the Executive in accordance with their commitment in the Programme for Government to review the use of private finance to address Northern Ireland's infrastructure deficit. The Committee for Finance and Personnel's report provides useful, important information, and the final report of the working group is scheduled for completion in March 2002 for consideration by the Executive. It will be published and will be subject to public consultation. The final decision on the way forward for the policy will be taken by the Executive by September 2002.

Dr Birnie raised the issue of community division, which was also mentioned tangentially by others. The Executive considered that matter carefully, because of its sensitive nature, before deciding what measures to take to tackle the deep and painful divisions in our society. Our proposals reflect the actions in the first Programme for Government, such as the development by 2002 of a cross-departmental strategy for the promotion of community relations, leading to measurable improvements in community relations. It is easy to say that. It is easy to have measures. However, as some have said, it is the change in the attitude of mind of the individual that is really needed. There are other actions that can be taken to promote, for example, integrated education and the concept of citizenship among children and young people.

7.15 pm

Dr Birnie said that it was important to permit difference rather than try to assimilate all differences into one. We subscribe to that theory and believe that there must be support for cultural and linguistic diversity. No society or state today is made up of a homogeneous group. The vast majority of democratic states comprise heterogeneous groupings in which people must learn to live, work and enjoy their time together and, at the same time, celebrate their differences.

Edwin Poots, Roy Beggs and Esmond Birnie mentioned the review of public administration. We are committed to ensuring greater accountability — the Assembly is only a beginning. All services must be more efficient and effective, and there must be a better structure for local and regional administration. We remain committed to undertaking that comprehensive review of public administration. It is an important matter, on which the Programme for Government must deliver, and it is one of the Executive's key priorities. Those are complex issues, but we will deliver on them. The Executive are determined to get this right and have carefully considered all the issues. We hope we can reach conclusions, and we wish to launch the review by spring 2002.

Mr O'Neill said that the budget allocation should reflect culture, arts and leisure responsibilities. We are

conscious of the role that culture, arts and leisure play in supporting many priorities, and the needs of the Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure's programme will be considered as part of the needs evaluation.

On behalf of Mr Haughey and myself, I commend the draft Programme for Government to the House.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That this Assembly takes note of the draft Programme for Government.

Adjourned at 7.17pm.

NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

Monday 19 November 2001

*The Assembly met at noon (Mr Speaker in the Chair).
Members observed two minutes' silence.*

ROYAL ASSENT

Mr Speaker: I wish to advise the House that Royal Assent has been signified to the Social Security Fraud Act. The Act became law on 15 November 2001.

ASSEMBLY BUSINESS: STANDING ORDERS

Mr Speaker: At its sitting on Tuesday 6 November 2001, the Assembly agreed an amendment to Standing Order 3(8), which refers to Members' designation; it was to take effect until the commencement of a review under strand one of the Belfast Agreement. I have been advised in writing by the Secretary of State that that review commenced today. Therefore, with effect from today, Standing Order 3(8) reverts to the previous version, which was agreed by the Assembly on Friday 2 November 2001.

TAX CREDITS

The Minister for Social Development (Mr Dodds):
I beg to move

That this Assembly endorses the principle of including in the Tax Credits Bill provision for the transfer of responsibility for policy and administration of Child Benefit and Guardians' Allowance to the Inland Revenue and social security legislative changes consequential upon the establishment of new Tax Credits, and agrees that the Bill should be considered by the United Kingdom Government.

I seek the Assembly's endorsement of the transfer of responsibility for child benefit to the Inland Revenue as part of the tax credit reforms aimed at relieving child poverty and encouraging people into work. Bringing together responsibility for child benefit and tax credits, so that they are administered by one source, will create a more streamlined and transparent system of support for children. The new system will be more accessible and more easily understood by claimants.

I seek the House's agreement that this and other social security legislative changes that are consequential upon the establishment of new tax credits should be considered by the United Kingdom Government and carried in the Westminster Bill. It seems sensible that one instrument in one place should carry all the necessary amendments that affect the introduction of tax credits. Prior to today's debate every Member received a memorandum explaining the background to tax credits. With regard to social security, there has always been parity with Great Britain. That is how it should be. I am happy to respond to Members' questions as they arise.

In the 2000 Budget the Chancellor of the Exchequer announced the Government's intention to introduce new payable tax credits for families with children and for those in low-paid work. Those new tax credits will be available from 2003 and will be administered by the Inland Revenue. They will replace — and in some cases extend — the support currently available under working families' tax credit, disabled person's tax credit, the child elements of income support, income-based jobseeker's allowance and children's tax credit. A consultation exercise that included Northern Ireland was initiated in July 2001 and finished on 12 October. The document 'New Tax Credits — Supporting Families, Making Work Pay, Tackling Poverty' was widely distributed. It indicated that discussions were taking place with Northern Ireland Ministers to consider the impact of the proposed changes on Northern Ireland's social security provision. No significant comments were forthcoming from Northern Ireland regarding that consultation process.

The Westminster legislation introducing tax credits will apply to the United Kingdom and will make consequential changes to social security benefits in Great Britain. The main changes requiring primary legislation

are the removal of children's and disabled children's premiums in income support and jobseeker's allowance and the removal of child dependency increases from certain other benefits. Those will be replaced by a new system of support for families with children in tax credits for new cases from April 2003. To meet that timetable, the Government propose to introduce legislation at Westminster shortly.

Regarding Northern Ireland, the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions wrote to the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister to confirm that tax credits would be introduced in 2003. It was proposed to transfer responsibility for policy and administration of child benefit in Great Britain to the Inland Revenue. The Secretary of State has offered to include the necessary consequential Northern Ireland legislative changes in the Westminster Bill, subject to the agreement of the Assembly.

The transfer would affect 150 staff in the Social Security Agency. They would transfer from the Northern Ireland Civil Service to the Inland Revenue. Similar transfers that have taken place in Northern Ireland suggest that the terms and conditions of service are similar and have not proved contentious. A transfer of 229 staff has already taken place. Negotiations with the Northern Ireland Public Service Alliance will continue. The Department of Work and Pensions has indicated that, should the transfer take place, there will be no reduction in staff, and staff will not be transferred out of Northern Ireland. Assurances given to staff of the contributions unit and family credit unit at the Social Security Agency at the time of their transfer in 1999 to the Inland Revenue have been honoured. The Inland Revenue had to recruit additional staff to administer working families' tax credit. There is a firm expectation that additional staff will be needed to deal with the new tax credits.

If the motion is not passed, the retention of child benefit administration within Northern Ireland's social security system would probably entail significant costs by allowing the two systems to diverge in the long term. It would entail the considerable resource input of new information technology systems, which Northern Ireland would have to procure or, subject to the Department of Work and Pensions' agreement, it would have to pay for that Department to maintain separate computer systems for Northern Ireland-only claims.

It is difficult to quantify the time and costs involved in the consultation, negotiation and installation of a new computer system based in Northern Ireland, or the charges that the Department for Work and Pensions may levy to continue running the existing system to maintain Northern Ireland-only claims. It would require detailed negotiation; however, the costs are likely to be significant. Those costs plus the administrative costs involved would have to be met from within the Northern Ireland block. The Treasury may also raise concerns

about funding social security costs that do not have equivalents in Great Britain.

The transfer of responsibility for the administration of child benefit to the Inland Revenue would impact on recipients and staff. However, child benefit will continue as a universal benefit, which is not means-tested, and which is payable subject to similar conditions. Therefore there will be no differential impact on recipients. Experience from similar transfers has shown that there should be no differential impact on staff as regards equality, because terms and conditions of service are similar and have not proved to be contentious.

The Executive noted the Chancellor's proposal to establish new tax credits; accepted the offer to carry consequential Northern Ireland social security legislation in the Westminster Bill; and agreed, subject to Assembly approval, to the transfer of responsibility for child benefit to the Inland Revenue. I commend the motion to the House.

The Chairperson of the Committee for Social Development (Mr Cobain): The crux of the matter is our role in scrutinising legislation — legislation that affects the citizens of Northern Ireland. We need to pay a great deal of attention to the precise terms of the motion.

An official from the Department for Social Development appeared before the Social Development Committee on 27 September 2001 to advise us on the steps taken in regard to the document 'New Tax Credits — Supporting Families, Making Work Pay, Tackling Poverty'. I stress that I chose deliberately the term "advise us". It is fair to say that the Committee did not feel that it was consulted; that is always the problem with so-called parity legislation. The Committee for Social Development encounters that problem frequently.

Social security matters are devolved to the Assembly, but Westminster drives the law, often as part of tax and benefit reforms. I am not clear as to why it is considered necessary to devolve social security matters in the first place. However, they are devolved matters, and that is the dilemma we face.

The Inland Revenue published the consultation document on tax credits in July 2001. The proposals for the tax credit regime were first outlined in the 1999 Budget and were reaffirmed in the Chancellor's 2000 Budget statement. It is clear from the consultation document that the Chancellor and the Government intended that the proposals should apply throughout the UK. However, the Department did not engage with the Committee for Social Development until the end of September, and then it was simply to tell us what they planned to do.

Members always insist on parity, especially when it is to ensure that people in Northern Ireland are not

disadvantaged. Some people might say that choosing the Westminster route secures the parity arrangement that we seem to prefer. The Committee was told that Alistair Darling had offered the Office of the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister the opportunity to have Northern Ireland included in the forthcoming Bill.

The document entitled ‘Memorandum by the Minister for Social Development on the Proposed Transfer of Responsibility for Policy and Administration of Child Benefit and Guardian’s Allowance to the Inland Revenue and Social Security Changes Consequential on the Introduction of Child Tax Credits’ refers to the consultation that took place with Northern Ireland Ministers. I quote from paragraph 6, which concerns the Inland Revenue’s consultation document

“... discussions were taking place with Northern Ireland Ministers to consider the impact of the proposed changes on Northern Ireland social security provision”.

12.15 pm

Did that constitute consultation? Why were the discussions restricted to Ministers? Why was the Committee for Social Development not consulted?

If we follow the parity argument in this case — that arrangements for tax credits should apply here — how do we arrange for that to come about? On the face of it, a single Bill taken through Westminster might well satisfy our needs if we felt that we were being consulted about it.

It may be worth reminding the House that the Northern Ireland version of the Social Security Fraud Bill was brought before us not so long ago. The Minister requested accelerated passage for that Bill, but it was denied. It was denied because Members insisted on exercising their right, under the Assembly rules, to conduct the Committee Stage to scrutinise the law affecting our citizens. If we agree to the motion today, will we deny ourselves the right to scrutinise tax credits law? It is possible that we may do more than that. We may signal our acceptance that social security matters, which are currently devolved, should return to Westminster. That may set a precedent on which we find ourselves divided. It is a major issue of constitutional importance. I would be interested to hear whether the Minister considers that the motion, if passed, would have a consequential effect on the Northern Ireland Act 1998.

In dealing with tax credits in the debate today, we are examining matters of principle — the principles of parity and scrutiny. Is our present scrutiny of social security matters worth a penny candle? How effective is it, especially if one starts from the principle of maintaining parity? The tax credits law will be scrutinised at Westminster. If the House agrees to the motion, our real problem would be that the Assembly has no procedures in place to allow us to feed our views into the consideration and scrutiny that will take place at

Westminster. How can that happen? If it is an oversight, it is an unfortunate one. It does our electorate a great disservice.

Wherever the fault lies, the House deserves to know how the Minister expects Northern Ireland’s views on this important piece of legislation to be represented. The principles of if, how, and to what extent we can make an effective contribution to the scrutiny of law that is generated and processed in Westminster, but which affects us in Northern Ireland, are important. Those issues are likely to arise time and again, particularly in relation to social security matters, and in other fields. If the House agrees to accept the Westminster route, it is important that urgent action be taken and that arrangements be made to ensure that our views are listened to there. We need guarantees on that today.

If the Westminster Bill proceeds without including Northern Ireland, where will that leave us? We will be back to the parity issue. The Minister has made it clear that we would need to introduce our own systems to match those in Great Britain. We will have to bear the cost of doing that, and that could be significant. We have no way of financing those systems, so the money will have to be found from within the Northern Ireland block grant. The bottom line is that our citizens will be less well-off.

I am conscious that members of the Committee and other Members wish to speak. I expect that they will touch on issues such as job security and the employment implications for those involved in the administration and payment of benefits. I am sure that they will highlight their concerns about the detail of the proposed legislation and the effects that it will have on people here. It is important that those points be made, but is it enough that they are simply made here today? I think not. They need to be made in a debate during which the law is being scrutinised, wherever that may take place. If we fail to ensure that that happens, we will fail the people in the Province.

When the Social Development Committee discussed the tax credits issue, it was decided that I should not express on behalf of the Committee any view on the transfer of a devolved matter back to Westminster — a procedural question. That is a matter for this House.

Mr Gallagher: My view is more clear-cut than that which was expressed on behalf of the Social Development Committee by its Chairperson.

The Minister has concerns about the possible divergence that might arise between the system here and that in Westminster. Nevertheless, because of my concerns, I ask the Minister not to move this motion today. It is being put through too hastily. I get the impression that we are reacting to what the Government in Westminster are telling us; there is a sense that we should be moving on. Our first responsibility is to

the people in Northern Ireland who will experience changes, not least the 150 workers who will be affected if the motion is passed. Many members of the public would also experience changes.

The key issues that have not been addressed are staffing, accessibility and the cross-border matters that frequently arise, as Members who represent border areas know.

We are told that 150 staff will transfer. The memorandum states that nothing contentious has arisen as a result of an earlier transfer to allow for new family credit arrangements, but that took place just two years ago. That time span is too short. The 150 workers whose future promotion opportunities may be affected would like more thought to be given to the arrangements that will be in place for them in five or 10 years' time. We have not been given the answers to those fundamental questions. Negotiations with the trade unions are incomplete, and we should not pass this motion until those negotiations have been concluded.

Many parents have enquiries about accessibility. They want a front office arrangement, whereby they can come in off the street to ask questions or make complaints. Those arrangements have not been clarified. What will happen under the Inland Revenue? Will the important child benefit system be located in a back room of some Inland Revenue office? Accessibility is a central issue, and we need more information.

Many cross-border workers are already experiencing difficulties. The system is complicated, and if we transfer responsibility for tax credits to the Inland Revenue, it will become more complicated — it will then be completely beyond our control. At this stage, we do not have enough information about these key issues. We need wider and more detailed consultation. I ask the Minister to reconsider the motion. Then, when that consultation has been completed, the Minister can come back to the Assembly with another Bill.

Mr M Robinson: I support the motion. I am in no doubt that the administration should be transferred to the Inland Revenue for the reasons I am about to give.

This debate has come about as a result of the announcement by the Chancellor of the Exchequer that the Government intend to introduce new tax credits for families with children and those in low-paid work. New tax credits, which will be available from 2003, will provide more support for the most vulnerable in society and thus tackle child poverty and social exclusion.

The main aim of the scheme, however, is to make work pay. For many years, reliance on the benefit system has sometimes proved a better financial option than seeking employment. Nobody should be better off unemployed. The scheme aims to make employment a more attractive and viable option and will give people

an opportunity to escape the cycle of deprivation. It also reinforces the Government's commitment to combating poverty, particularly where it affects children.

The new tax credits will not detract from the current system, but will instead build on its strengths. It will, therefore, fulfil an important role in the world of benefits. This is to be a programme of reform intended to rationalise and consolidate the existing system of support. In doing so, it will make it easier to understand and more transparent, responsive and accessible.

The scheme is particularly aimed at families with children and those in low-paid work, and it will bring all associated benefits under one umbrella, cutting down on pointless bureaucracy and red tape. The new system will introduce uniformity, with a common framework for assessment and payment, which will ensure that the people of Northern Ireland will be able to benefit from United Kingdom legislation. The change that we are debating today is not change to the form of support, but rather a change of policy. We are advocating that our legislation should mirror that in Westminster, making it a uniform system.

I will move to an examination of the financial implications of this transfer of responsibility. If we in Northern Ireland were to take sole responsibility for the new system, it would require finance that would become a burden on the public purse. Management of the scheme here would require a complete overhaul of the computer network to bring the system into line with that in the rest of the United Kingdom. We have been assured that the transfer will have no negative impact on the current system, or on the recipients. The staff concerned will be working for the Inland Revenue rather than the Northern Ireland Civil Service. They have been assured that there will be no job losses, and their terms and conditions of employment will be largely similar.

It is envisaged that the transfer of the system will make the scheme much more accessible to users and, as a result, more effective, efficient and responsive to their needs. The new system will run on an annual cycle, which will ensure continuity and cut out pointless stops and starts midway through the year. This will remove any uncertainty about the level of support that a family is entitled to. It is also envisaged that the system will allow support to be finely targeted so that the most needy and vulnerable will be able to benefit from the resources available.

One of the major aims of the new scheme is to promote equality. Unfortunately, the most needy in society are usually the most excluded and often face financial barriers in the labour market.

The new tax credits scheme will promote inclusion rather than exclusion, and will extend support to those who were previously denied it.

I support the transfer of responsibility for policy-making and administration of child benefit in Northern Ireland to the Inland Revenue.

12.30 pm

The Deputy Chairperson of the Committee for Social Development (Ms Gildernew): Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. I am concerned about the motion and about the way in which the Committee for Social Development was consulted. Whom does the Minister think the motion will benefit? It will not make access to benefit any easier.

The SDLP has already mentioned the effect on jobs in the Six Counties, and I know that the Northern Ireland Public Service Alliance (NIPSA) is strongly opposed to the motion. As elected representatives, Members deal with people who have difficulty obtaining their benefits. It will be difficult for Members — and for the public — to move away from dealing with local social security offices to dealing with the Inland Revenue, when they are trying to sort out entitlement to benefits.

I am surprised that the DUP wants to take powers away from the Assembly, given that it is so keen on devolved government. I thought that it would prefer the Assembly to be accessible and accountable. Rev Ian Paisley, for instance, has worked well with the Agriculture Committee and has obviously found such accountability to be of great benefit to the people he deals with.

One of the issues relating to the Tax Credits Bill is whether benefits should go to the main carer. When it was first raised, that issue was extremely contentious, as it could mean that money is transferred from the mother's purse to the father's pocket. It will continue to be a contentious matter. We are not debating that today, but it would be in the interest of Members to be able to scrutinise the Bill.

If the motion is passed, Members will be passing powers back to Westminster and affording the Assembly no chance of scrutinising or changing the Bill. It will mean that the Assembly will have no input into the legislation, and that will have a huge impact on our constituents. Passing on that responsibility could be viewed as political cowardice, at worst, or political laziness, at best. The Assembly should not transfer powers back to Westminster on matters in which it can make a difference.

The SDLP asked that the motion not be tabled today. However, it has been tabled, so Members should vote against it to prevent further disadvantage to the most needy and vulnerable in society. Go raibh maith agat.

Mr B Hutchinson: The PUP is concerned about the procedure that the House is going through. I urge the Minister to reconsider the motion. Members have had this discussion before. We have this debate every time

that parity legislation comes before the House. Members must try to get round the notion of parity.

The Assembly debated a request for accelerated passage for the Social Security Fraud Bill. The Bill was not given accelerated passage, and the Minister had to come back to the House. One of the problems pointed out by Members was that Westminster had been working on the issue for six months before the Assembly even found out about it. The Chairperson of the Committee for Social Development, Mr Cobain, said something similar this morning. He said that Alistair Darling was supposed to have contacted our Ministers. Members of the Scottish Parliament were also asked for their feelings on the issue. It is a procedural matter, which creates a lot of difficulties. If Members do not support the motion, we will have to find the money from the Northern Ireland block. All those things pose problems for the Assembly.

Mrs E Bell: Does the Member agree that one of the potential problems with the transfer to the Inland Revenue is that Northern Ireland would not, automatically or immediately, receive annual uprating in line with Great Britain and that the vulnerable section of our community discussed today would be further disadvantaged?

Mr B Hutchinson: That is the point I am making about the annual block. This also has implications for people who are already employed, for changes in their employment and for job losses. All of those points are important.

However, I want to focus on the procedural matter between here and Westminster. This debate is about the return to Westminster of responsibility for matters that were transferred to Northern Ireland. Either we have a devolved Government and a legislative Assembly that will continue to try to make things better for people in Northern Ireland, or we do not; we have to get this right.

If a responsibility has been devolved, there is no reason for Westminster to take it back. We need to focus upon that very point. We will get lost with arguments about whether it is the right place or not. We have to decide whether we want to continue to accept parity. We need a proper discussion about parity, when the House can be informed and we can play a proper scrutiny role — that will be the litmus test.

However, Standing Order 40 does not mention legislative parity. We must continue to look at that in order to find a way forward. I support the remarks made by the Chairperson of the Committee for Social Development. As members of that Committee, we face this regularly, owing to the number of pieces of parity legislation that come to us. Why did they give us all this parity with social security matters in the first place if they want to take it back again? As an Assembly we have to focus on existing procedures and on how we deal with parity. This must change; the House must be

notified early in the process; and we need access to Westminster to enable us to start scrutinising at an early stage and not at the last minute. I urge the Minister to reconsider this and to find a different way of proceeding.

Mr Hussey: I accept what the Minister has told us about the significant costs that could be involved if we allow the two systems to diverge. However, like some others in the House — and I would like some answers in the Minister's conclusion — I am concerned about paragraph 20 of his presentation, which deals with the movement of staff from the Northern Ireland Civil Service to the Imperial or Home Civil Service.

My concerns centre on the fact that many young people join the Civil Service on the basis that they will be able to transfer around Northern Ireland within the Civil Service. Many people from western parts of Northern Ireland move to Belfast for training and employment initially, hoping to move back to their home areas eventually.

I ask the Minister to respond clearly to the fear that this may involve the curtailment of transfer and promotion opportunities for staff. I note that negotiations with NIPSA continue, and I hope that if the transfer comes about, staff will be allowed to choose whether to remain a part of the Northern Ireland Civil Service or to transfer to the Home Civil Service.

Mr Fee: I have severe problems with the motion. It is not clear what the outcome will be if the Assembly takes a decision on the matter. The motion says

“That this Assembly endorses the principle...”

Are we endorsing the principle that pieces of serious public policy will revert to Westminster? If we support the motion, we are establishing a principle. I do not support that principle — I support devolution, and we should operate it properly.

The motion goes on to propose that the administration of child benefit and guardians' allowance be transferred to the Inland Revenue. I do not have a problem with ensuring that our administration is efficient and cost effective. Already, we efficiently administer working families' tax credit, disabled person's tax credit, jobseeker's allowance and the child-related elements of income support. I have a serious problem with transferring responsibility for child benefit and guardians' allowance policy. The Assembly already supports the appointment of a children's commissioner. Will we really transfer responsibility for policy in the enormous area of child welfare to the taxman? Is the Inland Revenue the right body to have responsibility for policy on those issues? I have a problem with that, and I will not be supporting the motion.

The motion also asks us to give responsibility to the Inland Revenue for rafts of unspecified, consequential changes in social security legislation. It would be

madness for us to give such responsibility back to Westminster. I have not seen the legislation, and I cannot endorse that. If we say it is all right for Westminster to legislate and that we do not want to see the script, the Bills or the Orders, that subverts the role of the Assembly Committees, particularly that of the Committee for Social Development. This is a complete abdication of the responsibility of the Assembly and its Committees.

Two other issues concern me. We have heard hints of a massive cost implication if we do not go along with the motion. Figures of around £5 million have been whispered. I can see no reason why the administrative element should not proceed, with the Inland Revenue footing the bill as it has in other cases.

Mr Dodds: I thank the Member for giving way. I will respond to these points, but the Member is living in fantasy land if he thinks that the Inland Revenue will cough up money to maintain and develop a new and separate computer system for Northern Ireland when it is offering to include us in its own system. Either we provide a new computer and IT system and the necessary administration, or the Inland Revenue will charge us for it. We must not indulge in fantasy politics.

Mr Fee: The Minister has eloquently illustrated my next point. There is no reason for not bringing in and administering an Inland Revenue system for Northern Ireland. The Inland Revenue wants policy and legislative authority over social security issues here, and I do not believe that we should allow that. The Treasury will put up the money on its terms — if we cede authority. The Treasury is pushing us around, and we should resist.

Have we all lost our ambition for this place? Are we giving away any prospect of gaining tax-varying powers for the Assembly in the future? I do not know about other Members, but I will not give up trying on that.

12.45 pm

Mr Shannon: I support the motion proposed by the Minister, but I want to make several comments. It is vital that our legislation be brought into line with that in the rest of the United Kingdom. Continuity of the system is vital, as is equality for all. We have concerns about several points, some of which have already been expressed; staffing is one of them. The transfer of 150 staff from the Social Security Agency to the Inland Revenue has raised concerns about job transfer. Can the Minister tell us what stage the discussions are at? Have the outstanding issues been dealt with, and does he believe that staff will be happy to settle for the changes in their security? Will more staff be needed to deal with the new children's tax credit as well as the new changes?

Concern has been expressed that the changeover could cause delays in the payment of child benefit. Can the Minister confirm that manual payments will be made to cover short-term delays in payment, should they

arise? We want to ensure that there will be no delays for those who need the money most.

Point 6 of the Minister's statement said

"No significant comments were received from Northern Ireland."

That shows that some of the people who expressed concern this morning said nothing during the consultation process, and it is a bit late in the day for them to do that now. Why did they not do so earlier? The consultation paper was widely distributed, so perhaps they will address that point.

The Minister has described the legislation that is required, and the reason for it, but further points must be made, notably about consultation. Can the Minister confirm that the Office of the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister fully scrutinised the proposed legislation? If so, when did that scrutiny allow discussion with the parties and other groups in the Assembly?

Most important is the matter of money. Can the Minister clearly detail why he must have this legislation immediately? If there is any delay whatsoever in implementing the legislation, what will the financial implications be? When people consider them, they will realise how necessary the legislation is.

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

Mr O'Neill: We have already begun to consider some of the difficulties that members of the Committee for Social Development faced when dealing with this. The Chairperson was correct to say that the outcome of the deliberations was inconclusive. We were neither for nor against the move — we simply could not agree. It is not surprising that there is a divergence of views in the Chamber. However, as Members are aware, a significant issue is at stake. Child benefit is a devolved matter. We have control over it. If responsibility for the policy and administration of child benefit is transferred to the Inland Revenue since taxation is a reserved matter, we will have handed back a devolved responsibility.

It is interesting to see Nigel Dodds, in his role as Minister, advocating that we do that. He has been the champion of devolved responsibilities in the past, yet he now says that we do not want responsibility for child benefit, which should return to Westminster.

The Minister and Jim Shannon use arguments about financial costs and time implications to blackmail the Assembly into supporting the motion. As my Colleague, John Fee, pointed out, this is a difficult motion to be certain about — even its structure leaves a lot to be desired. The Minister requests that we support the motion. He says that if we do not, the additional cost to the Budget could possibly be £5 million, and that if we do not make the decision today, we could be left behind. We should not allow ourselves to be blackmailed by

anybody, because that would negate what we are supposed to be doing.

Let us look at the Minister's arguments. This is not the first occasion when the time factor has been used to push things forward. In those instances, the Assembly has democratically decided to take its time and to ensure that it has all the facts in order to make a correct decision. We should not be too impressed by that argument.

Though figures were mentioned, we have yet to see a proper analysis of the possible costs. We do not know how much it will cost, nor how much of that cost will be picked up by the Inland Revenue. We have not been informed of the benefits to accessibility, openness and transparency, jobs or the protection of promotion prospects within the Civil Service. Neither have we seen an analysis of the benefits of the introduction of new technology into the present system — that is bound to be beneficial. If we had those analyses, we might be able to weigh up the pros and cons of the argument and come to a correct decision.

Michelle Gildernew remarked on the SDLP attitude. My party is asking the Minister not to move the motion today, which is his privilege. If he does not move the motion, the Committee can have a period of further deliberation and consultation. If the Minister insists on moving the motion, against the concerns of a number of Members and parties, we will vote against it. That is our clear position on the issue.

As a social democratic party, the SDLP argues that the Assembly should have full responsibility for all social issues. Transferral of responsibility to the Inland Revenue, with its reputed lack of transparency, does not bring us forward into open and transparent devolved Government, but backward. We have major concerns about moving in that direction.

Mr Morrow: I support the motion. I am a little perturbed by some of Mr O'Neill's comments. I am not saying that they were in any way insincere, but they were difficult to understand.

Several Members have questioned the issue of parity: should we or should we not? I agree that blindly following parity is the wrong principle on which to support the motion. However, where it is proven and demonstrated to be to the distinct advantage of the people of Northern Ireland, we can have no hesitation in saying that parity is the way forward. Those issues where parity may not be to our advantage are obviously a different matter.

Everyone in the Assembly has the right to vote against the motion, but with that right comes responsibility. The sum of money is approximately £5 million. Where do we find £5 million? Can we tell the Exchequer in London that we have deviated from parity and taken a different line on the issue, and that they should put up

£5 million? Anyone who thinks that that would work does not live in the real world. The Exchequer would say that we made the decision to deviate onto another road, and that we can therefore pay for it.

During my time as Minister for Social Development, the Alliance Party proposed a very good motion to increase pensions by £5. No one in the House had any problem with that idea, but it would have had to be paid for from our own pocket. The first question was, therefore, "Where do we find the £50 million to pay for that?". At that stage, cold reality took over.

Some Members have played up the potential for job losses. I have read the Minister's memorandum, and I am satisfied that the opposite will be the case. Jobs will be created. Paragraph 13 states that

"The Secretary of State for Work and Pensions, Alistair Darling, has indicated that should the transfer take place there will be no reduction in staff requirements nor will any staff be transferred out of Northern Ireland. Assurances given in 1999 at the time of the transfer of staff in the Social Security Agency Contributions Unit and Family Credit Unit to the Inland Revenue have been honoured."

Those who talk of potential job losses are ducking and diving. That issue is a red herring. It does not exist. There will be no loss of jobs. Jobs will be created.

We have a responsibility to support the motion. This is not the time to prove a point, political or otherwise, to the cost of the people of Northern Ireland. The tab will be picked up by them alone, not by the Assembly. The Minister will undoubtedly clarify points of genuine concern at the end of the debate.

I exhort Members to vote for the motion and to support the Minister's endeavours.

1.00 pm

Dr Birnie: I apologise for not being present at the start of the debate. I support the motion for three reasons. First, it was said that those who opposed the motion wished to preserve devolved power. That power is not real; it is cosmetic, and it is a veil. Child benefit in Northern Ireland is administered at the same rate as in the rest of the United Kingdom, and it is inconceivable that we would wish that position to change in future. Therefore, it is a power without any great benefit.

Secondly, those who attempt to take a principled stance to preserve that small part of devolved power are in grave danger of hurting the poor. That is a strange attitude for parties that claim to have a social, democratic or radical basis to take. A parity principle is in place; the levels of social services and benefits across the United Kingdom should be the same. That principle was established — at some cost and difficulty — by previous Administrations that operated from this House during the 1920s, and after 1945, when the Labour Government under Attlee developed the welfare state in the UK.

Members should hesitate before they throw out the motion and threaten the long-established and beneficial practice of parity in social services and benefits in the United Kingdom. That is the longer-term danger should the motion be rejected. The more immediate danger, as has already been stated, is that an attempt to establish our own duplicate services for tax credits might incur costs. Those services would uselessly mirror the Inland Revenue in London.

Finally, a consultation exercise on integrated child and employment tax credits ran from the summer to the autumn. I responded to that, and I wonder how many of the opponents of the motion took that opportunity to raise some of the issues that we have heard today.

Mr J Kelly: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I oppose the motion. If we have devolved powers, we should not hand them back. It is Committees' role to scrutinise legislation. Why did the issue not go before the Committee for Social Development? Did its Chairperson, Mr Cobain, equivocate because the issue did not go before the Committee, or is he opposed to the power being returned to Westminster? That important distinction must be made. We heard that jobs will not be lost. However, if jobs are not to be lost, why would we transfer back the power? The issue must be teased out more thoroughly, and I support the SDLP's view that it should be either postponed or withdrawn.

The Committees' role is to scrutinise, and I would like the Chairperson of the Committee for Social Development to clarify whether he is unsure about that, or whether he feels that the point is valid and that the motion should be scrutinised before any further action is taken.

Mr Dodds: I have listened carefully to Members' points. Many raised important issues and concerns, and I hoped that I had dealt earlier with some of those; indeed, in my opening remarks I addressed some of the themes that were raised. However, I am happy to address those concerns again, and to deal with other issues that arose.

I will try to explain why we are at this stage and why we are proceeding in this way. It is in the interests of the recipients of child benefit and the people of Northern Ireland. I have heard arguments about principles and parity; and there may need to be further debate in Committees and in the House about parity as it relates to the area of social security. People speak about having power over social security but, as Dr Birnie rightly reminded us, it is a power that is never exercised. Who in their right mind would want to exercise that power to the detriment of the people of Northern Ireland by creating a less favourable situation than exists in the rest of the UK?

I will return to that theme, but we must concentrate on the matter before us, and on what impact the motion will have. Let us deal with issues such as devolution and principle, but let us not lose sight of the impact there will be on Northern Ireland — and the implications for the Northern Ireland block — if we do not proceed in this way.

Mr Cobain, the Chairperson of the Committee for Social Development, Mr Hutchinson, Mr Gallagher and others raised the issue of the role of the Committee. There has been much talk about the role of the Assembly in relation to tax credits and tax credits legislation. The Inland Revenue is responsible for the Tax Credits Bill: the Assembly has no choice in the matter. Taxation is a reserved matter, whether we like it or not. The matter is being brought forward at Westminster, whether we like it or not. That is the reality.

We could talk all day about this, but the Chancellor and the Government at Westminster have responsibility for the matter and are proceeding with it. The Government are going down this route, and we are merely being asked to consider the changes that will result from the establishment of tax credits. There seems to be a misunderstanding that we could have a role to play if we deferred the matter. The Bill is going ahead; all that the Assembly is being asked to do is to deal with the consequences. The choice is between maintaining the administration of child benefit using our own computer systems, administration, and the cost of doing that, and transferring that responsibility to the Inland Revenue following the changes under the tax credits legislation. This is not a situation where, if we do not go through with this, we can sit down and discuss the issue of tax credits. That is not the issue. Some Members have greatly misunderstood what we are being asked to do.

The document that Dr Birnie referred to, 'New Tax Credits — Supporting Families, Making Work Pay, Tackling Poverty', was published in July. There was a 12-week consultation period that finished on 12 October. I presume that all Members who were so exercised about the issue responded during the consultation period. I will look carefully at the responses of Members who raised these issues to make sure that they did so to the relevant Government, which in this case is Westminster. A copy of the document was sent to each MLA — indeed it was sent wider afield. As I made clear to the House from the start, no significant concerns were raised — according to those who deal with the policy and practical aspect of these issues. I will deal with the staff employment issues shortly.

As the Chairperson said, a letter providing details of tax credits, dated 20 September, was sent to the Committee for Social Development. We should remember that tax credits are not a devolved issue for Northern Ireland; they are an issue for Westminster. It was not

possible to bring the matter before the Committee earlier due to the confidential nature of correspondence. Members often wax eloquent and lyrical about the agreement, the legislation, and so on. However, in keeping with the memorandum of understanding and the devolution guidance note 8, the Executive must respect the confidentiality of such exchanges between the mainland United Kingdom Government and the Assembly as a devolved institution.

I shall examine ways to involve the Committee in such issues as early as possible. My record, and that of my predecessor, shows that we try to do that as much as is possible. However, we have to deal with a mechanism and a framework that sometimes circumscribe our ability to do that. It is not of our making, but we have to deal with it.

I have already mentioned the limited response to the consultation process. However, I re-emphasise that responsibility for tax credits does not fall within the Assembly's remit.

Billy Hutchinson mentioned the situation in Scotland. We have discussed devolution, and whether it is a real power. In regions of England, Scotland and Wales, the Scottish Parliament is held up as an example of the best and strongest form of devolution. However, the Scottish Parliament does not have responsibility for social security. Therefore, the idea that there is a massive point of principle involved in the benefits issue in Northern Ireland is misguided. The recipients of those benefits must be kept at the forefront of the debate. The Scottish Parliament would be consulted only about those areas within its control that are affected by tax credits — issues such as training. We must be clear about the real issues.

Some Members, including Mr O'Neill, have asked me to delay the motion. However, by so doing, we would lose the opportunity to have the consequential changes carried at Westminster. The Assembly cannot avoid the task, for the Westminster Bill is ready to go before Parliament, where responsibility for tax credits lies, and where decisions will be taken.

I have also dealt with the costs issue. Members have spoken about a procedural matter of principle — it is more than that. A decision that is not in the best interest of the people of Northern Ireland will affect the Northern Ireland Budget and block. The estimated cost of procuring and operating a computer system to handle Northern Ireland-only child benefit claims and administration is likely to be some £5 million per annum. As a Member from this side of the House asked, what purpose does that serve if it is simply to duplicate what has already been done in Great Britain? The current charge is £215,000. Annual maintenance charges are likely to be much higher than that £215,000, given the need to maintain a similar service

to that provided in Great Britain. That £5 million will supply only the basic, minimum system.

It does not take account of future development costs of keeping the system in line with changes that may occur in Great Britain. This is not something that Members can vote on without there being an implication here — there are strong implications.

1.15 pm

If the Assembly decides to retain this area of child benefit administration, it must be aware of the consequences. The reality is that Members will want to maintain child benefit at the same rate and under the same conditions as elsewhere. Regarding the talk about power and where it lies, is anyone seriously going to come before the Assembly and suggest that we should not have the same position as elsewhere? The increases are funded centrally, they are demand-led, and they do not come out of the Northern Ireland block. Of course, Members might suggest differences that will have to be met out of the Northern Ireland block — I would be interested to hear where that money is likely to come from.

The reality is that the Assembly will want to maintain parity so that our people receive the same benefits as those elsewhere. If this motion is not passed today, we will need a system that will guarantee payment to Northern Ireland recipients. We will have to make provision for the introduction of new computer systems and the associated administrative costs. We cannot run away from this reality. The idea that the Inland Revenue will pick up the costs is simply pie-in-the-sky, fantasy nonsense. What compelling argument could be advanced to suggest that the Inland Revenue would be willing to finance a separate system when it is offering to include that as part of an overall UK-wide system? Clearly, the costs would have to be borne out of the Northern Ireland block — that is the reality.

Mr Gallagher mentioned cross-border workers. We have been down this route before. Working families' tax credit already deals with such workers on a satisfactory basis. The problem was recognised when the system was established and measures built in. I hope that that takes care of the point Mr Gallagher and others made on that issue. Some Members referred to benefits for women and lone parents. Much of the benefit of the new integrated child credit will go to women, including lone parents. People with disabilities will continue to benefit from support as now. It has been concluded that there have been no identified negative differential impacts arising from a person's sexual orientation, political or religious beliefs. Of course, that situation will continue to be monitored, and a final equality impact assessment will be issued after the consultation period.

What are the advantages? Some Members, including Mr Gallagher, asked who will benefit from this and

expressed concern about access. I emphasise that child benefit will continue to be administered in Northern Ireland. People will continue to have access to the same staff on the same basis as at present — we have seen this happen already in the case of working families' tax credit. I would be interested to know of any Member's representations of dissatisfaction on that score — and I am talking here about access to staff, not to the system.

Consultation with the union will continue. The transfer will not take place until 2003 and, as I said in my opening remarks, will affect some 150 staff in the Social Security Agency. Similar transfers have taken place before involving 229 staff — 106 from family credit and 123 from the contributions unit. Those transfers clearly suggest that terms and conditions of service are similar, and they have not proved contentious.

Negotiations with NIPSA will continue as part of the overall consultation process. Some Members raised the issue of staff transfers and the number of staff that will be required. There will be no reduction in staff requirements, and staff will not be transferred out of Northern Ireland. The Inland Revenue had to recruit additional staff to administer the working families' tax credit. It is expected that additional staff will be needed to deal with the new children's tax credit. Mr Shannon raised the possibility of delays in manual payments. Delays will be likely only if the motion is not passed and if the Assembly breaks with the parity principle and the current system.

The additional costs that would result from the failure to pass the motion would have to be met from elsewhere in the Northern Ireland block, as would the administrative costs. I have further long-term concerns regarding the issue of parity. The Treasury may raise concerns that funding for something that is classified as social security costs in Northern Ireland does not have a corresponding social security benefit in Great Britain. The Assembly must recognise that, and it may have to deal with the issue. We can discuss the issues with the Government at Westminster and lobby there. However, those issues must be decided at Westminster. As tax credits and child benefit become more closely aligned and developed by the Inland Revenue, it will become increasingly difficult for Northern Ireland to replicate those changes. The Assembly would have to decide how to legislate for the annual upgrading of those benefits, the amounts to be upgraded and the basis for the upgrading. Whether any increases would be in line with the increase in child benefit set by the Inland Revenue, or possibly determined by some other method is a further consideration.

It is difficult to envisage circumstances in which the Assembly would not want to maintain parity. Considerable costs will be incurred by allowing the systems to diverge in the long term. Section 87 of the Northern

Ireland Act 1998 — a piece of legislation that many Members have quoted as something that must be supported and reinforced — states that:

“The Secretary of State and the Northern Ireland Minister having responsibility for social security (“the Northern Ireland Minister”) shall from time to time consult one another with a view to securing that, to the extent agreed between them, the legislation to which this section applies provides single systems of social security, child support and pensions for the United Kingdom”.

They have agreed to continue to operate the existing parity system.

The argument that such a motion, which is of benefit to the people of Northern Ireland and to the Northern Ireland block, is against devolution per se, is ludicrous and without foundation, particularly when compared to the situation in Scotland. The Assembly has a duty to bring that forward in the interest of the recipients of child benefit. The concept of parity means that people in Northern Ireland pay the same rate of income tax and national insurance contributions as elsewhere. In return they have access to the same range of benefits, both contributory and non-contributory, paid at the same rates and subject to the same rules and conditions.

I would welcome a debate on the wider issues and principles; that could be beneficial. However, the accepted view is that parity works to the advantage of the Province. Contributory benefits, such as retirement pensions and incapacity benefit, are funded from national insurance contributions. The amount raised in Northern Ireland from those contributions is insufficient to meet the demands of those benefits. It has been so for a long time. The shortfall in the Northern Ireland national insurance fund is made up by a transfer from the fund in Great Britain. Similarly, in relation to non-contributory benefits financed from taxation revenue, expenditure is demand-led and outside the managed block. That is in the interests of the people of Northern Ireland.

I hope that I have addressed most of the issues raised. When Hansard is printed, I will ensure that Members receive a written response to any matters that I may have omitted. I remind the Assembly that the main purpose of the debate is to give Members the opportunity to endorse the principle that in Northern Ireland all social security benefits should continue to operate in strict parity with Great Britain, and thus be fully funded by the Treasury. Agreeing to the transfer of the administration of child benefit to the Inland Revenue is the only way for Northern Ireland to maintain that position.

1.30 pm

Question put.

The Assembly divided: Ayes 43; Noes 32.

AYES

Mr Armstrong, Mr Beggs, Mr B Bell, Mr Berry, Dr Birnie, Mr Campbell, Mr Carrick, Mr Clyde, Mr Cobain, Rev

Robert Coulter, Mr Davis, Mr Dodds, Mr Douglas, Sir Reg Empey, Mr Foster, Mr Gibson, Sir John Gorman, Mr Hamilton, Mr Hay, Mr Hilditch, Mr Hussey, Mr B Hutchinson, Mr R Hutchinson, Mr Kane, Mr Kennedy, Mr Leslie, Mr McClarty, Mr McFarland, Mr McGimpsey, Mr Morrow, Mr Paisley Jnr, Mr Poots, Mrs I Robinson, Mr K Robinson, Mr M Robinson, Mr P Robinson, Mr Savage, Mr Shannon, Mr Trimble, Mr Watson, Mr Weir, Mr J Wilson, Mr S Wilson.

NOES

Mrs E Bell, Mr Bradley, Mr Byrne, Mrs Courtney, Mr Dallat, Mr A Doherty, Mr P Doherty, Mr Fee, Mr Ford, Mr Gallagher, Ms Gildernew, Dr Hendron, Mr G Kelly, Mr J Kelly, Ms Lewsley, Mr Maginness, Mr Maskey, Mr McCarthy, Dr McDonnell, Mr McElduff, Mr McHugh, Mr McLaughlin, Mr McMenamin, Mr Molloy, Mr C Murphy, Mr M Murphy, Mr Neeson, Mrs Nelis, Dr O'Hagan, Mr O'Neill, Ms Ramsey, Mr Tierney.

Question accordingly agreed to.

Resolved:

That this Assembly endorses the principle of including in the Tax Credits Bill provision for the transfer of responsibility for policy and administration of Child Benefit and Guardians' Allowance to the Inland Revenue and social security legislative changes consequential upon the establishment of new Tax Credits, and agrees that the Bill should be considered by the United Kingdom Government.

**ASSEMBLY:
AD HOC COMMITTEE ON THE
PROPOSAL FOR A DRAFT JUSTICE
(NORTHERN IRELAND) BILL AND
THE CRIMINAL JUSTICE REVIEW
IMPLEMENTATION PLAN**

Dr McDonnell: I beg to move

That, pursuant to Standing Order 49(7), this Assembly appoints an Ad Hoc Committee to consider —

- (a) The proposal for a draft Justice (Northern Ireland) Bill; and
- (b) The Criminal Justice Review Implementation Plan, referred by the Secretary of State and to submit a report to the Assembly by 11 December 2001.

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

Quorum: The quorum shall be five.

Procedure: The procedures of the Committee shall be such as the Committee shall determine.

Mr McLaughlin: Go raibh maith agat. Our party has no difficulty with the formation of an Ad Hoc Committee. However, we have problems with the way in which this is being advanced. A very short time is available for public consultation, and that runs contrary to the guidelines, custom and practice that have developed through the requirements of equality legislation. Having put down that marker, we will work with the Ad Hoc Committee to ensure that there is the fullest possible public consultation on this. The Assembly needs to debate the ramifications. We support the motion.

Mr A Maginness: My party is concerned about the short time that this Ad Hoc Committee will have to consider issues that are important and which go to the heart of the legal system.

It is not good enough that we should have such a short time. That is the way in which several issues presented to the House have been managed — perhaps deliberately — by the Government at Westminster. It is unfair to force us to rush through our consideration of far-reaching reforms of the legal system. I reiterate the point made by Mr McLaughlin: it is wrong, in principle, for the Government to put the Assembly in that position. They have done so before, and they have now done so again on an issue of fundamental importance to the community. On behalf of SDLP Members, I express deep regret at the manner in which the matter has been put to the Assembly.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That, pursuant to Standing Order 49(7), this Assembly appoints an Ad Hoc Committee to consider —

- (a) The proposal for a draft Justice (Northern Ireland) Bill; and
- (b) The Criminal Justice Review Implementation Plan, referred by the Secretary of State and to submit a report to the Assembly by 11 December 2001.

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

Quorum: The quorum shall be five.

Procedure: The procedures of the Committee shall be such as the Committee shall determine.

The sitting was suspended at 1.41pm.

On resuming (Mr Speaker in the Chair) —

2.30 pm

Oral Answers to Questions

EDUCATION

Mr Speaker: Question 13, in the name of Mr Derek Hussey, has been withdrawn.

ICT Strategy

1. **Mr M Murphy** asked the Minister of Education what resources have been allocated to schools to further his ICT strategy and if the deployment of Classroom 2000 will take place within the expected timescale.
(AQO 392/01)

The Minister of Education (Mr M McGuinness): The Department of Education met the £3 million costs of the education and library boards' 'connecting teachers to ICT' programme, which trained teachers in core information and communication technology (ICT) skills in preparation for their training in the use of ICT in their subject areas. The new opportunities fund is funding the latter training with a grant of £10·81 million over three years. The Department has also assisted schools with that comprehensive training programme by providing £20 million for 12,000 laptop computers and almost 1,000 digital projectors, and by granting exceptional closure days that can be used for the training.

A further £15·8 million has been made available to enhance electrical and data cabling circuits in schools. I also recently announced an investment of £16 million to implement the Classroom 2000-managed services in 574 small primary schools over the next eight months. That is the first of several procurements that are well under way. The plan is to award the contract for the remaining primary schools at the end of January, and the contract for special and secondary schools before the end of this school year.

All that major investment is additional to the schools' computer-based administration systems and the NINE Connect Internet services, which are already in place. It is envisaged that the Classroom 2000 managed services will be available in all schools by the start of the 2003 school year. Through the entire process, expenditure has been managed centrally in order to minimise the bureaucratic burden on schools, so that they can concentrate on the educational use of ICT.

Mr M Murphy: Is the Minister satisfied with the resources that have been allocated by the Minister of Finance and Personnel? Will they enable the Minister

to implement the ICT strategy, including Classroom 2000?

Mr M McGuinness: ICT has an important role to play in education. When used effectively in teaching and learning, it helps to raise standards. Teachers have responded well to the challenge. I have no doubt that their training programme, the NINE Connect services and Classroom 2000 provide the kind of support that enables teachers and learners to be creative in their use of the new educational technologies.

Mr Hussey: How does the Minister intend to address complaints that teachers receive inadequate and inappropriate computer training, and that they must undertake training at home, sustaining personal telephone charges?

Mr M McGuinness: I have not heard those complaints, but if the Member forwards details of instances in which he believes that to have happened or about which complaints have been made to him, I will gladly have them investigated by my officials.

Mr Gibson: The younger generation has accepted IT as the new infrastructure for Northern Ireland. Does the Minister not consider the resources that he has announced today — and previously — inadequate to ensure sufficient provision to allow Northern Ireland to compete equally on the European scene?

Mr M McGuinness: Anyone who listened carefully to my answer to Mr Murphy would know that the Department of Education had put a great deal of finance into the development of Classroom 2000. During the recent negotiations, there have been some difficulties, which we are now well on our way to overcoming. The Department has put important resources directly into the classroom and will continue to do that in the coming months. It will pay off. Young people, teachers and everyone else in the education system understand the vital importance of ICT in the classroom.

As we have said recently, we are seeking to bring about a modern education system for a modern world and, indeed, for modern children, who are well up to the challenge. On my travels, I have been amazed by some 80-year-old "children" who think it important to attend training courses on ICT. There have been many examples of that, and there is a growing appreciation, particularly within education, of the importance of ICT in people's lives.

Primary School Uniforms

2. **Mr Kennedy** asked the Minister of Education what plans he has to introduce grants to assist the unemployed and those families on low incomes to buy primary school uniforms.
(AQO 389/01)

Mr M McGuinness: Wearing a school uniform is not governed by legislation; it is a matter for each school's board of governors. Given the pressure on the recurrent and capital education budgets, it would be extremely difficult to justify diverting scarce resources to that end. Therefore, I have no plans at present to extend eligibility for uniform grants to the primary sector.

Mr Kennedy: Does the Minister accept that in many primary schools school uniforms are necessary, whether or not they are compulsory, because they help children to avoid being stigmatised or being seen as different? Does the Minister recognise the hardship and debt that is faced by many families? How can he justify uniform grants being given for post-primary school pupils and not for primary school pupils?

Mr M McGuinness: Generally, uniforms for primary schools are simple and cheaper. Most primary schools have a school tie that is distinctive, but the rest of the uniforms can usually be obtained from any of the major chain stores and, hence, at competitive prices. Some schools may require a sweater with distinctive piping, but that is not a major cost.

I must have regard to spending priorities, and my aim is to ensure that the maximum level of resources is directed to classrooms. Extending the clothing allowance scheme would be relatively expensive. A grant of £50 would cost an additional £2 million a year. Funding would have to come from elsewhere in the budget, and I cannot justify diverting resources to this at present.

Mr Dallat: To follow up, can the Minister assure us that the additional cost of sports equipment, and so on, is no longer a source of embarrassment for families on low income? Whether it is a tennis racquet or a camogie stick, can he assure us that no child is embarrassed by not having one?

Mr M McGuinness: We are keen to see that no children are embarrassed by any situation that can develop in schools. Regarding school uniforms, the modest sum that is granted to families by the education and library boards is to deal with basic clothing. If we start supplying equipment for sporting occasions, the education budget will rocket. That is where important decisions have to be made.

Increasingly, the Department of Education is concerned to see that money goes directly to the classrooms. That is vital. Clothing grants are a matter for the education and library boards and parents. Dealing with the issue that the Member has raised would have to mean a substantial increase in my allocation from the block grant, and that would mean a huge battle in the Executive.

Mr Molloy: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. The Minister said that boards of governors decide whether school uniforms should be worn, but what consultation

is there? Is he in a position to direct a board of governors on that?

Mr M McGuinness: The individual school's board of governors will decide whether the school should adopt a uniform. My Department has suggested to boards of governors that they consider the importance of ensuring, through school prospectuses, that parents are aware of the school's policy on uniforms and its cost implications, especially for those parents on a low income.

School Transport

3. **Mrs Courtney** asked the Minister of Education to detail the criteria used to determine the availability of free school transport. (AQO 380/01)

Mr M McGuinness: Legislation requires education and library boards to make such arrangements for the provision of transport as they consider necessary, or as are directed by the Department, to facilitate the attendance of pupils at grant-aided schools. The arrangements made by boards are subject to the Department's approval.

The current approved arrangements, introduced in 1997, enable transport to be provided where pupils have been unable to gain a place in all suitable schools within statutory walking distance of their home: that is two miles for primary school pupils and three miles for others, measured by the nearest available route.

The term "suitable school" relates to the established educational categories of controlled, Catholic maintained, integrated and Irish-medium schools, and, in the grammar sector, denominational and non-denominational schools.

Mrs Courtney: Is the Minister aware of the anomaly that exists in the Foyle constituency? Parents are advised, when their son leaves primary school, to nominate a school that is not his first choice. Parents do this in the knowledge that their child will not be accepted because of enhanced criteria used at that school to determine those entitled to free school transport. If they do not go through that procedure, the parents must pay for their child to attend the grammar school of their choice. That issue needs to be addressed.

Mr M McGuinness: The transport arrangements must be administered fairly and equitably. Many grammar schools admit pupils with lower test grades. The guidance makes it clear that to qualify for transport assistance to a school outside statutory walking distance, parents must formally apply for and be refused a place in all schools in the chosen category that are within statutory walking distance. No exceptions are made on the basis of possible rejection by nearer schools. That does not affect the likelihood of a child being admitted to other schools, as the order of preference expressed by parents may not be included in schools' admission

criteria. Any child refused a place at a nearer school would have his or her application for admission to more distant schools considered on its own merits and on an equal footing with all other applications received by the school.

Mr Hamilton: Will the Minister give an assessment of the recommendations made by the Committee for the Environment in its recent report into transport used by children travelling to and from school?

Mr M McGuinness: I welcome the Committee's report and assure the Assembly that my Department and the education and library boards take their responsibilities in relation to safety seriously. I shall consider the Committee's recommendations. We must, however, recognise that the full implementation of its recommendations would require significant additional resources. Some £42 million would be needed for capital costs, as well as £23 million for running costs to remove standing passengers on school buses and the three-for-two seating arrangement. Further substantial costs would be associated with other recommendations, such as the installation of seat belts. There is a need for detailed costings and clear evidence of the benefits that would be accrued through the implementation of those recommendations before any decision is made.

Post-primary Review

4. **Mr McHugh** asked the Minister of Education to outline his plans in respect of the consultation process for the second phase of the post-primary review.
(AQO 394/01)

Mr M McGuinness: The Burns review body's report is significant for the education system. I launched an extended consultation period to ensure that everyone with an interest will have the opportunity to consider the proposals and submit their views. The report has been sent to all MLAs, schools, education partners, further and higher education institutions, district councils, and business and community organisations.

It is available to the public and libraries on the Department's web site and on request from the Department. In view of the report's complexity, I asked the review body to undertake a programme of information seminars for teachers, principals, school governors and education and related bodies. Five seminars have been held already, and nine more will take place in the next few weeks.

2.45 pm

This consultation presents a unique opportunity for us to shape our education system for the future. I urge all who have an interest or an opinion to submit their views in writing to my Department by 17 May 2002.

Mr McHugh: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. Given the need for change in post-primary school provision, does the Minister not think that the consultation period is too long, and that it delays unnecessarily the implementation of a new and better post-primary system?

Mr M McGuinness: It is important to take sufficient time to agree the best way forward rather than to rush into ill-considered change. These matters are vital to the future of our education system. For that reason, I decided that there should be an extended consultation period. Our overriding objective must be to create an education system that will enable all children to reach their full potential. I intend to consider carefully all the responses we receive, and proposals for future post-primary arrangements will be discussed by the Executive, the Education Committee and the Assembly.

I have been heartened by how the debate has been conducted by everyone — educationalists, schools, teachers, principals, boards of governors and the Assembly — not only during the last couple of weeks, but over some 18 months. Many parties have made a huge contribution towards the sensible and mature discussions that we must have if we are to deal with such an important issue for children and the education system. I want to pay tribute to Assembly Members, who have adopted a well-considered approach to this. By the way in which they have contributed to the debate, they have shown that the prospects and opportunities for children are much more important than anything else. That is encouraging. I hope that people will continue to think carefully about this. From next January they can contribute to a debate which is vital to everyone.

Mr K Robinson: Does the Minister agree that the abolition of academic selection, as recommended in the Burns report on post-primary education, will have a detrimental effect on the standard of education in Northern Ireland?

Mr M McGuinness: First, we should pay tribute to Gerry Burns and the review body for producing an important report. What is pleasing about the review is that it places children at the centre of its thinking. It places the needs and rights of all children above the preservation of structures, which is crucial.

Those who have been involved in considering the weighty body of research which has recently been put before us know that there are serious weaknesses in the education system. The research conducted by Prof Tony Gallagher from Queen's University and Prof Alan Smith from the University of Ulster, together with the work carried out by Save the Children and the Education Committee, has shown up those weaknesses. The Committee has made it clear that we must accept that

change is necessary and appropriate, and the Assembly has endorsed that.

We know the difficulties that exist. Much of children's time is wasted in preparing for the transfer test — at the expense of real learning. One third of children who benefit from a grammar school education do so at the expense of the two thirds who are regarded as failures. The confidence and self-esteem of those two thirds takes a terrible knock that is difficult to restore in the secondary sector. Inevitably, the selection process also leaves a long tail of low-achieving schools. Only 10% of children from low-income families make it to grammar schools. Indeed, that figure is as low as 2% in the Shankill Road area. That is totally unacceptable and makes a very convincing case for change.

Change is needed. The fact that the Committee for Education and the Burns review body have spoken on this indicates that their approach is correct. We need an education system based on equality, excellence, choice and accessibility. The big challenge for us is to provide an education system where all children — irrespective of their backgrounds or circumstances — can realise their potential. We need a modern education system that caters for all children and gives them the confidence and encouragement to move into a new era.

AS Level Examinations

5. **Mr Gallagher** asked the Minister of Education to detail the number of pupils who took examinations at AS level last year. (AQO 386/01)

Mr M McGuinness: The only information that is currently available relates to candidates who took GCE AS levels with the Council for the Curriculum, Examinations and Assessment (CCEA). There were 9,561 such candidates, including students at further education colleges, with a total of 19,104 subject entries.

Mr Gallagher: There was a good deal of confusion last year among the public, schools and some of the examination boards. Will the Minister consider taking any steps to prevent a repetition of such confusion this year — particularly as the AS level examinations will be accompanied by the introduction of examinations at A2 level?

Mr M McGuinness: On 12 September, I announced new arrangements that will benefit all concerned, both in the number of modular examinations that are taken and in the reduced possibility of timetable clashes. Pupils will now be able to take all the written examination requirements of a full AS level in a single half-day session of up to three hours, instead of a possible four and a half hours in separate sessions. That will mean fewer examinations and, therefore, less chance of timetable clashes.

Further work from the CCEA and the Qualifications and Curriculum Authority (QCA) has been commissioned. I will consider what further action is required on receipt of those reports, which are due to be completed by the end of December.

Ms Gildernew: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. What other action might the Minister take to deal with concerns from parents and pupils regarding AS levels?

Mr M McGuinness: As I said in my previous answer, I have already announced new arrangements that will benefit everybody concerned. We have looked carefully at the way that AS levels have been managed. They are a comparatively new development. We would have been surprised if there had been no initial hiccups or difficulties to be addressed. We have certainly addressed the problems that have been brought to our attention. Problems have been created, not least for pupils, parents and teachers.

The steps we have taken, however, will serve to alleviate those difficulties, and we hope that the problems of the last year will not be repeated.

Mr Savage: The Minister answered part of my question, but I will ask it nevertheless. Will he take steps to ensure that one age cohort is not singled out and used repeatedly for future educational experiments?

Mr M McGuinness: We are not interested in experimenting with our children. They are too precious a resource. However, we will certainly look — as we do on all occasions — at the particular problems and difficulties which beset us in education. In whatever decision we take, we will ensure that any problems present are overcome.

Capital Expenditure

6. **Mr S Wilson** asked the Minister of Education to outline the timetable for the announcement of schools capital expenditure. (AQO 396/01)

Mr M McGuinness: I hope to announce the schools capital programme in March 2002, following consultation with the Education Committee.

Mr S Wilson: Will the Minister give the Assembly an assurance that when proposals are brought forward next year we will not see the same imbalance as that in evidence over the last two years? Two years ago the ratio of capital spend between the maintained and controlled sectors was 3:1. Last year it was 2:1. Can he assure us that this time there will be an even spread of money?

Perhaps while he is at it the Minister could explain to the House how Members can accept any assurances from him, given yesterday's revelations that he was engaged in handing out bombs to youngsters in Londonderry and organising the murder of a schoolteacher.

Mr Speaker: Order. The Member put a supplementary question, the second part of which did not relate to the original question.

Mr M McGuinness: Some journalists do not let the truth get in the way of what they consider to be a good story.

Concerning the first issue raised by Mr Wilson, I say categorically that the allegations he made were untrue and unjustified. I have consistently maintained that the schools capital building programme is determined by educational needs, be they in controlled or voluntary schools or in any other schools sector. The make-up of last year's conventional school building programme was six Catholic maintained school projects, costing £25.7 million; 10 controlled school projects, costing £24.1 million, including two special schools which were the capital priorities of two education and library boards; and one grant maintained integrated school project, costing £12.5 million. In addition, provision was included for eight secondary projects with a total capital value of approximately £70 million under public-private partnership, and those are grouped under three separate contracting authorities. The Trustees of Catholic Maintained Schools in the Derry diocese have been allocated £34 million, the North Eastern Education and Library Board, £15 million and the South Eastern Education and Library Board, £21 million.

Mr J Wilson: I accept that the Minister will wish to reserve his right to deal with the detail of his capital expenditure plans in accordance with his Department's timetable. However, will he assure me that projects where a clear need has been identified, or where a site has been purchased and an economic appraisal completed, will receive priority? The new buildings for Loanends Primary School in my constituency of South Antrim are an example, particularly because the board of that school hoped to be among the new starts for the last financial year.

Mr M McGuinness: I certainly appreciate the concerns of schools and their authorities who have advanced their projects by completing an economic appraisal. My point of view, and that of the Department of Education, has always been that that is a prerequisite of ensuring a school's eligibility for a place in the programme. Projects must be supported by an economic appraisal and be at a suitable stage of planning.

Projects are selected according to educational need, not the length of time that they have spent on the schools' planning list.

3.00 pm

Mr McGrady: How will the Executive's commitment to measures such as rural proofing, equality and social inclusion influence the Minister's decisions on the new starts programme for 2002–03? It will come as no

surprise to him if I refer to the areas that I represent. St Patrick's Grammar School, Downpatrick, has waited for 18 years; its counterpart, Assumption Grammar School, Ballynahinch, is on the waiting list, and the rural Mourne area of Moneydarragh is in urgent need of a new primary school. How can those specific examples be brought into line with rural-proofing and social-inclusion commitments?

Mr M McGuinness: Under the new starts programme, available capital resources are directed at the highest-priority cases, based on educational need. That encompasses the areas of social inclusion and equality, and ensures that rural communities have access to a network of strong rural schools. The Department of Education's equality scheme provides for the school building programme to be subject to an equality impact assessment in the next financial year.

HEALTH, SOCIAL SERVICES AND PUBLIC SAFETY

Rehabilitation Facilities

1. **Mrs Courtney** asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety if she has any plans to increase rehabilitation facilities for those in the north-west with head injuries; and to make a statement.

(AQO 381/01)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety (Ms de Brún): Choimisiúnaigh mo Roinn an Cuibhreannas Réigiúnach Seirbhísí Míochaine le moltaí a fhorbairt do sheirbhís gortuithe inchinne. Tá feidhmiú a mholtaí á thabhairt ar aghaidh ag na ceithre bhord seirbhísí sláinte agus sóisialta, agus aird á tabhairt ar riachtanais mheasta a ndaonraí agus na hacmhainní atá ar fáil. Tugann Bord an Iarthair le fios gur fhorbair sé straitéis le frestal ar riachtanais daoine fásta le gortú inchinne agus go bhfuil sé i mbun a fheidhmithe.

Go dtí seo tá cúig leaba tiomanta ag an bhord i dTeach Spruce i gcomhair measúnú, athshlánú agus cúram faoisimh míochaine do dhaoine le gortú inchinne, agus tá seirbhísí pobail á bhforbairt trí sholáthar fhoireann athshlánaithe pobail ildísiciúneach.

The Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety commissioned the Regional Medical Services Consortium to develop proposals for a regional brain injury service. The four health and social services boards are addressing the implementation of its recommendations by considering the assessed needs of their populations and the available resources.

The Western Health and Social Services Board has developed a strategy to meet the needs of adults with brain injury and is in the process of implementing it.

To date, the board has committed five beds in Spruce House to the assessment, rehabilitation and respite medical care of people with brain injuries. Community services are being developed through the provision of a multi-disciplinary community rehabilitation team. A neuropsychologist and a social worker have been appointed. Funding has also been made available to facilitate the development of other specific community rehabilitation services in the Foyle Health and Social Services Trust and the Sperrin Lakeland Health and Social Services Trust.

Mrs Courtney: I thank the Minister for her response. I was also referring to those young people who are paralysed by a serious head injury. Unfortunately, no treatment facilities exist in the north-west. I know of young men aged 22 and 23 who receive treatment 75 miles from their homes. Members can imagine the extra expense that those families incur should they wish to visit their sons every day. Moreover, there is the added problem of where those people will be treated once they go home. That is a problem for many of my constituents, and I would like the Minister to address it.

Mr Speaker: I was about to ask the Member whether she was coming to a question. I presume that the question is whether the Minister will look at the issue.

Ms de Brún: All boards are developing multi-disciplinary community brain injury teams in keeping with the findings of the Regional Medical Services Consortium. The need for further community provision is constantly under review, and services are developed as funding permits.

Mr Molloy: What action is being taken to prevent or reduce head injuries?

Ms de Brún: Prevention is a major part of the Executive's health and well-being priority area, as we strive to improve the population's health. Males are four times more likely to receive brain injuries than females, and the peak age for such injuries is 15 to 25 years. A third of those injuries are associated with alcohol, and road traffic accidents account for 60% of such cases. The Executive are advancing the cross-departmental drug and alcohol strategy. Public drink-driving campaigns target young males, in an attempt to reduce road traffic accidents, which are the main cause of head injuries in that at-risk group.

Downe Hospital (Withdrawal of Maternity Services)

2. **Mr M Murphy** asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to make a statement on the proposed withdrawal of maternity services from the Downe Hospital. (AQO 398/01)

Ms de Brún: Is eol domh gur cúis inní í forbairt chritéir aistrithe ardphriacail ag aonad Otharlann an Dúin.

Mar sin féin, féadaim a dhearbhu don Chomhalta gur chuir mé in iúl do Bhord an Oirthir agus do Iontaobhas an Dúin Lios na gCearrbhach go gcaithfear gach iarracht a dhéanamh le próifíl seirbhíse Ospidéal an Dúin a choinneáil, ag brath ar chinní a ghlacfar mar gheall ar thorthaí athbhreithniú na n-ospidéal géarchúraim. Is eol domh gur ghlac an bord agus an t-iontaobhas céimeanna suntasacha le haonad máithreachais an Dúin a chothabháil.

I am aware of the concerns that have arisen from the development of high-risk transfer criteria at the Downe Hospital unit. However, I can assure the Member that I have made it clear to the Eastern Board and the Down Lisburn Trust that every effort must be made to sustain the current service profile of Downe Hospital, pending decisions made following the acute hospitals review. I am aware that the board and the trust have already taken several significant steps to maintain the Downe maternity unit.

Mr M Murphy: Why did the Eastern Health and Social Services Board carry out a further assessment of service in only the Downe Maternity unit, after it had carried out a risk assessment for all the maternity units in the board area last year? Why, following that, did it issue further instructions to staff on criteria for determining high-risk maternity cases? Go raibh maith agat.

Ms de Brún: All maternity units in the Eastern Board area were advised to formalise their criteria for high-risk transfers in 1999. Lagan Valley Hospital completed the work in 1999 and implemented the criteria for admissions to the unit. I have been advised that no further assessment was carried out at the Downe Hospital. The Downe maternity unit did not finalise its criteria in 1999 and requested an extension until September 2001. The Mater Hospital is in the process of finalising its criteria. I understand that transfer criteria have been introduced at Lagan Valley Hospital and that a revision of risk criteria is nearing completion at the Mater Hospital's maternity unit. Trusts are required to review risk assessments in all maternity units continually, and the screening of referrals at the Downe maternity unit was examined as part of that process.

Mr O'Neill: I thank the Minister for her assurance about the continuing delivery of good maternity care in Downpatrick, but how could she allow a small number of centralised professionals to continue to threaten the provision of maternity and other acute services in our area? Is she content that she and the Department should continue to follow the diktat of those key professionals?

Ms de Brún: In my main answer, I signalled my clear intention that every effort would be made to sustain the current service profile of all hospitals, pending decisions made following the acute hospitals

review. The board and the trust have already taken steps to sustain the Downe maternity unit. Arrangements involving anaesthetists from Belfast have been introduced to maintain a robust anaesthetic service at the Downe Hospital, and those are reported to be working well. Five extra theatre nurses have been appointed to assist with the 24-hour anaesthetic rota, and the training programme for midwives has been reviewed so that all midwives are now offered the opportunity of advanced life support training.

Those measures demonstrate a clear commitment to sustaining maternity services at the Downe Hospital — that commitment is evident in the work of all the professionals in that unit. As a result of anaesthetists' concerns, in January 2001 the Down Lisburn Trust asked the board to arrange for the high-risk pregnancy group to complete its work on the screening of referrals to the unit as soon as is practicable. However, that work was undertaken in the context of an ongoing risk assessment initiated in all units in the board area in 1999.

Acute Hospitals Services

3. **Mr McGrady** asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety when she will make her formal response to the Hayes report on acute hospitals services; and to make a statement. (AQO 374/01)

Acute Hospitals Review Group Report

12. **Mr Gallagher** asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the number of responses to her consultation on the report of the acute hospitals review group. (AQO 384/01)

Ms de Brún: Le do chead, a Cheann Comhairle, glacfaidh mé ceisteanna 3 agus 12 le chéile mar go mbaineann siad araon le tuairisc an ghrúpa athbhreithnithe ar ospidéal ghéarchúraim. With your permission, Mr Speaker, I shall answer questions 3 and 12 together, as they both relate to the acute hospitals review group report.

Tháinig an tréimhse chomhairliúcháin ar an tuairisc chun críche ar an 31 Deireadh Fómhair. Fuarthas isteach agus amach le 60,000 freagairt scríofa. Áirítear orthu sin thart ar 24,000 cárta poist agus litir ag tacú leis an chás go mbeadh ospidéal géarchúraim san Ómaigh, thart ar 35,000 ag tacú le hospidéal géarchúraim in Inis Ceithleann agus thart ar 500 ag tacú le soláthar seirbhísí géarchúraim in ospidéal áitiúla eile. I ndiaidh torthaí an phróisis chomhairliúcháin phoiblí a bhreithniú agus plé a dhéanamh le Comhghleacaithe ar an Choiste Feidhmiúcháin, is féidir moltaí ar an bhealach chun tosaigh a chur faoi chomhairliúchán. Tá súil agam bheith i riocht cinní a fhógairt i rith 2002.

Consultation on the report ended on 31 October. Some 60,000 written responses have been received, including

about 24,000 postcards and letters supporting the case for an acute hospital in Omagh, around 35,000 supporting an acute hospital in Enniskillen, and around 500 supporting the provision of acute services in other local hospitals. Following consideration of the outcome of the public consultation process and discussion with Executive Colleagues, proposals on the way forward can be put out for consultation. I hope to be able to announce decisions in 2002.

Mr McGrady: There is concern in many areas — particularly rural areas — about the extended delay in the consideration of the Hayes report. Although the consultation period has just expired, I urge the Minister to bring forward the expected date of the departmental response, particularly in the light of the answer that she has just given about the Downe Hospital, because the maternity unit and the acute hospital are interdependent. The Minister does not seem to understand what is happening on the ground, despite a letter sent to her on 4 October by the Royal College of Midwives. It advised that, unless immediate action is taken on the maternity issue, the Downe Hospital will be closed, because new criteria introduced six weeks ago, without reference to any other Department or hospital, will be implemented in Downpatrick with discrimination.

Mr Speaker: Does the Member have a question? That seemed to be a statement.

Mr McGrady: I asked the Minister when she will bring forward the review of the review of the review, so that the maternity unit that she was so concerned about can be saved and does not cease to exist before the review is completed.

Ms de Brún: The issues involved are far-reaching, as illustrated by the many responses to the consultation. They affect many people, who have a right to have a say in decisions that affect their lives and shape their services. Indeed, the major scope and scale of the matters involved are such that they go far beyond the remit of my Department, and the way forward must be considered by the Executive. Under statutory equality duties, the equality implications will be subject to assessment and consultation.

Were I to move forward without taking any of those steps, I am sure that the Member would be the first to draw to my attention the need to do otherwise. Officials will now examine and analyse the responses, and the Executive must do likewise. We hope that proposals on the way forward can then be put out to consultation as soon as possible.

3.15 pm

Mr Gallagher: I thank the Minister for the figures that she has given us. They reflect the high level of concern in the Fermanagh and Omagh areas about the

provision of acute hospital services. In view of that, will the Minister give an undertaking to the people in both areas that services will be retained in those hospitals at their current levels, while we await her decision on the location of a new hospital for the south-west?

Ms de Brún: I have signalled that I expect the current profile of services in hospitals to be maintained, and I expect boards and trusts to make every effort to ensure that they are maintained pending decisions following the outcome of the report of the acute hospitals review group. My officials are in constant contact with the Western Health and Social Services Board and both trusts to ensure that any interim difficulties arising in the trusts can be looked at urgently, as is being done in other board areas.

Mr Shannon: When will the acute services at the Ulster Hospital be upgraded? How can a service be delivered when the local hospital trust has been told that the number one priority is to break even, and not to spend over its budget? If this continues, there will be deaths, which will be down to the inability and unwillingness of the Minister and her Department to get on with the job. Will the Health Department remove the break-even criteria?

Ms de Brún: I am not certain that the question is specific to the matter being discussed.

Mr C Murphy: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. I will have to learn this new trick of asking two supplementaries in one question. Have the Executive had any opportunity to discuss the financial implications of the Hayes report?

Ms de Brún: It is for the Executive to decide what will be on their agenda. However, it is clear that the Executive are aware of the considerable resource implications, given the amount and the scope of the recommendations made in the acute hospitals' review. The Executive will have to examine the issue, and the financial and serious resource implications will have to be taken on board. It is not possible to say exactly when this will take place. The substantial volume of responses is being analysed by officials, and meetings are being arranged with those who asked to meet with me before the consultation period ended.

Prescription Fraud

4. **Rev Robert Coulter** asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what steps she has taken to deal with prescription fraud. (AQO 391/01)

Ms de Brún: Tá tosaíocht á tabhairt ag mo Roinn do thabhairt faoi chalaois díolúine oideas agus is cuid é de mhórchlár gníomhaíochta le cur i gcoinne calaoise, is cuma cé acu daoine as an phobal nó liachleachtóirí a dhéanann é. Tugadh faoi mhéid suntasach oibre cheana

féin agus táthar i mbun troda i gcoinne chalaois oideas. Mar shampla, tugadh isteach seiceálacha pointí dáilte, bunaíodh aonad tiomanta frithchalaoise in Eanáir na bliana seo le díriú ar phríomhréimsí na mí-úsáide díolúine, agus le 18 mí anuas tugadh níos mó ná 120 duine tríd an Chúirt Mhionéileamh leis na muirir oideas a seachnaíodh a ghnóthú.

Tackling prescription exemption fraud is a priority of my Department, and part of a major programme of action to counter fraud, whether perpetrated by members of the public or practitioners. Significant work to combat prescription fraud is ongoing. For example, points of dispensing checks have been introduced, and a dedicated counter-fraud unit was established in January 2001 to target the main areas of exemption abuse. Over the last 18 months more than 120 members of the public have been taken through the small claims court procedure to recover the prescription charges evaded.

Next year the Department intends to introduce fixed penalty fines of up to £100, to penalise those who fraudulently claim exemption from prescription payments. Individuals who have been found to have repeatedly evaded payment of prescription charges could be prosecuted and fined up to £2,500. Those measures represent a major advance in deterring members of the public from fraudulently claiming exemption from payment of prescription charges thereby securing additional resources for the Health Service.

Rev Robert Coulter: How much money has been earmarked to carry out those procedures? How much money will be saved as a result of those procedures in the coming year?

Ms de Brún: I cannot tell the Member the precise cost of carrying out those procedures. That will depend on how long the procedures take and whether the payment is forthcoming immediately or has to be pursued through a small claims court, for example. It is estimated that in the 2000-01 financial year some £9.5 million was lost to the Health Service on account of false claims of exemption from prescription charges. During the same period, income realised from prescription charges was £10.1 million. The annual loss due to prescription exemption fraud has decreased from £11 million, in 1999-2000, to £9.5 million in 2000-01. However, those figures do not reflect the full impact of the counter-fraud unit, which became fully operational in January 2001.

Ms Gildernew: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. What is the role of the counter-fraud unit?

Ms de Brún: The counter-fraud unit, which is based in the Central Services Agency, has a dual remit. It is responsible for the detection and follow-up of exemption fraud cases. It is also responsible for the investigation

of cases of suspected fraud by the public and by practitioners.

Mr McCarthy: The figures that the Minister quotes are staggering. How do figures relating to prescription fraud in Northern Ireland compare with those for other regions in the United Kingdom?

Ms de Brún: The Department does not have comparable figures for incidents of prescription fraud. In Northern Ireland the rate of prescription exemption claims, including prepayment certificates, is 90%. That figure compares with 90% in Scotland and 85% in England.

Special Needs Assessment Centres (Occupational Therapy)

5. **Ms Lewsley** asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail arrangements to ensure that adequate and appropriate resources are made available for occupational therapy for children in special-needs assessment centres. (AQO 377/01)

Ms de Brún: Is faoi na hiontaobhais agus na boird seirbhísí sláinte agus sóisialta atá sé a chinntiú go gcuirtear teiripe shaothair ar fáil le freastal ar riachtanais mheasta leanaí ina limistéir, agus aird á tabhairt acu ar na hacmhainní atá ar fáil dóibh. In Aibreán 1999 leithdháil mo Roinn £400,000 athfhillteach orthu do sholáthar breise teiripe do leanaí réamhscolaíochta agus in aois scoile.

I mbliana, bhunaigh mo Roinn comhghrúpa oibre le feidhmeannaigh ón Roinn Oideachais le breithniú a dhéanamh ar an tacaíocht teiripe a theastaíonn ó leanaí le riachtanais speisialta agus an bealach is fearr leis an tacaíocht sin a sholáthar. Cuideoidh obair an ghrúpa cainníocht a dhéanamh ar na riachtanais nár freastaladh orthu go dtí seo, agus eolas a thabhairt ar spriocdhíríú, pleanáil agus forbairt seirbhíse na seirbhísí teiripe, teiripe shaothair san áireamh. Tá an grúpa ag fiosrú deiseanna chomh maith do thionscadail phiolótacha cómhaoinithe le soláthar seirbhíse a mhéadú.

It is the responsibility of health and social services boards and trusts to ensure that appropriate occupational therapy is provided to meet the assessed needs of children in their area, within available resources. In April 1999, the Department allocated them an additional £400,000 of recurrent funding to provide extra therapy for children of pre-school and school age. This year the Department established a joint working group with officials from the Department of Education to consider the therapy support required by children with special needs, and how that can best be provided. The work of the group will help to quantify unmet need and to inform service targeting, planning and the development of therapy services, including occupational therapy. The group is

also exploring opportunities for joint-funded pilot projects to enhance service provision.

Ms Lewsley: I thank the Minister for her detailed answer. Would her Department check the situation at Greenwood House Assessment Centre? The full-time occupational therapist there is due to go on maternity leave, but no replacement has been put forward yet. The assistant occupational therapist is not qualified to make assessments or reports and will return to Musgrave Park Hospital after Christmas. The centre will not be able to offer any occupational therapy services, thus denying children their legal right to receive special-needs education.

Ms de Brún: I will examine the issues raised by the Member. Had she wanted to include that much detail in the question, it would have been open for her to do so. The recruitment and retention of staff involve other issues. Boards and trusts seek to address the wider issues at all times and, at any given time, the specifics of the availability of trained staff in their centres.

The University of Ulster has increased from 50 to 60 the annual intake of students for its occupational therapy course. My Department is carrying out a comprehensive review of health and social services workforce planning to identify further measures that need to be taken to address specific issues in particular specialisms. The review will be completed next year.

Mrs Nelis: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. In the light of the additional funding allocation to the boards, what action are health boards taking to address service deficits in their areas? We could all stand up at Question Time and ask questions about problems in our own areas; I thought that questions were supposed to be general.

Mr Speaker: It is open to Members to put specific questions or general questions. However, there is a convention in other places that if Members intend to ask a specific question as a supplementary they contact the Minister in advance so that a reasonable response may be given. It is easy to ask a general question, and to then home in on a specific point, but there is little purpose in that if a proper answer is required from the Minister — and that is the case for any Minister. The convention applies not just to Question Time, but in other contexts where a specific answer is requested of a Minister. On occasion, something unusual will arise, but if it is a Member's intention to ask a supplementary, or a specific question in other contexts, the convention elsewhere is to give the Minister some notice. That makes an immediate reply a much easier prospect. I call the Minister to reply to the supplementary.

Ms de Brún: Health boards are taking specific actions to address existing identified pressures in their areas. As the pressures in board areas will not be identical,

the measures and specific actions undertaken will be different.

The Eastern Health and Social Services Board is carrying out a review of occupational therapy services, including provision to children. The Southern Health and Social Services Board has secured Executive programme funding for a wrap-around pilot scheme to address the needs of children with disabilities. The Northern Health and Social Services Board is reviewing the health and social care needs of children with disabilities who are attending mainstream schools, and has just completed a review of the healthcare needs of children with life-limiting conditions. The Western Health and Social Services Board carrying out a review of its professions allied to medicine services.

Eastern Health and Social Services Board (Neurosurgeons)

6. **Mrs E Bell** asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what action has been taken to increase the number of neurosurgeons in the Eastern Health and Social Services Board area in general, and in the Royal Victoria Hospital in particular; and to make a statement. (AQO 400/01)

Ms de Brún: Tá cúigear néarmhainlia comhairleach fostaithe ag Iontaobhas Ghrúpa na nOspidéal Ríoga. Soláthraíonn siad seo iomlán na seirbhísí néarmhainliachta ar fud cheithre limistéar boird.

Tá tacaíocht ag na comhairligh faoi láthair ó dhá shainiúnaíthe. Tháinig folúntas i gceann de na poist sainiúnaíthe le gairid agus táimid ag súil go gcuirfear dlús le hionadaí a fháil. Forálfáidh cothabháil thrí phost sainiúnaíthe d'fholúntais comhairleach a thiocfadh chun cinn amach anseo trí scor ón obair nó trí bhunú post breise.

3.30 pm

Five consultant neurosurgeons are employed by the Royal Group of Hospitals Health and Social Services Trust. These provide the totality of neurosurgical services across the four board areas. The consultants are currently supported by two specialist trainees. One further specialist trainee post has recently fallen vacant, and we expect replacement to be expedited. Maintenance of three specialist trainee posts will provide for future consultant vacancies arising through retirement or the establishment of additional posts.

Mrs E Bell: I thank the Minister for her encouraging answer. As she may know, the reason that I asked that question was that I have been approached by a number of patients who have been on the waiting list for one or two years. The Minister has answered the question, but, for the record, does she agree that such waiting times are unacceptable?

Ms de Brún: We have said that everything must be done to ensure that we tackle the considerable question of waiting lists and waiting times in the specialities. This is no exception. However, consultant neurosurgeons represent only one element of the service provided, albeit a critical element. They depend on adequate support from anaesthetists, nurses and technical colleagues in providing the service. They also need adequate access to theatre facilities. Currently the five consultants in post have limited theatre access due to deficiencies in support staff. That is another element that we will be addressing urgently.

Dr Hendron: The Minister is aware of the dangerous situation that we have in neurosurgery in the Royal Victoria Hospital, which is also the main trauma hospital for Northern Ireland. Does she accept that additional to, and closely identified with, the shortage of neurosurgeons, is the necessity for appropriately trained post-neurosurgery intensive-care nurses? We should bear in mind that some patients have recently been sent home with brain tumours — gliomas — because the proper capacity in the hospital was not there either in neurosurgeons or appropriately trained intensive-care nurses.

Mr Speaker: Order. I am going to have to ask the Minister to reply in writing to the Member, should she choose to do so.

Ms de Brún: I have already replied.

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

Mr Hussey: Will you take a point of order now or after the next set of questions?

Mr Speaker: I will take it after the next set of questions. I do not normally take points of order during Question Time, though I did make a point to Members during the last set of questions. That is why we went over the 30 minutes, though not as far over as Dr Hendron might have liked.

FINANCE AND PERSONNEL

Review of Rating Policy

1. **Mrs Courtney** asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel, in respect of the review of rating policy, to detail (a) the current position of the review (b) when the review will be finished and (c) what consultation will take place on this issue. (AQO 401/01)

5. **Mr McElduff** asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel to provide an update on the review of rating policy, including the extent of the consultation process with district councils and other interested groups or individuals. (AQO 412/01)

The Minister of Finance and Personnel (Mr Durkan): With your permission, Mr Speaker, I will take questions 1 and 5 together. The stage-one report covering analysis, issues and options, which is being drafted by an interdepartmental working group, will be finalised for consideration by the Executive in December. Following agreement on options to be considered, impact analysis will start before public consultation begins in around February 2002. The final report is due in July 2002.

Mrs Courtney: Can the Minister give an indication that, whatever the outcome of the review, the least well-off in our society will be protected in the matter of paying rates?

Mr Durkan: The existing rate rebate scheme, as part of the social security system, already ensures that the impact of rates is lessened for those in the lower income bands, including a great number of those on fixed incomes in receipt of state pensions. I recognise, however, that many individuals who would not necessarily be considered as well off fall just outside the parameters of the rebate scheme as it currently exists. The review will address that difficult problem directly. The question of equity within the system is central to the review process.

Mr McElduff: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. Will the Minister consider compensatory measures for those citizens living west of the Bann — where there is a marked deficit of services — in any new rating review?

Mr Durkan: The review of rating policy will examine how the rating system is structured and how rates are levied. It will try to ensure that equity is more strongly reflected in the new regime. However, when looking at rate levels, as they are levied across council districts, analysis shows that high rates tend to occur in district council areas that are more affluent while low rates tend to occur in less well-off areas. Departments and councils organise and provide services in different ways, and therefore there is no means of directly relating rates to local services.

Mr Hay: Everyone welcomes the review of rates in Northern Ireland. However, it is important to consult with various agencies about the rates review. Will the Minister tell the House what groups and agencies he has been consulting in Northern Ireland?

Mr Durkan: An interdepartmental working group is involved in the review. Options emerging after the first stage will be subject to public consultation, and there will be no limit to the groups and agencies that may be consulted. All the groups on the Department's consultation list for the equality scheme will be canvassed for their views, given that part of the focus will be on issues of equality and targeting social need. However,

it will be an open and public consultation, and the Committee for Finance and Personnel will be fully involved.

The Chairperson of the Committee for Finance and Personnel (Mr Molloy): What consultation has taken place in relation to the general grant that is available to district councils? Does the Minister realise the extra burden that that will put on councils — particularly those in the west — as they will have to raise rates to keep level with existing services because of the reduction in the general grant?

Mr Durkan: This question relates to the Budget rather than the rating policy review. If the Chairperson's question is about whether there should be a review of how the resource grant is structured and how it is allocated, because the reduced funding envisaged for it in the draft Budget is having an impact on less well-off councils, then that is a matter for the Department of the Environment. That Department presides over the resource grant regime.

Trust Board Deficits

2. **Mr McGrady** asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel to detail any discussions with the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety concerning the review into trust board deficits; and to make a statement. (AQO 375/01)

Mr Durkan: I met with the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety in February, specifically to discuss this matter. It is a significant issue, which has been covered in other budgetary discussions since then. It has also been considered by the Executive, as reflected by our decisions in February, June and July.

Mr McGrady: The Minister referred to the joint committee set up in February to review the situation. Through that committee, will he and the Minister of Health address the injustice and lack of parity in services rendered by trusts? This comes about because some trusts stick to their budgets and do not create deficits: they achieve this by cutting back on services in their localities. Other trusts exceed their budgets, create deficits, and give a better service. When does the Minister anticipate that action will be taken on this, and when will the reports come from the joint committees?

Mr Durkan: The review of trust deficits has been completed, and its work was the basis for the decisions taken in June and July and the subsequent announcements and discussions in the House previously. The question of the pattern of trust deficits, and the fact that not all trusts recorded deficits, is one that Members have previously addressed. It is a question that the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety

and the Committee for Health, Social Services and Public Safety have been interested in.

It is not for me as Minister of Finance and Personnel to go into the details of specific trust decisions, or of how some trusts have taken steps to avoid deficits, whereas others have incurred deficits because of certain pressures and demands. Trusts with acute services seem to have had particular difficulty in avoiding deficits. That reflects the pattern of the pressures that those trusts are under. More detailed consideration is for the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety and her Department, and not for me.

Mr Hussey: I listened to the Minister's answer very carefully. Will he indicate what issues were raised during his meetings with the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety? Did they discuss the transfer of patients on the closure of a hospital, or indeed from one board area to another, and the financial pressures that creates for a trust? That was the case when the South Tyrone Hospital was closed, and patients were transferred to the Tyrone County Hospital.

Mr Durkan: The Member's question should be answered by the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety. Questions at this level of detailed service spend are not directly within my bailiwick as Minister of Finance and Personnel. Members will be aware, however, that allocations have been made in monitoring rounds in order to make good some of the pressures manifested as a result of previous decisions in relation to the South Tyrone Hospital.

Marginalised Communities (Resources)

3. **Ms Ramsey** asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel what action he proposes to take to increase the allocation of resources to marginalised communities. (AQO 403/01)

Mr Durkan: We are addressing the needs of marginalised communities in several ways. New targeting social need (TSN) is a policy theme that cuts across all areas of activity by trying to use more of our existing resources to benefit people in greatest objective social need, including those identified by the new Noble indicators.

All Budget proposals are evaluated for their New TSN implications. The Executive are considering the future priorities that should be addressed through the promoting social inclusion aspect of New TSN, and will be announcing new priorities shortly. The social inclusion Executive programme fund has been designed to focus resources on actions against poverty, as well as on community relations and cultural diversity. In addition, social integration, inclusion and reconciliation are key priorities of the new Peace II programme.

New TSN is one of the horizontal principles identified in the Northern Ireland community support framework.

It is embedded in, and will be delivered through the implementation of, building sustainable prosperity and Peace II.

Ms Ramsey: Does the Minister agree that given the level of poverty in communities, and the importance of education and health in increasing life chances and quality of life in marginalised communities, the current health and education budgets are inadequate and need to be addressed?

Mr Durkan: The health and education budgets are both the subject of Executive priority consideration, as reflected in the draft Budget. That is reflected in the fact that those two Departments have received the most significant uplifts on their newly projected allocation for next year, as opposed to what was in last December's indicative allocation for next year. How Departments best target their allocations to meet their New TSN and equality obligations is a matter for the Departments themselves.

3.45 pm

Human Rights Culture

4. **Mr C Murphy** asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel what steps he has taken to ensure the development of a human rights culture within his Department. (AQO 402/01)

Mr Durkan: The Department of Finance and Personnel promotes awareness of human rights issues to all its staff, through tailored training courses and monitoring of case law. Central Personnel Group, given its central role, has also initiated Northern Ireland Civil Service-wide specialist training for senior Civil Service staff. Business areas in the Department have carried out assessments of legislation and procedures, and audits of policies to ensure compatibility with the Human Rights Act 1998.

Mr C Murphy: I thank the Minister for his answer. Will he explain to the House how promoting the human rights ethos will affect decisions on, for instance, the relocation of Civil Service jobs to allow people access to jobs closer to home? Will promoting human rights have an impact on that sort of decision?

Mr Durkan: Some of the issues mentioned by Mr C Murphy are more relevant to equality considerations and New TSN policies than to human rights as under the Human Rights Act 1998. As previously stated, equality, New TSN, the regional development strategy, efficiency and costs, for instance, are informing the work on the accommodation policy strategy review.

Land Register (Computerisation)

6. **Mr Savage** asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel what action he proposes to take to help

alleviate the disruption caused to the legal profession as a result of the computerisation of the land register.

(AQO 409/01)

Mr Durkan: The land register has significantly increased productivity in the past year as a result of computerisation. However, an estimated 25% increase in the workload in some areas has meant that backlogs and registration delays have not improved over that time. I have asked land registrars to make proposals for substantially reducing the backlog over the next 12 months and, as part of those proposals, to consider the possibility of delaying any further extension of compulsory first registration until the backlog is reduced. That would be of considerable benefit to the legal profession. Those proposals are to be submitted to me in the next few days.

Mr Savage: The Minister will be aware that he has had representations from the Law Society of Northern Ireland on this and that it is not only solicitors who suffer from the disruption but mortgage lenders and other financiers too. There is a backlog with proof of title for home-buyers in County Down especially, where it appears to be worse than anywhere else. It would be appreciated if easing that backlog could be speeded up.

Mr Durkan: I am aware of the representations from the Law Society of Northern Ireland, and the Committee for Finance and Personnel has also relayed details of them to me. Not all the problems are as straightforward as some of those lobbying would suggest. If all the information received by land registrars, including information from the legal profession and others working in the property field, was accurate, delays and time spent on the misplaced activity sometimes involved would be reduced.

However, the land registrars appreciate the needs of their customers and know that their customers are not only those in the legal profession. They have already made good some of their commitments in recent months to secure improvements in the short term. The focus now is on trying to ensure that underlying improvements last for the longer term.

Barnett Formula

7. **Mr Fee** asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel what steps he intends to take to secure further resources under the Barnett formula. (AQO 385/01)

Mr Durkan: Officials are examining the effects of operating the Barnett formula under the resource accounting and budgeting system and discussing them with the Treasury. The case for assessing the needs of public expenditure is being examined in the context of the six needs and effectiveness evaluations being undertaken in Departments. As already stated, the 2002 spending review sets the context for negotiations on the Barnett formula with the Treasury.

Mr Fee: I think that I have been headed off at the pass, but nonetheless I want to ask the Minister two questions.

In the future, will he perhaps consider publishing a “fool’s guide” to the Barnett formula, as it is a complicated and mysterious method of establishing our Budget? Can he give more detail on how the change to resource accounting and budgeting will affect the formula, and how the six needs and effectiveness reviews will be used to support all the Barnett negotiations?

Mr Durkan: I think two questions became three; that is inflation for you. I wish the Barnett formula would work like that and give us more at the end than it started out offering.

To take the last point first, the work on the needs and effectiveness evaluations will provide the most basic and essential information for any negotiations we have with the Treasury. They are aimed at providing a clear and realistic assessment of our needs. We need to reflect that clearly in negotiations with the Treasury, and to seek a move to funding allocations which also reflect that need. In the context of the negotiations that we will face, we have to show that we are properly addressing the effectiveness issues as well. The needs and effectiveness evaluation exercises will throw up questions and issues for us as far as our own decisions and allocations are concerned, as well as issues that we will want to talk to the Treasury about.

Regarding the impact of resource accounting and budgeting, a significant issue — probably the most significant issue in respect of Barnett — is the question of capital charges and depreciation costs. Where those have been taken account of previously, as part of annually managed expenditure, they did not impact on the funds that were within our discretion under the departmental expenditure limit. With resource accounting and budgeting, they now will.

We have a very high capital base here compared to England. For example, many roads in England belong to local authorities and do not count in the departmental expenditure limits. Here, they will. Water and sewerage are not owned by central government in England and do not count under the departmental expenditure limits in resource accounting and budgeting. Here, they will. Even on the impact of resource accounting and budgeting alone, we have a significant case to argue for modification to the Barnett formula.

Regarding the publication of a “fool’s guide” to the Barnett formula, we will try to produce further information and advice on its operation, not just for Members but for wider public interests. People see different reports in various magazines and periodicals that slice the issue and represent it differently.

Mr McCarthy: Does the Minister agree, or will he at least consider the possibility, that if the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety were divided in two — one Department for health, and another for social services and public safety — we could perhaps attract more funding through the Barnett formula?

Mr Durkan: There is no relationship between the number and functional responsibilities of Departments and the Barnett formula. I refer again to the point about water and sewerage, which do not count towards public expenditure in Britain. What we receive from the Barnett formula does not include an allocation for water and sewerage, so we have to make provision for that out of our own resources. Commitments such as that further squeeze the Barnett formula, and for those reasons we have to look to what it is we are going to do for ourselves through rates and revenue-raising. There is more work for us in analysing those issues than there is in restructuring Departments or reallocating responsibilities, as that will make no impact on what the Treasury allocates to us.

Social and Economic Marginalisation

8. **Dr O'Hagan** asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel what steps he has taken to ensure that departmental procurement enhances the objectives of tackling social and economic marginalisation. (AQO 405/01)

Mr Durkan: Although current procurement policy is driven by value for money and delivery against price, the integration of social and economic considerations in procurement offers the potential to ensure that that important activity is managed in a way that promotes and is consistent with our wider policy objectives.

I commissioned a review team to look at procurement, and it has made several recommendations. I have invited comments on the recommendations from external stakeholders by 30 November. After that date, the Executive will make a final decision.

Dr O'Hagan: Will the Minister give a personal commitment that social and economic issues will be kept at the centre of any departmental procurement procedures and that equality requirements will be adhered to? Go raibh maith agat.

Mr Durkan: Following on from the implementation review, one of our public procurement aims is to reduce the transaction costs so that we can re-deploy savings into vital areas of expenditure, not least to support broader social and economic policy. Although the policy of value for money will run through all areas of procurement, like letters through a stick of rock, it is also possible to achieve other multipliers, not only in the Executive's social and economic policy, but in the environmental area.

I am committed to ensuring that public procurement achieves best value for money and also contributes to social and economic policy objectives. The workings of our procurement policy will support the course of action that we take in relation to our valid economic regional objective of improving our small- to medium-sized enterprises (SMEs). We are concerned about targeting social need, tackling long-term unemployment and trying to improve working opportunities for people with disabilities. Such initiatives, as well as good environmental standards, are supported by our policy of procurement activity.

Senior Civil Service Review

9. **Ms Lewsley** asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel what progress has been made regarding the Senior Civil Service review. (AQO 382/01)

Mr Durkan: The first meeting of the review team took place on Monday 5 March. Since then, the team has considered and analysed a wide range of issues and undertaken a programme of consultation with key stakeholders and other interested parties. It is anticipated that the team will submit its report to me by mid-December, before the Executive make a final decision.

Ms Lewsley: Will the Minister expand on his answer and give some detail on how wide-ranging the review will be? What level of consultation will take place?

Mr Durkan: The terms of reference for the review were deliberately broad to maximise the opportunity provided by such a review. Its four aims are: to ensure that current practices and procedures for appointment to and promotion within the Civil Service facilitate the business objectives of Departments and Ministers; speedily to enhance representation in the Senior Civil Service; to address and identify obstacles to fair participation by all sectors of the community; and to match best practice in other major public-and private-sector bodies. To ensure that those aims are addressed, the review team has consulted with 39 organisations or groups that represent the voluntary and public sectors, as well as the business community. That work is almost complete. The organisations and groups consulted included Executive Committee members, the Committee for Finance and Personnel, the Equality Commission, trade unions and other groups identified in section 75 of the Northern Ireland Act 1998. There may be further consultation on specific measures, depending on proposals that emerge from the review.

Accommodation Review

10. **Mr Gallagher** asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel when the accommodation review will be completed. (AQO 383/01)

4.00 pm

Mr Durkan: I anticipate a completion date of April 2002 for the Government accommodation review. The timetable incorporates proposals for the submission of an interim report by the consultants at the end of November.

Mr Gallagher: After April 2002, who will decide which functions will be decentralised or relocated?

Mr Durkan: The consultants who are undertaking the review can only make recommendations. Once the review report is produced, the Executive will have to reach consensus on any accommodation implementation plan, taking into account the overall financial implications.

That will involve value for money considerations and a range of other relevant policies, including equality, New TSN and the 2025 regional development strategy. It will fall to the Executive to bring forward proposals for the Assembly's approval. For the information of some Members, I should clarify that it is not a matter for the Department of Finance and Personnel to determine by directive what branch or division will move where. All Members should be aware that Departments have their own rights and responsibilities in those areas.

Mr Speaker: Questions 11 and 12 have been withdrawn and will receive written answers from the Minister.

Adjourned at 4.01 pm.

NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

Tuesday 20 November 2001

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

Members observed two minutes' silence.

ASSEMBLY BUSINESS

Dr Adamson: On a point of order, Mr Speaker. At the weekend, our party Whips advised us that on the Order Paper this morning there was to be a motion pertaining to the serious situation at Bombardier Shorts. Is it in order to ask why that motion was withdrawn?

Mr Speaker: It is unfortunate that, from time to time, some change may arise in the circumstances of someone who has a motion on the Order Paper, after the Business Committee has agreed the Order Paper but before it is printed. It may concern a Member who is tabling a motion, a Minister with an item of business, or a particular clause of a Bill, with the result that that item of business must be withdrawn. It can even happen that items of business that are on the Order Paper do not proceed for various reasons.

As far as the particular circumstances are concerned, I would prefer that those issues did not become a matter of substantial debate in the Chamber. There is, of course, no reason why the Business Committee could not discuss such a matter.

NORTH/SOUTH MINISTERIAL COUNCIL

Tourism

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment (Sir Reg Empey): The fourth meeting of the North/South Ministerial Council (NSMC) in the tourism sectoral format took place in Dublin on Wednesday 7 November 2001. After nomination by the then First Minister and the then Deputy First Minister, Dr Seán Farren and I represented the Northern Ireland Administration. The Irish Government were represented by Dr James McDaid TD, Minister for Tourism, Sport and Recreation. This report has been approved by Dr Farren and is also made on his behalf.

Mr Andrew Coppel, chairman of Tourism Ireland Ltd, presented a progress report to the council on developments since the last tourism sector meeting. Mr Coppel reported that, after an open recruitment process, Mr Paul O'Toole formally took up his position as chief executive of Tourism Ireland Ltd on 16 July 2001. Mr Coppel also gave an update on recruiting staff to new positions in the company and on progress on the company's new premises in Dublin and Coleraine. Mr Coppel reported that the board of Tourism Ireland Ltd had formulated a comprehensive marketing programme for the 2002 season, together with the creation of new marketing communication materials. Mr Coppel also informed the Council that a tourism marketing partnership had been formed with members of the tourism industry to assist Tourism Ireland Ltd in its strategic thinking.

The Council noted that preparation of the Tourism Ireland Ltd corporate plan had commenced. It is intended that the plan will be submitted for approval at the next meeting of the North/South Ministerial Council in this sector.

The Council received a verbal report from Mr O'Toole on developments since his appointment in July. That covered issues such as market conditions in the tourism industry after the events of 11 September and the objectives and strategy of the company for the 2002 marketing campaign. The Council assured Mr O'Toole of its support in meeting the significant challenges facing the company.

Dr Farren gave the Council an update on the progress made on the tourism training initiatives that were discussed at earlier meetings, such as the business renewal for hospitality and tourism operators programme, the operational skills development programme and the scheme facilitating the exchange of teachers, educationalists, trainers and practitioners.

The Council agreed that its next meeting in tourism sectoral format would take place in Northern Ireland in February 2002.

Mr McClarty: Will the Minister advise the House if a location has been identified for the Northern Ireland headquarters based in Coleraine? Has recruitment begun, and when is the Coleraine office likely to open?

Sir Reg Empey: Significant progress has been made in establishing the Coleraine office. Discussions between Tourism Ireland Ltd, the Valuation and Lands Agency and the developer are almost complete. Tourism Ireland Ltd wishes to ensure that the Coleraine office is a fully functional regional office, including reception, necessary information technology infrastructure and the ability to meet the trade and to support future board meetings.

Owing to the technical requirements of the information technology role in Coleraine, costs are still being calculated. Temporary premises have been identified in the New Row area, at numbers 34 to 36b, and will be available from 1 December 2001. Coleraine will have 16 staff with responsibility for information technology, direct marketing, printing and distribution, financial and administrative support for Coleraine, call centre management and public relations. It is expected to take approximately four to five months to build the new structure with the specific information technology requirements that are necessary. In the meantime, temporary facilities will be available. Some staff are already transferring. Two have been identified so far. The total complement will be 16.

Mr Dallat: Representing as I do the North's number one tourist area, which includes Coleraine, I welcome the Minister's interest in that area. Can he give the number of people, North and South, participating in the training programmes that he has announced? Has any evaluation taken place? What relationship will the new tourism company have with the regional tourism organisations (RTOs)?

Sir Reg Empey: I see that the last two Members are impartial in their opinions of the tourism potential of Coleraine.

Regional tourism organisations remain a significant tool in the delivery of a successful tourism policy. Tourism Ireland Ltd has already engaged with them directly. As far as I know, the chief executive and his colleagues have been to see most of the RTOs and have explained their ideas to them. One measure of the company's success will be its ability to build strong partnerships with the RTOs.

I shall have to defer to my Colleague, Dr Farren, regarding numbers on training programmes. I shall write to the Member with those details. Dr Farren will confirm that the response has been exceptionally positive, and we are very pleased. Some of the schemes are over-

subscribed, particularly as regards graduates. The Council of Education, Recruitment and Training (CERT), which is the Republic of Ireland's equivalent body for dealing with training in the tourism and hospitality sector, and the Department for Employment and Learning have worked very closely together. The schemes have advanced more quickly than expected since our meeting in Letterkenny, and we expect a positive outcome. Dr Farren's Department and CERT will monitor the results, and I am sure that those can be made available to Members.

Mr McElduff: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. Cuirim fáilte roimh an chruinniú agus roimh an ráiteas.

I welcome the meeting, the statement and Mr O'Toole's appointment as chief executive of Tourism Ireland Ltd. Does the comprehensive marketing programme include a focus on cultural tourism? Have the Minister's thoughts on market conditions developed in the wake of the events of 11 September?

Sir Reg Empey: Mr O'Toole and Mr Coppel reported on events after 11 September, and it will come as no surprise that there has been a significant impact. Air traffic and passenger movements in the United States immediately dropped by 90%, as did confidence in the market. Approximately 25% of the seats on flights across the Atlantic have now gone.

This period, like spring, is called the shoulder of the season, and it is being used increasingly to bolster tourism earnings. Undoubtedly, there will be a significant fall-off, and there is no way of sweeping that under the carpet. The precise extent varies among sectors, and the full picture will not be available until statistics are collected.

Cultural tourism is an area with significant growth potential. Marketing plans are still being established, but it is obvious that we can offer culture-related and heritage-related tourism. We believe that it is attractive to visitors from North America and Europe. Last year, we had a substantial increase in tourism from France, and it was in the area of natural resource-based cultural heritage, gardens, and visits to historical sites. Cultural tourism will be one of the growth areas of the future.

I shall briefly return to Mr Dallat's question, because I was not quick enough with my notes. I do have some statistics on participating numbers. However, in view of the different categories it would still be better to provide details in writing.

Mr J Wilson: The Minister will be aware that August was a particularly disastrous month for the tourism industry. I believe that Americans are in the habit of booking holidays in February and March. At that time of the year, we were in the middle of the foot-and-mouth disease crisis. Action must be taken to attract lost

business back to Northern Ireland; it will not happen of its own accord. Are there plans to make the industry more buoyant?

10.45 am

Sir Reg Empey: The Member has identified one of this year's twin problems. The foot-and-mouth disease outbreak happened in the spring — I think in February. Many holidays are booked during March and April. Undoubtedly, there was a significant downturn in business, with figures of 10% to 15% mentioned. However, until the season is over, and statistics are analysed, it will be difficult to determine the exact amount of decline. Moreover, a complete cut-off point was reached as a result of the events of 11 September.

The North/South Ministerial Council has discussed the problem at great length. The chairperson and the chief executive of Tourism Ireland Ltd are focused on that issue. They have set out an ambitious, but thoughtful, marketing programme for the coming season. Members will be impressed with it. It is intelligent, with Tourism Ireland Ltd retaining a degree of flexibility. The company does not commit its entire budget to any one sector. It will hold back some resources so that it can react as events occur. However, using the Gulf War in 1991 as a yardstick to measure how quickly the American market can recover, it took three to four full seasons. That was taken into account on the marketing plans.

We shall not attract the same volume of business from North America. Therefore, we must attract more business from closer to home. That means refocusing additional marketing in Great Britain. There will be a specific marketing strategy for Scotland and the north of England, as those areas attract the most visitors. We shall also refocus to a degree on Europe because, although there have not been the same flight difficulties, huge access problems exist. That is another major issue.

Dr McDonnell: I thank the Minister for his report. Members are interested in the outlook for 2002 and must be satisfied with predictions. Many people want to know when Tourism Ireland Ltd will begin to make an impact. That is its first test.

Another important issue is the relationship between the Tourism Ireland Ltd offices abroad, the IDB offices and the Executive Information Service offices in Washington and Brussels. Will an integrated approach be adopted to maximise the benefits as widely as possible?

Sir Reg Empey: If things go according to plan, the transfer of staff from Bord Fáilte and the Northern Ireland Tourist Board will formally take effect on 1 September. For the first time, the company will have its own staff. The transfer of people from the overseas offices to Tourism Ireland Ltd will take effect from 1 December.

The future of the overseas offices has not been determined. The Council will return to the issue at its

next meeting, because several instances of duplication have arisen. Some of the offices are located in embassy buildings, whereas Tourism Ireland Ltd's approach will be market driven and commercially focused. Therefore offices must be established with that in mind. At the moment, the Industrial Development Board (IDB) has a network in North America and one or two offices in other parts of the world. However, those offices are not specifically linked to tourism. Tourism Ireland Ltd is a joint company owned by the two tourist boards.

New York is still one of the best places to have an office — it would be inconceivable not to have one there. We would need some convincing that Washington would be a suitable location for a tourism base — we do not even have an Industrial Development Board office there. However, when the Executive office in Washington is opened we expect the IDB to make use of it, although that may not be on a permanent basis. I note the point and will mention it to the company, but there are no plans to develop a totally integrated approach with the Tourism Ireland Ltd offices. I can, however, foresee circumstances where the Brussels and Washington offices could have a gateway into both of those sectors.

Mr Speaker: I shall call one further Member, but I wish to make a comment that is more for the benefit of Members who are not here than those who are. Ministers have generally been good about making statements to the House rather than making them outside first. That should be appreciated and respected. Statements are made to provide information and to give Members an opportunity to ask questions. Therefore in future I do not intend to call Members to ask questions on ministerial statements if they have not been here for ministerial statements. It is clear that those Members do not intend to ask questions on the statement but on a subject that takes their fancy. If Ministers are good enough to come to the House to make statements rather than make them outside, Members ought to be good enough to be in the Chamber to hear the statement on which they can ask a question. That is a warning for the future, and I hope that Members will transmit that to erring absent Members.

Mr McElduff: On a point of order, Mr Speaker.

Mr Speaker: Points of order are not normally taken during ministerial statements, so I shall take the last question and then the point of order.

Ms Morrice: I want to apologise. When I switched on the monitor and saw the Minister speaking, I was afraid that I would miss something in my rush down to the Chamber, so I stayed to watch the speech on the monitor. That way I made sure that I did not miss anything in the Minister's statement.

I am impressed by the marketing angles. I was also impressed by what the Minister said about the need to

focus on Europe. The same air flight difficulties do not exist in Europe as in the United States. The Minister will know what my question will be. What accommodation will be made for the fact that the euro is being introduced? Is Tourism Ireland Ltd making any plans to accommodate the euro, with foreign tourists in mind?

Sir Reg Empey: The Member has combined ingenuity in introducing the matter and predictability in asking the question. As the Member knows, my Department is responsible, through the euro preparations forum, for ensuring that businesses are aware of the implications of the introduction of the euro in January. Tourism Ireland Ltd does not have a responsibility in that regard, for, although the Republic is introducing the euro and we are not, it is still the responsibility of individual businesses to prepare. However, Tourism Ireland Ltd and the respective tourist boards have been anxious to ensure that customers can be accommodated. With effect from January, customers in the European Union have a right to be accommodated. Therefore, if businesses fail to follow the guidance that we have issued or to take up our offers of help, they will fail as businesses because they are obliged to be able to take payments and make appropriate arrangements in euros with effect from January. Tourism Ireland Ltd is trying to market in two currencies. That is a difficult problem to tackle.

The literature that is being prepared will make specific reference to currencies. It will point out the differences and try to offer the best advice to potential visitors by ensuring that they are fully informed. Similarly, industry is being kept informed of the proposed contents of the literature and the web site so that it can be prepared. However, individual businesses have an obligation to ensure that they can accommodate our visitors. They will be in default if they do not.

Mr Speaker: I am all for the use of new technology, but the Member and the House must be aware that her reason for being allowed to ask a question despite not having been in the Chamber will not be acceptable in future: it is too easily abused.

Dr McDonnell: Lies. She is telling lies.

Mr Speaker: The Member should withdraw that comment made from a sedentary position. It is unparliamentary.

Dr McDonnell: I withdraw the remark.

Mr McElduff: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. Does the Speaker have the flexibility to offer those Members who were present for the Minister's statement the opportunity to ask a second round of questions?

Mr Speaker: Ms Morrice's ingenuity is matched only by that of Mr McElduff. The answer to both their questions is no.

PART-TIME WORKERS (PREVENTION OF LESS FAVOURABLE TREATMENT) REGULATIONS (NORTHERN IRELAND) 2001

The Minister for Employment and Learning (Dr Farren): I beg to move

That the Part-time Workers (Prevention of Less Favourable Treatment) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2001 (SR 319/2001) be approved.

I shall refer to those Regulations as the part-time workers Regulations. They were laid before the Assembly on 12 September 2001, came into operation on 21 October 2001, and are subject to confirmation by the Assembly within six months of the latter date.

The Regulations amended the Part-time Workers (Prevention of Less Favourable Treatment) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2000, which implemented European Union Directive 97/81/EC, as extended to the UK by Directive 98/23/EC, in Northern Ireland. The aim of this essentially technical amendment is to enable the Labour Relations Agency to conciliate in industrial tribunal cases brought under the part-time workers Regulations.

Under the Industrial Tribunals (Northern Ireland) Order 1996, the Labour Relations Agency may conciliate between parties to certain employment disputes, and, if both parties agree, reach binding agreements that obviate the need for a tribunal hearing. However, the Labour Relations Agency is granted that power only in respect of disputes relating to specified employment legislation. The list of such legislation did not cover disputes relating to certain provisions of the Part-time Workers (Prevention of Less Favourable Treatment) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2000. The Regulations before the Assembly today will enable the Labour Relations Agency to conciliate in that jurisdiction also. In other words, these Regulations effectively make good an omission relating to the jurisdiction of the Labour Relations Agency in certain provisions of those Regulations. I commend the Regulations to the Assembly.

The Chairperson of the Committee for Employment and Learning (Dr Birnie): On behalf of the Committee, I welcome the approval of this statutory rule. The Committee considered the rule on 11 October 2001, together with the report from the Examiner of Statutory Rules, and the Committee had no objection to the rule. As the Minister said, the statutory rule is a technical amendment to primary legislation, and it gives new powers to the Labour Relations Agency to conciliate on claims where part-time workers allege that they have suffered a grievance at work.

At present such cases must go directly to an industrial tribunal. The Committee welcomes the proposal because it will take pressure off the tribunal system.

11.00 am

The Committee shares the concern raised by many people about the increase in the number of cases that went through tribunals in the past decade. The Committee for Employment and Learning will scrutinise how this legislation and other improvements relating to the tribunal system help both employers and employees, so that a speedier resolution can be achieved. However, the Committee wants reassurance that the Labour Relations Agency has received, or will, if necessary, receive, the extra resources needed to carry out this function effectively. Subject to that caveat, I add the Committee's support to the motion.

Mr Dallat: As a Member of the Committee for Employment and Learning and as someone with an interest in equality, I too welcome the motion. It will enable the Labour Relations Agency to help to settle disputes in the workplace. Indeed, I will take this opportunity to say that the performance of the Labour Relations Agency has been very satisfactory in recent times.

It is important that part-time workers have the same rights and protection as their full-time colleagues. For too long part-time workers were the Cinderellas of the workplace. This statutory rule proposes equality for a group that has suffered terrible injustices in the past, often resulting in personal hardship not only for individuals but also for their families. At a time when more and more people are employed part time — sometimes by choice, but often through necessity — it is critical that their human rights are protected in the same way as those of full-time workers. There never was, nor should there ever have been, any excuse for treating workers differently, but part-time workers have on occasions been exploited in the most appalling ways.

Let us send out a clear message that the age of equality is arriving — slowly, but surely — and that the Assembly is determined to eliminate all forms of social and legal injustice so that the principles enshrined in the Good Friday Agreement apply to everyone. Part-time workers have been treated badly by both the Government and the private sector. That should now end. We hope that all employers now follow the example of others who never differentiated between full-time and part-time workers, but treated them as people.

Can the Minister tell us what percentage of industrial tribunal cases the Labour Relations Agency deals with successfully?

Dr Farren: I thank the two Members who have spoken.

Workers who lodge an industrial tribunal application under the Part-time Workers (Prevention of Less Favourable Treatment) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2001 will have the same right as in other jurisdictions to

approach the Labour Relations Agency for assistance in reaching a conciliated settlement with their employers.

In response to Mr Dallat's question, the Labour Relations Agency facilitated a conciliated settlement in over 22% of all cases brought to industrial tribunals and played a key role in a significant proportion of the 33.5% of cases withdrawn. Obviously, access to the Labour Relations Agency for assistance in reaching a conciliated settlement can be quite effective and should, in all justice, be available to part-time workers as much as to full-time workers, as this amendment to the Regulations is intended to ensure.

Regulations provide for greater choice for part-time workers and their employers in the way in which their cases are handled. They will afford them the opportunity to avoid the cost and inconvenience of a full hearing, if they wish. Any reduction in the number of cases needing to be heard by an industrial tribunal is also good news for the tribunal system itself. I can tell Dr Birnie that my Department will monitor the resource implications of any significant increase in the caseload of the Labour Relations Agency.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That the Part-time Workers (Prevention of Less Favourable Treatment) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2001 (SR 319/2001) be approved.

HEALTH AND SOCIAL SERVICES STAFF

Ms Ramsey: I beg to move

That this Assembly calls on the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to work towards the common validation and recognition of the qualifications of health and social services staff on a cross-border basis.

Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. I thank the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety for attending.

All Members are aware of the financial and staffing problems in the health sector. Recognition of qualifications on an all-island basis would give staff greater flexibility of movement. That would be especially important in the border counties, where hospitals and boards already work on a cross-border basis for the benefit of their patients. Such recognition of qualifications would remove the need for dual registration, which is time consuming and costly. It would also go some way towards tackling staff shortages, especially in positions that must be filled at short notice.

The current registration system prevents nurses from working throughout areas such as those covered by hospitals in Letterkenny and Derry or Sligo and Enniskillen. Everyone is aware that waiting lists are growing — in some cases, that is due to a shortage in nursing staff — and this small move would have long-term benefits for patients and would help to shorten waiting lists.

There have always been strong links between practitioners North and South; most difficulties concerned service delivery, which is affected by the registration situation. The British Medical Association (BMA) has written to welcome the commitment in the Programme for Government to develop areas for closer co-operation through the North/South Ministerial Council. The BMA asks for a cross-cutting study of the barriers that doctors face in North/South work. The BMA also wants clarification of any new all-Ireland system of registration of medical practitioners and of how such a system would solve the professional, legal and technical problems of working in both jurisdictions. The BMA also recognises the importance of sharing clinical expertise and experience and of co-operation in areas such as research and development. In September 2000 the BMA and the Irish Medical Organisation jointly hosted the first all-Ireland health conference.

Paramedics can work on both sides of the border as a good Samaritan act, and they have a good working relationship. However, there are some serious problems. Agreed training standards would benefit patients, especially in the border counties. I urge all parties to support this common-sense approach; it can only be of benefit to patients and staff.

Mr McCarthy: Ms Ramsey said, there is a crisis in almost every sector of Northern Ireland's health and social services, including staff throughout the Health Service. The motion is worthy of support because, if implemented, health and social services staff throughout this island would be able to exercise their skills across Northern Ireland. Currently, health staff are being brought into our hospitals from the far corners of the world. Such staff are very welcome, and they contribute enormously to the welfare of all the people of Northern Ireland.

As the health spokesperson for the Alliance Party, I fully support the motion. Ms Ramsey mentioned the border counties; I would prefer to include all counties in Northern Ireland among those that would benefit from the proposal.

Mr J Kelly: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. I too support the motion. As my Colleague has said, it will help to bring forward the harmonisation of healthcare throughout the island of Ireland. That is significant. It is not a political point. The health issue affects all of us who live on this island.

Considering the wider issue, with co-operation, major savings could be made in health benefits, particularly in the border counties. As Kieran McCarthy has said, that is not confined to the border areas but applies to the island of Ireland. That is especially true in relation to nursing and health and social services staff, because there is currently a shortage of nursing staff. Nurses are being brought in from the Philippines and from other Far Eastern countries to help to service the shortage of nurses in the island. Harmonisation, or fewer difficulties for nurses from one part of the island practising in another, would help to alleviate those shortages.

The shortages are an important issue, but the wider picture involves an attempt to bring some harmonisation to health provision. We looked at the fuel crisis, and we discussed harmonisation in that context, given the wide variation in fuel prices — petrol and diesel, et cetera — between the Twenty-six Counties and the Six Counties. The harmonisation of healthcare would have a much greater impact on the well-being of our citizens throughout the island of Ireland.

The motion, while it is confined to the issue of health and social services staff, widens the horizon and gives us an idea of how we might approach health on a 32-county, all-Ireland basis. I support the motion. We should give consideration to its wider implications for health provision.

Ms Morrice: I support the motion on the grounds that it makes sense. I must admit that I understood that in the single European market there was provision for the freedom of movement of goods, capital and services throughout the member states of the European Union.

Strenuous work has been conducted in Brussels to move towards the mutual recognition of diplomas and qualifications in all European Union countries. That would be important, not only on a cross-border, island of Ireland basis but on a Europe-wide basis. In a single market, people with qualifications should be able to move — whether it is to the Republic of Ireland, Italy, Greece, Portugal or anywhere in the European Union. In the early days there was mutual recognition of qualifications in hairdressing. That got through, but there is still much work to be done on other qualifications, such as pharmaceutical industry qualifications.

I support the motion not only on an all-Ireland basis but also on a Europe-wide basis.

11.15 am

The Chairperson of the Committee for Health, Social Services and Public Safety (Dr Hendron): I congratulate Sue Ramsey on tabling the motion and apologise for not being in the House for her speech.

Co-operation and Working Together (CAWT) is a long-established co-operative venture. The CAWT project was set up in 1992 when the North Eastern and North Western Health Boards in the Republic, and the Southern and Western Health and Social Services Boards in Northern Ireland, entered into formal arrangements. That was the Ballyconnell Agreement.

It is important to work towards the common validation and recognition of the qualifications of health and social services staff on a cross-border basis. Nurses are the backbone of any health service, and that is true of Northern Ireland, where there are major problems in the Health Service. There are grades for nurses, social workers and others. It is not irrelevant to note that many nurses in the Ulster Hospital and elsewhere are working at higher grades and have more responsibility than they are being paid for. It is important to sort out our own house. It is also important for cross-border issues. Nursing qualifications in the North are recognised in the Republic and vice versa, but educational qualifications in the North and South must be standardised.

Queen's University is the only medical school in Northern Ireland, but there are several such schools in the Republic. Qualifications are recognised on both sides of the border and worldwide. The same goes for special needs, general medicine and surgery, but other qualifications such as diplomas may cause problems.

Doctors and general practitioners from the South work in Northern Ireland in primary care, and the same applies vice versa. The question of doctors being revalidated every few years is at the forefront of debate in the United Kingdom, including Northern Ireland, and parts of Western Europe. That will also apply to nurses and members of other professions. I am not sure what

the position on revalidation is in the South, but that is something to be considered over the next couple of years.

The North/South Ministerial Council set up the Obstacles to Mobility working group that dealt with standardisation and recognition of qualifications across the board. Ms Morrice made some comments about social workers. The social worker mobility study was part of that working group. The Northern Ireland Social Care Council was established on 1 October 2001. Its primary role is to register and regulate the social care workforce and to draw up codes of practice for social care workers and their employers. The council was set up to redress the lack of qualifications among social care staff here. Bearing in mind that 80% of the 30,000 social care staff in Northern Ireland have no relevant qualifications, the cross-border mobility study was undertaken for the National Social Work Qualifications Board in the South and the Central Council for Education and Training in Social Work in Northern Ireland. The aim of the research was to analyse social work training courses on both sides of the border to identify any differences between them and to examine, in particular, social policy, social delivery structure and law. The ultimate aim of the project is to facilitate the cross-border mobility of social workers through the development of a teaching tool to bridge any gaps in training between the two jurisdictions.

The most significant difference between training for social work in each jurisdiction was that, in general, courses in the Republic lasted longer than courses in the North.

Among the recommendations for facilitating cross-border mobility was the creation of a system of cross-border exchange placements, an idea that was generally well received on both sides. It was suggested that intensive seminar exchanges, and the sharing of information, should continue. Recommendations were also made in regard to the contents of the resource pack, social services systems and Government structures.

There is still much work to be done, but progress is being made. The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety has the support of the House in carrying out this useful work.

Mr Savage: When dealing with such issues as the validation of qualifications, we should think in broader terms, beyond an all-Ireland approach. Recently, the all-Ireland approach has proved beneficial in dealing with foot-and-mouth disease. Everyone is concerned about health, and the all-Ireland approach to such matters of common concern as healthcare is always sensible, but we must also think in European terms.

Surely there is parity of qualifications between member states? Recently, Spanish doctors and nurses were recruited to the beleaguered English Health Service. Their medical qualifications, therefore, were acceptable.

Is the motion really necessary? Surely protocols exist for the recognition of all qualifications obtained in EU member states? Are we saying that those protocols are inadequate? There is a sound reason for their existence: to ensure genuine comparability of qualifications between member states.

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety should indicate whether she is satisfied that those protocols are effective. If they are, why change them? On an administrative level it may be simpler to change them, so that those from the South may apply more easily for jobs in the Health Service here. However, does that not discriminate against those with equivalent qualifications from other member states such as Germany, France or Spain? The Minister for Employment and Learning could no doubt advise us on that. However, we must be mindful that we do not breach European regulations by giving favoured member status to the Republic of Ireland over other member states.

Should there not be protective measures for those who have already qualified in Northern Ireland? Comparability of qualifications is all right in itself, but those who qualify in our own system must be protected. If there is a shortage of applicants for jobs, people will have to be recruited from other countries. However, if that is not the case, are we to allow those from elsewhere to slip into jobs in our system ahead of those who qualified in Northern Ireland?

We have a duty of care to protect students who qualify in our own institutions in the job recruitment in our system. Our primary duty is to protect the welfare of the young people of Northern Ireland. We must not be seen to enact legislation that is contrary to EU regulations. Anything that can be done to bring the Health Service up to a more acceptable standard must be the priority of every Member.

Mr Dallat: I am old enough to remember when work permits were necessary in order to get a job in the North. However, we now live in a global society in which people want to travel and gain experiences — they do not want bureaucracy to get in the way of their careers.

The motion is useful in that it raises issues that affect all Departments. Since partition there have been many cases of hardship created and maintained by two sets of bureaucracy that sought to separate, differentiate and divide. Health has no respect for political borders. However, the absence of common validation and recognition of qualifications has created real hardship for the people who work in the Health Service and, more importantly perhaps, for the people who need the service.

Cross-border bodies create opportunities to confront many issues relating to qualifications and training. As already mentioned, our membership of the EU endorses

that fine principle and in many respects enables us to address the issue.

I support the motion and I hope that progress is made with expediency and effect on this issue, on education, on the legal system, on social services, and on many other issues that affect people's lives daily.

Mr B Hutchinson: This is an important motion, and I thank the Member from Sinn Féin, Ms Ramsey, for tabling it. However, as the old joke goes — if a plane crashes on the border between Switzerland and Italy, where are the survivors buried? We must focus on the issue. We talk about where people should receive the medical treatment they need, and who is best equipped to administer it. However, if someone is the recipient of medical care, it does not matter who provides it, or where that person receives it, as long as he or she is receiving the best attention.

The point has been made that we live in a global society. We should view this issue in an all-Ireland and British Isles context and also, as Jane Morrice stated, in a European context. I want people to return to the Health Service in Northern Ireland. Members should recognise that there are a number of foreign nationals working in the Health Service, all of whom provide a service here that is not being provided by other people for different reasons. We should not be disparaging about Filipinos or anybody else. They have come here and they have done a job, and I think that they have done it very well. Anyone who has relatives in hospitals or nursing homes where those people are working will bear testament to that.

Ms Ramsey: By tabling the motion I did not intend to be disparaging about outsiders coming here to work. The motion aims to make it easier for people who gain qualifications in Belfast but who want to work in Louth to be able to work there. I was not criticising outsiders who come here to work.

Mr B Hutchinson: I am not suggesting that Ms Ramsey said that. I am picking up on what other Members said when they mentioned Filipinos. I am saying that we should recognise the skills that those people have and what they do in the medical professions.

There is a great deal of talk about qualifications. It is important that somebody who has qualified at Queen's University can go to work in Dublin, Milan or elsewhere. That is their choice, and they are entitled to it.

When I was growing up there was a notion about hospitals and nurses. People had a Florence Nightingale-syndrome conception about nursing. That has changed. Nowadays, young girls and young men do not see nursing as a profession that they want to go into because there are so many social problems. The Government did not put money into the Health Service in Northern

Ireland over the past 30 years, and everyone knows what has happened.

A few weeks ago, when Belfast City Hospital staff were dealing with people involved in the anthrax scare at the Post Office, 46 people were lying on trolleys in corridors. That image is not one that would encourage people to work in the Health Service.

Nurses, doctors and medical staff are people's first point of contact when entering an accident and emergency department, and they are often abused because there are no beds available or because patients cannot get immediate treatment. We must improve the Health Service to attract staff back — nurses do not want to stay in that situation.

I gave blood yesterday here, and I spoke to one of the staff. She said that she had left the City Hospital to work for the Blood Transfusion Service because the abuse from patients and their relatives on the wards was increasing and that it was worse for her colleagues in accident and emergency. This is a result of a lack of proper Health Service funding over the past 30 years.

11.30 am

Mr Speaker: Order. The Member is roving wide of the debate, which, as I remind the House, is about the validation and mutual recognition of qualifications and not about staffing levels.

Mr B Hutchinson: I understand that, Mr Speaker. I can see why you think that I am wide of the mark. Validation and recognition of qualifications are important, but my point is that we must remind ourselves that we have a problem in Northern Ireland and in the United Kingdom because the Health Service has been run down over the past 30 years. Unless we do something about that, cross-border validation and recognition of qualifications will be meaningless and will not help the situation.

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety (Ms de Brún): Gabhaim buíochas le Sue Ramsey as an cheist seo a thabhairt faoi bhráid an Tionóil. Tá áthas orm bheith in ann freastal ar an díospóireacht agus chuir mé suim, agus mé ag éisteacht, sna pointí a luaigh Comhaltaí.

Tá suim ar leith agam i bheith ag obair le bailíocht chomónta agus aitheantas ar chailíochtaí fhoireann na seirbhísí sláinte agus sóisialta a bhaint amach ar bhonn trasteorann. Aithním fosta go gcuireann an iomad gairmí atá bainteach leis seo le castacht an ábhair. Tá difear ann idir na grúpaí gairmiúla ó thaobh an mhéid iniúchta a rinneadh ar fhorbairt bailíochta comónta.

Caithfidh daoine a fuair a gcuid cailíochtaí sa Deisceart, agus rinne Comhaltaí tagairt dó sin sa díospóireacht, aitheantas foirmiúil a fháil dóibh ón bhord rialaithe abhus le ligean dóibh oibriú mar altra nó mar chnáimhseach

sna seirbhísí sláinte sóisialta agus pearsanta. Is é a fhearacht sin ag daoine i ngrúpaí gairmiúla eile a fuair a gcuid cailíochtaí sa Deisceart agus ar mian leo oibriú sa Tuaisceart.

Ciallaíonn sin go gcaithfidh duine clárú leis na boird rialaithe sa Tuaisceart agus sa Deisceart faoi seach le cleachtadh sa dá dhlínse, fiú má aithnítear an chailíocht ghairmiúil féin sa Tuaisceart agus sa Deisceart.

Mr Speaker, I thank Sue Ramsey for bringing this matter to the Floor of the House. I am pleased that I have been able to attend the debate, and I have listened with interest to the points made by Members.

Working towards a common validation and recognition of the qualifications of health and social services staff on a cross-border basis is an area in which I have a particular interest. I recognise that the wide range of professionals involved makes this complex. The extent to which the development of common validation has been explored varies between professional groups.

Ms Ramsey and other Members have pointed out that people who qualify in nursing in the South must have their qualifications formally recognised by the regulatory body here to allow them to work as nurses or midwives here. The same is true for people in other professions who qualify in the South and who wish to work here. Therefore although a professional qualification may be recognised North and South, to be able to practise in both jurisdictions, a person must register with both regulatory bodies.

Dr Hendron said that some groups have taken steps to correct this, resulting in the new regulatory body for social care staff, the Northern Ireland Social Care Council (NISCC) and the Central Council for Education and Training in Social Work its predecessor (CCETSW). These bodies have established close links with the National Social Work Qualifications Board (NSWQB) in the South and have undertaken some joint work, including the recent cross-border mobility study. I am keen to see further development of initiatives of this kind, as such work is extremely important.

Some of the existing arrangements inhibit the development of flexible cross-border working patterns that would offer service benefits North and South. Mr Savage and others queried the potential benefits, but they are clearly there.

The Centre for Cross Border Studies published a report earlier this year on cross-border co-operation in health services in Ireland. The report cited the requirement that registration and accreditation of nursing, medical and allied professions be carried out North and South as a serious inhibition to developing joint appointments, staff rotations, placements and cross-covering, all of which health professionals have been discussing as ways to improve services in their areas.

The report highlighted the fact that undergraduate and postgraduate training is organised and accredited by different bodies, North and South. It was also recognised that, in many cases, reciprocal recognition does not exist, and this inhibits partnerships in training programmes.

As Mr Dallat said, there are other aspects far beyond the question of validation or accreditation that must be taken into account. In considering the obstacles to mobility, the North/South Ministerial Council will consider some of the more general questions. The main issue is not just mutual recognition, but also differing terms and conditions of service and general barriers, not specifically related to health and social care.

Mr Savage asked whether the measures that are in place, or that we seek to take forward, are discriminatory. The underlying rationale of mutual recognition is to remove the potential for discriminatory action; it will not favour one member state over another.

The North/South Ministerial Council has commissioned a study on obstacles to mobility between the two parts of the island. I anticipate that similar barriers will be identified to those already cited and which individuals have encountered when moving, either North to South or vice versa.

Dr Hendron mentioned co-operation. The health and social care professionals working in border areas have local knowledge of the practical benefits of working together in the various fields. They have carried out that work across different areas. The recent Altnagelvin/Letterkenny partnership project, for example, detailed 13 constraints to effective cross-border partnership. The knowledge and awareness of the various barriers and obstacles to cross-border working has come from those who have working experience and who seek to improve matters in their areas. They are, therefore, well placed to contribute to the North/South Ministerial Council's study of obstacles to mobility.

These considerations highlight the complexity of the area and the need to be clear about the barriers and how they might be overcome. I am keen to see progress on the matter and will be exploring the use of the North/South Ministerial Council as a vehicle for progressing the issue.

Ms Morrice and others said that this is a question for the island of Ireland. It is also a question in a wider European context. I was delighted to jointly open a recent conference at which the delegates studied the work in the wider context.

I have listened carefully to Members' contributions and will respond in writing to any issues that I have not covered. I welcome this debate; it is key to the improvement of border areas. It is vital that people from that substantial part of the island get the best out of local services. A recent North/South Ministerial

Council sectoral meeting on health and food safety considered regional and supraregional services. I appreciate the attention that the Assembly is giving to this important matter.

Ms Ramsey: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. I listened carefully to the Minister and to Members.

This is probably one of our easiest debates on health matters. As far as I know, it is the first time that everyone has agreed a motion. We are moving forward.

Several Members mentioned the problems faced by the Health Service in general, and I agree with them. However, if we make it easier for staff to work on an all-island basis we shall fill gaps in provision in the short term. Kieran McCarthy said that we should not concentrate solely on the border counties. I agree with that, but the primary effect of the proposed changes will be on people living in those areas, because they live close to hospitals on either side of the border.

Jane Morrice and Billy Hutchinson mentioned the European market. I agree with what they said, but, at present, nursing staff must re-register, which has cost implications for the individual. That system should be stopped, and registration should be automatic. Several Members, including Mr Dallat, said that the issue involved all Departments. We should aim at making things easier for professionals working in the health sector or in any other sector.

Dr Hendron rightly said that nursing staff were the backbone of the Health Service. I also agree with Mr Savage, who said that it was not simply an all-Ireland matter and that we must examine the matter in a European context. However, tall oaks from little acorns grow. The problem of foot-and-mouth disease was dealt with successfully by work done on an all-Ireland basis. If we start by considering qualifications from an all-Ireland perspective we can progress to involving the British-Irish Council and Brussels.

I thank the Minister for saying that the motion covered a range of professionals associated with the Health Service. It highlights the problems faced by those working at service delivery level. All Members seem to agree with the motion, so I hope that it will be passed. We must sort out the problems as soon as possible.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That this Assembly calls on the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to work towards the common validation and recognition of the qualifications of health and social services staff on a cross-border basis.

RUC RESERVE PENSIONS

Mr Hussey: I beg to move

That this Assembly supports the right of the Royal Ulster Constabulary Reserve (Part-Time) to proper pension provision.

The part-time Royal Ulster Constabulary Reserve was formed under section 9 of the Police Act (Northern Ireland) 1970. The full-time Reserve also came into being in 1970. I propose the motion knowing that it relates to a reserved matter but trusting that those at Westminster who have responsibility for it will read the Hansard report of today's debate with interest and will rectify an unacceptable position.

The only mention of pension provision for part-time RUC Reserve members in the Police Pension Regulations is as follows:

"Where a member is medically discharged from the force because of an injury received in the execution of his duty and sick pay ceases, the RUC (R) Pensions Regulations provide for the payment of a pension if the member, as a result of his injury (providing such injury is not wholly or mainly due to the member's own serious and culpable negligence or misconduct), is permanently disabled from following his own employment. The amount of such pension, which includes a lump sum payment, depends on the degree of disablement, the rate of Police pay on which the calculation is based, the length of RUC (Reserve) service and the National Insurance Benefit to which a member may be entitled."

There is no doubt that pensions is an extremely complex arena.

11.45 am

Part-time RUC Reserve members are liable for further national insurance contributions under the Social Security Benefit (Northern Ireland) Act 1992 to the maximum contribution levels that occasionally apply. There was no mention of a pension for part-time members anywhere in RUC Regulations. Similarly, no pension provision was made for full-time members of the RUC Reserve: rather, a £500 bounty was paid on a triennial basis — a not inconsiderable amount in the 1970s. At the same time, regular RUC officers received no bounty, but were still expected to pay a percentage of their pay into the pension scheme. Some officers received less take-home pay than some of their full-time Reserve colleagues.

It seems strange and, indeed, discriminatory that full-time Reserve members were paid a bounty every three years while part-time members were not. That bounty was surely a payment in place of a pension provision. A judicial review in 1994 rightly resulted in a pension scheme's being awarded to full-time RUC Reserve officers, backdated to 1988. Again, the part-time Reserve was not included in those new arrangements.

I shall speak about the status of the part-time Reserve. Part of the problem is that some people regard the part-time Reserve as part-time employees of a part-time force.

Full-time Reserve officers are full-time workers employed under renewable contracts, and the Chief Constable regards that section of the force as essential. He has praised that part of the full-time force and believes that he would have great difficulty meeting policing needs without the part-time Reserve. The full-time element of the Reserve is made up of full-time workers, and the part-time Reserve is part of that. Members are not part-time workers of a part-time force; they are part-time workers of a full-time force. There was a debate earlier on the rights of part-time workers. This motion continues that debate but addresses a specific aspect of it.

Let us briefly look at the work of the part-time force. Men and women do their day's work but assist the community and help to maintain security in the evenings and at weekends, and their presence frees full-time Reserve and regular officers. Surely, we all recognise the important work that policing must undertake, particularly in the evenings and at weekends. I also remind the Assembly that the part-time Reserve remains *in situ* under the new policing arrangements.

Under the terms of the relevant pension legislation, part-time Reserve members were and are in non-pensionable employment. Heretofore, that also applied to the full-time RUC Reserve. Part-time members could, if they wished, contribute to their pension plans, and those contributions were eligible for tax relief at the highest rate. All contributions to an approved pension scheme are eligible for such relief. If, as in the case of the full-time Reserve, a bounty of £500 were paid into a pension fund, a gross payment in the region of £700 would have followed.

At that time of high inflation and of high returns from tax-free growth, which were allowed because of the legislation that applied to pension contracts, a substantial fund could have been established for part-time members. The majority of those members have given more than 20 years' service to the Northern Ireland community. That should have provided a reasonable annuity and, in normal circumstances, a lump sum at a reasonable cost to the taxpayer. The police pension scheme is one of the best available in the public service. It allows for retirement after 30 years' service, with no loss of benefits for retirement before the statutory age of 65.

I hope that the Assembly will agree that the RUC part-time Reserve has been overlooked for years in respect of a bounty payment or a pension. The present Government have introduced the stakeholder pension scheme. Part-time members have received letters that tell them that they can buy into the scheme. However, when they buy in, they receive no Government contribution, unlike their full-time colleagues. Others who work in security and emergency cover in Northern Ireland, such as the Territorial Army and the Royal Irish Regiment — formerly the Ulster Defence Regiment

— contain part-time elements who receive a bounty payment. I ask the Assembly to support the RUC part-time officers' attempts to get what they duly deserve.

Mr Attwood: I wish to raise some points about the entitlements and future recruitment of the Police Service of Northern Ireland Reserve. Members have on various occasions discussed the entitlements of workers in Northern Ireland. One such debate was on the minimum wage, which applies especially to those in part-time permanent or temporary contracts. Therefore in the context of the entitlements of workers in general, and of part-time workers in particular, the Chamber should consider the work and employment conditions of PSNI members and of the PSNI Reserve.

On hourly rates, holiday entitlement, and general pay and conditions, the principle outlined in the motion warrants consideration, and, in many people's opinion, support. That principle is, if consistency is to be maintained in the Chamber, that all part-time workers should be entitled to equal conditions, whether they belong to the PSNI or to any other public or private service. Given that that is the principle being advanced, the SDLP is sympathetic to Mr Hussey's motion.

However, Members must be cautious in applying that principle. It was interesting that Mr Hussey talked about the bounty payment for those in the full-time Reserve, and how that could be applied to those in the part-time Reserve. That differs from an established pension scheme in which people make weekly or monthly payments into a pension fund.

That aside, we should be cautious as to how far the principle might apply in respect of pension entitlement for members of any organisation who give only a few hours of service. Part-time workers might work for only four hours in any week. Therefore, the application of a pension principle to those who might work for such limited hours needs to be carefully thought through.

I would also caution that while there may be some merit in the motion, and while it may be considered further in other places, its principle, and the approach adopted by Government and policing organisations to it, should not in any way be used to delay or frustrate the new beginning for policing. There is concern that delays in resolving the negotiations between the representative policing organisations and the Government on the severance scheme for members of the full-time Reserve might bring about a delay in the new beginning for policing. Such delays could be in relation to the phasing out of the full-time Reserve or to the recruitment of the new PSNI part-time Reserve.

Whatever the entitlement of the full-time or part-time Reserve might be, it is important, in order to be consistent with the new beginning for policing, and mindful of the security situation, that recruitment into the new part-time Reserve start quickly. In that recruitment the

Patten principle that people should be recruited from areas where there are no, or few, members of the current part-time Reserve should be applied vigorously. It is important that the target of 2,500 part-time Reserve members over three years, outlined in the Patten implementation plan, be achieved in a way that is consistent with the new beginning for policing. That will ensure that the growing support for the PSNI will begin to develop pace in all sections and all communities in the North.

Mr Speaker: Order. I must caution the Member that the motion is very clear. It is about the RUC part-time Reserve and the pensions of people from that era. It is straying outside the realms of the motion to talk about those who may come to be members of the PSNI.

Mr Attwood: Thank you, Mr Speaker. I was somewhat surprised that you have already given me the flexibility that you have.

I return to the substance of the motion. It is also important — and this is part of the emotional thinking as opposed to the political and tactical thinking behind what Derek Hussey has outlined — to acknowledge that the part-time Reserve, over the years of service within the RUC, and now within the PSNI, did fulfil a valuable role. That role was not the role of the established RUC; it was to provide community support and community service in the North. Contractually and practically, that was the role of the part-time Reserve, and that role will be valuable in the future in ensuring that the core value of policing — community policing — is honoured, respected and advanced. In having sympathy with the motion, we wish to acknowledge that that was the historic and intended role of the part-time Reserve. We also acknowledge that its members — like other members of the RUC — far too often, in far too many places and in far too many ways, had unjustified and illegitimate threat and terror inflicted on them. Immense pain was caused to the part-time Reserve, the RUC and their wider families. In that context, and for those reasons, the SDLP has sympathy with the motion and will not oppose it.

12.00

Mr Paisley Jnr: I congratulate Mr Hussey for moving the motion. The DUP will wholeheartedly support it, and I hope that all Members support it fulsomely and without caveat. It is essential that the House should defend the rights of those in employment, whether they work in the Health Service, education or policing. Public representatives have a duty to do that.

I hope that no one will let his anti-RUC bias deny members of the RUC Reserve their pension rights. I welcome Mr Attwood's saying that it is appropriate for proper employment arrangements to be made for the RUC. It is appropriate. He made some justification

of it. I do not mind what spin he puts on it as long as he and the SDLP support the motion. That is progress.

The House must send out the message that RUC Reserve pensioners deserve proper recognition and proper pension rights. It is essential that the House does what it can to raise that issue with the Government, the Chief Constable and those people who take the decisions that deny members of the RUC Reserve their proper pension rights.

Mr Hussey mentioned the vital role played by part-time members of the RUC. That can be seen from the rolls of honour in police stations and other public buildings that show the ultimate sacrifice that those people made, even though they were part-time members of the police force.

Mr Attwood said that the RUC Reserve did play a vital role. I hope that “did” is not the operative word and that the Reserve continues to play a vital role because it remains part of policing here.

I was interested in the operational manpower figures for Northern Ireland in Her Majesty’s Inspector of Constabulary’s report. They should be a wake-up call for Members interested in effective policing. Members of the Northern Ireland Policing Board should accept that if they want more beat officers in rural and urban areas, full-time and part-time members of the Reserve play a vital part in everyday policing here.

Look at the statistics. In Mr Attwood’s constituency, West Belfast, 43% of all police officers on the beat are members of the full-time and part-time Reserve. In areas west of the Bann, an average of one in three officers is in the full-time or part-time Reserve. In North Antrim, 25% of officers on operational duty are in the full-time or part-time Reserve. In other areas the figures are over 40%. People should realise that the vital role played by those members must be recognised by an adequate salary and pension and, as Mr Hussey pointed out, by a bounty such as is made available to others who work for the defence of this country.

The policing demands of Northern Ireland cannot do without the level of manpower that the full-time and part-time Reserve provide. With that important issue in mind, it is essential that we support the motion. Some people are in danger of sacrificing good and effective policing on the altar of Patten, as if he were a god.

Mr Speaker: Order. What is sauce for the goose is sauce for the gander. The motion does not refer to upcoming officers in a new and developing service, but to the right of the part-time RUC Reserve to receive proper pension entitlement. The motion refers to part-time, not full-time, staff, and to past, rather than future, service. I draw that to the Member’s attention as I drew it to the attention of Mr Attwood earlier.

Mr Paisley Jnr: Thank you, Mr Speaker. I consider myself told off and reprimanded. Nonetheless, I am glad to have put those issues on the record.

I agree with Mr Hussey that many members of the RUC Reserve have been overlooked with regard to pensions or bounties. However, I will go further and say that they have been treated with contempt when it comes to their pension rights. They are being turned into a political sacrifice, and they are paying the price, because they are losing their pension rights. Northern Ireland is also paying a price, because it will lose out on the service and the level of effectiveness that we can expect from the police in the future. I hope that all sides of the House will have the courage of their convictions. If Members support employment and pension rights for other people under other circumstances, I hope that they will support those rights for members of the RUC Reserve.

Sir John Gorman: I support the motion, which is very appropriate at the moment. I have a little problem with the new initials — PSNI — especially after your chastisement of my Colleagues, Mr Speaker, for introducing what you saw as a subject that was not relevant to the motion. Nonetheless, it is important that people like me, who have never had any initials to use other than “RUC”, get into the habit of using “PSNI” and become familiar with the term. Mention of the PSNI is relevant because if the treatment of the former RUC Reserve members is unjust and ungenerous, that will have an effect on the future recruitment of a very necessary part of the policing service of the country.

I know well from my own many years of service in the police that there are many occasions of public importance — from motor racing events to political gatherings and other large public occasions — which it would be absurd to man with expensive, professional, highly trained people. What is needed is bodies on the ground who are well trained for the functions that they are being asked to perform and who are available at short notice.

If we forget about the service of the part-time RUC Reserve, we will find their replacements hard to recruit. We spoke to the Police Federation, which represents all ranks of the police on such matters, and we were given some technical advice about the complications that could happen if identical pension schemes were to be introduced for regular and reserve police. We concluded that it was proper to examine each police reservist’s service individually. An honorarium system would take due account of the service given by individual men and women and enable them to make pension provision if they so wished. I have discussed this with Mr Hussey, who concurs, and I am happy, therefore, once again, to practise saying the initials “PSNI”, and to support the motion.

Mr Hussey: I welcome Members' contributions. I thank Mr Attwood for his support of the principle and his acknowledgement of the excellent input of officers to the community over 30 years and of the pain — and worse — that they have suffered. I thank Mr Paisley for his expansion of my explanation of the vital role of the reserve element in policing in Northern Ireland.

Mr Speaker, I thank you for your intervention and reminder that the debate is on the RUC part-time Reserve. However, the point was also made that that element continues through. Sir John Gorman took that line. His contribution was one of the most telling. He said that the way we treat officers who have served in

the RUC part-time Reserve will impact on people's attitude to joining the new PSNI. His idea of an honorarium has opened the debate up a little, but policing is a reserved matter. We may have some impact if those responsible read the Hansard report of the debate. I sincerely urge them to consider carefully the matters we have raised. I urge support for the motion.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That this Assembly supports the right of the Royal Ulster Constabulary Reserve (Part-Time) to proper pension provision.

Adjourned at 12.12 pm.

NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

Monday 26 November 2001

The Assembly met at 12.03 pm (Mr Speaker in the Chair).

Members observed two minutes' silence.

ASSEMBLY BUSINESS: SUSPECT PACKAGE

Mr Speaker: I advise Members that the sitting commenced later than usual today due to a health alert over a package that was received this morning at the rear of the Building. Safety procedures have been put into operation. The area has been sealed off, and the matter is being attended to.

Mr Kennedy: On a point of order, Mr Speaker. Has the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development expressed a wish to make a statement to the Assembly about the non-prosecution of persons allegedly guilty of making fraudulent sheep subsidy claims?

Mr Speaker: I have not received a request from the Minister, or from any Member, to make a statement on that issue.

Ms Armitage: On a point of order, Mr Speaker. I wish to inform the House that I received a package similar to the aforementioned package at my home on Saturday morning. I called out the police and the Fire Brigade. I have also received 10 anonymous letters. Since 2 November, the police have been at my house more times than in my entire life. I ask whoever is responsible to leave me alone.

Mr Speaker: The House is concerned about harassment of any of its Members. Although the Member says that she has received a similar package, that may not be the case. It is not clear what the package received here contains. The package raised health concerns rather than security concerns.

Mr Kennedy: I condemn attacks on Members. The House expresses its abhorrence of the attacks on Ms Armitage.

On a further point of order, Mr Speaker. Do you consider the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development's non-attendance and the absence of a statement

on the non-prosecution of fraudulent sheep subsidy claimants to be a matter of contempt?

Mr Speaker: Order. The Member will resume his seat. He is not making a point of order; he already knows the answer. It is for Ministers to decide whether they wish to speak. The Member is making a point of politics. He ought not to enter into matters of that kind. Points of order are not to be used to raise points of politics, although that is frequently the case.

PERSONAL SOCIAL SERVICES (AMENDMENT) BILL

First Stage

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety (Ms de Brún): Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. Iarraim cead an Bille seo a leanas a leagan faoi bhráid an Tionóil. Is é sin Bille do dhéanamh socrú faoi mheasúnuithe ar riachtanais cúramóirí, faoi sheirbhísí tacaíochta do chúramóirí agus faoi nithe gaolmhara.

I beg leave to lay before the Assembly a Bill [NIA 1/01] to make provision for the assessment of carers' needs; to provide for services to help carers; to provide for the making of direct payments to persons in lieu of the provision of personal social services or carers' services; and for connected purposes.

Bill passed First Stage and ordered to be printed.

Mr Speaker: The Bill will be put on the list of pending business until a date for its Second Stage has been determined.

INDUSTRIAL DEVELOPMENT BILL

Consideration Stage

Mr Speaker: No amendments have been tabled to the Bill. The Deputy Chairperson of the Enterprise, Trade and Investment Committee has expressed a wish to speak to schedule 1. I propose, therefore, by leave of the Assembly, to group the eight clauses, followed by schedule 1, schedules 2 to 4 and the long title.

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

Schedule 1 (Invest Northern Ireland)

Question proposed, That schedule 1 be agreed.

The Deputy Chairperson of the Committee for Enterprise, Trade and Investment (Mr Neeson): The Committee for Enterprise, Trade and Investment has not tabled any amendments and is therefore supporting the Bill. I thank the Minister, his officials, Committee members and staff for their contribution to the production of the report.

The Committee had some concerns about the system of appointments to the board. Many public appointments fall outside the scope of anti-discrimination legislation because they are made by, or under the authority of, Ministers. That problem is not unique to the board of Invest Northern Ireland. Anyone holding a statutory office — that includes many public appointments, such as those proposed in the Bill — is not protected by the employment provisions in the current employment legislation. That means that such people could not, for example, bring any action alleging religious, political or other unlawful discrimination in relation to appointment or non-appointment, treatment during service, termination of appointment or victimisation.

Many public appointments or statutory offices involve a considerable amount of work and carry appropriate levels of remuneration. They are usually advertised in employment listings, and appointments follow a competitive procedure. They often involve working to a set job description. Salaries are paid and are subject to tax and national insurance, and in many other ways such posts are comparable to ordinary employment. The Committee believes that it is right that people holding public service posts of that type should not be given a lesser degree of protection from discrimination.

It would be preferable — to enhance public confidence and having regard to the duties imposed by section 75 of the Northern Ireland Act 1998 — if Ministers and Departments were able to offer a full and public defence against any accusation of unlawful discrimination. There should be no need for Ministers to shelter behind special protection. It is to be hoped that Members will

have the opportunity to debate the issue in more detail when the single equality Bill comes before the House.

Sir Reg Empey: I thank the Member and the Committee for their support for the Bill, for their significant work during the Committee Stage and for their help in getting us to the Consideration Stage today.

We are committed to establishing Invest Northern Ireland as soon as possible, and it is my intention that it should be established on 1 April 2002. I acknowledge the Committee's concern on the issue raised by schedule 1, but the Committee, and its Chairperson, has acknowledged that it is a matter for the Office of the First Minister and the Deputy Minister to consider, given that Department's responsibility for anti-discrimination legislation and public appointments. I will draw the Member's comments, and those of the Committee, to the attention of that Department.

Schedule 1 agreed to.

Schedules 2 to 4 agreed to.

Long title agreed to.

12.15 pm

GAME PRESERVATION (AMENDMENT) BILL

Consideration Stage

Clause 1 (Close seasons)

Mr Speaker: A number of amendments have been tabled, and I trust that Members have a copy of the Marshalled List of amendments. I trust that they also have my three revised groups of amendments. For the first group of amendments, it will be convenient to debate amendments 1, 5, 6, 7, 8 and 10 together.

Mr Ford: I beg to move amendment No 1: In page 1, line 5, at end insert —

‘(a) in paragraph (a) for “February” substitute “January” and for “eleventh day of August” substitute “twenty fifth day of December”’.

The following amendments stood on the Marshalled List:

No 5: In page 1, line 11, at end insert—

‘(2A) In section 7, subsection (2) shall be omitted.’ — *[Mr Ford.]*

No 6: In page 1, line 1, leave out all from ‘or’ to end of line 19. — *[Mr Ford.]*

No 7: In page 1, line 19, at end insert—

‘(3A) In section 7(4), the words from “Provided that” to the end shall be omitted.’ — *[Mr Ford.]*

No 8: In page 1, line 19, at end insert—

‘(3B) In section 7D, for subsection (4) there shall be substituted—

“(4) It shall not be lawful for any person to take a hare alive by trap or net for the purpose of coursing or hunting.” — *[Mr Ford.]*

No 10: In the proposed new schedule, in line 9, at the end insert —

‘The Game Preservation Act Section 7(2).

(Northern Ireland) 1928 (c. 25) In section 7(4), the words from “provided that” to the end.’ — *[Mr Ford.]*

The amendments, all of which I will speak to now, relate to the conservation — or “preservation” in the language of 1928 — of the Irish hare. I am not putting a case against blood sports or putting a case for country sports. My amendments make the case for the conservation of a mammal that is severely under threat from numerous quarters.

This morning, many Members will have received an e-mail from the League Against Cruel Sports. I wish to quote one section from that:

“The Burns Inquiry, set up in England and Wales, to examine the question of hunting with dogs, said:

‘There is understandable concern that the seasons for hare coursing and hunting are too long in relation to the hare’s breeding season. In the absence of a ban on hunting, an option would be to introduce a closed season.’ ”

That is what I seek to do.

Before I outline the general case and discuss the detail of each amendment, it is perhaps necessary to restate what my amendments are not concerned with. Last Friday, several Members received an e-mail — I believe that a copy was addressed to you, Mr Speaker — from the British Association for Shooting and Conservation (BASC) that fundamentally misinterpreted two of the amendments tabled in my name and that of Mrs Eileen Bell. I must refer to that. It appears that BASC, in suggesting that amendment No.1 relates to the shooting of partridge and snipe, has failed to distinguish between the amendment Bill and the Act that it will amend. Amendment No.1 relates solely to section 7(1)(a) of the Game Preservation Act (Northern Ireland) 1928, which is solely concerned with hares. It does not refer to partridge or snipe.

BASC made similar erroneous comments about amendment No. 6. I am happy to confirm that after I pointed that out, I received an apology by e-mail this morning. Sadly, the apology appears to have come to me alone, even though the initial allegations were sent to several Members.

It is appropriate that I should read to the House an e-mail from Mr Gorman of BASC:

“Thank you for clarification of your amendment to Clause 1. I am pleased that it doesn’t relate to the shooting season for partridges and snipe.”

I suspect that Members who received that e-mail on Friday can now ignore it. It has been shown to be inaccurate as far as it refers to my amendments, as opposed to Mr Leslie’s.

There is no doubt that the Irish hare is under severe threat. In the biodiversity strategy for Northern Ireland, which was drawn up by the Northern Ireland Biodiversity Group and supported by the Environment and Heritage Service (EHS) of the Department of the Environment, the Irish hare is one of only three species that have been selected for a specific Northern Ireland action plan. The others are the chough and the curlew. The Irish hare is the only mammal that is seen as needing its own plan.

The species action plans were published in October. Although they included numerous recommendations, no action has been taken by the Department of the Environment. There is no doubt that field survey was delayed by foot-and-mouth disease — a convenient excuse but, nonetheless, valid in this case. The best information available is now at least five or six years out of date, as it is derived from data collected in a survey between 1994 and 1996. I understand that the

Department is due to start the next survey of hare numbers in the spring of 2002.

I will quote three paragraphs from 'Northern Ireland Species Action Plans'. Paragraph 1.2 says:

"populations are thought to have undergone a substantial decline in the last 10-20 years. ... Population levels may have fallen to critical levels in some areas."

Paragraph 1.3 says:

"The Irish hare is a quarry species ... It is listed in Annex V (a) of the EU Directive 92/43/EEC (Habitats Directive), which determines that such species may be exploited provided that this is compatible with their maintenance at a favourable conservation status."

What is a favourable conservation status?

Paragraph 5.1.3 refers to the intention to

"review and, if necessary, increase the level of protection given to the Irish hare in the Wildlife (Northern Ireland) Order 1985."

Action was expected on that from the Department of the Environment, but, unfortunately, that has not happened.

The Environment and Heritage Service's web site lists two papers concerned with the current status of Irish hares. One paper examines the distribution of hares in five areas of County Antrim and County Down and is incidental to a survey being conducted on foxes. The other paper is the PhD thesis and associated literature compiled by Dr Karina Dingerkus, under the supervision of Dr Ian Montgomery of Queen's University, completed in 1997 and published in the academic journal 'Game and Wildlife' in September 1997. The thesis examined the distribution of hares in 150 areas of 1 sq km throughout Northern Ireland — rather greater than the areas considered by the more recent paper covering the winter and spring of 1994-95 and 1995-96. Dr Dingerkus wrote to the Environment Committee in January 2001, and I have also had a conversation with her. In 'Game and Wildlife', the inadequacies of the Department of the Environment's approach are highlighted:

"Again records do appear to be relatively similar to the present study" —

a study conducted some years ago —

"however, the present study engaged a higher level of effort in the field while both Arnold's and Ni Lamhna's early efforts were only based on incidental records."

In other words, the only in-depth study is being disowned and discarded by the Department, which is working on anecdotal evidence, and other anecdotal evidence appears to confirm the statements made by Dr Dingerkus and Dr Montgomery.

In her letter sent to the Committee in January, Dr Dingerkus said that the only thing that the Department had done since 1997 was to produce the biodiversity action plan. She said that of the 150 sq kms examined, 36% had no evidence of hares. Many farmers have

spoken of a dramatic decrease in numbers, and that was confirmed by the recording of hares as locally extinct in over 11% of the areas surveyed. Dr Dingerkus also said that game bag records from a century ago showed much higher densities of hares and that estimates for Northern Ireland suggested that hare numbers could be as low as 8,250. In Dr Dingerkus's opinion, the Irish hare could become extinct in 20 to 30 years. The possible extinction of a mammal that is, supposedly, on a protected list should be of concern to the Department. However, the matter does not seem to have attracted much attention so far. Dr Dingerkus also referred to important issues such as habitat management. Those issues can be — and are — addressed elsewhere. The final paragraph of the letter reads:

"I would like to urge you and your colleagues to do what you can to protect this wonderful species."

Everyone in the Chamber should listen to that this morning.

The Committee has asked numerous questions of the Department in the past year. Departmental staff have appeared before the Committee and written numerous responses, although it would be difficult to suggest that they replied to the questions asked or answered them properly in many cases. I will give the House a brief sample. On 2 January 2001, a question was asked regarding the returning of hares to the area from which they had been taken, which is a Department of the Environment requirement under a licence to net for coursing. It was admitted that two hares had been taken from Rathlin Island in September 2000. The Department subsequently requested that neither of them be released on Rathlin, because the two animals could not be identified individually and because releasing non-Rathlin hares might cause genetic contamination of the local stock. That is a wonderful example of how the licences are enforced. The Department makes a condition and then asks that it not be enforced, because there are further problems.

Mr Paisley Jnr: Does the Member accept that, at the time, there were concerns about diseases coming onto Rathlin Island and that, for the safety of the island, it was sensible to diverge from the rule?

Mr Ford: I accept that there were good reasons why the hares should not have been released back to Rathlin Island when their identities were unknown. However, the story suggests that the Department cannot enforce the conditions of its own licences.

On 5 September, the Environment Committee was told that the Minister had decided that the issue of permits to net hares could not be resisted on conservation grounds, because the current legislation was inadequate. If that is the case, I presume that the Minister will accept the stiffening of the legislation by our amendments. If he argues that the legislation is inadequate,

but does not accept our amendments, there will be serious questions about what the Department is up to.

On 4 October, the Committee received information from the Department on the status of the second, more recent hare survey. The precise phrase used was that the data was “collected opportunistically” when a PhD student from Queen’s University was surveying the population of foxes. The word “opportunistic” may mean “fortunate”, but it also suggests that the data was not collected because of deliberate action by the Department. Nonetheless, the data seems to have been given the same importance as the detailed survey conducted some years before.

On 26 October, the Committee received further correspondence from the Department, including the following choice paragraph:

“Moreover, ecological evidence indicates that the main factors limiting the hare population are the availability and quality of habitat. This suggests that the loss of some hares would soon be compensated for by the natural expansion of the population to reoccupy the habitat vacated.”

If there were a natural expansion, that would appear to be a logical statement. However, since everybody seems to accept that there is actually a decrease in the number of hares, the Department’s reference to natural expansion clouds the issue.

Most recently, on 21 November, the Department responded to concerns about the damage that might be done to hares if they were coursed and then released. The Department had raised the concern that the hares’ fecundity might be impaired — in other words, they might be unable to breed. The Department now seems to be concentrating on the effects of stress on the reproduction of the snowshoe hare in North America. The simple fact is that the Department cannot say how many hares it expects to be affected.

In the same letter, there is a reference to the Dingerkus and Montgomery study, which, it says, gave the Department cause for concern. The final paragraph of the letter says that

“In the Department’s opinion, the precautionary principle does not apply here, as we have evidence of the probable hare population and evidence that this is not threatened by legal hare coursing.”

I suggest that there is no valid evidence of the numbers and no evidence of the effects of coursing or, more particularly, of the attempts to snare hares which then escape, perhaps damaged and unable to breed. Typically, the Department has failed to follow through on its concerns. It is entirely appropriate that the Assembly should give the hare much higher conservation status than the Department has been willing to do. I will explain the detail of the amendments.

12.30 pm

Mr Speaker: I remind the Member that he has been on his feet for some time.

Mr Ford: I was not aware that there were time limits.

Mr Speaker: There are not, but there may be limits to the House’s patience.

Mr Ford: I will endeavour to ensure that I cover all the amendments in the remaining time, Mr Speaker.

Amendment No 1 is a simple matter of extending the close season, taking account of the breeding season for hares. It seeks to ensure that if the Act cannot be amended in order to provide total protection for hares, maximum protection possible, consistent with the seasons, will be applied.

Mr Leslie: For the sake of clarity, will the Member explain what the season would be if amendment No 1 were agreed to?

Mr Ford: The season would exist from 26 December to 31 December.

Mr Berry: That is too long.

Mr Ford: I look forward to a further amendment from my colleague at the Further Consideration Stage of the Bill.

Amendment No 5 crucially removes the specific exemption that allows coursing to take place during the close season. It is illogical to have a close season and then allow coursing to take place within that period.

Amendments Nos 6 and 7 are purely consequential to amendment No 5. Amendment No 8 is a key amendment that relates to the Department’s current powers to authorise snaring or netting for coursing. The amendment removes the Department’s power to authorise such activity. Amendment No 10 is an amendment to the schedule consequential to amendments Nos 5 and 7 being agreed.

I trust that giving an explanation for the amendments has not detained the House too long. I draw the attention of the House to a superb cartoon by Ian Knox that appeared in ‘The Irish News’ in January 2001, which shows a hare being pursued by two dogs across the front lawn of Parliament Buildings. The caption reads:

“A happy new year to the rare and beautiful Irish hare, officially an endangered species but still legally trapped and hunted to the verge of extinction”.

There is a man hiding in the shrubbery, and the caption continues:

“and a happy new year to that other most timid of mammals — the Environment Minister who issues the licences!”.

The House should present a happy new year to the hares and the Environment Minister by passing the

amendments and ensuring that the present situation does not continue.

The Chairperson of the Committee for the Environment (Rev Dr William McCrea): Before addressing the group of amendments, I will refer briefly to the work of the Environment Committee during the Committee Stage of the Bill.

The Committee ordered its report on the Game Preservation (Amendment) Bill to be printed on 18 October 2001 after consideration of the Bill at its four meetings during September and three in October. The Committee received evidence from the British Association for Shooting and Conservation (BASC) and the Countryside Alliance Northern Ireland. I particularly thank Ronan Gorman of BASC and Will Chambré of the Countryside Alliance Northern Ireland for their assistance to the Committee in the preparation of its report and for their significant contribution to the Minister's amendment to clause 2 that will be considered later.

I thank the Minister and his officials for their willingness to listen to the views expressed during Committee Stage and for their efficiency in reflecting those views in the Minister's proposed amendments. I stress to the House that — as recorded in the Committee's report — the Committee did not propose to bring forward amendments to the clauses of the Bill, and it has not done so.

Amendments No 1, No 5, No 6, No 7, No 8 and No 10 proposed by Mr Ford principally address the lawful taking and killing, or destroying, of hares for hunting and coursing under the Game Preservation Act (Northern Ireland) 1928.

As Chairperson of the Committee for the Environment I want to put on record the following: the Committee has, for over 12 months, been questioning and opposing the Department of the Environment's practice of issuing licences to capture live hares for hare coursing. The Committee has serious concerns about the acknowledged decrease in the hare population throughout Northern Ireland. However, these specific amendments to the Bill before the House, with the exception of the Minister's amendments, were not considered by the Committee, so I cannot give the Committee's views on them.

In conclusion, the Committee received clear information to the effect that the Irish hare is an endangered species. I have made my concern clear, as other Members of the Committee have done, at the lack of up-to-date data in the Department. Every protection should be given to this endangered species, and it should be made unlawful to trap or net hares for coursing.

Mr Leslie: I want to address Mr Ford's amendments briefly. I share the concerns that he and Dr McCrea have about the low number of hares on the evidence of

my own eyes. I see far fewer over the winter than I would have done 15 years ago.

Very few people would shoot a hare nowadays because the numbers are scarce. I know a considerable number of landowners who will not permit the shooting of hares. A considerable effort is being made within shooting to acknowledge the position of hares, and a case could be made for shortening the season, which currently runs from 12 August to 31 January. I will not propose any amendments during the next Stage on this. However, if the season were to be shortened, it should be by the December/January part, as this is closer to the pairing off and breeding season in March and April.

I do not agree with Mr Ford's contention that trapping hares for coursing contributes significantly to their decline, as almost all go back into the wild. The practices of hare coursing here are exemplary; I regret to say that in England they do not muzzle dogs, and hares are killed during coursing. That is not the case here, although sometimes things go wrong for other reasons.

A healthy interest in coursing means a healthy interest in hares, and people engaged in the sport have more reason than anyone to ensure that the Irish hare increases in number. Likely changes in agricultural practices, such as a move away from intensive farming, would be the best possible tonic for the hare population. I am hopeful that over coming years we will be able, largely because of that, to reverse its decline. However, I oppose this group of amendments.

Mr A Doherty: I enjoy watching wildlife programmes on television. It is impossible not to marvel at the amazing variety and beauty of mammals, birds, fish and insects in their natural habitats. It is also impossible not to be struck by the fact that almost every species survives by hunting, killing and eating other living creatures — nature red in tooth and claw.

Of course, humans are different: we are humane. When someone carries out a particularly vicious or nasty act, we say that they are beastly, or that they are no better than animals. We have got it wrong. Animals must hunt and kill to survive; they have no choice.

They do not carry out these acts for fun or sport, except now and again. A cat will sometimes toy with, or torment, a mouse before killing it. I have seen a school of killer whales play, with apparent enjoyment, "pass the parcel" with an unfortunate seal — good hunting. The irony is that we recoil from such sights, not because those creatures are being beastly, but because their behaviour is almost human. The victim is no longer food; it is "game".

It should be obvious by now that I find it difficult to feel enthusiasm for legislation that deals with hunting and killing, even when the title of the Bill includes the word "preservation". The Bill has little to do with the

preservation of partridges, snipe or hares so that they can live happily in the wild and be eaten by foxes. It deals with those creatures as “game”, and they are described as being

“vitally important components in the rural economy”.

I received a letter from the British Association for Shooting and Conservation, which stated that

“Shooting provides a major incentive for the management of land — its conservation achievements are recognised by the Environment and Heritage Service through a joint statement of common interest with BASC”.

That must be a great comfort to the partridges as they are lined up to be shot by our local sporting heroes and by visitors from other lands.

I am privileged to live in a truly beautiful rural area. At times, I have to stop my car a few hundred yards from my home to avoid running over a dozen or so newly released young pheasants, milling about forlornly in the middle of the road. As I shepherd them into a field, they cluster around me as if I were their long-lost father. If I were a sportsman, I could easily break a record by despatching 10 or 12 pheasants with a single shot, although they come so close that I might also damage my toes.

The enlightened code of good shooting practice seems to dictate that birds must not be hunted until they are sufficiently mature. It is reassuring that they are given a good sporting chance to fight back with their vicious, animal ferocity: hell hath no fury like a mature partridge.

It has been said that man is a hunter who will hunt in any circumstances. If that is the case, it is preferable that he hunt animals rather than other men, and it is preferable that his hunting exploits be controlled by legislation.

As a meat eater, and a conscience-stricken member of the Committee for the Environment, I shall not oppose the Minister's Game Preservation (Amendment) Bill and shall give due consideration to the other amendments, but I am not a happy bunny.

Mr M Murphy: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. My party supports the broad intention of the Bill. However, some serious issues with regard to hare coursing have not been considered. The Minister advised the Committee for the Environment that he would address the issue, and we look forward to a speedy response.

There are many competing claims and concerns, including animal cruelty and the depletion of the hare population. The hare population is decreasing, but that is largely due to their loss of habitat, which is an important matter in itself. Agriculture takes its toll also — for example, combine harvesters destroy the habitat of the young hare.

Since 1993, dogs involved in hare coursing have been muzzled, and veterinarians who are on hand during coursing have assured me that all precautions are taken to promote the safety of the hare.

The issue of the rural economy is also important. As coursing is an important part of the greyhound industry, it has an economic aspect. Those involved in the industry have taken many precautions, such as muzzling dogs, to ensure that the sport is more humane. The netting of hares is carried out under licence and is supervised by the Department of the Environment's Environment and Heritage Service.

12.45 pm

I do not support Mr Ford's amendments, which go beyond the intentions of the Bill and have not been subject to any public consultation. At present, many land managers who are interested in shooting carry out positive action for hare conservation. This practice might not continue if the season were to last for only six days. It should also be noted that Christmas Day is not one of the six days for hare coursing.

Bodies with interests in shooting game are the only ones who are carrying out positive action for hare conservation, such as habitat management and the control of predators that have a profound effect on young hares. The current level of hare shooting is sustainable. This amendment would mean the unjustifiable loss of opportunity, as it is widely accepted that it is changes in agricultural practices that have led directly to the decline in the hare population.

Mr Leslie has raised concerns at Committee level. However, Mr Ford has signed off the report. He produced his amendment at the last minute. I support the Bill but not the amendment. Go raibh maith agat.

Mr Shannon: I am concerned about the amendments that we are debating today. I do not deny that the Member has a right to have his say. However, the consultation process on party shooting took three years.

As one who has pursued hares as part of the country sport of rough shooting, I have some knowledge of the subject. I have not shot a hare on our land for at least ten years. We do not shoot hares any more, because there are not as many of them as there used to be. We used any hares that we took, and there was no waste.

These amendments affect the shooting fraternity, which is self-regulating. Its regulations have been effective. Those who have an interest in the hare will ensure that the population increases. There are approximately two or three hares on our land on the Ards Peninsula. They are completely protected, nobody chases them, and they are left alone. Their numbers have remained the same for the last few years, but we hope that they will increase.

I do not know how many hares there are in Northern Ireland, and a survey should be carried out across the Province to ascertain their numbers. As far as I am aware, the only two places in the Province where the hare population is large and increasing are Rathlin Island and the Belfast International Airport at Aldergrove. People who have flown into Aldergrove may have seen the hares on the grass by the runway, and visitors to Rathlin may have seen large numbers of hares.

Farming practices have changed; more pesticides are used, and the hedges have been removed. These things have changed the habitat, and they are contributing factors to the decrease in hare populations. That has to be taken into consideration when discussing the amendments.

There has also been a large increase in the number of foxes, which has led to a decrease in the number of hares. That is one reason why hares are under threat. If the number of hares has decreased, and information indicates that that is so, it is time for action to be taken. We are aiming for maximum protection of the Irish hare. Landowners, farmers and those involved in leisure activities in the countryside are clearly protective of the hare. Protection is already in place through self-regulation, which shows the remarkable contribution from those involved in countryside activities.

The Minister of the Environment (Mr Foster): I thank all Members who participated in the debate for their undoubted interest and the intensity of their arguments. I also thank Mr Ford for his comments. He has certainly read up on the subject, although I refute his attempt to castigate the Department and his references to inadequacies within it. Those are entirely unjustifiable.

I thank David Ford for his clarification of amendment No 1, which, taken with other amendments in that Member's name, would shorten the open season for the hare. The amendments would remove section 7(2) of the Game Preservation (Northern Ireland) Act 1928. It would reduce, by two months, the open season for pursuing or killing hares by hunting with dogs, or by coursing. The amendments would also replace the provisions of section 7D, subsection 4, of the 1928 Act, which would ban the organised coursing of Irish hares which have been trapped or netted in Northern Ireland throughout the remaining open season from 12 August to 31 January.

The amendment would not prevent imported live hares from being used in organised coursing during the open season. The remaining amendments are consequential to those two proposals. I am aware of the need to keep the hare population in Northern Ireland under review. I am also aware of the many concerns expressed by Members and by the Committee for the Environment. I pay tribute to the Committee for its help and co-operation in this matter.

As part of the wider biodiversity process, the Department has drawn up a species action plan for the Irish hare. The Environment and Heritage Service (EHS) is drawing up an implementation plan for a range of biodiversity actions. The EHS intends to publish the plan by March 2002. The plan will cover a wide variety of measures, some of which will contribute to the conservation of habitats used by the Irish hare, such as semi-natural grasslands and upland heath. Those will in turn benefit the hare and other species that share its habitats.

The Department will also undertake a repeat survey of hares to ascertain what further steps, if any, need to be taken to protect the species. However, a survey was also carried out between 1997 and 1999 in County Antrim and County Down, which was extrapolated to all Northern Ireland, that estimated that the hare population was 16,500. That figure is similar to the median hare population estimated by the Dingerkus study, which was undertaken between 1994 and 1996.

The proportion of the hare population that is affected by hunting or organised coursing is very small and is of negligible importance to both the current size of the population here and to the normal fluctuations in populations of small mammals such as the hare. Mr Ford has already mentioned ecological evidence. Such evidence indicates that the main factors limiting the hare population are the availability, non-availability and quality of habitat. That suggests that the loss of some hares would soon be compensated by the natural expansion of the population to reoccupy the vacated habitat. The amendment would encourage the undesirable practice of bringing in live hares from outside Northern Ireland.

In the light of that, and because the conservation status of the species and the issues affecting it are still under investigation, I am not in a position to support the amendment.

Mr Ford: I thank some of the Members who spoke, and in particular Dr McCrea, to whom I should apologise. Forming these amendments depended to some extent upon the Minister's changing the long title of the Bill and, given their late timing, I was unable to mention them at the Committee meeting last week.

I thank Mr Arthur Doherty in particular for his support. I would ask on what basis Mr Mick Murphy's talk about economic benefits should be considered. If we are facing the serious and potential destruction of a mammal in the next 20 or 30 years, some minor economic benefits seem rather less important.

Mr Shannon said that hares are common on Rathlin Island and at Aldergrove. When did he last see hares in any number at Aldergrove?

Mr Shannon: In August.

Mr Ford: I represent Aldergrove, and anyone who travels regularly through the airport knows that there are now far fewer hares than there were 10 or 20 years ago. It is deeply regrettable that, despite his having no evidence to show that the status of hares is acceptable at the moment, the Minister is unwilling to apply the precautionary principle. I will persist in promoting this amendment.

1.00 pm

Question put, That the amendment be made.

The Assembly divided: Ayes 24; Noes 43

AYES

Mrs E Bell, Mr Berry, Mr Campbell, Mr Carrick, Mr Close, Mr Clyde, Mr Dodds, Mr Ervine, Mr Ford, Mr Gibson, Mr Hay, Mr Hilditch, Mr B Hutchinson, Mr R Hutchinson, Mr McCarthy, Rev Dr William McCrea, Ms McWilliams, Ms Morrice, Mr Morrow, Mr Poots, Mr M Robinson, Mr Watson, Mr Wells, Mr S Wilson.

NOES

Mr Adams, Mr Attwood, Mr Beggs, Mr B Bell, Mr Byrne, Mr Cobain, Mrs Courtney, Mr Dallat, Mr Dalton, Mr Davis, Mr A Doherty, Mr Fee, Mr Foster, Ms Gildernew, Sir John Gorman, Ms Hanna, Dr Hendron, Mr Hussey, Mr J Kelly, Mr Kennedy, Lord Kilclooney, Mr Leslie, Ms Lewsley, Mr Maskey, Mr McClarty, Dr McDonnell, Mr McFarland, Mr McGimpsey, Mr McHugh, Mr McLaughlin, Mr McMenamin, Mr McNamee, Mr Molloy, Mr C Murphy, Mr M Murphy, Mrs Nelis, Dr O'Hagan, Mr O'Neill, Mr Savage, Mr Tierney, Mr Trimble, Mr Weir, Mr J Wilson.

Question accordingly negatived.

Mr Leslie: I beg to move amendment No 2: In page 1, leave out lines 7 to 9 and insert—

“(bb) any snipe during the period commencing on 1st February in any year and ending with 31st August next following;

(bbb) any partridge during the period commencing on 1st February in any year and ending with 14th September next following;” and’

The following amendments stood on the Marshalled List:

No 3: In page 1, line 7, leave out from “any” to the end of line 9 and insert—

‘any partridge during the period commencing on 1st February in any year and ending with 14th September next following;’ and’
— [Mr Leslie.]

No 4: In page 1, line 7, leave out “or snipe”. — [Mr Leslie.]

I was not expecting to address a full House on the amendment, but I shall make the most of the opportunity.

The three amendments that I have tabled relate to the main substance of the Bill, which is concerned with changing the partridge season. They also refer to snipe. I wish to speak separately about partridges and snipe because the two are — [Interruption].

Mr Speaker: Order.

Mr Leslie: The two birds are completely different. Partridges are reared; their numbers can be replaced and augmented by rearing. Without rearing, there would be no partridges in Northern Ireland and without shooting there would be no rearing of partridges. That situation is created by, and for, the shooting fraternity. Snipe, about which I shall say more later, are completely different. A snipe is a wild bird, and different considerations apply to wild birds. Some of those considerations are almost contradictory to those that apply to reared birds. I expressed reservations about those matters at Second Stage. Unfortunately, I missed the key Committee meetings, but, I expressed my reservations to the Committee and advised it of my intention to table amendments.

As regards partridges, the thrust of the first two amendments is that, instead of moving the season from its current start of 1 October to 1 September — thereby extending the season by one month — [Interruption].

Mr Speaker: Order. Members who wish to have conversations should do so in the Lobby, so that those who wish their education to be enlarged may hear what Mr Leslie has to say.

Mr Leslie: I suggest that, instead of extending the partridge season by one month, we should compromise on two weeks, starting the season in the middle of September. The reason is that it is difficult to be sure of producing fully mature partridges by 1 September. I cite as evidence for that the fact that few shoots, even in the south of England, would start shooting partridges on 1 September even though they are entitled to do so under the Regulations. There is no question but that mature partridges can be produced quickly. It would involve a bit of interfering with the breeding cycle, but modern genetics has no difficulty with that. It would involve stuffing a lot of antibiotics into the partridges.

There is another reason why it is a bad idea. My hope is that we can re-introduce the grey partridge into Northern Ireland and introduce the red-legged, or French, partridge as a wild bird. However, birds stuffed full of antibiotics will not make it in the wild. They will just about last out the shooting season, and are unlikely to form wild breeding stock. That is another reason why we are not proceeding by the optimum means.

At Second Stage, and in subsequent discussions, I was concerned to hear that the main argument advanced was that there were important commercial considerations and that increasing the partridge season by a month would be of great commercial value. That is not a good argument for shooting. The preservation of wildlife, the enhancement of its habitat and caring for that wildlife — matters discussed earlier in the debate about hares — are the arguments that I would advance in favour of shooting. I am uncomfortable with the commercial argument. As I said, I acknowledge that, as agricultural practices change and the areas of cultivated land in Northern Ireland are likely to decline, people will seek other uses for that land. A reasonable use would be more widespread shooting, most of which would be commercial.

The people best placed to judge whether partridges are fit to shoot on 1 September would be those who rear them or the people in charge of the shoot. I entirely accept that. Unfortunately, that is where we bump into a problem with advancing the commercial argument for partridge shooting. Someone may have booked a group of people from abroad — Italy, for example, which is typically a place where they would come from — to come and shoot partridges in Northern Ireland during the first week of September. If it is discovered in early or mid-August that the partridges will not be ready, it is unlikely that people will be able to re-arrange their plans. Judgements about the state of the partridges will be made after the bookings have been made. If groups of foreign visitors come to Northern Ireland to shoot partridges during the first two weeks of September, those partridges will be shot whether they are ready or not. Therefore, despite the best intentions, there is the potential for shooting — perhaps inadvertently — to get itself a bad name. The commercial arguments are flawed.

1.15 pm

It is safe to start the season on 1 October. However, people with long experience of rearing partridges without genetic modification have told me that they would be unsure about the strength of their birds by that date. If compromise is reached and the season begins in mid-September, shooting will take place in a proper and sporting manner.

Shooting has another value for partridges. Partridges live in family groups called covies. One of the benefits of shooting is that it breaks up those covies. Partridges then mix and breed with other covies in the wild. One reason why native grey partridges died out in Northern Ireland was that they remained in their own covies and interbred and, as a result, weakened their own stock. That was quite apart from their other problems, such as loss of habitat and predators. There are some grey partridges left in the Republic of Ireland. With the current enthusiasm for the reintroduction of the grey partridge, it may be possible to reinstate the breed. The

enthusiasm of the shooting fraternity would be essential to that.

Those are the reasons why I believe that the House should extend the partridge season by, at most, a fortnight, and not by a month as is proposed in the Bill.

The snipe season starts on 1 September and ends on 31 January. That was set by a 1954 amendment to the Game Preservation Act (Northern Ireland) 1928, consolidating into the main legislation the current practice of shooting snipe. The House should consider whether it is appropriate to consolidate the season on those dates, rather than shorten it by a month. If the snipe season were to start on 1 October, it would be set on the same basis as the woodcock season. The woodcock is the other principal wild bird shot in Northern Ireland. Snipe numbers, having fallen to a worryingly low level a few years ago, seem to have revived recently. There is no argument that numbers are falling; they appear to be rising. However, I repeat my dissatisfaction with the commercial argument. Unfortunately, some commercial shooting of snipe is taking place. We must be cautious about that, because wild birds that are shot commercially cannot be replaced by breeding. It is likely that if the season for the commercial shooting of partridges is extended, visiting sportsmen will be tempted to have another couple of days' sport by increasing the shooting of wild snipe. It would, therefore, be prudent to reduce the snipe season by a month and start it from 1 October.

Currently, self-regulation within shooting preserves the snipe population. However, there is always the danger that commercial interests can occasionally intervene to overcome the best instincts of self-regulation. It would be sensible to amend that rule and to remove some of that temptation. The biggest self-regulator of the shooting of snipe in September is the snipe. There are few of them to be found in Northern Ireland at that time, unlike in Scotland.

Amendment No 2 would confirm the snipe season as it is, and it would vary the proposal on the partridge season to the compromise position of having the season start in the middle of September. Amendment No 3 would also compromise on the partridge season at mid-September, but it would shorten the snipe season, starting it on the same day as the woodcock season, which is 1 October.

Amendment No 4 is a saver, in that it accepts that the partridge season should start on 1 September, but leaves out the words "or snipe". That would put snipe into the "any other game bird" category, the result being that the snipe season would start on 1 October.

Mr J Wilson: I am a member of the British Association for Shooting and Conservation (BASC), the voice of the shooting fraternity, which has a degree of professionalism that is the envy of many other bodies representing sporting interests and other outdoor recreational pursuits.

BASC has approximately 6,000 subscribing members and is recognised as an authoritative voice by statutory and voluntary agencies in Northern Ireland. The association, together with participants in the sport of shooting, contributes an estimated £15 million to the Northern Ireland economy annually.

The principal objective of the Game Preservation (Amendment) Bill is to extend the annual shooting season for partridge so that it commences on 1 September. That change will bring the shooting season for partridges into line with Scotland, England and Wales.

A public consultation exercise showed that a majority was in favour of commencing the shooting season for partridge on 1 September. The Committee for the Environment considered the matter in detail and supported the extension to the shooting season. I draw Members' attention to paragraph 10 of the explanatory and financial memorandum, which shows the wide variety of opinion that supported the Bill.

The concern that partridges are immature by 1 September is unfounded. It is close to suggesting that there is a level of irresponsibility in the management of shoots across the Province. BASC is widely accepted as the foremost authority on the management of shooting in Northern Ireland. It is the view of the organisation — I share the view — that with appropriate management partridges can be fully mature by 1 September. Many factors have a direct effect on the maturity of game birds that are reared and released. Dates of release, stocking densities, habitat type, weather conditions, diet and the prevalence of disease and its treatment, among other factors, will determine how partridges develop.

The shoot manager is the appropriate person to decide whether partridge are sufficiently mature to present a sporting opportunity. The code of good shooting practice, which is supported by all the major shooting organisations, makes specific provision for the rearing and release of game birds, including partridge. It is widely accepted that there is a high level of self-regulation in shooting sports, and there is no evidence of bad practice in game management.

The amendments are unnecessary and will defeat the principal purpose of the Bill, which is to bring shooting practices in Northern Ireland into line with the rest of the United Kingdom.

Mr Shannon: I oppose the amendments put forward by Mr Leslie for several reasons. The consultation process has taken upwards of three years to complete. It involved individuals and the shooting organisations — the BASC and the Countryside Alliance in Northern Ireland. It also involved game conservation interests, individual farmers and shoot owners. The consultation was wide and far-reaching.

Like many others, I believe that the proposal put forward by Mr Leslie to change the date from 1 to 15 September does not add up. Indeed, his arguments are suspect. Shooting sports are already self-regulating. I said that in the last debate. The contribution of countryside sports cannot be ignored. The people involved in countryside sports have been actively involved in conservation. Conservation is high on their agenda. They are the ones who have planted the trees, created the ponds and maintained the hedgerows; they have reared and released the birds. We must underline the contribution that they have made.

I also want to consider tourism. There is potential for greater tourism, which can be realised and which will be to the benefit of many people. One example — not in my constituency but in the constituency of my Colleagues from North Antrim — is Rathlin Island. A very successful partridge shoot takes place there. The islanders have tried to bring people in specifically to take advantage of the opportunities for partridge shooting.

In Strangford, we have various shoots — Portaferry, Greyabbey and Ballywalter to name but three. There are many others involving the release of partridge for shooting on the Ards Peninsula. Again, those have shown the potential to create employment — *[Interruption]*.

Mr Speaker: Order.

Mr Shannon: They give an economic boost to people who live in the area. There are benefits for the owners of bed and breakfast accommodation, hotels and restaurants — indeed, for many of the people who live in that area. Our agriculture industry and our countryside need that economic benefit, they need it quickly. The amendments put forward by Mr Leslie have not addressed those issues.

Pheasant shooting takes place on 1 October. In most cases, people do not shoot the pheasants until the end of October, primarily because the birds are not mature enough. However, there are occasions in early October when it would be suitable to go out and take advantage of mature pheasant shooting. The same thing applies to partridge shooting. Partridge mature more quickly than pheasant, mallard or any other bird. They are ready for thriving in the countryside, they are healthy enough to live in the wilds, and they are ready for pursuit at 1 September. It does not matter whether it is at 15 September, as suggested by Mr Leslie. It does not make any difference — the birds are mature on 1 September. The climate here suits them. Indeed, it ensures that those birds are — *[Interruption]*.

Mr Wells: Is that why they became extinct?

Mr Shannon: Reared partridge are not extinct, but perhaps the Member did not know that. We need a system — *[Interruption]*.

Mr Kennedy: Would the Member confirm that his party is split on the early release of partridges?

Mr Speaker: Given where the Member is now seated in the House, it ill becomes him to judge whether other parties are split or not. I would, however, say that while I understand that the House may not have an intimate interest in the question of partridge, I would have thought that the issue of snipe was one to which Members could have paid at least some attention.

Mr Shannon: Mr Speaker, I thank you for your comments. We must take all the important issues into consideration. The climate here suits the early release of partridge. It is down to the gamekeepers, to the shoot organisers and to the syndicates — they know whether the partridge are sufficiently mature and ready to pursue as rough shooting.

1.30 pm

The organisations have supported the change in the legislation, which will bring us in line with England, Scotland and Wales, and also with Éire. It makes sense to have the same legislation here as across the water.

The amendments put forward by Mr Leslie are unnecessary and unworkable and do not address the issue. I had the pleasure of being in Mr Leslie's company at a shoot at Ballydugan just over a year ago. I suspect that his amendments are similar to his shooting — way off target.

Mr McLaughlin: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. I know nothing whatsoever about this subject, other than — *[Interruption]*.

Mr Speaker: Order.

Mr McLaughlin: — other than the advice that has been offered from the opposite side of the House. However, I found the work of the Committee interesting. Mr Leslie said that he had concerns and reserved the right to bring them to the attention of the Assembly. I remain unconvinced that his amendment would have any appreciable benefit in relation to the concerns that he addressed. Advancing the season by a fortnight would have a negligible effect.

I am more concerned about endangered species — and I acknowledge that the Minister responded when these matters were raised. If there is the ability under statutory regulation to monitor and respond in order to provide the necessary protections, then I will be interested to hear the proposals or policy that the Minister will announce.

I have no interest in the sport of hunting — I have an instinct against it. However, I recognise that there is a legitimate constituency of people who derive pleasure from the sport. The efficacy of self-regulation will always be subject to debate between those who oppose and those who support. No evidence has been

produced to support the amendments before us today. Therefore I support the view taken by the Environment Committee.

Mr Wells: I am not a member of the Environment Committee — I wish I were — although I sometimes go along and listen. Some of the subjects discussed, including this one, are extremely interesting. I have not heard the full debate on this issue in the Committee, and many points have been made behind closed doors that I am not aware of. I understand that Mr Leslie raised these matters at the Committee, and they were debated. However, he was unsuccessful.

Rev Dr William McCrea: I draw to the House's attention and that of my hon Friend the fact that our Committee is 99% open, and not behind closed doors.

Mr Wells: I accept the hon Member's point. He is the very wise Chairperson of that Committee, and I have seen him in action. He has always tolerated my coming along to listen as the unofficial member of the Environment Committee, and I stand corrected.

I am conscious that I have not heard the various arguments. Some of Mr Leslie's arguments have considerable merit, but — as I will clarify later on — I will not be supporting them.

I was formerly employed by the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds in monitoring wildfowling activity in the Lough Neagh area. If what I saw of the self-regulation of the shooting fraternity is anything to go by, then it is no regulation whatsoever. There are many instances of young birds, which are barely capable of flapping along the surface of Lough Neagh, being shot on 1 September. There does not seem to be any regard in the shooting fraternity for the age of the bird or its ability to escape. Assurances given by the partridge-shooting fraternity that they will ensure through self-regulation that young birds that cannot escape are not shot are frankly — *[Interruption]*.

Mr Shannon: Has the Member informed any of the shooting organisations, or the police, about these incidents? Does anyone else know about them apart from himself?

Mr Wells: The incidents that I referred to are not illegal, because 1 September is recognised in law as the start of the wildfowling season. For instance, it is not unusual for tufted duck to produce young out of the nest by 16 August. The ducklings are in no position to escape being shot, but are shot nonetheless. I am not alleging anything improper or illegal — *[Interruption]*.

Mr Shannon: Has the Member seen any of these incidents?

Mr Wells: I certainly have. Undoubtedly there will be those on the opposite Benches who will leap upon this as a split — *[Interruption]*.

Mr Speaker: I ask the Member who was speaking from a sedentary position to communicate in the normal fashion through the Chair.

Mr S Wilson: Stop sniping.

Mr Wells: Stop sniping, indeed. I can say to the Members on my left that this is the only split that they will ever see in the DUP. It is an indication of how united we are. Had they been with us on Saturday they would have seen a very united party indeed.

Mr Paisley Jnr: Is the Member telling us that he is in favour of the early release of partridges; the harmonisation of legislation with the Irish Republic, and the non-decommissioning of weapons?

Mr Wells: I am sorry, Mr Speaker. Some of that was so deep that I missed it completely. It obviously escaped the entire House also. I am not in favour of harmonisation with any foreign state, including the Irish Republic. However, I am in favour of actions being taken to ensure that young birds cannot be shot.

I will be totally honest and frank. How anyone could find entertainment and amusement from going out on a Saturday morning to shoot a wild bird totally escapes me. That is my personal opinion. However, I understand that there are others, in the House and in the community, who have a totally different view, to which they are entitled, as long as they remain within the law. I could not shoot a wild bird for sport.

Various points were made earlier about the so-called need for this. Mr Shannon, for instance, is a tall, well-built gentleman. No one can tell me that he needs to shoot for food to maintain his welfare, or that of his three children. I suspect that they may well be able to maintain a sensible lifestyle without the need for game birds.

This is being done entirely for enjoyment. I find that very difficult to accept, but there are others who have a different opinion. There are enormous pressures, however, on the managers of shooting estates to ensure that when parties arrive either from Northern Ireland or other parts of the United Kingdom, the birds are available to be shot. Those groups may be paying several thousand pounds. How can the manager tell them that they cannot shoot on a particular day because the birds are not mature enough? The economics are such that that is simply not possible. We have to establish in statute a date on which we can be fairly certain that the birds will be, by the natural way of things, ready to be shot and able to escape.

I disagree with Mr Leslie on the point about snipe. Snipe are currently under enormous pressure in Northern Ireland and throughout western Europe. The evidence from surveys in Britain has shown that the snipe population has fallen by 80% since 1970. In Northern Ireland, between 1987 and 1995, it has fallen

by 22%. I took part in the survey in 1987 that established the baseline population figure.

The difficulty is that in winter, there is a large influx of Continental snipe into Northern Ireland, as well as jacksnipe. There are two species — jacksnipe, which is protected, and common snipe, which is not. Whilst the Continental population has remained fairly stable, the British — and by that I mean including Northern Ireland — population has declined quite dramatically. The difficulty is that the shooter cannot distinguish between British-bred snipe and Continental snipe. They are identical, so the Northern Ireland snipe population is shot along with the Continental immigrants. We should be restricting the shooting season for snipe to as short a period as possible because of the impact on the local snipe population. Therefore there is some merit in what Mr Leslie says. However, I was not at the Committee session to hear the counter-arguments, so I shall not be voting for the amendment.

I must nail the false view that shooters are the great supporters of conservation and that it is in their interest to maintain healthy stocks of wild birds for shooting. If only that were true. However, there has been a dramatic decline in many prey species in the past 30 years, and it has not been the shooting fraternity that has introduced conservation measures to protect them. Organisations such as the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds (RSPB), the National Trust, the Wildfowl & Wetlands Trust (WWT) and similar organisations have acquired refuges to protect populations of endangered species.

Mr Morrow: I wish to correct the fallacy that the Member is trying to put about that the shooting fraternity plays little or no part in conservation. Were it not for the shooting fraternity, the cock pheasant — indeed, all pheasants — would probably be extinct in Northern Ireland. It is wrong for Mr Wells to suggest that the shooting fraternity is a selfish, indulgent crowd of people. It is the greatest conservationist of wildlife in Northern Ireland. I accept that other organisations, some of whom the Member has mentioned, play a significant part in conservation. I would like Mr Wells to withdraw his suggestion that the shooting fraternity has no concern for the preservation of wildlife.

Mr Wells: There is a slight divergence of emphasis between myself and the DUP's Chief Whip. I suspect that there is a grey area that needs to be examined. I accept that Mr Morrow is an expert on shooting and I am not; I derive no enjoyment from killing wild animals.

However, Mr Morrow's point is not borne out by the facts. Mr Leslie said that the shooting fraternity had preserved the partridge and that it was its aim to preserve the partridge for shooting. If that were so, why did the partridge become extinct in Northern

Ireland in 1978? Granted, it was reintroduced by shooting interests, but if they had been protecting that species in the wild for shooting, why did it disappear? Why has the Irish hare population collapsed if those individuals protect and conserve its habitat?

Wildlife in Northern Ireland is under enormous pressure as a result of the intensification of agriculture. Hedges are being uprooted, and wetlands are being drained.

Mr Morrow: Will the Member give way?

Mr Speaker: Order. I need to keep some kind of control over this debate. There is obviously an element of control within the party that is properly the role of the Chief Whip. However, when it comes to debates in the House it moves to another place. If the Member wishes to speak, I am happy to call him to do so, but repeated interventions are not appropriate.

Rev Dr William McCrea: Are you protecting — *[Interruption]*.

Mr Wells: I shall continue with my winding-up speech, Mr Speaker.

Mr Speaker: There is the question of endangered species.

Mr Wells: The factors that I have mentioned are leading to the dramatic decline of wildlife in Northern Ireland. The shooting fraternity, whether it is conserving or otherwise, has little or no impact on that situation. Nobody can do anything about it. However, I shall bow to greater knowledge on the issue. I was not at the Committee session; I did not hear the debate. Therefore it would be unfair of me to make a judgement having heard only one side of the story. I shall abstain on the motion.

Mr Foster: I commend Members for showing such interest in the debate. There is a feeling of concern, not TLC — tender loving care — for the subject. Much sniping has also been going on, so much so that I feel like a lion among a den of Daniels.

Amendment No 2, which was tabled by Mr Leslie, proposes that the close season for snipe end on 31 August, as detailed in clause 1 of the Bill, and that the close season for partridge end on 14 September and not 31 August, as detailed in the same clause.

Amendment No 3, tabled by Mr Leslie, reiterates the proposal contained in the second part of amendment No 2 pertaining to the close season for partridge, as contained in clause 1 of the Bill. Amendment No 4, tabled by Mr Leslie, proposes that snipe should be deleted from the provisions of clause 1 of the Bill.

1.45 pm

The proposals contained in amendments No 2 and No 3 pertaining to partridges would reduce the new

September season to two weeks, considerably eroding the prime purpose of the Bill. It would also run counter to the overwhelming support received for the measure generally, and particularly from sporting interests.

The advice given to the Assembly at the Second Stage of the Bill, and consequently to the Committee for the Environment, is that normally the birds are fully mature in September and — and I must emphasise this — that no responsible manager would wish to bring the sport into disrepute by releasing birds that were not fully mature. Such action would not be considered good sporting practice. I am confident that game managers will act responsibly in this.

The British Association for Shooting and Conservation and the Countryside Alliance, Northern Ireland, supported this view in their evidence to the Committee for the Environment. The Committee indicated that in its report on the Bill and said that it was content with the proposal as contained in clause 1. The proposed extension will bring the legislation here into line with that in the rest of the United Kingdom, where the maturity of the birds has not been an issue.

With regard to amendment No 4 tabled by Mr Leslie, a statutory rule specifying the close season for snipe from 1 February to 31 August has been in force since 1 September 1954, which is, coincidentally, the same as the close season now being proposed for partridge in clause 1. As Mr Leslie has already said, the purpose of including snipe in clause 1 is to clarify the position within the context of the Game Preservation Act (Northern Ireland) 1928. Its inclusion in the Bill will mean no change in the law for shooting snipe.

There is some reference to the numbers of snipe, and contrary to what Mr Wells has said, there is no evidence to suggest that the numbers of snipe are affected by shooting. The 1999-00 survey showed that there are more snipe in Northern Ireland since 1996, when the number was exceptionally high. I know Mr Leslie and others have considerable experience, and I fully recognise their concerns. However, for the reasons I have given I have decided not to accept these three amendments.

Mr Leslie: I thank the Members who have contributed. We have had a worthwhile discussion on this.

There are two matters here. Most Members addressed the matter of partridges, which is the main issue in the Bill. Less was said on the subject of snipe, which, as I said earlier, are different, being wild birds. I can see that snipe numbers could be an issue for a long time. My observation is that numbers have increased over the past four or five years. I would not be able to dispute with Mr Wells how numbers compare with numbers in 1970 — I see that Mr Wells has left us. They are probably lower now than they were then, but they are higher now than they were five years ago. It is

difficult to count snipe — almost as difficult as it is to shoot them.

Mr Jim Wilson declared his membership of the British Association for Shooting and Conservation. I am a member of the Countryside Alliance, which does not have any bearing on this. I said in the Second Stage debate that I rear, shoot and eat partridges.

It is wrong to make absolute declarations on the maturity of partridges. They are capable of being mature by 1 September, and if you seek that, you can achieve it, but not always. I know people who rear partridges and gamekeepers who keep them and arrange for them to be shot. Those people do not believe that it is realistic to have them mature by 1 September — some think it is quite difficult to do even by 1 October. It depends on how natural or unnatural the methods are. It also depends on the region. The chances of getting the birds ready early are better in the southern area. People are wrong to declare that it is a matter of absolutes. If self-regulation of the industry is used, I trust that it will work properly.

It has been amusing to watch the contortions that Mr Wells went through to avoid any idea that there might be a split in his party while at the same time supporting and enhancing all my arguments. It is a relief to Members on the Ulster Unionist Benches that all Members are free to argue their point of view, declare their intentions and vote accordingly despite the fact that they may not have the same view as their party Colleagues.

Mr Speaker: I point out to the House that if amendment No 2 is made, amendments No 3 and No 4 automatically fall. Should amendment No 2 fall, the mover will decide if he wishes to move amendment No 3. If so, it will be put to the House, and so on.

Question, That amendment No. 2 be made, put and negatived.

Mr Speaker: The Noes have it, as Mr Byrne said, “just by a hair”.

Amendment No 3 proposed: In page 1, line 7, leave out from “any” to end of line 9 and insert —

“any partridge during the period commencing on 1st February in any year and ending with 14th September next following;” and” — [Mr Leslie.]

Question, That the amendment be made, put and negatived.

Amendment No 4 proposed: In page 1, line 7, leave out “or snipe”. — [Mr Leslie.]

Question, That the amendment be made, put and negatived.

Mr Speaker: I point out to the House that if amendment No 5 falls, amendments No 6 and No 7 also fall.

Amendment No 5 proposed: In page 1, line 11, at end insert —

“(2A) In section 7, subsection (2) shall be omitted.” — [Mr Ford.]

Question put, That the amendment be made.

The Assembly divided: Ayes 29; Noes 33.

AYES

Mr Attwood, Mrs E Bell, Mr Berry, Mr Byrne, Mr Carrick, Mr Clyde, Mrs Courtney, Mr Dallat, Mr Dodds, Mr A Doherty, Mr Fee, Mr Ford, Mr Gallagher, Mr Gibson, Ms Hanna, Mr Hay, Mr Hilditch, Mr R Hutchinson, Mr Maginness, Mr McCarthy, Rev Dr William McCrea, Mr Morrow, Mr Paisley Jnr, Mr Poots, Mr M Robinson, Mr Shannon, Mr Tierney, Mr Watson, Mr Wells.

NOES

Mr Beggs, Mr B Bell, Dr Birnie, Mr Cobain, Rev Robert Coulter, Mr Dalton, Mr Davis, Ms de Brún, Mr Foster, Ms Gildernew, Sir John Gorman, Mr Hussey, Mr J Kelly, Mr Kennedy, Lord Kilclooney, Mr Leslie, Mr Maskey, Mr McClarty, Mr McElduff, Mr McFarland, Mr McHugh, Mr McLaughlin, Mr McMenamin, Mr McNamee, Mr Molloy, Mr C Murphy, Mr M Murphy, Mrs Nelis, Dr O'Hagan, Mr O'Neill, Mr Savage, Mr Trimble, Mr J Wilson.

Question accordingly negatived.

Amendment No 6 not moved.

Amendment No 7 not moved.

2.00 pm

Amendment No 8 proposed: In page 1, line 19, at end insert—

“(3B) In section 7D, for subsection (4) there shall be substituted —

“(4) It shall not be lawful for any person to take a hare alive by trap or net for the purpose of coursing or hunting.” — [Mr Ford.]

Question put, That the amendment be made.

The Assembly divided: Ayes 21; Noes 33.

AYES

Mrs E Bell, Mr Berry, Mr Byrne, Mr Carrick, Mr Clyde, Mr Dallat, Mr Dodds, Mr A Doherty, Mr Ford, Mr Gibson, Ms Hanna, Mr Hilditch, Mr R Hutchinson, Mr Maginness, Mr McCarthy, Rev Dr William McCrea, Mr Morrow, Mr M Robinson, Mr Tierney, Mr Watson, Mr Wells.

NOES

Mr B Bell, Rev Robert Coulter, Mrs Courtney, Mr Dalton, Mr Davis, Ms de Brún, Mr Fee, Mr Foster, Mr Gallagher, Ms Gildernew, Sir John Gorman, Mr Hamilton, Mr J Kelly, Mr Kennedy, Lord Kilclooney, Mr Leslie, Ms

Lewsley, Mr Maskey, Mr McClarty, Mr McElduff, Mr McFarland, Mr McHugh, Mr McLaughlin, Mr McMenamin, Mr McNamee, Mr Molloy, Mr C Murphy, Mr M Murphy, Mrs Nelis, Dr O'Hagan, Mr O'Neill, Mr Savage, Mr J Wilson.

Question accordingly negated.

Mr Speaker: Members may not be aware that if tellers are not provided by one side or the other, the side that does not produce tellers loses the vote without a count. I draw that to the attention of the House.

Clause 1 ordered to stand part of the Bill.

Clause 2 (Shooting of rabbits on agricultural land)

Mr Foster: I beg to move amendment No 9: In page 2, line 1, leave out clause 2 and insert

‘Protection of game and rabbits

2.— (1) For section 7A of the 1928 Act there shall be substituted—

“Protection of game and rabbits

7A—(1) Any person who kills, takes or destroys any game—

- (a) on a Sunday; or
- (b) during the period commencing one hour after sunset on any day and ending one hour before sunrise on the next day, shall be guilty of an offence under this Act.

(2) Any person who—

- (a) at any time kills, takes or destroys any rabbit by means of a firearm on any land; and
- (b) is not an authorised person in relation to that land, shall be guilty of an offence under this Act.”.

(3) Subsection (2) does not apply in relation to the killing, taking or destroying of any rabbit in pursuance of any power conferred by or under—

- (a) the Forestry Act (Northern Ireland) 1953 (c.2); or
- (b) the Diseases of Animals (Northern Ireland) Order 1981 (NI 22).

(4) For the purposes of subsection (2) a person is an authorised person in relation to any land if he is, or is authorised by—

- (a) the owner or occupier of the land; or
- (b) a person who has a right of shooting on the land.”.

(2) In section 9 of the Forestry Act (Northern Ireland) 1953 (c.2) (right of occupier to kill rabbits, hares or deer damaging trees) in subsections (1) and (2) the word “rabbits,”, wherever it occurs, shall be omitted.

(3) In section 10 of that Act (prevention of damage caused by rabbits, etc.) subsection (3) shall be omitted.

(4) In the Ground Game Act 1880 (c.47) (right of occupier to kill and take hares and rabbits) —

- (a) in section 1, in subsection (1) —
 - (i) for the words “duly authorised by him in writing” there shall be substituted “authorised by him”; and
 - (ii) paragraphs (a), (b) and (c) shall be omitted;

(b) in section 1, subsection (3) shall be omitted; and

(c) section 10 shall be omitted.

(5) In the Miscellaneous Transferred Excise Duties Act (Northern Ireland) 1972 (c. 11) —

(a) in section 29(3) (persons not required to have game licence) for paragraph (c) there shall be substituted—

“(c) any occupier of any land, or any person authorised by him, engaged in the killing or taking of ground game on that land;”;

(b) in section 35(4) (sale by occupier of ground game killed or taken on his land) for the words from “duly authorised” to the end there shall be substituted “authorised by him to kill and take ground game”;

(c) in section 37(1) (restriction on sales to licensed game dealers) the words “in accordance with the Ground Game Acts” shall be omitted;

(d) in section 41(b) (saving for rights of occupier under Ground Game Acts) for “Acts” there shall be substituted “Act 1880”;

(e) in section 42 (interpretation) the definition of “the Ground Game Acts” shall be omitted.

(6) The statutory provisions set out in the Schedule are repealed to the extent specified in the second column of the Schedule.’

I propose the amendment as a result of representations made to me by the British Association for Shooting and Conservation and the Countryside Alliance in Northern Ireland to control pest rabbits. The amendment will regularise current practice, which has existed for some time. During its consideration of the Bill, the Committee for the Environment was made aware of the amendment, and it is content with it. I am grateful for its support.

The amendment will relax the existing controls on where and when rabbits can be shot, allowing for pest rabbits to be shot on any land at any time. However, it is subject to the requirement that the person must hold a valid gun licence and be legally authorised to shoot rabbits on the land in question.

Rabbits are defined as ground game for the purposes of the Ground Game Acts, the purpose of which is to allow farmers to control rabbits that damage their crops, without requiring a game licence. It will remain an offence to kill, take or destroy any game on a Sunday or at night or to take game or rabbits by cruel methods, as stipulated in article 12 of the Wildlife (Northern Ireland) Order 1985.

The amendment necessitates several consequential amendments to related legislation. It retains the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development’s existing rights to allow duly authorised departmental officials, including vets, to kill, take for veterinary testing or destroy any rabbit, under the Diseases of Animals (Northern Ireland) Order 1981, in the event of a risk of rabbits transmitting disease to livestock. It protects the

existing rights of the Forest Service to prevent damage as a result of infestation in the vicinity of tree-planted land, after prior notice to the owner-occupier.

The provisions of amendment No 11 are consequential to amendment No 9 and necessitate the repeal of section 1(1)(a),(b), and (c), section 1(3) and section 10 of the Ground Game Act 1880. The amendment will also repeal in full the provisions of the Ground Game (Amendment) Act 1906, and I have detailed the reasons for that. Amendment No 12 takes account of the fact that the previous amendments require a change in the long title of the Bill.

2.15 pm

Rev Dr William McCrea: I support the Minister's proposed amendment to clause 2 and the associated amendments to the repeals schedule and long title. The amendments will bring the Bill into line with current practice and with the Wildlife (Northern Ireland) Order 1985. It will also allow for effective pest control on land types that are not covered by current legislation. The proposed amendment was put forward as a result of representations made to the Committee by the British Association for Shooting and Conservation, with support from the Countryside Alliance in Northern Ireland. Representatives from those organisations agreed the terms of the Minister's amendments on the protection of game and rabbits, the repeals schedule and the long title. The Committee for the Environment commends the amendments to the House.

Mr J Wilson: I support the amendment. I compliment the Committee for the Environment on its support for the amendment — it is simply common sense. The amendments bring the regulations into line with what is happening in other parts of the United Kingdom and improve a system that has been outdated for far too long.

Mr Foster: I have listened with interest to both Members' comments, which have been informative and supportive. I am grateful to the Committee for the Environment for its support and advice on the amendments, and on the Bill as a whole, at Committee Stage. I am satisfied that there are no conservation objections to the relaxation of the restriction. The change will regularise current practice.

Amendment agreed to.

Clause 2, as amended, ordered to stand part of the Bill.

Clauses 3 and 4 ordered to stand part of the Bill.

New schedule

Amendment No 10 not moved.

Amendment No 11 made: After clause 4, insert —:

‘SCHEDULE
REPEALS

	Short Title	Extent of repeal
5	The Ground Game Act 1880 (c.47)	In Section 1(1), paragraphs (a), (b) and (c). Section 1(3). Section 10.
	The Ground Game (Amendment) Act 1906 (c.21)	The whole Act.
10	The Forestry Act (Northern Ireland) 1953 (c.2).	In Section (1) and (2), the word “rabbits” wherever it occurs. Section 10(3).
	The Miscellaneous Transferred Excise Duties Act (Northern Ireland) 1972 (c.22).	In section 37(1), the words “in accordance with the Ground Game Acts”. In section 42, the definition of “the Ground Game Acts”.
15		

— [*The Minister of the Environment.*]

New schedule agreed to.

Long Title

Amendment No 12 made: In the long title, at the end insert —

‘;and to amend the law relating to the killing, taking or destroying of rabbits and hares.’ — [*The Minister of the Environment.*]

Long title, as amended, agreed to.

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

COMMITTEE BUSINESS: SALARY OF COMPTROLLER AND AUDITOR GENERAL

The Chairperson of the Audit Committee (Mr Dallat): I beg to move

That the annual salary of the Comptroller and Auditor General (NI) shall be increased to £105,893 with effect from 26 November 2001.

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

Following devolution of power to the Assembly, the salary of the Comptroller and Auditor General is determined in accordance with the provisions of the Northern Ireland Act 1998. These provisions provide that the salary payable to the Comptroller and Auditor General (NI) shall be determined by, or in pursuance of, a resolution of the Assembly and that the Assembly does not have power to reduce the salary payable to the Comptroller and Auditor General.

Following correspondence with the Minister of Finance and Personnel, the Audit Committee agreed that until an agreed procedure was put in place for determining the salary of the Comptroller and Auditor General for Northern Ireland with the appropriate level of scrutiny, the Audit Committee would carry out such functions in relation to its determination that it considered necessary. Over the past months, the Committee has examined the options for putting in place a formal procedure for doing so and will put forward proposals for approval by the Assembly in due course.

Under present arrangements, the annual pay award for the Comptroller and Auditor General is calculated using a formula linked to the judiciary group 5 spot rate and the salary payable to permanent secretaries of the Northern Ireland Civil Service. That reflects an agreement between the Department of Finance and Personnel and the Public Accounts Commission at Westminster prior to devolution. That agreement stipulated that the salary of the Comptroller and Auditor General for Northern Ireland should be progressed along a scale, over a five-year period, that would align it with the judiciary group 5 by the time he reached 60. However, to prevent the C & AG's salary from overtaking immediately that of a permanent secretary, a mechanism was incorporated into the formula to ensure that the Comptroller and Auditor General's salary remained within 5% of that of a permanent secretary. The Audit Committee agreed that that arrangement should remain in place until proper procedures were in place, whereupon the formula could be reviewed.

At its meeting on 12 November, the Audit Committee considered the advice of the Department of Finance and Personnel for this year's pay award, which was

due to the Comptroller and Auditor General from 1 April. The Committee agreed with the Department's recommendation that the salary should be raised to £105,893 and that the Minister of Finance and Personnel may pay arrears owing to the Comptroller and Auditor General.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That the annual salary of the Comptroller and Auditor General (NI) shall be increased to £105,893 with effect from 26 November 2001.

The sitting was suspended at 2.24 pm and resumed at 2.30 pm.

On resuming (Mr Speaker in the Chair) —

2.30 pm

Oral Answers to Questions

FIRST MINISTER AND DEPUTY FIRST MINISTER

Mr Speaker: The first question, in the name of Mr Armstrong, has been withdrawn.

Equality Proofing

2. **Mr C Murphy** asked the Office of the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister to outline what input the Public Appointments Unit has in respect of equality proofing appointments to public bodies. (AQO 434/01)

The First Minister (Mr Trimble): Public appointments procedures are regulated and monitored by the independent Commissioner for Public Appointments for Northern Ireland. All public appointments which fall under her remit are governed by the overriding principle of selection based on merit.

Candidates recommended to Ministers for consideration have gone through a rigorous selection process and independent scrutiny to ensure compliance with the Commissioner's guidelines. To ensure fairness and equity, all Departments — including my own — apply the Commissioner's procedures to all public appointments, including those outside the Commissioner's remit, although adherence to those principles is a matter for the appointing Minister.

The central appointments unit in the Office of the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister publishes an annual report that gives details of all appointments. It also analyses them with regard to gender, age, disability, ethnic and community background and political activity.

Mr C Murphy: Does the First Minister accept that there is a general perception that the public appointments system as practiced under direct rule had many imbalances in regard of gender, geographical representation and political representation? It is vital for the new Administration to be seen to tackle that head-on in order to ensure that the highest standard of equality proofing is vigorously applied to all public appointments. Can he assure us that that will take place? Is it the policy of the Office of the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister?

The First Minister: I understand the Member's point and agree with a number of his criticisms of appointments made under direct rule. We too felt that, on many occasions, direct rule appointments were lacking in

some respect. However, one should take account of the fact that completely new procedures with regard to public appointments have been introduced in the last few years, in particular the creation of the post of Commissioner for Public Appointments and the procedures and guidelines that she has established.

Those procedures are monitored by the central appointments unit, and I recommend that the Member obtains copies of its reports. The last report was produced in March 2001, and the Member will see the analysis that was conducted.

The situation may not be perfect from his point of view, but one should always bear in mind that when appointments are made on merit, they can only be made on merit based on those who apply. All of us want to see a greater range of applicants, because that might cure some lingering problems.

Mr Hamilton: Can the First Minister comment on the anomalies evident in appointments to public bodies such as the Parades Commission?

The First Minister: I am happy to say that that is not a responsibility of mine, or of the devolved Administration. Appointments to the Parades Commission are made by the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland, and it is a matter entirely for him. I cannot possibly comment.

Mr S Wilson: Perhaps the First Minister would care to comment on some of the appointments for which he is responsible, such as the cross-border institutions to which well-known members of his party who support his arguments within the party have been appointed — for example, Mr Kerr and Mr Laird.

More recently, the Northern Ireland Human Rights Commission has appointed well-known members of the "Yes" camp in Ulster Unionism, whereas those who are against the agreement were not appointed.

Mr Speaker: Can the Member come to his question?

Mr S Wilson: Will the First Minister demonstrate to the House where he has shown equality in the appointments for which he has been responsible?

The First Minister: I thank the Member for making clear the distinction between appointments to the Human Rights Commission, which are a matter for the Secretary of State, and appointments to the North/South bodies for which I will accept a certain responsibility. The Member has criticised those appointments. Let me assure him that we would be delighted to appoint members of the Democratic Unionist Party, so if he, or any of his Colleagues, wish to secure appointment to these bodies, let us know. We will see what we can do to facilitate that.

Executive Meetings (Attendance by Ministers)

3. **Mr Davis** asked the Office of the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister to state what measures are being taken to ensure regular and full attendance by all Ministers at Executive meetings. (AQO 430/01)

The Deputy First Minister (Mr Durkan): Under the Belfast Agreement, and under section 18(8) of the Northern Ireland Act 1998, a Minister shall not take up office until he or she has affirmed the terms of the Pledge of Office.

The Minister for Regional Development and the Minister for Social Development have taken a pledge to fulfil the duties of their ministerial offices. Although they do not attend meetings of the Executive in person, DUP Ministers have complied with the requirements of the ministerial code in seeking the agreement of the Executive on their proposals for the Programme for Government, budgets, legislation and major policy areas that impact on other departmental programmes. They comment in writing on papers before the Executive and have permitted their senior officials to make presentations on policy areas that concern the Executive.

Despite the non-attendance of these Ministers at Executive meetings, the Executive have ensured that important strategic and policy decisions are taken to enable the two Departments to function effectively so that the people of Northern Ireland are not disadvantaged by their non-attendance.

Mr Davis: Is the Deputy First Minister saying that the DUP policy is a sham and has no real effect on the running of the Executive?

The Deputy First Minister: It would not be for me to take issue with the Member's description. These Ministers engage in a kind of correspondence-course relationship in that they afford their views on various issues to the Executive in writing and, of course, they bring forward departmental proposals to the Executive for consideration. The Executive have also been able to address a number of issues that affect the areas of these Departments', consistent with their commitments in the Programme for Government. That has been particularly so in the area of infrastructure, for instance, and also in free transport for the elderly.

Mr McElduff: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. Will the Deputy First Minister agree that the continued absence of Peter Robinson, the Minister for Regional Development, for example, from Executive meetings has a detrimental effect on the process of bidding for funds and priority in the Executive? An example would be the case for the improved roads infrastructure west of the Bann that is being hampered by Mr Robinson's continued absence.

The Deputy First Minister: Those Ministers who do not attend the Executive and who are happy to trust the rest of us with decisions that affect their Departments, and their Department's programmes, are obviously showing that they have a huge degree of confidence in the Executive and in the other Ministers.

The Executive, in taking decisions on financial allocations, have considered fully the needs of all Departments, including the Department for Regional Development, not least concerning the roads programme. We have been able to reflect priority and need in those areas. However, by absenting themselves from the Executive, Ministers are obviously missing out on the key strategic discussions that inform final Executive thinking on some of these issues. The Executive are not punishing or penalising any Department that is not represented at Executive meetings, but, of course, Ministers would be able to make a fuller contribution and would be able to make a more rounded presentation of their Departments' needs if they properly attended.

Mr McCarthy: Mr McElduff has got in just before me, but I will ask my question anyway. Mr McElduff mentioned the area west of the Bann; I will mention the area east of the Bann as regards funding for roads. I also want to raise the point about the Minister for Social Development and the effect on funding for housing east of the Bann.

The Deputy First Minister: I refer the Member to my earlier answer. The Executive have shown sensitivity in the way in which they have dealt with budgets, monitoring rounds and Executive programme funds. They recognise the needs of programmes in every Department, including those whose Ministers do not attend Executive meetings. I note the Member's emphasis of various spending programmes. Last week he told us that there was only one priority to be considered, however that priority was not among those that he mentioned.

North Belfast

4. **Mr Cobain** asked the Office of the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister to make a statement with regard to the initiatives being undertaken by the Executive's liaison officer in north Belfast.

(AQO 446/01)

The First Minister: I am sure that all Members will join me in welcoming the suspension of the protest at Holy Cross Primary School and the beginning of dialogue between the communities in Ardoyne and upper Ardoyne. In our discussions last week with representatives of those communities we made it clear that we wanted the protest to end, and on a basis that would ensure that it would not resume. Our Department's senior liaison officer has contributed significantly to the resolution, through contact with local elected and community

representatives, church leaders and representatives of statutory and voluntary agencies. There is still much work to be done.

After several recent meetings with elected and community representatives, the Deputy First Minister and I outlined a series of measures for tackling social, economic and community issues in the area. Those measures will quickly begin to address the long-standing problems of both communities. It is equally important that the process of dialogue between the two communities continue. Mutual trust and confidence must be established so that the communities can engage to resolve the issues that divide them and the problems that they share.

Mr Cobain: I congratulate the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister on their Department's efforts to bring the Ardoyne dispute to a satisfactory conclusion. In the event of a lasting community capacity-building exercise, will they guarantee that their Department will maintain a high level of involvement in north Belfast?

The First Minister: I thank the Member for his comments. I congratulate him, the other MLAs, and the MP for the area, for the constructive role that they played. The proposals that we put to the parties on Friday were contained in a letter, a copy of which has been placed in the Library. The Member will see from that letter that we are working on the development of a community action project to strengthen community development capacity in the area. That project is focused on the whole North Belfast constituency. We hope to make rapid progress on the project and that it will result in permanent improvements by addressing a range of socio-economic interests in North Belfast. I am sure that reminders from the Member and his Assembly Colleagues will ensure that the issue remains a priority.

Mr A Maginness: I also congratulate the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister on their political initiative; it led to the breakdown of the gridlock that characterised the situation at Holy Cross Primary School. I pay tribute to the Police Service of Northern Ireland for its work to normalise the situation in Ardoyne.

What plans do the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister have to develop cross-community dialogue and to create a cross-community forum? Are there plans to develop community policing, which would create stability and security in that neighbourhood?

The First Minister: I agree with the Member's comments, and I endorse the congratulations that he paid to the police on their handling of the issue during the last three months. The police have dealt with an extremely difficult situation, and they have shown their willingness to respond to the change in climate and to the developments of the weekend.

The police intend to adopt a community approach in the neighbourhood and have a unit dedicated to

that. Precisely when and how it is deployed is an operational matter, but I believe the police intend to deploy it as soon as possible. I welcome the dialogue that took place. A forum is a natural means of enabling that to proceed, and the parties to the dialogue will control the extent to which it develops. Judging from comments made to the Deputy First Minister and me last week, there is a willingness to develop this in such a way that the problem does not recur.

2.45 pm

Gender Inequality

5. **Mr Ford** asked the Office of the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister to make a statement on implementing policies to tackle gender inequality. (AQO 419/01)

The Deputy First Minister: In the Programme for Government we are committed to bringing forward, consulting on and implementing a cross-departmental gender equality policy. This will complement and strengthen the work already being done in line with the statutory duty under section 75 of the Northern Ireland Act 1998. Officials are having pre-consultation interviews with key community and voluntary groups to find out what affects those groups and what they would like to see included.

Mr Ford: The Minister will agree that it is important to lead by example. Can he tell the House how many women and how many men are employed as special advisers to the First Minister and himself?

The Deputy First Minister: As far as I know, three special advisers work for the First Minister, who are all male, and as Deputy First Minister I have three special advisers, who are all male. Further decisions will be taken in due course when I cease to be Minister of Finance and Personnel.

Mr Speaker: Question 6, in the name of Mr McMenamin, has been withdrawn.

Commissioner for Children

7. **Ms Hanna** asked the Office of the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister to make a statement on the consultation for a commissioner for children. (AQO 422/01)

The Deputy First Minister: The consultation period ended on 8 November, and 286 responses were received from a variety of sources, including children and young people. The responses are being analysed carefully, and a summary of the views will be available on the Department's web site in due course. We aim to finalise proposals as quickly as possible and hope to bring a Bill before the Assembly in early January, a little later

than intended, so the commissioner may be appointed by June 2002.

British-Irish Council

8. **Mr Gallagher** asked the Office of the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister to make a statement on the next proposed plenary meeting of the British-Irish Council. (AQO 421/01)

The First Minister: The next plenary meeting of the British-Irish Council is scheduled to take place on 30 November 2001. The main focus for discussion will be a paper on future co-operation on drugs, on which the Irish Government have agreed to take the lead. In accordance with section 52, subsection 6 of the Northern Ireland Act 1998, a report of the meeting will be made to the Assembly as soon as reasonably practicable afterwards.

Mr Gallagher: Does the First Minister think it ironic that the British are the lead Administration in the British-Irish Council on the environment? Will he assure the Assembly that the mixed oxide fuel plant at Sellafield will be raised at this week's meeting?

The First Minister: The Member is correct. At the first ministerial meeting of the British-Irish Council on 2 October it was agreed that the environment would be one of the initial areas for discussion. Within that there is the matter of radioactive waste from Sellafield. The possible impact of climate change and waste management is also included.

Initial work on the areas is being taken forward for discussion by officials at future meetings of Environment Ministers. I would be very surprised if, at those meetings, that issue did not arise and if the point that the Member raised did not arise. It is hoped that those matters will be considered in a cool, calm atmosphere and not dealt with strictly on their environmental merits.

Review of Public Administration

9. **Mr McGrady** asked the Office of the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister to outline (a) how the Executive plan to progress the review of public administration and (b) what consultation is proposed with the Assembly parties. (AQO 424/01)

The Deputy First Minister: The Executive reaffirmed, in the draft Programme for Government, their commitment to improving the efficiency, effectiveness and accountability of public administration and the delivery of services in Northern Ireland. They have set a target of spring 2002 for the launch of a comprehensive and strategic review of public administration. Much work and discussion has taken place already, and it is hoped that conclusions on outstanding issues will be reached in the coming weeks.

It is essential that there be a significant level of consultation, and that the Executive appreciate that the Assembly and Committees will wish to play a role in the consultation. How best that can be achieved, however, needs to be considered further.

Mr McGrady: I thank the Deputy First Minister for his reply on this important development, which must take place if we are to administer ourselves democratically. Will the Deputy First Minister elaborate on his answer by telling the House what independent advice or consultation will take place in respect of the review? The Deputy First Minister also referred to consultation with the Assembly and Committees: will there be a wider consultation on that, and what methodology will be applied in carrying out such consultation?

The Deputy First Minister: I welcome the Member's acknowledgement that the Executive are undertaking work in this area. It will be a major exercise as it represents a unique opportunity to review the systems and structures of public administration here. It is important that the Executive get it right. They have agreed that it is essential that the review has a strong independent element that will draw on relevant expertise and experiences learnt in other regions and countries. However, the Executive also recognise that they cannot shirk their responsibility and that it will also be important for the Assembly to be fully engaged in the process. Therefore there is a balance to be struck in how the review is taken forward.

Given the potentially far-reaching implications of the review, it is also essential that as many people as possible engage in the process and make their views known. It is important that those who use and provide public services will have an opportunity to voice their opinions and make suggestions. Therefore the Executive recognise the need for significant consultation, and we are currently considering how best that can be achieved.

The Chairperson of the Committee of the Centre (Mr Poots): Without prejudice to the outstanding court case, will the Deputy First Minister tell the House how much the review of public administration will cost; why no money was set aside in the draft Budget for the review if it is to start early next year; and why there has not been terms of reference established for the review? Those are crucial issues. When the 11 Departments were created by the pro-agreement parties the promise was made that the review would take place, and Northern Ireland is now costing £80 million a year more to administer in April 2001 than it did in April 1998.

The Deputy First Minister: The Member has raised a number of points. First, as I have previously told the Member in my capacity as Minister of Finance and Personnel, the Executive have decided that the resources for the review of public administration will be met by in-year monitoring. Therefore we have already factored

in that that is one of the issues that the Executive will be seeking to address through in-year monitoring. With regard to the structural issues and how the review is to be conducted, the final proposals will determine what the exact resource implications will be. Some of them are still under consideration in the Executive and will then be the subject of further consultation in the Assembly.

An exercise like this must be well thought through. Reflex initiatives will not work. We must think through all the implications, and the Executive have been discussing these. Those of us who attend the Executive have taken part in discussions; and those who do not have not taken part in discussions. The non-attenders have done nothing to move it forward.

We shall meet the commitment of having this launched in spring of next year, and we shall then test the quality of people's contribution to and participation in the review when it is under way.

Programme for Government

10. **Mr Byrne** asked the Office of the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister to outline how the Executive will ensure the effective implementation of the Programme for Government given the refusal of two Ministers to participate fully in the Executive's decision-making process. (AQO 432/01)

The First Minister: The Pledge of Office requires Ministers to participate with Colleagues in preparing a Programme for Government and to operate within the framework of that programme when it has been agreed in the Executive Committee and endorsed by the Assembly.

All Departments have contributed to the preparation of the programme, and the Executive wish to ensure its effective implementation. Although they did not attend meetings of the Executive in person, DUP Ministers have complied with the requirements of the ministerial code in seeking the agreement of the Executive for their proposals for the Programme for Government, budgets, legislation and major policy areas that affect other departmental programmes. They comment in writing on papers before the Executive and have permitted their senior officials to make presentations on policy matters that concern the Executive.

Despite the non-attendance of these Ministers at Executive meetings, the Executive have ensured that important strategic and policy decisions are taken to enable the two Departments to function effectively so that the people of Northern Ireland are not disadvantaged by their actions.

Mr Byrne: Does the First Minister accept that there is severe pressure on limited public finances for infrastructure and capital investment? Does the First Minister agree that the personal participation of the Minister for

Regional Development in a collective Executive would be more effective than the present, bizarre arrangements?

The First Minister: I cannot disagree with the Member's last observation on some of the curious aspects of how we proceed; nonetheless, we proceed. I cite the formulation and implementation of the Programme for Government and the original Programme for Government and its implementation as examples. I also cite our formulating a revised Programme for Government at the moment.

At this morning's Executive meeting we approved the amendments to the draft, which will be brought before the Assembly in a week or so. We can do all these things without any difficulty, and we were assisted in so doing by the active participation of the Department for Regional Development and the Department for Social Development; that active participation is demonstrated through the work of their officials. We have been able, despite the strange appearances from time to time, to function.

I do not believe that infrastructure has suffered. I cite major infrastructure undertakings such as the gas pipeline and the road from Newry to Larne as examples of collective decisions in which the Ministers were to some extent peripheral.

We may suffer by not having the benefit of the views, wisdom and experience, if appropriate, of those Ministers in a collective discussion in other matters. However, their non-attendance at Executive meetings demonstrates their full confidence and trust in those who are making decisions on their behalf.

Mr Paisley Jnr: While recognising that the First Minister has full confidence in the Sinn Féin Ministers to do their job, perhaps he will tell the House, and indeed the people of Northern Ireland, why he spends his time attacking the Members of my party who play a role in this Government.

Why does he refuse to attack the Minister in his Executive who has been accused of handing out pipe bombs and who is a self-confessed commander of the Provisional IRA? Why does he not spend some time attacking that Minister?

3.00 pm

The First Minister: I am at a loss to understand how the Member can produce that supplementary question in view of my reply. I invite him to read Hansard tomorrow and see whether he can find an attack in my comments: I suggest that he will not. I noticed that he started his supplementary question with the word "recognising", and the Deputy First Minister and I welcome his recognition. I ask him, in a comradely spirit, to consider the speeches made at his party conference last Saturday and to ask himself which party was being attacked. What did he and his

colleague spend their time doing? Did they spend their time attacking Sinn Féin, or did they spend their time attacking my Colleagues and me?

Culture, Arts and Leisure

Mr Speaker: Mr B Hutchinson is not in his place.

Execution of Robert Emmet (Bicentenary)

2. **Mr McElduff** asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure if he has any plans to mark the bicentenary, in 2003, of the execution of Robert Emmet.

(AQO 436/01)

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure (Mr McGimpsey): My Department has no plans to mark the bicentenary of the execution of Robert Emmet. The aftermath of the 1798 rebellion, including Emmet's attempts to revive the rising, has already been dealt with in the context of the 'Up in Arms' exhibition, staged by the Ulster Museum in 1998.

Mr McElduff: OK. Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. Given that the Minister is Minister for all the people — *[Interruption]*.

Mr Speaker: Was that Irish, Mr McElduff?

Mr McElduff: I said, "OK".

Mr Speaker: It certainly was not parliamentary.

Mr McElduff: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. Given that the Minister is Minister for all the citizens of the Six Counties, I ask him not to be partisan in the use of public money for the commemoration of historical events. I am thinking of the commemoration of the Act of Union and the preparations for the golden jubilee of the British Queen, for which £200,000 has been set aside. Irish Nationalists and Irish Republicans live on the island too, and the Minister should take their concerns on board.

Mr McGimpsey: It is important that the celebration of one culture does not diminish another. We have celebrated the 'Up in Arms' exhibition, which covered the 1798 rebellion, and we have also marked the Act of Union, which, whether one approves of it or not, was a defining moment in modern Irish history, the consequences of which are still with us.

Next year is the Queen's golden jubilee, and my Department is responsible for co-ordinating Northern Ireland's jubilee programme as part of a Commonwealth-wide event. It will be a regional, national and international event. Next year, because of a desire expressed by Members, we will mark the annual Holocaust Memorial Day on 27 January 2002.

Many celebrations and remembrances are recognised. It is unfortunate that Mr McElduff sees such events in

such a narrow way. Marking, or celebrating, one culture does not diminish another. The golden jubilee celebration is a legitimate expression of the wishes of the people in Northern Ireland.

Mr B Bell: Has the Minister any plans to mark the 360th anniversary of the Irish rebellion of 1641, in which thousands of Protestant settlers lost their lives, most notably those from my town — *[Interruption]*.

Mr Speaker: Order. The Member's supplementary question is not in order as it refers to a different event. If I were to permit it, there would be no reason for not raising a series of other events.

Mr B Bell: I was coming to the point, Mr Speaker.

Mr Speaker: I trust that the Member was coming to the point. If he has a supplementary question about that event, I will allow it.

Mr B Bell: That was a preamble to my point. Does the Minister agree that all such commemorations are divisive and out of tune with our peace agenda?

Mr McGimpsey: With the greatest respect, I do not agree. If we were to agree with that, several events would be made redundant, and a body of Orangemen would possibly feel redundant if they were unable to celebrate their events. However, we cannot celebrate everything; we must prioritise. It is also important that events are not dealt with divisively. It is unfortunate, returning to the main question, that Mr McElduff chooses to see the event in divisive terms, rather than as part of a shared cultural heritage. It is something that we all share. We can all celebrate or, at least, mark it.

Mr Paisley Jnr: Does the Minister accept that if he were to mark the bicentenary of the execution of Robert Emmet, he and the Department might be expected to mark occasions relating to other more suitable people and their careers? Is he thinking of establishing any criteria so that a proper and objective view can be taken of important events, such as the 150th anniversary of the birth of Sir Edward Carson, the 130th anniversary of the birth of Lord Craigavon and the 170th anniversary of Dr Henry Cooke? Those events —

Mr Speaker: I advise the Member to stick to the first part of his question, which was, of course, entirely legitimate.

Mr Paisley Jnr: Is the Minister thinking of establishing criteria whereby his Department can consider suggestions to mark more legitimate and less politically-orientated events?

Mr McGimpsey: The celebration next year of the Queen's golden jubilee is not overtly political, nor should it be divisive. As I said, the Act of Union was a defining moment in modern Irish history, and we are

still living with the consequences of it. Such an event merits being marked.

We must be careful about marking the birthdays of individuals, because we must then assess whom we consider to be of particular importance. The Member, for example, mentioned Carson and others. Many of those things spring readily to mind, and their importance is self-evident. I do not see this as being an annual event or something that requires the creation of criteria. Certain things are self-evident, and the Act of Union is one of them. The golden jubilee is being celebrated throughout the kingdom, and, as the Member is aware, Northern Ireland is part of the kingdom. The occasion is being celebrated throughout the Commonwealth, so it is regional, national and international.

Mr McGrady: Does the Minister agree that some events can have great local cultural significance? 2003 is the bicentenary of the death of United Irishman Thomas Russell — “the man from God knows where” — who was executed in Downpatrick Gaol, which is now the Down County Museum. Is the Minister aware that the Hearts of Down — a group of museum curators and historians — is organising a series of events to commemorate that, and will he consider funding that group?

Mr Speaker: Order. Virtually every Member who has spoken — including the Minister — has tended to refer to other events entirely. We must bring this round to a close because, in truth, there is probably no end to the issue of the commemoration of events.

Darts

3. **Mr Close** asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure, pursuant to AQO 399/00, to provide an update on plans by the Northern Ireland Sports Council to recognise darts as a sport. (AQO 420/01)

Mr McGimpsey: In previous answers on this matter, I said that the recognition of darts would be considered at the next meeting of the Sports Council’s officers recognition panel. That was scheduled to take place in June, but, unfortunately, it was postponed. Another meeting is planned to take place in December 2001. I understand that the recognition of darts will be on the agenda. Darts has not, so far, been recognised UK-wide as a sport on the grounds that insufficient physical activity is involved.

Mr Close: Does the Minister agree that the issue is — to use a sporting analogy — constantly kicked into touch? I first asked the question about the recognition of darts as a sport in December 2000. I was advised that the matter would be considered in spring 2001. That did not happen. I posed the question again in May 2001, only to be told that it would be considered in June 2001. It is now almost the end of November

2001, and I am told to expect a reply sometime next month.

The previous question referred to anniversaries, centenaries and bicentenaries. I trust that I shall not be posing my question next year on its second anniversary. Many people feel discriminated against because they do not have access to suitable funding for a worthwhile sport.

Mr McGimpsey: Mr Close is right to say that I gave him timetables. Responsibility for activities that are considered sports in Northern Ireland lies with the Sports Council for Northern Ireland. Recognition of sports lies with home countries’ sports councils, which have a recognition panel that meets once a year. It was anticipated that the panel would meet earlier in the year, but it has not met to date. I am told that it will meet in December, as I said. It is not in my power to determine when the recognition panel meets, but I anticipate that, because the rules dictate that the panel must meet once a year, it will do so before the end of the year.

If darts is recognised as a sport — this is the reason behind the question and the lobbying — it can apply for National Lottery sports funding. However, simply being recognised as a sport does not guarantee funding. It simply allows access to that fund. I refer the House to the definition of sports used by the Sports Council and throughout the home countries:

“all forms of physical activity, whether through casual or organised participation, aimed at expressing or improving physical fitness, mental well-being, forming social relationships or obtaining results in competition at all levels.”

Darts has not, so far, been recognised as a sport on the grounds that insufficient physical effort is involved. It may be that the recognition panel has decided to change its opinion, but, as things stand, the likelihood of success should not be rated too highly.

Steering Group (Irish/Ulster-Scots)

4. **Dr Adamson** asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to indicate which members of the steering group set up by Foras na Gaeilge, Tha Boord o Ulster-Scotch, the Ultach Trust and the Arts Council of Northern Ireland to research the arts of Irish and Ulster-Scots have expertise in Irish and which in Ulster-Scots.

(AQO 415/01)

Mr McGimpsey: The arts steering group to which the Member refers was set up by the Arts Council of Northern Ireland to oversee an audit and needs analysis to provide a comprehensive review of the Irish and Ulster-Scots language arts sector. In setting up the steering group, the Arts Council invited nominations from Foras na Gaeilge, the Ultach Trust, Tha Boord o Ulster-Scotch and the Department of Culture, Arts and

Leisure. The nominees with expertise in Irish are Aodán McPóilin of the Ultach Trust and Deirdre Devitt of Foras na Gaeilge. No member of the steering group has Ulster-Scots expertise.

Dr Adamson: Before I ask my supplementary question, I declare an interest as the founding chairman of the Ulster-Scots Language Society.

The Ultach Trust is used to represent the interests of Ulster-Gaelic in such steering groups. Will the Minister consider using the Ulster-Scots Language Society to represent Ulster-Scots?

Mr McGimpsey: The steering group was an advisory panel set up by the Arts Council, not by the Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure. The single criterion was the status of the funding partner. One funding partner that the Arts Council went to was Tha Boord o Ulster-Scotch, which selected and nominated a representative. However, I understand that the representative does not have expertise in Ulster-Scots.

3.15 pm

I see no reason why the Ulster-Scots Language Society should not represent Ulster-Scots. Where, for example, decisions on the defining criteria for membership lie with my Department, I can assure the Member that each case will be examined individually. However, it is, to some extent, out of my hands in cases in which my Department does not set the objective criteria or is not responsible.

Armagh Planetarium

5. **Mr Kennedy** asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure if he has made representations to his ministerial colleagues concerning the future of the Planetarium at Armagh. (AQO 445/01)

Mr McGimpsey: The Member will be aware that my Department commissioned a review of the planetarium's activities following its closure in November 2000 for health and safety reasons. The completed review was passed to me three weeks ago. I ensured that it was made available to the planetarium's management committee, its staff union representative and members of the Culture, Arts and Leisure Committee. My officials will discuss its recommendations with representatives of the management committee. We will also hear representations from the union in the next few weeks. I will raise the issue with my ministerial Colleagues when I have fully considered the review's recommendations.

Mr Kennedy: I welcome the Minister's answer. Will he consider making plans to upgrade and extend the Armagh Planetarium and its educational facilities as a major cultural site of international repute and standing that can be used by the entire community?

Mr McGimpsey: The Member is aware that for health and safety reasons the planetarium is only open on a limited basis and that the star theatre remains closed. However, limited opening has proved to be a great success, as has the outreach service to schools and other groups.

The four options suggested by the review were to maintain the status quo on the basis of limited opening; demolition and rebuilding; an expanded outreach service; and closure. It will surprise no one that my preference at this stage would be for the construction of a new planetarium. However, funding issues must be taken into account before a final decision is reached.

I am mindful that the planetarium has an important educational role and that it is not just a matter of pounds and pence. Its historical site beside the observatory is another important asset in the cultural estate. I assure the Member that those issues will be considered carefully and will be discussed with the Culture, Arts and Leisure Committee before a decision is reached.

Mr Hilditch: The Minister touched on the matter of consultation with staff at the Armagh Planetarium during the preparation of the review. Can he reveal the level and detail of that consultation?

Mr McGimpsey: As I said to Mr Kennedy, I ensured that the review was made available to the staff union representative. The matter is under consideration, and I anticipate responses from several bodies, including the union. I cannot determine the way forward until those responses are received and the issues and concerns are considered.

'Face to Face'

6. **Mr McCarthy** asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure what steps he is taking to implement the findings of the document 'Face to Face' with regard to increasing accessibility to the arts and cultural activities. (AQO 418/01)

Mr McGimpsey: The launch of the 'Face to Face' document in June 2001 represented a significant milestone in the provision of a framework for the arts and culture sector. Universal accessibility was a core priority, and I have asked that a steering group be set up to advise the Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure on the implementation of the document's recommendations. The group will reflect the broad range of interests in the arts and culture community, and its first meeting will take place at the end of November. It will consider the implementation of 'Face to Face' in full, including moves to increase accessibility.

Mr McCarthy: The Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure's audit of disabled access must be welcomed. Can the Minister assure Members that funding will be

made available to arts facilities and galleries to ensure greater access for disadvantaged and disabled groups through changes in physical access and the use of sign language, Braille and new technology for the transmission of information?

Mr McGimpsey: It is important to recognise that in order to provide greater accessibility, we must do more than simply tackle the physical barriers; there are social and community barriers as well. We must consider the broad sweep of accessibility.

In November 2000, the Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure initiated the ADAPT Northern Ireland (Access for Disabled People to Arts Premises Today) pilot programme to carry out an audit of 40 venues. The audit was completed, and £100,000 has been allocated to allow the pilot programme to continue. In addition, I announced funding of £100,000 for the Arts Council, specifically for widening access. That money allowed for wider access for new generation audiences, early-years provision and the development of partnership with district councils. Therefore, the Department is moving forward on more than one initiative in order to achieve progress in its policy of widening access.

Mr Molloy: Does the Minister agree that the best way to improve access to the arts is to spread funding across the different venues in the North and move away from multi-million, one-off payments to venues such as the Grand Opera House?

Mr McGimpsey: I am sorry, Mr Speaker, I heard “Grand Opera House”, but I did not hear the amount that the Member referred to. I stress that there is a spread of funding in the Province. Not all funding is earmarked for big projects; various projects are funded. The Arts Council — through directly voted funds and lottery funds — makes an important contribution, not only to the big venues such as the Grand Opera House and the new Millennium Theatre in Derry but also to smaller venues up and down the country that stage events and festivals.

Lagan Navigation

7. **Mr Poots** asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to provide an update on the report commissioned on the potential reopening of the Lagan navigation.
(AQO 433/01)

Mr McGimpsey: The feasibility study update and economic appraisal that the Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure commissioned in May 2001 on the possible reopening of the 12-mile lower Lagan navigation between Belfast and Sprucefield should be completed by the end of the month. The report will provide the Department with the basis for further discussion with the key partners, such as Lisburn Borough Council, Castlereagh Borough Council, Belfast City Council,

the Liganside Corporation and the Environment and Heritage Service, to explore the scope for reopening the abandoned waterway.

Mr Poots: I welcome the news that the report will come out at the end of the month. Can the Minister assure the House that he will seek funding to assist the local authorities in the reopening of the Lagan navigation? Will he support a measure to give the local authorities vesting powers in situations where it is difficult to release land?

Mr McGimpsey: It is important to stress that we are considering the Lagan navigation in two parts. I was referring to the lower Lagan navigation, not least because most of the land involved is owned by my Department and other public bodies. Much of the upper Lagan navigation — the Lough Neagh end — has been sold off since its abandonment in the 1950s. Therefore, it is easier and more cost-effective to begin with the section of the canal that is still in public ownership.

It would be difficult to argue the case for public funding for the entire investment. We must consider various ways of obtaining the funding and different approaches to the project. For example, there are 13 locks on the lower Lagan navigation canal alone. As a member of Lisburn Borough Council, Mr Poots will know how much it costs to refurbish one lock, let alone the whole canal. That will involve considerable investment. I will not give a figure for it because the figure that I was given originally has long since been superseded.

Arts Projects (Derry City Council Area)

8. **Mrs Courtney** asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to detail the amount of funding awarded to arts projects in the Derry City Council area in the past three years.
(AQO 429/01)

Mr McGimpsey: In the past three financial years, the Arts Council of Northern Ireland has awarded just under £4 million to arts projects in the Derry City Council area. That figure is made up of funding from the Arts Council’s grant-in-aid from Government sources and the lottery. The figure does not include all of the funding that is available for arts projects, and further funding may come from the council’s special programmes and initiatives.

Mrs Courtney: I welcome the Minister’s response. How much funding will be available for the Millennium project? The Minister will be aware that the project has been running for several years.

Mr McGimpsey: In the past three years, 101 awards have been made in that area — a total of just under £4 million. The single largest award was £2.5 million of lottery funding to the Derry Theatre Trust, for the

Millennium forum. The trust is anticipating a building budget deficit of between £100,000 and £300,000. However, I understand that it is hopeful that the Millennium Commission and a private investor will cover the deficit. There is also the possibility of an operating budget deficit in this financial year. The Derry Theatre Trust is working on a strategy to resolve that matter and may submit applications to the Arts Council of Northern Ireland and Derry City Council.

Mrs Nelis: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. Is the Minister satisfied that a sufficient proportion of the Budget is directed towards promoting community arts in the city?

Mr McGimpsey: I am not aware of the exact direction that the theatre trust is taking. I cannot answer in detail for the Millennium forum. The theatre has its own management structure, which is responsible for the direction that it takes. I am sure that the criteria for the Arts Council of Northern Ireland and lottery funding were satisfied. I would be surprised if they were not meeting the criteria. If the Member has concerns about that, it would be useful if she could write to me. I will ensure that she gets an answer, and I will check that everything is done correctly.

Mr Hussey: Does the Minister agree that one of the biggest inputs to culture and arts in the Derry City Council area is provided by the Apprentice Boys of Derry Association's celebrations? Will the Minister take the opportunity to wish the association well in its celebrations this Saturday?

Mr McGimpsey: The Department and I have had a direct interest in the Maiden City Festival, which is sponsored by the Apprentice Boys of Derry. Support has been secured for the festival.

It has been described by a number of people there as one of the best things ever to happen to the Maiden City. Indeed, the Maiden City Festival is going from strength to strength, which shows that there is much more than simply marching or bonfires to the Apprentice Boys. Also, next Saturday's event has been moved forward to facilitate Christmas shopping in the city, and that shows the responsibility of the leadership of the Apprentice Boys and its ability to celebrate our culture and heritage, which is important to us all.

3.30 pm

Cultural Tourism

9. **Mr Dallat** asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure what steps he is taking to enable a more intensive promotion and expansion of cultural tourism; and to make a statement. (AQO 425/01)

Mr McGimpsey: My Department and its sponsor bodies can contribute to delivering the Tourist Board's

commitment to developing cultural tourism, and this is reflected in the Department's corporate strategy. With cross-departmental working, we will strive to ensure that the full potential of our cultural life is realised by attracting visitors and enhancing their experience of Northern Ireland.

Our creativity and cultural expression are unique selling points for us, and we are committed to helping to build a positive image for Northern Ireland through the work of the Northern Ireland Events Company, by developing and enhancing our cultural facilities and by supporting partnerships between the Arts Council, the Museums and Galleries of Northern Ireland and the Tourist Board.

Belfast's possible designation in 2008 as European Capital of Culture provides an unprecedented development opportunity for cultural tourism. My Department will be bidding for Executive programme funds to help improve the city's cultural infrastructure. If successful, this will contribute to making Belfast a more attractive and marketable tourist destination. The report of the Committee for Culture, Arts and Leisure —

Mr Speaker: I am afraid the Minister is over time. I shall have to ask him to give the complete answer in writing to Mr Dallat, who, unfortunately, will not be able to ask a supplementary on this occasion.

AGRICULTURE AND RURAL DEVELOPMENT

Departmental Budget

1. **Mr Armstrong** asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development what proportion of her departmental budget is used for administrative costs, most notably Civil Service salaries, and what proportion is used for direct support to farmers in the form of direct grants, subsidies and incentive packages. (AQO 443/01)

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development (Ms Rodgers): Next year, expenditure on the administration of the Department and policy development work is expected to be approximately £27 million, or 6.9% of the total budget. Direct expenditure to farmers, in the form of grants, subsidies, and incentives, should amount to some £187 million, or 47.4% of the total budget. It should be borne in mind, when analysing departmental expenditure, that the budget includes provision for the Rivers Agency, the Forest Service, sea fisheries, meat hygiene enforcement on behalf of the Food Standards Agency and rural development.

(Madam Deputy Speaker [Ms Morrice] in the Chair)

Mr Armstrong: It is clear from its annual report that the Department acts merely as an agent of the

European Union, paying approximately £160 million of EU grants in rural areas while paying only £16 million of grants in its own right out of a budget of £200 million. Does the Minister accept that it is a disgrace that only 8% of her Department's spending goes to farmers and others in rural areas?

Ms Rodgers: The Member needs to remember that the bulk of my Department's spending goes towards areas that benefit farmers, including the service to farmers through colleges, the advisory services and the veterinary services. While this is not money that goes directly into farmers' pockets, without those services those farming communities would be at a great disadvantage. What does not go directly into farmers' pockets goes indirectly or, indeed, directly to their benefit.

Mr Paisley Jnr: In the light of last week's announcement, and given the resources that are allocated either to subsidies or to staffing in the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development, will the Minister tell the House how much money will be allocated to bring about the successful prosecution of fraudsters? Will the Minister make a statement to the House on that travesty at the next opportunity?

Ms Rodgers: The Member is somewhat confused. The fraud that he refers to comes to a total of £17,000. There is an annual fraud bill of £58 million in another Department that is the responsibility of a Minister with whom the Member is very familiar. I am surprised that he is not making a bigger issue of that. There is quite a difference between £17,000 and £58 million.

After a review of fraud, the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development brought forward a strategy that was put before the Committee last Friday. It deals with areas where the Department must tighten up. With regard to the specific issue that the Member refers to — the south Armagh cull — the Department has always prosecuted farmers who are found to be in default or are attempting to defraud the system. Last year there were five successful prosecutions. There was also a successful prosecution in August 2001. However, the legislation on which that prosecution was based was challenged, and an appeal was launched. The Director of Public Prosecutions (DPP), who was in possession of the facts about the south Armagh cull that I had made available to the House and to the public in July 2001, had arranged dates for seven cases to be heard. The view was that the prosecutions could go ahead.

On the day of the appeal to the August case, however, the DPP decided that it should not go ahead because there was a point of law on which the legislation was weak. He subsequently decided not to go ahead with the cases in south Armagh. Therefore, until recently the Department had been able to prosecute on the basis of that law. It has moved to address the situation.

The law is being changed to ensure that that does not happen again.

Mr Ford: What proportion of modulation money, taken from direct production subsidies to farmers and paid to them under agrienvironment schemes, is retained by the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development — in the Forest Service, for example?

Ms Rodgers: I do not have those details to hand. I will write to the Member.

Madam Deputy Speaker: Question 2 has been withdrawn.

Common Agricultural Policy

3. **Mr Gallagher** asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to outline any progress made in developing a common approach to the reform of the common agricultural policy; and to make a statement.

(AQO 437/01)

Ms Rodgers: Under the auspices of the North/South Ministerial Council I have agreed with Joe Walsh a set of common concerns and priorities for the development of the common agricultural policy (CAP), and the related issues of EU enlargement and World Trade Organisation negotiations. We have agreed to continue to review developments on those matters. I have regular discussions with my ministerial counterparts in Great Britain on a broad range of agriculture issues, including the future of the CAP. They are aware of my views.

Mr Gallagher: What is the Minister's view of the reformist position of the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, Margaret Beckett, which seeks to end farm subsidies?

Ms Rodgers: Margaret Beckett's position on CAP reform reflects the stance that was adopted by successive UK Agriculture Ministers and Governments. I recognise the pressures on CAP and appreciate that further reform is inevitable, but I have grave concerns about the agriculture industry's ability to embrace radical change at present.

It is crucial that we avoid adding to the difficulties and the genuine fears that exist in rural communities. Any reform of the CAP should take place at a sustainable pace, and we must be prepared to help the industry through the significant difficulties that change will bring. There will be change as a result of the World Trade Organisation negotiations and the need to reform the CAP, but the industry and our farming community must be supported so that they can remain viable.

Mr Hussey: I listened intently to the Minister's answer to the original question and the supplementary. Madam Deputy Speaker, you will be aware of the difficulties that will result from the CAP reforms and

the enlargement of the European Union. Everyone in the House is aware that agriculture has suffered 10 years of reversal and that it has since been further blighted with the foot-and-mouth disease.

Does the Minister agree that the new dimension adds urgency to the arguments in favour of an early retirement scheme and a loan scheme for farmers? Those would create a legislative framework around which the agriculture industry could be restructured to meet the new threats that will result from the accession of eastern European states to the European Union.

Ms Rodgers: I accept the Member's point about the early retirement scheme; I know that there is a demand for it in many areas. I received the vision report on the subject some time ago, and I am consulting all interested parties on that. I am examining the possibility of an early retirement scheme, but I have not yet reached a conclusion. A desk study was carried out, but a definitive conclusion was not possible because there was an absence of proper research. I have therefore initiated research to be carried out by University College Dublin and Queen's University into the impact of early retirement schemes in other parts of the EU. The vision group favours the introduction of a new entrants scheme, but it is not in favour of an early retirement scheme.

I am aware of the need for restructuring, but I cannot come to a conclusion on the matter until I have seen the results of the research into its impact on the industry and its cost-effectiveness. An early retirement scheme might eat up the entire budget, but it would accommodate just a small number of farmers, leaving the vast majority without resources. I am open-minded, and I am examining every angle.

Mr McHugh: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Given the drive by the World Trade Organisation and statements on world prices by Margaret Beckett and others, will farming be able to survive without agripayments? The pressure created by large-scale production in the USA, Argentina and Brazil means that we will never be able to deal on a level playing field.

Ms Rodgers: It is for that reason that I set up the vision group last year. I am aware that change is imminent and that we will not be able to stop it — we cannot stop the world.

3.45 pm

There will be changes. Pressure is being brought to bear on the common agricultural policy because of enlargement and the pressures under the World Trade Organisation for liberalisation in the market. It is not a question of what my opinion is. It is a case of having to face the reality that change is inevitable in the world situation.

It is most important for us to face those changes, to look at the challenges that change will bring and to be ready to meet those challenges. We must ensure that

our industry is in a position to meet those challenges. That is why I am concerned about a headlong rush or a quick move to remove subsidies. Change will impact on the level of subsidies, but I want it to be at a pace that will allow us to ensure that our rural communities and farming industry remain viable.

Beef Labelling Regulations

4. **Mr Leslie** asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development what progress has been made on the implementation of the new European Union regulations on beef labelling which come into force on 1 January 2002. (AQO 444/01)

Ms Rodgers: The EU legislation on beef labelling introduced in July 2000 provided for a two-stage approach to compulsory labelling. The initial compulsory indications that related to a reference number or code, member state or third country of slaughter and member state or third country of cutting were applicable from 1 September 2000. Additional indications requiring the name of the member state or third country in which the animal or group of animals were born and that in which the animal or group of animals were raised must also be shown on the label from 1 January 2002.

Existing legislation provides the necessary powers to enforce the additional, compulsory indications applicable from 1 January 2002. Slaughterhouses, cutting plants, meat processors, retail butchers and trade organisations have already been formally advised of compulsory beef labelling indicators applicable from 1 September 2000 and 1 January 2002. My Department will write again to interested parties to remind them of the additional compulsory indicators in advance of their coming into force.

Mr Leslie: The Minister will be aware that this matter has been raised in this House before. Can she make it absolutely clear that these regulations will come into force in Northern Ireland on 1 January 2002? Can she clarify whether the beef produce will be stamped "Produce of Northern Ireland" or "Produce of the United Kingdom"?

Ms Rodgers: The regulations will come into force on 1 January 2002. Beef produced in Northern Ireland will be labelled as UK beef, but there is no reason why, for marketing or other reasons, processors or those with commercial concerns cannot put a label of their own choosing on it. However, it will have to bear the UK stamp because that is the member state from which the beef comes.

Animal Health

5. **Mr Byrne** asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to detail (a) the number of North/South working groups that have been established to explore further opportunities for co-operation in the

area of animal health, (b) their key areas of work and (c) when she expects to agree common animal health strategies with the Republic of Ireland. (AQO 426/01)

Ms Rodgers: To date, two working groups have been established, and another seven are in the process of being established. The key areas of work for the nine groups are brucellosis, tuberculosis, transmissible spongiform encephalopathies (TSEs), veterinary medicines, zoonoses, animal welfare, animal health schemes, disease surveillance, import/export and cross-border aspects of fraud. We aim to have agreed animal health strategies by 30 September 2002.

Mr Byrne: I thank the Minister for her comprehensive answer. It will be widely welcomed in the farming community. Does the Minister accept that there has been a widespread concern about the health of sheep, particularly in relation to how foot-and-mouth disease spread through that category of farm animals during the recent crisis? Will the Minister indicate if the problem of scrapie in sheep is being tackled, particularly on a North/South, all-Ireland basis?

Ms Rodgers: Scrapie has been present for over 200 years, and it has been a notifiable disease in Northern Ireland since 1992. The control measures taken by my Department include a legal obligation on flock owners to notify the Department of suspected cases of scrapie. Those animals are slaughtered, and the farmers are compensated for their loss. The carcasses are tested by the veterinary science division and then destroyed.

Feeding ruminants meat-and-bone meal has been banned since 1989, and controls in this area were significantly strengthened in 1996. Specified risk material controls were introduced in 1990 for cattle, and in 1996 for sheep. In 1993 the Department initiated a national scrapie monitoring scheme involving a sampling target of 330 sheep per annum at abattoirs.

A programme of active surveillance in accordance with EC Regulation 999/2001 involving sample testing of sheep over 18 months old will start in January 2002. The authorities in the Republic take similar control measures. The nature of the disease and the sheep population in Ireland means that it makes sense to adopt a unified approach. Under the auspices of the North/South Ministerial Council, Joe Walsh and I have committed ourselves, in principle, to an all-Ireland approach to achieve the eradication of scrapie on an island-of-Ireland basis. We are consulting on proposals for a voluntary scheme involving genotyping, which is a method of breeding resistance to scrapie into the sheep population, as well as other more focused eradication measures. The proposals for a Northern Ireland scrapie plan are designed to take advantage of the low incidence of scrapie here, to reduce and, over time, to eliminate scrapie from the Northern Ireland flock.

Renewable Energy

6. **Mr Savage** asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development what steps she proposes to take in regard to the promotion of renewable energy through the use of biofuels. (AQO 442/01)

Ms Rodgers: I fully support the development of renewable energy sources. However, the responsibility for biofuels falls outside the remit of the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development. The Department for Regional Development and the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment are responsible. Invest Northern Ireland (INI) has a role in the promotion of energy plants using biofuels. My Department promotes the use of biofuels and biolubricants where it makes business sense to do so. For example, Forest Service actively encourages the use of biodegradable oils in its vehicles and machines in support of certification of its forests under the United Kingdom woodland assurance standard. Other forestry machinery will be adjusted to use biodegradable products where practicable and where operations can realistically bear the additional costs. Similarly, forestry contractors will be encouraged to follow the example set by Forest Service.

Mr Savage: Will the Minister undertake to investigate the potential of amoebic systems, which combine the safe disposal of agrifood waste, avoiding the dangers of botulism, with cheap eco-friendly energy production? That would enable us to meet European standards for renewable energy, which we currently fail to do.

Ms Rodgers: I do not understand the question. However, when I have digested it and the Member has talked to me about it, I will consider it.

Mr Molloy: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Will the Minister consider a cross-departmental project, which could be funded from Executive funds, to promote the use of digesters in both farm waste and waste management? That would be a very useful project for the community.

Ms Rodgers: The responsibility for that does not lie with my Department. It is the responsibility of the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment. I cannot take a lead on that. However, if propositions are put to me I will look at them.

Rural Tourism

7. **Mr O'Neill** asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to outline any update on the work of the Peace II natural resource rural tourism initiative; and to make a statement. (AQO 439/01)

Ms Rodgers: The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment, the Minister of the Environment and I have agreed four of the local partnerships that will

deliver this initiative. The partnerships are Causeway Coast and Glens Heritage Trust, South Armagh Tourism Initiative, Mourne Heritage Trust and Sperrins Tourism Ltd. The partnership group for the Fermanagh area will be announced shortly. A consultation exercise was carried out in parallel with the initial invitation to prospective partnerships interested in delivering the initiative. A reply to the 36 written responses to the consultation exercise will be issued very shortly. The partnerships will have up to six months to prepare sustainable tourism strategies for their respective target areas.

Mr O'Neill: I congratulate the Minister and her Department on the work being done in this area. I am sure that she is aware that there is concern about how long it is taking to get these projects off the ground. When will the successful local partnerships be in a position to call for project applications?

Ms Rodgers: Successful partnerships will have up to a maximum of six months to produce a sustainable tourism development strategy for their target areas, which will bring us to May 2002. However, in view of the tight timetable for the Peace II programme, strategies will be considered as they are received. When approved, the strategies will be awarded an interim indicative financial allocation to allow work to begin. Final indicative allocations will be made when all the strategies have been assessed.

Grading (Meat Plants)

8. **Mr Poots** asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to outline the potential benefits of having meat plants carrying out grading. (AQO 431/01)

Ms Rodgers: I assume that the question follows the vision group recommendation that the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development should consider, in consultation with the industry, the transfer of carcass classification from the Livestock and Meat Commission (LMC) to the meat companies. The fact that the vision group has made this recommendation, as with all other recommendations, should not be taken to imply that I or my officials either support or oppose it. I will want to take account of comments received on this, as on other recommendations, during the consultation exercise, before making a decision.

Mr Poots: First, it is a disgrace that the Minister has not made a statement on the statement made last week to the House.

Secondly, I do not assume that the Minister has made any decisions on whether meat plants should be grading or not. I have asked the Minister to outline the potential benefits. I can see the potential downside. The question still sits before the Minister.

Ms Rodgers: I am not aware of the statement the Member is referring to. Many statements are made in the House. He has not been specific.

As regards the question that he asked, I clearly indicated that I do not want to prejudge any of the debate that is taking place or the conclusion that I will come to following consultation. The Member would be the first to criticise me if I stood up in the House and prejudged issues that are currently the subject of consultation.

Farmed Fish

9. **Mrs Nelis** asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to detail (a) the number of farmed salmon which have escaped from the Northern Salmon Company Ltd in Glenarm and (b) the number of farmed fish which have escaped over the past three years.

(AQO 448/01)

Ms Rodgers: The Northern Salmon Company Ltd has reported to the Department that approximately 13,000 salmon escaped when a net at Glenarm suffered structural damage during a storm in August. There is no method of independently assessing this figure. The Northern Salmon Company Ltd is currently dealing with its insurers. There have been no other escapes of farmed fish from the Northern Salmon Company Ltd or other farms in Northern Ireland over the past three years.

Mrs Nelis: I am sure the Minister has noted that Glenarm salmon is on the menu here today. In view of the concerns expressed about farmed salmon escapees and the disastrous effects that they have on the Atlantic wild salmon population, does the Minister have any plans to monitor the situation at Glenarm?

4.00 pm

Ms Rodgers: Glenarm salmon frequently turns up on the menu here, and I was in a restaurant on Saturday night where it was also on the menu. I wondered how it had suddenly become so popular.

Members have raised concerns about the genetic integrity of the wild fish, and the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development will keep a close eye on that area. However, the Department has already conducted some work in that area. It monitored the genetic composition of the salmon stock in the river, following an escape in 1990. That indicated that some change in the genetic composition of the wild population had taken place, and that was probably attributable to interbreeding between wild fish and escaped farmed fish in the lower part of the river.

There is no evidence that such a change is detrimental to the wild population, but precautionary scientific advice is to remove as many of the escaped farmed fish from the river as possible. Accordingly, no fish of farm origin

would be selected as brood stock as part of any fishery enhancement activity, and the Department's technical staff will repeat the electro-fishing operation to remove any remaining escapees before the spawning period.

Vision Group Report

10. **Mr McGrady** asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to detail (a) when the conference addressing the report of the vision group into the future of the agrifood industry will take place (b) when the consultation will end and (c) to make a statement in respect of the meetings she has held to date with interested parties. (AQO 438/01)

Ms Rodgers: The conference will take place tomorrow. The consultation period ends on 31 December 2001. As part of the consultation process, I have begun a series of meetings with stakeholders in order to obtain their preliminary views on the vision report. So far, I have met organisations that represent farmers, consumers, processors and environmental interests. A programme of meetings with other stakeholders has been arranged.

REPORT OF THE AD HOC COMMITTEE ON CRIMINAL INJURIES COMPENSATION

The Chairperson of the Ad Hoc Committee on Criminal Injuries Compensation (Mr R Hutchinson): I beg to move

That this Assembly notes the Report of the Ad Hoc Committee on Criminal Injuries Compensation, (1/01/R) established by resolution on 10 September 2001, and agrees that it be submitted to the Secretary of State as a Report of the Northern Ireland Assembly.

Following the resolution of the Assembly on 10 September, the Ad Hoc Committee established to consider the proposal for a draft Criminal Injuries Compensation (Northern Ireland) Order 2001 and its associated scheme met on 17 September, and I was elected as Chairperson. As Chairperson, it is my responsibility to present a report to the Assembly for its endorsement.

I shall give a brief overview of the background of the draft proposals and the work that the Committee undertook. In October 1997, the then Secretary of State for Northern Ireland, the Rt Hon Dr Marjorie Mowlam MP, established the Northern Ireland's Victims Commission to consider possible ways to recognise the pain and suffering felt by victims of violence associated with the troubles. That commission, chaired by Sir Kenneth Bloomfield, reported in April 1998, and one of its recommendations was for the Government to establish an objective, independent and wide-ranging review of the fitness for purpose of the compensation system as it operated in Northern Ireland.

On 12 August 1998, the then Minister for Victims, Adam Ingram, announced the Government's intention to establish such a review as part of the Victims Liaison Unit's package of measures. That review was established, and, in July 1999, a report was issued for consultation, prior to the final recommendations being submitted to the Government.

I will list some of its recommendations for a fairer, more equitable, open and transparent system. Compensation should continue to be decided by the Compensation Agency, with a right of appeal to the courts; there should be a simpler method of deciding how much compensation is paid for less serious injuries; victims who suffer more serious injuries should continue to have their claims assessed as at present; where a person has died as a result of violent crime, an enhanced bereavement support payment should be payable up to a maximum for any one family of £50,000; compensation for psychiatric illness should be paid in a wider range of cases; there should be more flexibility in the time limit for making an application; and cases should be capable of being reopened in particular circumstances.

The Government's response to those proposals was contained in the draft Criminal Injuries Compensation (Northern Ireland) Order 2001 and the draft Northern Ireland Criminal Injuries Compensation Scheme 2002. The Government did not accept all the review's recommendations.

Over the past few weeks, the Ad Hoc Committee has heard evidence from various interested bodies — the Compensation Agency, the Law Society of Northern Ireland, the Northern Ireland Office and Victim Support Northern Ireland. During those meetings, many issues were raised, and the Committee considered each in detail.

The proposals are being taken forward by the Northern Ireland Office, and the Committee welcomed the opportunity to comment on them in their draft form. The key features of the proposed new arrangements are the introduction of a tariff of injuries, setting out the value of specific injuries; the hearing of appeals by an independent appeals panel; and the removal of paid legal assistance from the scheme, to be replaced by support and help from Victim Support Northern Ireland. There should also be wider eligibility criteria and other changes to eradicate anomalies; the removal of specific terrorist exclusion provisions; and provisions for past victims of child sex abuse, who cannot claim because of the current statutory time limits, to make a fresh claim.

The Committee had reservations about the proposed legislation. The assumption that a tariff system is in the best interests of victims of crime is erroneous. All the evidence suggests that it is a cost-saving exercise that will reduce the compensation paid to victims of crime, while removing paid legal assistance. The Committee felt that the removal of the right of appeal to the courts as part of the due process of law is fundamentally flawed and may be subject to challenge under the Human Rights Act 1998.

The Committee recognised the role played by Victim Support Northern Ireland over many years in supporting and counselling victims. However, the proposal to use Victim Support Northern Ireland in a quasi-legal support role is inappropriate, given the reservations outlined in its submission.

The Committee noted the core recommendations set out in the Law Society of Northern Ireland's supplementary memorandum of evidence. It called for the establishment of a working party with a general remit to examine the compensation process. The key objective would be to bring about systematic improvement by addressing the problems of delay and ensuring transparency, communication and closer liaison among agencies in the system. The Committee encouraged the Northern Ireland Office to engage with the Law Society and give due consideration to its proposals.

In light of the Committee's reservations about the proposed new arrangements, the Committee recommended

that the proposed legislation should not be introduced to Parliament in its current form. Despite a tight time-scale, the Committee considered all the proposals, and, although some of them would be welcome, the Assembly should send a strong message to the Northern Ireland Office that the proposals should not be implemented as they stand in the draft Order and scheme. I recommend that all Members lend their support to our report and its recommendations.

Mr K Robinson: I thank the Committee Clerk and his staff and those who gave evidence to the Committee or made written submissions that helped us in our consideration of the proposals. We were charged by the Assembly to produce a report by 27 November, and we have fulfilled that duty, albeit with just a day to spare. We held six Committee meetings, took oral evidence from four bodies and received submissions from another six. The record of that evidence is in annexes three and four of the report.

The Ad Hoc Committee took its scrutiny role seriously. Given the central importance of victims in our society, we were guided by a shared desire to recognise their trauma and continuing suffering. As far as possible, we also wished to ensure that society understood why victims deserved to have their suffering considered sensitively and practically. In that context, I welcome the proposal referred to in paragraph 66 on page 17 of the report, which seeks to introduce a "bereavement support payment". Victim Support Northern Ireland and many other bodies also welcome that proposal, which not only acknowledges the grief and sorrow caused by the death of the victim but ensures that there will be no further misinterpretation of the purpose of the payment. The proposed extension of the cohabitation definition, as noted in paragraph 67 on page 17 of the report, together with the two-year residential time frame, are also viewed as positive indications of a desire to reduce the trauma for victims and their families.

For those claiming compensation for psychological injuries, the proposal is to widen the eligibility criteria, and that is also viewed as a positive step towards recognising the suffering of many in our society. I welcome the removal of the stipulation requiring a person "to be present at the scene of the crime". Anyone who reads the case submitted by Victim Support Northern Ireland on page 108, paragraph 3i, will concur. That case concerns a lady who was confronted by a harrowing scene at the end of her lane, following a heinous crime perpetrated by terrorists. As any good Samaritan would, she responded to the need of that fellow human being, who died in her arms. She was subsequently denied compensation for the trauma that she had experienced, as she was deemed not to have been present at the scene of the horrific crime.

I welcome the inclusion of the proposal to define a disabling mental illness, rather than the previous

reference to serious and disabling mental disorder and to have that confirmed by psychiatric diagnosis. That is a step forward in recognising the different forms of trauma experienced by victims.

So far, I have welcomed the proposals in the draft Order, but I must now express some serious concerns. The proposals purport to address the needs of the victim regarding time scales, transparency and reduction of trauma. One could be forgiven, however, for drawing the conclusion that the tariff system is a device for reducing compensatory payments. The wisdom of removing the assessment of compensation from the judiciary and placing it in the hands of the executive arm of Government is to be questioned. On page 19 paragraph 3c of the report it states that the Law Society of Northern Ireland proposes the establishment of a working party that would include representatives of the professions, agencies and victims in order to prevent such a contingency. I welcome that proposal. The working party would consider the present system, identify measures to reduce delays, improve inter-agency communication and seek to increase transparency.

The Committee considered that the proposals in the draft Order exacerbated the claimant's distress by constraining his or her ability to have needs individually assessed, even more than the present arrangements. The example submitted by the Association of Personal Injury Lawyers — the details are on page 69 — concerning the individual impact that the loss of an eye would have on a pilot as opposed to an elderly person highlights the need for each case to be assessed individually.

4.15 pm

I am in serious conflict with the proposal to withdraw paid legal assistance from claimants. We recommend that, in the interests of fairness, paid legal assistance should continue. The tariff system will seriously erode the ability of a claimant to receive adequate or equitable settlement. The stipulations concerning multiple injuries, as commented upon in paragraphs 78 and 79 on page 19 of the report, illustrate the point that the tariff system's inflexibility will cause claimants to lose out. We also noted that the scale of tariffs is significantly lower than that currently available under the 1996 Northern Ireland "Green Book" formula.

Victims will be penalised by any proposals that are designed to deduct payments from private healthcare insurance towards medical expenses or healthcare arrangements. That situation would be further exacerbated by the proposed removal of compensation for the loss of earnings for the first 28 weeks following an injury and the removal of compensation for special expenses, such as the adaptation of accommodation, unless earnings capacity had been lost. Both proposals appear punitive and are not in keeping with the Northern Ireland

Victims Commission's remit to recognise the pain and suffering felt by victims of violence. After all, that was what led to the 1998 review of criminal injuries compensation, 64 recommendations of which laid the basis for many of the current proposals.

I subscribe fully to recommendations 6, 7, 8 and 9 and to the conclusion in recommendation 10 that the proposed legislation should not be introduced to Parliament in its present form.

Finally, the role envisaged for Victim Support Northern Ireland is grossly unfair to that highly respected body. How can it be expected to assemble on a Province-wide basis the number of highly skilled personnel needed to deal with thousands of extremely complicated cases? That defies all logic, as the Committee of the Centre highlighted in its submission, reproduced on page 79 of the report.

The withdrawal of legal aid will save an estimated £7 million, yet additional funding of only £400,000 will be provided for Victim Support. Surely, there is cause for concern that, if the level of support to claimants that is envisaged in paragraph 50 on page 14 is introduced, applicants will not receive the representation that is currently provided by geographically well dispersed, long-standing legal firms with expertise in the field. That fact cannot be ignored.

Victim Support should be given an enhanced, proactive role that reflects its specific expertise in providing support and counselling for the victims of crime. I support the recommendation made by the Chairperson of the Ad Hoc Committee that the proposed legislation should not be introduced to Parliament in its present form.

Mr A Maginness: We have all become sensitised to the need to recognise the position of victims. One of the outstanding success stories is that, since the agreement, we have built a consensus that recognises the special needs and place of victims. I wish that that recognition were reflected in the draft legislation. It seems that the Government have not learnt the lesson that victims in Northern Ireland deserve special attention, sensitivity and care. Not only are the proposals presented to the Assembly inadequate, they are antipathetic to the interests of victims. The Ad Hoc Committee's report reflects the concern that we, as legislators, have for victims of violent crime in Northern Ireland. This is probably the worst piece of draft legislation that the British Government have presented to the Assembly for consideration.

The Ad Hoc Committee's robust critique of the Government's proposals has done a great service to the cause of victims. It has highlighted the gross deficiencies in the proposed legislation. The draft Order purports to reflect the Bloomfield report; it does not do that. The proposed legislation departs materially from the Bloomfield report, which did not recommend that all injuries

should be governed by a tariff scheme. The Bloomfield report proposed that minor injuries should be considered by a tariff scheme.

Along with other members of the Committee, I have misgivings about adjudging even minor injuries on a tariff basis. However, serious injuries should surely not be adjudged on a tariff basis. Ken Bloomfield made it clear that he excluded serious injuries from any tariff scheme. He also said that he would retain the right of appeal to the county court for victims of violent crime. That is an important provision, because the right of appeal to the courts is a safeguard for everyone, particularly for the victims of violent crime.

If there is no right of appeal to a court, a victim's position with the statutory agency — the Compensation Agency — is seriously weakened. As Ken Robinson suggested, that hands over adjudication of compensation for victims to the executive. In the Western World at least, the separation of powers is regarded as a fundamental part of constitutional politics. In other words, the executive is separate from the judiciary. It is important that that separation is maintained, because it is a safeguard for everyone. The proposed legislation fuses the executive and the judiciary. There is no effective appeal to a judicial body. That is fundamentally wrong.

The Ad Hoc Committee considered the tariff scheme carefully and unanimously opposed it. The Committee believes that a tariff system is inadequate for safeguarding the interests of victims, as there is no individual assessment of the pain and suffering that someone has endured. As Bloomfield said:

“there is no objectively ‘right’ sum of money that can compensate an individual for the pain and suffering he or she has endured as a result of an injury”.

Furthermore, the Judicial Studies Board, in its ‘Guidelines for the Assessment of Damages in Personal Injuries’, 3rd edition, 1996, states:

“there is no right or exact figure for all cases involving the same injury, because no two victims suffer in exactly the same way”.

The proposed tariff system implies that everyone who breaks a leg endures the same pain and suffering. That is wrong, and that proposition should not be adopted into our law. A tariff system cannot properly compensate the victim of violent crime; it cannot compensate a person at all. The absence of individual consideration of pain and suffering goes to the heart of the proposals. We should not embrace the tariff system.

The tariff system is an invention of the civil servant mind. It attempts to bar code pain and suffering, and that cannot be done. Suffering is an individual experience, and it requires individual assessment. If one were to canvass opinion among victims who have suffered grievously, one would hear exactly that. Many victims have had misgivings about our judicial system and about their treatment by lawyers and others. Nonetheless, given

the choice, they would opt for the court rather than for an anonymous system that would not, in my view and in the view of the Committee, compensate the individual.

The proposals remove the right of appeal to the courts. Instead, a board will consider the cases of victims who have been dealt with by the Compensation Agency. The board will act as a court of appeal. We know from experience what such boards are like. We know the difficulties encountered by people who appeal decisions on disability living allowance. We know that honest citizens who appeal to such boards go through severe trauma. We must not be fooled: the boards are not judicial bodies, and they will not bring the same judgement and discretion to the cases of victims as the courts do.

The amounts given in the proposed scheme do not reflect the current level of awards in Northern Ireland; they are grossly undervalued. They are supposed to reflect pain and suffering, but they do not. The evidence from the Law Society shows that victims' pain and suffering are being greatly undervalued.

The green book — the guide to personal injuries that lawyers and judges use — shows that quite plainly.

4.30 pm

However, it gets worse. In cases of multiple major injuries, it is proposed that people should be compensated in full only for their worst injury. The compensation for the second most serious injury, even if it should be £50,000, can be reduced to 30% of that amount. The compensation for the third most serious injury is reduced to 15% of the possible amount payable. Therefore, a person is awarded 145% out of a possible 300%.

People's compensation is being deliberately undervalued according to this scheme, and the Government make no bones about it. That is the formula. Worse still, no compensation whatsoever is payable for the fourth and subsequent injuries. How can that be regarded as equitable or just? I ask anyone who is reasonable and objective to say that the scheme is fair and equitable. It clearly is not.

The scheme also compensates for minor injuries. In order to qualify for minor injury compensation, the claimant must jump over three hurdles. He or she must have three separate injuries; a black eye is not enough, a claimant must have other injuries as well. There must also be significant residual effects that last for more than six weeks, and the injured party must have made two visits to a medical person. There are three different hurdles to jump over, and that is unjust. The test is wrong and unfair.

On examining the system in more detail, it becomes obvious that people will not be compensated for pecuniary losses such as loss of earnings. Claimants must be out of work for 28 weeks before they can receive one penny

of compensation for loss of earnings. That is clearly unjust — a child could tell you that that is unjust.

How does that square up with the Government's view that it is a new and wonderful system that will help victims? How could it possibly help a victim to lose half a year's earnings through no fault of their own and not receive compensation? How could that possibly be just, right or fair? And yet, the Government have the cheek to present these proposals to us and dress them up by saying that they are trying to produce a new system that is fair to victims and will help them. How can that possibly be, in present circumstances?

Although we received assurance to the contrary, this fact must be highlighted: the proposals suggest that private insurance and private pension awards, as a result of injuries, should be deducted from any pecuniary loss. People would not — despite the fact that they paid into their pension fund or insurance fund — be able to enjoy that money. Instead, it would be deducted from any pecuniary loss. Surely that is wrong and unfair. We received a letter from the NIO in which it explains somehow that that does not form the substance of its proposal. If that is the case, let us hold the NIO to that commitment. It is important to highlight that today, in case the Government should back-pedal.

The Government have turned off the tap of legal assistance to victims of violent crime by refusing to pay reasonable legal or medical costs. How can that be just? How does that advance the interests or status of victims? Victims who need legal assistance in this complex area of law will not receive it. Surely that is wrong, given that at present we are trying to help victims of violent crime.

The Government say plainly that they aim to save £7 million. Is that not a cruel assertion? That £7 million is important to victims of crime who require legal advice. It is wrong that the Government should refuse to continue to provide legal assistance. As Ken Robinson said, the Government are putting back only £400,000 to Victim Support Northern Ireland. Its staff have done a tremendous job in giving practical care and counselling to the victims of crime here. That is their role; their job is not to act as surrogate lawyers. Victims seeking compensation through this complicated process will be deprived of practical legal assistance. If people seek legal advice, they will have to pay for it themselves. That is wrong.

The Government then go even further to disadvantage victims by proposing that the limitation period for claims be reduced from three years to two. How can they justify that? They have included what they would call a "safety net" whereby, in the interests of justice, that limitation period can be altered. However, those boards will act as tribunals, and it will be difficult to argue for an extension of the time period. It is already difficult to

gain an extension in the ordinary courts, which apply a three-year time limit, but it will be even more difficult to argue to a tribunal for an extension to the two-year limitation period.

Several parts of the proposed legislation would further disadvantage victims. However, there are some good aspects. For example, applicants for criminal injury compensation who have a criminal conviction will be given more flexibility. Madam Deputy Speaker, do you wish me to bring my remarks to a close?

Madam Deputy Speaker: A number of Members still wish to speak, so I invite you to draw your remarks to a conclusion.

Mr A Maginness: I will finish by saying that those who are excluded from compensation because of previous convictions, particularly for scheduled offences, will be treated with greater discretion. One only has to look at the Creighton case, which has been foremost in our minds in considering this. If somebody has fully rehabilitated himself, it is surely fair and just that he be compensated.

My final point on this is that the Government have said that they sought certainty and simplicity for victims and sought to be transparent in dealing with them. Quite clearly, these proposals, in my view and in the view of the Committee, will provide greater uncertainty and frustration for victims of violent crime. This system will be much more complicated than the present one, and the House should send a clear message to the Government that it unanimously adopts this report to stop this bad legislation in its tracks.

Dr O'Hagan: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I assure Members that my speech will not be as long as that of the last Member. First, I want to record my appreciation and thanks to the Committee and research staff for all the work and help that they give to the Committee.

There are probably a number of points in this that could be welcomed. I agreed with Mr Ken Robinson when he talked about bereavement support payment and the less restrictive method of determining psychological injuries. However, overall I believe that NIO cynically used the Kenneth Bloomfield review on victims, which reported in July 1999, as an opportunity for a cost-cutting exercise on the criminal injuries system.

The introduction of the tariff system for injuries received cross-party and unanimous opposition in the Committee. It is unfair and inflexible, as it does not take into consideration an individual's particular circumstances. In most cases it would have the effect of reducing the amount of compensation to a fixed level. There is a sliding downward scale of compensation for multiple injuries, and the whole system is not index-linked but subject to a review in three years. The tariff system

is already in place in Britain. It has been a source of controversy there, and there is general unhappiness with it. Indeed, the appeals panel has overturned in the region of 70% of the original decisions, which shows just how flawed the original process was. We should not take the view that because a system is in place in Britain, we must slavishly follow it here.

NIO then went on to argue that the introduction of a tariff-based scheme will so simplify the process that it will not require the services of a legal professional. Instead, Victim Support can do the job previously done by solicitors. I am sure that everyone here will agree that Victim Support does an excellent job helping victims of crime and the trauma that entails. However, I do not believe that it has the resources, the capacity, or the required legal background to fulfil the role that solicitors do. Victim Support has eight offices throughout the North of Ireland, with three full-time staff in each, and in the region of 200 volunteers whose hours vary from a few per week upwards. The intention is to recruit nine extra advice workers and about 100 extra volunteers. None of the people who work for Victim Support has legal qualifications, so compare that with the number of solicitors throughout the North of Ireland.

4.45 pm

There are over 600 practising solicitors in the North of Ireland, who are easily accessible and have offices in all towns. If someone is a victim of crime, he or she can go to a solicitor for help and advice.

In tandem with these proposals, the NIO intends to make paid legal assistance unavailable to victims of crime. The Ad Hoc Committee objects strongly to that. The NIO is not saying that a solicitor cannot be consulted. However, it is removing any financial help to do so. Victims must, therefore, pay for legal advice, which discriminates against those who are less well off and those who are statistically more likely to be the victims of crime. It seems that the Government want to pay only lip service to equality obligations.

The Human Rights Commission and other organisations that gave evidence to the Committee raised concerns that that may be in breach of international human rights norms for the right to legal representation. It appears to be a cynical cost-cutting exercise by the British Government and the NIO. It is estimated that money will be saved in the long term because of reduced compensation costs. It is also estimated that in the removal of paid assistance the Government will save £7 million, while the cost of enlisting Victim Support would be only £0.4 million.

There was some improvement in the draft legislation on ex-prisoners, particularly those who were imprisoned for political reasons, through the removal of the explicit and discriminatory block to compensation for those convicted under the provisions of emergency law.

However, considering that the majority of ex-political prisoners were sentenced to more than two and a half years' imprisonment, the proposed scheme will make no tangible difference to their situation.

The Secretary of State may also make a decision on the basis of other evidence that is available to him or her, which raises the prospect of intelligence reports that cannot be challenged. Paragraph 38 of the draft legislation, which deals with compensation in fatal cases, shows that while the explicit disqualification has been removed, implicit disqualification will remain. That is contrary to the search for a new, inclusive society, particularly when those who were caught up in the conflict, and their families, are still being discriminated against and punished.

Under the current legislation, and also under the proposed legislation, no distinction is made between people convicted of ordinary crime and people with political convictions. That is wrong. The majority of people who were in jail for political reasons would not have seen the inside of a prison but for the abnormal political conditions in the North of Ireland. The Good Friday Agreement recognises that the conflict was political and that it required a political solution. The British Government and the NIO should follow that through to its logical conclusion and distinguish between political and non-political convictions.

There should be compensation for loss of earnings. Awards should not be subject to reductions that take social security, healthcare and insurance benefits into account. There are problems in the current system with delay, transparency, communication and liaison. The legal profession recognises that. The Law Society of Northern Ireland has recommended that a working party, representing the judiciary, the legal profession, agencies and professionals working within the current system, and representatives of victims, should be set up to examine ways of improving the current system. That is a sensible approach.

I want to draw attention to wrongful action by the NIO in its treatment of the Ad Hoc Committee. When NIO representatives were invited to give evidence, the NIO initially tried to set the parameters of the debate. It attempted to rap the Committee over the knuckles when Committee members raised legitimate concerns, as is their right. That behaviour is unacceptable.

Recommendation 10 of the Committee's report states

"That the proposed legislation should not be introduced to Parliament in its current form."

Sinn Féin supports the report, and that recommendation in particular. I hope that the British Government and the NIO take heed of the Assembly's strong message. It should not use the new political dispensation to ride roughshod over the rights of people who are the victims of crime.

The Deputy Chairperson of the Ad Hoc Committee on Criminal Injuries Compensation (Mr McCarthy):

As Deputy Chairperson of the Committee I support the conclusions and recommendations contained in the report. The Committee considered all the evidence brought before it, bearing in mind that compensation for people who have suffered extreme pain and deaths because of violence from whatever source is a sensitive issue.

The Committee took evidence from people who are experienced in the problems associated with criminal injuries compensation, and I thank them for their contributions. I also thank the staff who serviced the Committee and the Members from all parties who played a constructive and valuable role as we reached our conclusions. It was a pleasure and a privilege for me to act as Chairperson on several occasions.

I consider the report to be fair and reasonable, covering all aspects, and I hope the Secretary of State, the British Government and our Government will abide by its recommendations.

Mr Dalton: I welcome the recommendations and congratulate the Committee on the extensive evidence taken. I concur with the comments of my learned Friend, the Member for North Belfast, Mr Maginness. He is correct that the fundamental principle is whether a tariff system should be used at all.

The use of a tariff system is fundamentally inequitable, because it treats individuals as a number each time and implies that every person's injury can be treated in the same way. That is absurd, and the Government should look at the comments of the House again. This is not an acceptable piece of legislation in its current form.

There is a caveat to that. I disagree with the Committee to some extent with regard to recommendation 5 in which the Committee suggests that the Secretary of State should not regard a person's criminal record when determining a reward when that person's actions, which may be indicative of that record, cannot be shown to be responsible for the act of criminal violence that resulted in the injuries for which compensation is sought.

I disagree. A person's past behaviour — in particular criminal convictions for serious offences — should be taken into consideration. If a person's behaviour in the past is indicative of a particular lifestyle which results in serious criminal injury, I am not comfortable with the concept that taxpayers should have to compensate him for having placed himself in that position.

However, I can see the problem with that. Having to demonstrate that a person is responsible for the act of criminal violence that resulted in the injuries is almost impossible unless it is somebody with a record of grievous bodily harm who starts a fight, gets injured and tries to claim compensation. Clearly that person is responsible.

However, a serial burglar's house may be burgled. He goes downstairs to confront the intruder and is injured, but the test should not apply, because he did not ask to be burgled. However, I do have a difficulty with saying that taxpayers should be forced to compensate somebody whose activities in the past were clearly antisocial and who does not deserve compensation, so I have some difference with the Committee.

Mr McCarthy: What would the Member say if a person were involved in some petty crime in his youth then lived a normal life, but after 20 years something happened, and he submitted a claim for compensation? Would that person, in the Member's opinion, have disqualified himself twenty years ago?

Mr Dalton: No, I would not suggest to the House that any conviction of any sort should automatically disbar a person from receiving some form of compensation. Obviously it is something that must be taken into account; the individual circumstances of each person must be taken into account.

However, it is right that the Secretary of State should retain a degree of discretion. Where a person's behaviour and criminal convictions demonstrate a particular type of lifestyle — where that person is clearly involved in criminal activity on a constant and ongoing basis — they should not be eligible for criminal compensation. If a drug-dealing gangster such as Johnny Adair gets beaten over the head, there is no way that honest, decent taxpayers should have to foot the bill for compensation for someone like that. That is the position that I would take. It should not necessarily be applied to a person who, for instance, commits a minor offence as a youth. We can all perform indiscretions in our youth, and I do not see that that should have such a serious and deleterious effect on a person's entire life.

I would, however, make some distinction in relation to very serious offences, even those committed at an early age. I have a huge amount of sympathy for Mr Creighton's position, but I have some difficulty with the idea of somebody who was convicted of so serious an offence as throwing a petrol bomb at age 18 receiving compensation. When one looks at the devastation, mayhem and death that has been caused by petrol bombs in our society, one should realise that the consequences of throwing that petrol bomb — for the thrower, as well as those on the receiving end — could be life-altering. For that person, it is life-altering in the sense that they place themselves outside a particular category of our society. Where someone performs an act that is so damaging to society in general — an act that can cause death — that person should not receive compensation at a later stage. However, I broadly support the recommendations of the Committee.

Dr O'Hagan: For the Member's information, the Committee makes the distinction that he refers to at paragraph 73 of the report.

Mr Dalton: In recommendation 5, the Committee clearly suggests that

“the Secretary of State should not, in determining an award, have regard to a person’s criminal record”.

That is the recommendation with which I am taking issue.

I broadly agree with the rest of the report. The comments that I made earlier on tariffs were correct. You cannot treat injuries of a similar nature caused to different people in the same way. It is completely unreasonable to accept that the loss of an eye for one person is the same as the loss of an eye for another. If I were to have my legs injured, it probably would not be that deleterious to my lifestyle, but if Joe Brolly were to have his legs broken, it would probably be severely deleterious to his lifestyle — and probably also to his team’s performance. Obviously, you must take into account the individual’s circumstances and their lifestyle. That cannot be done under a tariff system, so for that reason I agree with the general thrust of the report.

Mr McHugh: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I commend the work done by the Committee staff, the Committee members and those who attended all the meetings. Considerable effort was needed to complete the work by the date that was given. I commend that and welcome the report, its findings and its proposals to Government.

Most of the points have already been covered. The purpose of the Bloomfield Report was to deal with criminal injuries in a normal situation — or “normality”, as it is often called — and not the kind of situation that we have had here over the last long number of years. Therefore, I take issue with the point that you cannot make distinctions between particular injuries.

5.00 pm

The purpose of injuries compensation is to allow a person, injured through any situation, to get his or her life back on track again. The abnormal situation that we have lived through here must be taken into account. It is different to what would generally be covered by such a scheme. The Committee recommended a fairer, more equitable, open and transparent system. However, that is not what the Government are offering us. The introduction of the tariff system, and the independent appeals panel, has been mentioned, and the role of the panel and the people who are likely to have recourse to it have been outlined.

The removal of paid legal assistance is of particular concern; it is to be replaced by help from Victim Support. Support from a local solicitor was always something that people could depend on, whether they were facing a tribunal, an independent panel or anything else. The solicitor is usually on the side of the applicant or the person defending himself. That does not always happen

in tribunals. Those dealing with appeals or tribunals in relation to disability living allowance, or other such allowances, become desensitised to the interests of the individual. That could happen in criminal injuries appeals. The whole system would therefore work against the individual and the individual’s ability to defend himself. People who have gone through trauma are not in a strong position to defend themselves. You would need to bring a couple of barristers with you to most tribunals just to survive and get through them or to get any compensation. I am not sure that that is the way to go.

There are positive aspects, and they have been mentioned. The Committee seemed to be almost totally opposed to the recommendations by the Government from the start. The Government are looking for a back-door method of cost saving and cost cutting, and they are using the Bloomfield report as a way of doing that. My Colleague Dara O’Hagan mentioned that we should not have to rigidly adhere to what they do across the water. That system was not right for us. I see no reason why we cannot have a system of our own, or why we cannot improve on the system that is already there and that is of benefit to individuals. We should take a proper look at that, rather than have a straightforward cost-saving exercise, which seems to be the sole intent of the Government.

The individual is losing out in cases involving trauma and physical or psychological injury. Cases should be dealt with on an individual basis, and, as has been mentioned, they should not be given bar codes. For example, a rape attack could impact on a person’s future career and whether she could continue with that career. The consequential loss of earnings over the next few years, or damage to career prospects, is not compensated for. The person could lose a huge amount of money under the proposed system. We have been told that there is no upper limit, but I do not believe that, and solicitors do not believe it either. People will lose out badly.

We have agreed that paid legal assistance should continue to be available to people who wish to make application for compensation. The large number of people applying was mentioned. Often it is those who are most in need who are least able to pay for assistance. They probably are the majority of those applying. The Secretary of State, despite having some arbitrary powers, has not dealt with very many cases. That can hardly be considered an extra benefit.

There is also the question of deductions from the compensation to those who receive benefits or who have received a payment for health or other insurance. That poses the question of whether those on benefits enjoy equality with those who are in full-time employment.

I agree with recommendation 10 that the proposed legislation should not be introduced at this time. That

is the key message for the Government. They must reconsider the situation.

It must be recognised that Victim Support Northern Ireland's original role was an important one. However, I am not sure that it can fulfil this role. In practice, it may be very difficult. That is for Victim Support Northern Ireland to sort out for itself.

The issue of prisoners is very important to us. Submissions that we received show that in a fair and just compensation system singling out people with convictions is unfair, unjust and a denial of basic human rights. For years, ex-prisoners have suffered discrimination and have had claims denied solely because they were ex-prisoners. Whether or not the victim of a criminal injury has a previous conviction should not be taken into account when his or her claim is being assessed.

Various types of crimes have been mentioned. I know of one person whose house was burned but who received no compensation because that person had a conviction for a traffic offence. Members may check the statistics if they so wish, but this is not simply about political prisoners: it affects people at all levels. Many people who have previous convictions have gone on to lead constructive lives. Should they be victims of criminal injury in future they will also be denied compensation. That is wrong. We should have a system that is different and that does not simply follow what has gone before. Go raibh maith agat.

Ms McWilliams: Several useful points were made about the anomalies in the Criminal Injuries (Compensation) (Northern Ireland) Order 1988. Indeed, various victims' organisations made those same points in Sir Kenneth Bloomfield's first report, 'We Will Remember Them'. That was taken up when the compensation payments were reviewed. Some of those points concerned the use of language. The bereavement payment was always seen as offensive to victims and was misunderstood as a consequence. Therefore it was crucial that the word "support" was introduced. The extension of the bereavement support payment to those who are considered to be partners is extremely important.

There was unanimous support in the Committee for updating our legislation. There are anomalies in the Criminal Injuries (Compensation) (Northern Ireland) Order 1988, and the victims themselves are best able to point them out. One anomaly that is constantly highlighted is the treatment of those who suffer trauma and psychological injury as a result of witnessing a traumatic incident or who are present at the scene of a crime. They may not have been compensated but may endure a great deal of pain and mental illness as a consequence of what they have seen.

Over the years, survivors in Northern Ireland have made that point. Many have said that they should have been compensated for what they had observed and

endured because it took an enormous toll on their ability to continue with work and on their ability to remain as they had been before.

Any new legislation is a concern, and, as other Members have said, there is no need to abolish something that only needed to be amended. The current legislation should be amended in a way that takes cognisance of the fact that those who are present at the scene of a crime should be eligible for compensation.

In a country such as Northern Ireland, where mental illness has been treated as so insignificant in the past, it is even more important that the terms "mental illness" and "psychological injury" are to be extended and moved beyond the simple descriptions of "disorders". Therefore psychological symptoms such as anxiety, tension, insomnia, irritability, loss of confidence, agoraphobia and preoccupation with thoughts of guilt and self-harm will be included under the terms of compensation.

Anyone who has spoken to a survivor of a terrible incident will have observed the guilt that that victim suffers because he or she has survived while others have died or been terribly injured. Therefore it is important that feelings of guilt that lead to mental illness, depression and loss of confidence are acknowledged as a cause of psychological injury and that such injury be included under the terms of compensation.

The third anomaly to be addressed — and which should have been addressed before now — is time limitations, particularly in child sex abuse cases. That is also a welcome change. The legislation should have been amended, and it is good that that point was picked up. Members must remember that the terms of reference are concerned not only with victims of the troubles, but also with victims in other areas. In many cases child sex abuse victims want to lock away the memory of what they endured, and it is only in their adolescence or as they approach the years beyond 18 that the memory of those events returns to them. Because of the time limitations in place, those victims were prohibited from claiming. Therefore it is good that that statutory limitation has been lifted.

However, it is possible to amend the legislation to take on board all of those changes. As other Members have said, the Assembly should not be abolishing access to legal aid, the appeals to the courts and compensation based on individual cases.

An example from current English case law will illustrate exactly what would happen here if the Assembly were to introduce the new scheme. Tariffs will be introduced under the schemes that are currently operating in England. The Northern Ireland criminal injuries compensation scheme 2002, which was presented to the Committee, lays out exactly how much a victim would receive for a finger injury, a broken arm, rape, sex assault, or any other injury.

Caroline Fairfax was raped at knifepoint by a serial rapist called Stefan Molliere. In the attack she was punched and badly beaten. Under the criminal injury compensation scheme of tariffs, she was awarded £7,500. She believed that that was an insult to all rape victims. She said that the attack almost ruined her life; it caused her to give up work; she had to move house; and, similar to many victims, she required counselling. The price put on a rape at knifepoint — by which she was also severely injured — was £7,500. There are many other similar cases in England where the tariff system is operating.

I urge Members not to let such a system be introduced to Northern Ireland. This afternoon I tried to compare what tariffs different injuries would equate to.

5.15 pm

Under the proposed system the loss of a finger in an attack would cost the Northern Ireland Office up to £18,000. However, victims of severe sexual abuse lasting over three years — as there is a stipulation about how long the abuse may have lasted — with all the associated distress and mental illness would receive exactly the same amount. How can anyone decide that the loss of a single finger is the equivalent to sexual abuse that took place over three years? It is important to point out that each case should be decided on its individual merit. Therefore there is a reason for good legal advice.

Herein lies the criticism of the current system and why it needed to be changed. The current system is not transparent, and it is not sufficiently accountable. Therefore victims made an enormous number of complaints about that system. It could be made much more transparent and could be amended so that those victims understand what their rights may be.

Victims should also be entitled to appeal to the courts, so the loss of legal assistance is a concern. Undoubtedly, and other Members have mentioned this, there is the right to receive support from Victim Support Northern Ireland. However, that organisation made the point that one should look at what Kenneth Bloomfield referred to as less serious injuries and those that are more serious. Victim Support Northern Ireland is on record in Committee as saying that it would be in a position to look at the less serious injuries and assist people in that category. There is more legal complexity when one is addressing multiple injuries and more serious injuries.

Considering these serious points of view regarding compensation for criminal injury, the Committee was unanimous that this particular piece of legislation should not go forward. Members have addressed other issues that would lead to inequity. The withdrawal of benefits and the paying back of some benefits are two such issues. Currently, that is not the case. However, if it were, it would be seen as a step backwards and not as an improvement.

These are the major points, and ultimately I would argue that discretion and flexibility should always be seen positively, not negatively. It is not too difficult to take cases individually. As we make the transformation from conflict into, we hope, a more peaceful society it would be nothing short of a disgrace if the Assembly were to support the current proposals.

Mr R Hutchinson: I have had a relatively easy job today in that all of the Members who spoke were in support of the recommendations that the Committee has made. Therefore there are no questions that I need to answer, except perhaps the one that my Colleague from South Antrim, Mr Dalton, raised in his address to the Assembly. It is only fair to point out that the Committee's recommendation that he spoke about only extends to cases where the actions of the victim in no way contribute to his or her injuries. It was the Committee's view that if the perpetrator of a crime were injured then it is right that he or she should not be compensated for those injuries.

I thank everyone who took part in the debate for their contributions. I thank the members of the Ad Hoc Committee for their input during the weeks that we met. There has been a fair amount of unity in what we have said, what we have done and the work we have produced. I want to thank the Assembly Research and Library Services for its assistance, and I owe a debt of gratitude to the Committee Clerks who assisted us in our meetings over the past weeks.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That this Assembly notes the Report of the Ad Hoc Committee on Criminal Injuries Compensation, (1/01/R) established by resolution on 10 September 2001, and agrees that it be submitted to the Secretary of State as a Report of the Northern Ireland Assembly.

Adjourned at 5.20 pm.

NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

Monday 3 December 2001

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

Members observed two minutes' silence.

REVISED BUDGET (2002-03)

Mr Speaker: I have received notice from the Minister of Finance and Personnel that he wishes to make a statement on the revised Budget.

The Minister of Finance and Personnel (Mr Durkan): Mr Speaker, with permission, I will make a statement about the Executive's revised Budget for 2002-03 and the Executive's approach to the spending review next year.

The Budget statement, as opposed to the Budget document, contains some amended figures. An addendum with those changes has been sent to the Business Office, and a full revised version of the statement will be available to Members as soon as possible. This does not affect any of the Budget document figures.

The plans I am announcing today will underpin the Programme for Government, which has been sent to all Members this morning. The Executive have set clear priorities for action in the Programme for Government, and these are fully reflected in the Budget.

When I introduced the Executive's position report in June and the draft Budget in September, I made it clear that 2002 was a transitional year in which the Executive's Budget planning would be limited by the total resources made available by the Treasury in last year's spending review. In December 2000 the Executive published indicative allocations for all public services for 2002-03, and these have been reviewed during the Budget process. The Executive are working within the same total, apart from additional allocations as a result of the Chancellor's recent announcement — to which I will return later. Despite the absence of any significant change in the resources available, the Executive are determined to make a specific mark through the Budget for 2002-03.

It may be helpful if I remind Members about some of the features of the draft Budget presented in September. The Executive had £42.8 million available for allocation. This amount came from the Chancellor's March Budget

and as a result of reduced departmental requirements. The Executive proposed to supplement that amount with £48 million of planned carry-over from the in-year monitoring rounds in 2001-02. These amounts, together with a small reduction of £1.8 million in the indicative allocation for the Department for Social Development, gave the Executive £92.6 million to allocate.

In making use of this money, the Executive gave significant priority to health, schools and roads in the draft Budget plans. This is confirmed in the revised proposals I am announcing today. The Executive have been able to increase allocations for 2002-03 by £37.2 million and have been able to boost health spending in 2001-02 by £8 million. Later today I will announce the Executive's decisions on the second round of allocations from the Executive programme funds. Taken together, these decisions will show that the Executive have acted clearly and decisively to address some of the key Programme for Government objectives.

The Executive have been determined to increase scope for comment and consultation on this year's Budget process. Of course, Statutory Committees can question and analyse spending issues at any time. They do not need to await a starting pistol from me or from any Minister in order to initiate scrutiny on what areas Departments are spending money on, or on whether public services are serving the public in the best possible way. The range of issues that could be expressed will undoubtedly far exceed the time and scope available to Committees, even within the extended timetable for the Budget process. I encourage Committees to have an ongoing and continuous agenda of scrutiny in relation to aspects of spending programmes, including planning and targeting.

To facilitate the process of consultation and scrutiny, the Executive put forward a position report in June 2001 to draw out the main features of spending plans and provide a structured starting point for discussion. That was to ensure that when the draft Budget was presented in September, the Executive were not starting cold and that people in the Assembly and in the community could view the proposals against the backdrop of the issues that were presented in the position report.

Many people have responded positively and carefully to the Budget proposals presented in September. In particular, I thank the Committee for Finance and Personnel, which has brought together a timely and important report, drawing out some major themes from its own deliberations and the comments and recommendations received from other Statutory Committees. On behalf of the Executive I thank the other Committees for their contribution to this important process. I hope that they share my belief that it has been a better process than was possible last year. Nevertheless, there are further lessons to be learnt from this cycle, and they will be valuable lessons in what will be an important process next year. I will talk more about that shortly.

I would be surprised if anyone who has attended any of our discussions on financial issues in recent weeks would disagree that there is extensive concern about the current level of health expenditure. Health and personal social services represent 40% of our expenditure. The Executive gave significant prioritisation to health spending in the draft Budget. Demands and expectations on health services in societies such as ours are expanding rapidly. People rightly want the best standard of care, treatment and service available for themselves and their loved ones to alleviate suffering, improve life expectancy and provide dignity and comfort in extreme circumstances.

The Executive have increased spending on health significantly since devolution. In 2002-03, spending will be £687 million more, or 37% higher, than it was in 1998-99. We also provided non-recurrent additions of £48 million during 2000-01 and £42 million in the two monitoring rounds so far in 2001-02.

These amounts are large, but the bulk of the extra money is required to meet the cost of providing essential services. The fact that the Executive have provided extra funding when we have many other demands for spending on public services shows clearly the importance we attach to the Health Service.

We have allocated to health everything that came to us via Barnett from the increases attributable to it in England in last year's spending review, and more. However, because of the arithmetic of the Barnett formula, it still did not result in as big a percentage as that of the previous year in England. Yet the Health Service here has to address greater needs and hence costs more than it does in England. We must look at how it is managed and organised, and the Executive have asked for extensive work to be done on that.

The Department of Finance and Personnel, the Economic Policy Unit and the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety are engaged in the most extensive and thorough analysis of health needs and expenditure that has been undertaken in Northern Ireland for many years. We depend on the health needs and effectiveness evaluation for guidance on how best to spend money on health in the future and to provide clear understanding of the differences between what happens here and elsewhere. For many years it was thought that health spending and standards of service were relatively high here. There is no doubt that they have been eroded over recent years. We cannot take that lightly, and thoughtful analysis and discussion are needed.

It is not enough simply to put money into the Health Service. Many people rightly ask how the resources that have already been provided have been used. The Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety has provided detailed information on that, and the evaluation process will continue to explore it.

As with all public services, there are problems with management and efficiency which must be addressed. The way in which the services are organised begs many questions. Hard choices must be made which will affect the standard of care and the nature of hospital provision in the region. We must address these issues seriously and thoughtfully. The Executive, no less than the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety, are determined to find the best way to proceed.

Last week the Chancellor of the Exchequer announced an additional £1 billion for the Health Service in the United Kingdom. As a result, we have received a Barnett amount of £27·8 million. Although we heard of this only after we had taken our own main decisions, the Executive moved quickly to confirm the way ahead. We are not obliged to make use of money from Barnett for the same purpose as such money is used in England — that is central to the point of devolution. No matter what we think of it otherwise, the Barnett system gives us the distinct advantage of regional discretion as a devolved Administration.

In the case of the Health Service, we have decided on an increase in funding which is significantly larger than the amount provided by the Treasury. Making use of our allocations — including the Executive programme fund allocations that I will announce later today — and new money from the Treasury, we are providing an extra £41 million over and above the amounts that were announced in the draft Budget. We are also acting straight away. Members may recall that the increase for health which was proposed in the draft Budget was made possible only by planning to carry over some money from 2001-02. Of the total of £48 million that we planned to handle in that way, £31·1 million was for health. Because of the additional provision that we are making for 2002-03, we can add £8 million to the health budget this year instead of holding it back until 2002-03. This means that the service and, more importantly, those in need of treatment and care can begin to benefit immediately from the extra money.

I emphasise that that has been made possible through the Executive's planned additions to the health budget for next year. While the pre-Budget report has allowed those plans to be accelerated and the scale to be increased, we will not simply play follow-my-leader with the Treasury. The result is that the allocation for health in 2002-03 will be £72 million higher than the figures in the June position report, including the Executive programme fund allocations that I will announce this afternoon.

12.15 pm

Despite very tight constraints, we have met more than half the health bids that were lodged at the time of the position report. Compared with the plans made this time last year for 2001-02, and including the two rounds of allocations from the Executive programme

funds, there will be an increase of £224 million or 9.7%. On 25 September I explained that those figures include £19 million that was transferred from the social security budget. Thus, the true cash increase is £205 million or 8.9%. As in the past, most of that money is needed to cover rises in the costs of providing services, such as inflation rises over which we have limited control. However, it will provide some £41 million of service development for health and personal social services.

The new money will be used to provide several particular developments, including some £13 million for community services, which will allow additional community care places for older people. That will address some issues that have been raised about the appropriateness of care and the effect of deficiencies in community care on acute hospitals. It is vital that hospitals can use their services as effectively as possible, but that is difficult if the community care needs of older people are not being met.

An additional £12.4 million is being allocated to enable hospitals to address some critical issues, including the treatment of heart disease and cancer and the provision of extra beds so that more patients can receive urgent treatment. A further £2 million is being provided for much-needed children's services and family services, especially for the most vulnerable people.

I am pleased to confirm that we can now proceed with the introduction of free nursing care for the elderly, subject to the necessary legislation's being passed through the Assembly. That will cost some £4.5 million for 2002-03, although the full cost for the year will be about £9 million. That will surely be welcomed by all who care about the interests of older people.

The Executive's proposals represent a major commitment to meeting the needs of the Health Service. No one pretends that those additions, substantial though they are, will solve all the problems in the Health Service. We must also take account of the important work on health funding and management that is being done in both England and the South to develop the best strategy for our context. How we proceed for the longer term remains to be decided. We must take account of the available resources and the conclusions of the needs and effectiveness evaluation next year.

There are only a few other changes from the spending allocations in the draft Budget. I confirm that the £2 million required by the Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure for the cost of job evaluation in libraries will be provided. As I briefly explained in my statement on the September monitoring rounds, it has become clear, through a job evaluation exercise undertaken by the education and library boards, that the pay of junior library personnel will have to be increased. The boards made a commitment to backdate the job evaluation to 1 January 1995. Now that that process is complete,

those payments will be made. It was clearly impossible for the libraries' budget to absorb that substantial additional cost. Several Members had concerns about that when the September monitoring round was announced. However, it represents a clear contractual entitlement based on an objective evaluation of the library staff's work.

In addition, it is now possible to restore the £2 million of provision for the Department of the Environment's resources grant to district councils. That will avoid the need for a reduction, and it will bring the increase for that Department's budget up to 10% when compared to provision in 2001-02. The Executive concluded that it would be desirable to use the flexibility that has become available to ensure that full assistance to the poorest council areas is restored.

We have added £1.4 million to the social inclusion/community regeneration fund to provide for a Department of Education bid for provision for primary two classroom assistants. That will be covered in detail in my statement on the Executive programme funds this afternoon.

The additional allocations in 2002-03 amount to £37.2 million, which, together with the £8 million for health in 2001-02, makes a total of £45.2 million. The resources required to cover those additions come from four sources. These are: the additional £27.8 million from the pre-Budget report, which we are allocating to health; the £5.4 million that has been made available through a reclassification of some costs relating to Laganside; the setting of targets for Departments to increase asset sales in 2002-03 by £5 million, which will release additional resources; and our anticipation that £7 million will be found from reduced requirements in some departmental allocations at a relatively early stage in 2002-03.

For the remaining Departments, and for the North/South bodies, the allocations agreed by the Executive in the revised Budget remain as proposed in September. The plenary meeting of the North/South Ministerial Council on Friday 30 November adopted an initial opinion on the budgets for the six bodies for 2002. Those are reflected in the Budget proposals before the Assembly and will be kept under review in the in-year monitoring process, as will those for Departments.

The Department of Agriculture and Rural Development's allocation will be £204 million, which includes provision for BSE testing.

The Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment will have a total of £256 million, although, as I indicated on 25 September, that will be kept under review to take account of the implications of changes in the economic context.

With an allocation of £117 million, the Department of Finance and Personnel will be funded to provide the central finance and personnel functions and the necessary

support services for Departments and the public for which it is responsible.

The £619 million allocated to the Department for Employment and Learning will provide for the planned expansion of further and higher education places and measures to broaden access to further and higher education.

The Department for Regional Development has a 14.8% increase over its 2001-02 allocation, which includes substantial provision for the purchase of new trains. That is a clear demonstration of the priority that we are giving to roads and transport. The Chancellor's decision to phase in the aggregates tax will lead to a cost saving for the Department, which shows that a difference can be made by ensuring that the Treasury addresses the regional consequences of taxation measures.

The Department for Social Development's budget of £450 million represents a 7.5% increase over the 2001-02 provision. It includes substantial provision for welfare reform and modernisation, as well as for housing measures.

The Office of the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister will have a budget of £33 million, which includes provision for key research on equality and policy effectiveness.

Some pressure has been applied, especially by the Committee for Finance and Personnel, and comment has been made that departmental estimating processes are not as good as they should be and that there is a pattern of monitoring rounds yielding additional room to manoeuvre. That is indeed the case, and the Executive are well aware of the issues that that highlights.

We will consider carefully, in the course of next year's spending review, how best to take account of the pattern of underspending, and we will take steps to ensure that our resource planning is as effective and sound as possible. Money should be directed to where it is really needed, and our priorities should be fulfilled. The pattern of recent monitoring rounds suggests that it is entirely prudent to make use of a sum on the scale of £7 million.

However, there are always some uncertainties that cannot be covered in the Budget allocations. These include some technical issues in the expenditure of the Northern Ireland Housing Executive that may give rise to monitoring bids next year. These, and the routine costs of the Departments, non-departmental public bodies and the North/South bodies must be taken into account. The possibility of developments in the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment's budget, which is always more difficult to predict than the more routine recurrent budgets of other Departments, must also be taken into account.

In September, we decided to plan on the basis that some underspending would be carried from this year

to next year in order to part-finance next year's plans. That is necessary to ensure that the cost pressures identified for the year ahead can be covered adequately. It is a responsible use of the end-year flexibility arrangements that are designed to make the best use of the resources available, rather than their being drawn to areas of opportunity as opposed to areas of priority. In next year's spending review, we must consider how best to adapt that approach for the future.

That concludes my proposals for the spending allocations for 2002-03. They represent a clear statement of the Executive's determination to address the problems in the Health Service and to maximise the resources available to public services. As Minister of Finance and Personnel, I am in favour of public services, and I believe that my successor will carry forward the determined work to ensure that we can make the most of our Budget.

I remind the Assembly that there will be a full-scale spending review by the Treasury next year. It will address the spending plans for the period from 2003-04 to 2005-06. Our work, within our departmental expenditure limit will take place in that context. The review is likely to affect the total resources available to us in that period. However, the Chancellor of the Exchequer has made it clear that we cannot expect as rapid a period of growth in spending as has been the case since 1999-2000, which was the first year of the plans set in the 1998 comprehensive spending review.

In many ways, the devolved Administration had the good fortune of coming into office when spending was growing rapidly. As I said on 25 September, we cannot expect that to continue, and we must be able to adapt our ways to deal with a different situation.

The Executive are determined to use the opportunity of next year's spending review to make a clear and significant difference to spending plans for Northern Ireland's public services. The work will be informed by the needs and effectiveness evaluations. These already cover health, schools, vocational education and training, industry and housing and amount to 70% of the total departmental expenditure limit. The Executive recently agreed that there should also be a study of the programmes of the Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure.

In addition to these six evaluations, we will take account of the work on the future of the agrifood sector by the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development's vision group and the work of the Department for Regional Development on the regional transportation strategy. These strands of detailed analysis, together with the usual processes of bidding and scrutiny for all services, will ensure that the spending review will be truly fundamental.

A spending review should mean change — changing priorities to take account of what our society needs

and wants most. We have an immense responsibility to address that seriously and thoughtfully. The answers are not obvious, nor will the decisions be easy.

12.30 pm

To emphasise our determination to make a difference, we are publishing indicative minima, rather than spending plans, for allocations to Departments for 2003-04. We have taken about £125 million from the previous departmental indicative figures. That will be held by the Executive for allocation next September following a thorough root-and-branch analysis of where the money is needed most. It will take time for Departments, Executive Ministers, Assembly Committees and others to work through the analysis. The process is likely to lead to radical decisions being made on spending allocations. I invite the Assembly to view the process as beginning today. It is a major challenge that will give us a substantial opportunity to make our mark on public services.

The amounts allocated to all Departments for 2003-04 are well below the amounts required to sustain the level of service that we propose for 2002-03. That does not mean that we intend to make spending cuts. On the contrary, we are determined to ensure the growth of public services, so we need to ask which programmes need resources most and in what areas we most want to develop public services. It is likely that some reductions will be required in areas in which money can be better used in new or different ways. Certain objectives that took priority may have been broadly achieved. We do not look for change for change's sake, but for change that will benefit public services.

We have calculated the indicative minima in ways that take account of each aspect of the Budget. We have also taken into account the spending patterns that will be set in 2002-03; those include some substantial changes from the current year. It follows that the indicative plans that we published last year are no longer valid and need a radical overhaul. Spending can go down as well as up. That does not mean that something was wrong — it simply shows that priorities change, and we must adjust if we are to respond to need and get the best from the public services.

I shall not detail how the indicative figures were derived. It suffices to say that they take account of the characteristics of Budgets — pay bills are difficult to change quickly, and it is easier to make adjustments to capital.

In setting the indicative minima, we have held back a lower proportion of the amounts allocated to health and schools. That recognises the fact that, as well as having the characteristics that apply to all Departments, those two services are particular priorities, and it would be unrealistic to hold back a substantial percentage of the amounts set aside for them. However, there is no

question of their facing less demanding scrutiny. On the contrary, we have given priority to them in the needs and effectiveness evaluations, because it is vital that their large share of the Budget is used as effectively as possible. Evaluations become more important as the amounts increase.

I must emphasise that the amount held for allocation, which we call the Executive's SR2002 allocation, is in two distinct parts: one for resources and one for capital. That shows our determination to ensure that the amount for capital will be allocated to capital. If possible, we should seek to move some provision from resources to capital to increase the level of activity. That could proceed in conjunction with further work on public-private partnerships (PPPs), depending on the conclusions that we reach after the PPP review next year.

In setting indicative minima, our approach included all the Departments of the Executive and the North/South bodies. I invite the appropriate authorities in the Assembly to consider whether a similar approach to the spending of the Assembly and the Northern Ireland Audit Office might be appropriate, so that next year's spending review makes the best possible plans for the longer term.

The next spending review will mark the end of the beginning of devolution. The conclusions that we reach this time next year will give us a new direction that will assist us in 2005-06. That will coincide with the conclusion of the existing round of EU structural funds. It will be a vital period of planning for our society, one in which we can address the major economic and social issues that affect our region. The Executive remain determined to deliver on the objectives set out in the Programme for Government, and it will become increasingly clear that our spending plans follow the priorities set out in the Programme for Government.

It has been my privilege to present and explain the Executive's financial decisions to the Assembly on many occasions. I thank Members for the attention and care that they have given to those issues during my time as Minister of Finance and Personnel. I know that I can rely on Members to give my successor a similarly thoughtful and questioning response. I commend the proposals to the Assembly. Members have a week to discuss and consider them further before I put down a motion to seek approval of the revised Budget on Tuesday 11 December.

The Chairperson of the Committee for Finance and Personnel (Mr Molloy): Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. I welcome the Minister's statement. It shows that the Executive, and the Minister in particular, have been listening to the Assembly and have paid attention to Committee reports — especially those from the Committee for Finance and Personnel.

Does the Minister agree that the fact that he has been able to put additional money into health, over and above the amount allocated by the Chancellor, shows that a review of the Barnett formula is necessary and that having a local Assembly gives us the opportunity to make our own decisions, especially on health issues? Can he ensure that the money that has been ring-fenced for health — as announced by the Chancellor — will go to health? Patients are real people, and they need real care. We need new money — and real money — to ensure that that vital service is maintained.

Can the Minister also confirm that the allocation of £8 million of direct money that was announced today is over and above the £14 million that he announced in the September review?

I welcome the reinstatement of the general grant to the 16 poorer councils. Does the Minister agree that a reduction in the resources grant, together with a rate rise, would have had a devastating effect and would have created a real crisis for many councils whose resources are already under pressure? In relation to the potential review — *[Interruption]*.

Mr Speaker: Order. Although the Member is the Chairperson of the Committee for Finance and Personnel and, as such, is allowed more leeway when questioning the Minister, as is the case with all Committee Chairpersons, this is an opportunity for one or two, rather than a raft of, questions.

Mr Molloy: A Cheann Comhairle, I am asking questions on behalf of the Committee, which has many Members.

What steps will the Minister and the Executive consider taking before negotiations begin on the 2002 spending review, with its likely constraints, to ensure that allocations meet future needs?

Mr Durkan: I thank Mr Molloy for his initial comments. As Minister of Finance and Personnel, I have been happy to listen carefully to debates in the Chamber and to the Committee for Finance and Personnel. That is not only an indication that I am a good listener; it is also an indication that good points have been raised. The Executive have been able to reflect positively those issues in the revised Budget. We have been able to translate our stated priority for health into further allocations, which I believe is welcome.

As Mr Molloy pointed out, if the Barnett formula worked differently and more in our favour, we would be able to allocate even more money to health and to our regional priority. There has been some misunderstanding about that — every penny that we receive from the Barnett formula for health goes to health. Moreover, we allocate still more, as the revised Budget shows. I can confirm that the £8 million that will be allocated to this year's health budget is additional to

the £14.3 million that was allocated in the September monitoring round.

Therefore, since the draft Budget a further £22 million has been allocated to health this year and a further £41 million to the health budget for next year.

Work on the needs and effectiveness evaluation is laying the groundwork for the consideration we shall undertake for the 2002 spending review. I hope that Committees will soon start to address the 2002 spending review from their perspective.

The Chairperson of the Committee for Social Development (Mr Cobain): Will the Minister confirm that he recognises that the Department for Social Development deals with the most marginalised in this society? He has often said so. Will he explain to the House why it appears that that Department's budget is the only one that has been reduced since the draft proposals were published in September? Will he confirm that the cut is in the field of urban regeneration and community development and comes at a time when investment is desperately needed in places such as north Belfast to help and support local communities?

Mr Durkan: No budget has been cut. Since the draft Budget, the total budget for the Department for Social Development has been increased by 7.5%. No departmental allocation has been cut — *[Interruption]*.

Mr Speaker: If the Member wishes to intervene, the Minister is content to allow the intervention.

Mr Cobain: In September's draft Budget, the total allocation to the Department for Social Development was £450.5 million. The new allocation is £449.7 million, which is a reduction in that Department's overall budget.

Mr Durkan: My statement referred to a technical change that has led to a reduced requirement of £5.4 million for Laganside. That £5.4 million is part of the additional moneys that were available to us. The Department declared that change. The impression seems to be that some drive-by cuts are taking place by my, or somebody else's, hands. The £5.4 million reduced requirement has been used to make the changes that we have now presented in the revised Budget.

I also indicated that we recognise that certain Northern Ireland Housing Executive issues are likely to give rise to further claims on in-year monitoring allocations.

The Chairperson of the Committee for Health, Social Services and Public Safety (Dr Hendron): I welcome the Minister's statement, especially on health allocations. I welcome the £13 million for community services. Those include the additional community care places for older people, which will reduce the massive pressure on beds, the introduction of free nursing care for the elderly and the extra £8 million already mentioned.

Bearing in mind the gross underfunding of the Health Service over the years and the ongoing daily crisis, will the Minister agree that all money directly allocated for health by central Government should be spent on health in Northern Ireland? In England, 2% more is spent on health. The Chancellor of the Exchequer announced an additional £1 billion for health. How much of the £27·8 million received as a result is going to health in Northern Ireland?

Without knowing the Executive programme funds allocation, it is difficult to work out how much of that £27·8 million is going to health. I appreciate that there will be a statement later on Executive programme funds. However, with that new money and the money from the programme funds, can the Minister assure us that he and his Executive Colleagues will give total support to the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety in acquiring the necessary funding to set up the new cancer unit at Belfast City Hospital?

12.45 pm

Extra money is welcome, but does the Minister agree that we are still £50 million short of the Department's bids for the extra £122 million needed to maintain the services in 2002-03? Those services may continue to deteriorate. I welcome the Minister's positive statement.

Mr Durkan: The Executive have used every penny — and more — that was allocated for health in the Barnett formula to improve services. Let us be clear about that. I have said that a total of £27·8 million will go towards health. In fact, we can now allocate £41 million more for health for next year than was allocated in the draft Budget, which means £72 million more than was reflected in the position report. That goes a long way towards meeting more than half of the bids referred to by the Chairperson of the Committee for Health, Social Services and Public Safety. That £41 million extra for next year will allow for service development in several areas.

I said in the draft Budget that the allocation would not be sufficient to allow much service development and that services would just stand still. However, that allocation has been raised to allow for service development. The Member's assertion that £50 million more is needed just to maintain existing services is not true. Approximately £41 million of real service development can take place as a result of the additional allocations in the revised Budget.

Mr Speaker: There is only one hour for questions, so if a question has been answered, Members should not feel pressed to ask it again, thus inviting the Minister to give the same response. It is a different matter if a Member wishes to press the Minister on an unsatisfactory answer. However, a simple repetition of questions and answers is not the best use of our time.

The Chairperson of the Committee for Agriculture and Rural Development (Rev Dr Ian Paisley): When the chairperson of the vision group met my Committee, my Committee was flabbergasted to hear that no money has been allocated to put recommendations into operation. It is a waste of time and money for Committees to be appointed to make recommendations when no money is available to implement those recommendations.

On Friday, my Committee was staggered to hear that there is almost an epidemic of tuberculosis and brucellosis here, with 180 herds now closed. Some £22 million was paid in compensation in the previous financial year, and that may rise this year. Did the Department raise that with the Minister, and was there a request for further allocations for those important matters?

Mr Durkan: As I pointed out previously, the work carried out by the vision group is the subject of consultation, and final detailed proposals will emerge from that. It is not the only review exercise of that nature that could have resource implications, depending on the final proposals. As with the other exercises, the decisions on financial allocations will be made in the light of the proposals that we have received. I have made no secret of the fact that the Budget does not include additional resources for the outcome of the vision exercise. The Executive have already agreed that the need for resources will be considered following the consultation exercise. People may have accused us of pre-empting the outcome if we had fixed a particular allocation. In spring, when the results of that exercise become available and a draft action plan has been developed, the Executive will address the resource issues. That will be one of the major issues for the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development in the 2002 spending review.

I have no doubt that the other issues raised by the Chairperson of the Agriculture and Rural Development Committee will make their way to me or my successor when the Department and the Minister feel that it is appropriate.

Mr Close: I acknowledge the attempt made by the Executive to give greater recognition to the needs of the most vulnerable and weak in our society through the further increase in the allocation to healthcare provision. Will the additional allocation for community care packages be sufficient to end bed blocking in our hospitals? If not, what extra money would be required to achieve that goal?

I welcome the Minister's statement on free nursing care, but we need to know where nursing care ends and personal care begins. How much additional money would be required to end discrimination and ageism in healthcare provision?

Paragraph 32 of the Minister's statement says that

“the Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister will have a budget of £31.9 million”.

The Minister said that the Budget would be £33 million. Which is the correct figure? The Minister also said that the increase to the Department for Social Development's budget is 7.5%; the figure that we have in front of us is 8.6%.

Mr Durkan: I advised Members at the start of my statement that a couple of figures — not in the Budget document, but in the statement — were wrong. I corrected those figures, and a corrected version of the statement will be made available to Members. The figures that I read out were correct. I have no doubt that Mr Close will be scandalised by that and will call on me to resign. I shall consider my position.

Mr A Maginness: Shortly.

Mr Durkan: In the near future.

We have tried to prioritise health in several ways. Provision is made in the Budget to begin the introduction of free nursing care in October 2002, assuming that the relevant legislation is passed by the Assembly before that date. The full-year costs would be £9 million. It is not for me, as Minister of Finance and Personnel, to define a precise borderline between personal care and nursing care. We use the terms that are used by Departments.

I am glad that the Member welcomes the fact that we have been able to make that positive move, rectifying a regrettable consequence of the constraints that we faced in the draft Budget. I hope that Members will give what practical support they can, as we try to get the necessary legislation through the Assembly.

Mr B Hutchinson: I shall be as succinct as possible.

I understand and recognise the hard job that the Minister has had to do, and I also recognise that some of the decisions have not been of his own making due to the lack of investment in the past 30 years. Can the Minister say when he is going to consider reallocating the money that is currently given to the trusts and boards under the health budget, given that we now have a Committee, an Assembly of 108 Members, and a Health Department? The money would be better spent on health than on the administration of health boards.

Mr Durkan: I thank the Member for his question and his reflection on the historic background to those decisions.

It is not for me, as Minister of Finance and Personnel, to start proposing structures for health and personal social services. The issue of the number of trusts and boards et cetera is touched on in the Hayes report, which is the subject of consultation. The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety will introduce the relevant proposals on that. The Executive will initiate a review of public administration in a wholesale way

next spring, and that has implications for those issues. We are determined to ensure that as much money as possible goes to the services and not to the structures.

Mr McCartney: The Minister will be aware that the Chairperson of the Health, Social Services and Public Safety Committee has said publicly on at least two occasions recently that our Health Service is on the brink of disaster. It is also a matter of public record that our waiting lists for acute services — heart, cancer and orthopaedic treatment — are longer than in any other part of the United Kingdom. Indeed, elective orthopaedic services have been suspended for lengthy periods in the three major orthopaedic units.

In paragraph 10 of his statement, the Minister says that

“In 2002-03, spending will be £687 million more”.

However, the money spent to date has not alleviated, but rather increased, our difficulties. In paragraph 38, the Minister says that

“In many ways, the devolved administration has had the good fortune of coming into office at a time when spending was growing rapidly.”

There is a hint that spending will be cut back in the next spending review. In those circumstances, does the Minister think that the current provision for health will do anything significant, in the absence of fundamental reform, to increase the quality of the Health Service?

Bed blocking was the subject of the £1 billion payment announced by the Chancellor in England and the allocation of £13 million to community care services. Is the Minister aware that a bed occupied in an acute hospital costs about £1,200 per week and that a bed in a private nursing home could be obtained for less than half that? The beds are not being filled because of the absence of reform in hospital administration and because of the multiplicity of trusts.

Mr Durkan: The Member has raised several points. In budgetary terms, considerably more money is being spent on health this year than was the case in the year before devolution, and that was reflected in my statement. The Member suggests that that money makes the problem worse. Extra money does not make any problems worse. Yes, it is true that not all the problems are to do with funding; there are issues that relate to planning, management and service structures.

1.00 pm

It is for the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to deal with those issues. As the Minister of Finance and Personnel, I am dealing with budgetary issues, working with my Executive Colleagues. Many of the points that the Member has raised are for my ministerial Colleagues to answer.

It is clear that the additional money now being allocated to community services should be of assistance in regard

to bed blocking. This goes back to the initiative taken by the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety in December 1999, when there were acute winter pressures. Various reviews were undertaken, and we are now seeing the outworking of some of those considerations in the allocations that we are making.

Dr O'Hagan: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. The Minister referred to the spending review in his statement. I welcome that if it means that we are moving away from the failures of past spending patterns and will be developing more vigorous spending plans that accurately reflect need. Does the Minister agree that, to date, the Executive have failed to prioritise health and to address adequately the needs of a Health Service in crisis? Go raibh maith agat.

Mr Durkan: I do not accept that the Executive have failed to prioritise health. In circumstances where health spending next year will be 37% higher than it was before the Executive existed, no one can say that we have failed, in budgetary terms, to prioritise health. We have always been honest with the Assembly about the difficulties of getting the room to manoeuvre in order to prioritise effectively.

The Member's comments on the spending review are correct. We must make more of our total allocation available to meet, and to focus more heavily on, our regional priorities. However, making money available in that way is not easy when Members, across all parties and Committees, move defensively to insist that the previous Budget lines of their particular Departments must be protected. Many people work on the assumption that prioritisation is something that is done with new additional money and not by looking at whether all baselines can continue to be justified in the light of pressing priorities. Given what Dr O'Hagan has said, I look forward next year to hearing her and many other Colleagues joining with the Executive to ensure that we look seriously at spending in all Departments so that we can release as much money as possible to the most pressing priorities.

Mr Beggs: I welcome the allocation, additional to the draft Budget, of £72 million to health and social services, and particularly the 17.3% increase in the allocation to personal social services. In his statement the Minister referred to the extensive work undertaken by the Department of Finance and Personnel, the Economic Policy Unit and the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety on an assessment of how health services are managed and organised. Can he tell the House when this analysis will be completed, so that we can have greater confidence in the effectiveness of health expenditure?

Will the Minister also assure the House that in such a review he will address the inequality in the current system of allocating community health and social

services funding? It has produced huge variations between different community health and social services trusts and has resulted in the underfunding of the Homefirst Community Health and Social Services Trust, which serves my constituency.

Mr Durkan: I want to clarify that £72 million more has been made available than was indicated in the position report. It is £41 million more than was in the draft Budget. Both figures are significant and welcome improvements.

Bearing in mind next year's spending review and considering that many Members have mentioned the Barnett formula, our first concern in the needs and effectiveness evaluation exercise is to come forward with details on needs. We hope to do that early in the new year. The further detailed work on effectiveness will take another couple of months. It is not that that work has not begun, but that we had to ensure, in getting to grips with all the issues, that we had sufficient information on need to commence our discussions on the Treasury spending review. Therefore, the effectiveness evaluation will come forward later in the spring and will be available for the Executive and the Committees to work on.

The allocations within Departments — as between trusts — is not a matter for the Department of Finance and Personnel. All Departments have their equality schemes and obligations. All spending should be equality proofed, but the responsibility for that falls to each Department and not to the Department of Finance and Personnel.

Mr McGrady: I compliment the Minister for the clarity and precision of the revised Budget statement. All Members who have spoken so far have welcomed the substantive additional funding given to the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety. Can the Minister tell us when a report on the joint review set up in February 2001, involving the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety and the Department of Finance and Personnel, will be made. While all Members have welcomed the additional substantive money being added to the health budget in the current year and next year, there is concern about how effectively it is being spent.

The Minister said that he hopes that the needs and effectiveness review will be completed soon. Does he agree that that will set different patterns of expenditure in the future and that it will perhaps do away with, or break, the pre-devolution, predetermined expenditure that Departments currently appear to have as their dogma?

Mr Durkan: The needs and effectiveness evaluation covers a range of programmes across various Departments — over 70% of the total Budget. The Department of Finance and Personnel, the Economic Policy Unit and the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety are working together in relation to health and

social services. It is hoped that findings on need can be brought forward early in the new year, with findings on effectiveness following in the spring.

It would be wrong for me to pre-empt the precise implications of that, and I do not want to speak out of turn, given the role of a particular Department and another Minister here. However, it is our shared intent that the outcome of the needs and effectiveness evaluation will mean that the Executive are better able to assure themselves and the Assembly that they are matching resources to need and using resources to meet need rather than to sustain inherited patterns.

The Chairperson of the Committee for the Environment (Rev Dr William McCrea): On 25 September, as Chairperson of the Committee for the Environment, I asked a question on the justice of the proposal to cut £2 million from the resources grant payable to the poorest district councils. No one at that time could understand the unwarranted intrusion into the poorest district council funds or how the Department could even contemplate it, so it was condemned. The effective working of the Committee for the Environment exposed that iniquity, and the Committee can be proud of its success in bringing the matter to the forefront of debate. However, one issue still concerns the Committee.

Can the Minister assure the House that the allocation necessary for compliance with EU legislation on waste management will be ring-fenced and that none of it will be handed back by the Department, as happened this year? That is causing considerable concern, bearing in mind that we are facing infraction proceedings from Europe on waste management.

Mr Durkan: The Member is correct on the first point. He drew attention to this matter on 25 September by quoting the Minister of the Environment, who had referred to the point in his press release that day. Various representations have been received since then. It was precisely due to pressures on environmental issues, particularly waste management, that the Department — based on what looked like being the draft Budget allocation — had to concentrate on meeting EU requirements. That led to the squeeze in the resource grant; it was not a question of anyone's deciding to cut the council resource grant. With additional money, we have now been able to reverse that particular implication.

As far as ring-fencing is concerned, money allocated for a particular purpose is used for that purpose. Ring-fencing means that if money cannot be spent for a particular purpose, the money is handed back. Keeping money to do what one wants with it is not ring-fencing. If the Member wants assurance that money is given for a purpose — with a determination that it be spent on that purpose — this is the view of the Department of the Environment and the Department of Finance and Personnel.

If, for whatever reason, spending levels are not able to use all that money in a year, that will declare itself in a monitoring round. That is the right and proper way of maintaining Budget scrutiny and is consistent with many other points that have been made in the Chamber.

Ms Gildernew: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. I too welcome the Minister's statement. However, with regard to the Budget allocation for the Department for Social Development, if our aim is to tackle disadvantage and build communities, how does the Minister expect to see the achievement of this worthwhile aspiration if he cuts the budget for objective C, Urban Regeneration/ Community Development?

There has been a decrease in the Department for Social Development's budget, and that is made worse in real terms by the increase in spending on administration. Therefore, there is less money to be spent on the ground. I refer the Minister to paragraph 33 of his statement where he stated that money should go where it is really needed. It is needed for housing and community development and for the improvement of the social well-being of the most disadvantaged in our society, and not necessarily for administration fees.

Mr Durkan: I refer Ms Gildernew to the answer I gave to Fred Cobain. What is being identified here as a cut is a technical change in the treatment of Laganside expenditure and was brought forward by the Department for Social Development. Members must remember that Laganside spending comes under objective C. Some of that spending would not necessarily be what many of us might regard as frontline community development and community regeneration expenditure. People assume that only particular types of services and spend are being hit in this way.

The Executive have tried to address the prevailing concern of prioritisation and targeting need in health that has been expressed in the House.

Considerable spending continues on housing through the Housing Executive and housing associations. My statement also reflected the fact that, due to some technical issues regarding the Housing Executive, we anticipate that there will be further in-year bids for housing, as has been the case previously. The Executive will continue to make good their commitments to meet housing need. Obviously, housing is one of the programmes subject to the needs and effectiveness evaluation. We will give further consideration to the longer-term housing issues when we receive the benefit of that evaluation.

1.15 pm

Rev Robert Coulter: The Minister hinted that there would be some form of accountability in spending the money. What systems of accountability will he put in place to ensure that these allocations finance the

services for which they have been allocated and do not become confetti currency in the boards?

Mr Durkan: None of these moneys will be treated as confetti currency. If any Committee has reason to believe that a Department is treating money in that way, I rely on that Committee to bring the problem to light.

As I said in reply to Dr McCrea, moneys are allocated for specific purposes, and where Departments diverge significantly from that because they are not able to spend in a particular area, that should be declared. When variations are disclosed, Members should not make it a big issue. It is good financial management for Departments to make such savings known, and the Executive are then able to redirect available money to other programme areas. Members may feel more reassured that spending management is in line with stated plans when the needs and effectiveness evaluation results feed into the spending review.

Ms Lewsley: I add my voice of welcome to the Minister's statement, considering that this is his second Budget and, probably, his last.

There should be no doubt about the Minister's commitment to health and education. Can he summarise how much additional money has been given to these Departments since devolution?

Mr Durkan: I do not have precise figures at my fingertips. It depends whether we are considering two Budgets or three, as I provided a carry-over Budget in December 1999. We will make the figures available to the Member. There has been a significant increase in health spending.

Those two Departments are dealing with serious pressures, and the additional money that we have made available will not alleviate all those pressures. Rising costs in existing services and demands for new services have been factors, and acute pressures express themselves in different areas. I will not imply that we have done enough for those services and priorities, just as I recognise that there are many services in other Departments for which Members would like to see more funding.

Mr Shannon: The Minister has made a lengthy statement about the Health Service, and many people have concerns about the funding of that Department. The Minister said that the Barnett formula would give some £27 million extra. Can he advise whether the money given to the Health Service will be sufficient to bring it into line with the UK mainland? My information is that our health budget is already 9% shy of the UK average. Does the announced increase bring us into line with the national average?

In paragraph 17 of his statement the Minister referred to £13 million for community services and the provision of care places for older people. This year, the Ulster Community and Hospitals Trust needs £3 million

simply to cover costs. It is playing catch up. Does the Minister believe that £13 million is a sufficient allocation for 19 trusts and four board areas? What funding will be made available for winter provision? The Health Service has increased problems at this time of the year, relating to flu and other such ailments. What funding will be made available to provide extra nursing homes, beds, and step-down packages?

Mr Durkan: As I have pointed out to other Members, much of the detail of Mr Shannon's questions are for another Minister. It is not for me, therefore, to explain how that money will be spent, particularly with regard to boards and trusts. The relevant Minister and Department make those allocations through the appropriate structures.

No one is pretending that any allocation is adequate to cover every need that arises. The draft Budget allocation for health did not allow for service development. A further allocation now allows for that development. However, I do not pretend that all service needs will be met. There were other bids from the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety that could not be met. The further allocation for community care is aimed at supporting additional residential placements and domiciliary care packages. The effectiveness and extent of the impact of those services depends on how they are delivered.

Sir John Gorman: I am delighted that the Budget allocation for fuel poverty has increased from £4 million to £8 million. That is a wonderful example of how the Assembly can correct a problem that is particular to the Province, which has high fuel costs and a high level of fuel poverty.

I do not suggest that the Minister resign, as so many have tried that already. However, I am concerned about the discrepancy between figures that he gave to the Assembly previously and those that appear in the Budget — Laganside, for example, and the Housing Executive. I wish to make a special plea about the Housing Executive. I do not have the figures, but I do recall that in the last year's Budget statement the revenue created by the sale of Housing Executive houses was over £100 million. Departments other than the Department for Social Development benefited from about 50% of that money. The technical bid in the monitoring rounds will be for housing. I hope that more than 50% of the proceeds of house sales will go towards the Department for Social Development.

Mr Durkan: I thank the Member for a nice try.

That point has been discussed before on the housing programme and the moneys raised from house sales. In setting a Budget, the Executive must make an assumption about the amount of revenue raised from the sale of Housing Executive houses, just as an amount of money is assumed from Housing Executive

rents. When the Budget is examined, it should be realised that it is a public expenditure commitment. Other moneys will go into the total housing programme. I do not believe that I can give a commitment about a specific percentage or fixed proportion of any additional revenue from house sales that should go towards the housing programme.

It is well known that not every Department or service generates revenue as the housing programme does through house sales. Underinvestment in many other services is often said to have occurred when the Government's investment priority was, rightly, to invest in housing. Now that some of that investment is resulting in house sales and is generating revenue, it could be said that services which lost out before have a right to call on the additional revenue. The Executive will make those decisions in the light of prevailing pressures, patterns of need in housing and the needs of other Departments.

Mrs Courtney: I welcome the Minister's statement, particularly the restoration of £2 million from the Department of the Environment to the district councils and the significant extra allocation for health. I congratulate the Minister for providing the resources to implement free nursing care for the elderly. Can he confirm that he and his Colleagues in the Executive will encourage the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to move on the legislation that is required to bring this policy to life?

Mr Durkan: On the last point, I understand that the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety intends to bring forward the necessary legislation. I hope that all Members who support the extension of free nursing care to the elderly will give every support and facility to expedite the legislation through the House so that the money that the Executive are allocating can be used.

The allocation is intended to allow free nursing care to begin in October 2002. I make that point in case anyone should claim that I promised it earlier. It will take some time to get the legislation through.

Mr Speaker: I call the Chairperson of the Committee for Regional Development — sorry, the Chairperson of the Committee of the Centre, Mr Poots.

The Chairperson of the Committee of the Centre (Mr Poots): I will not take Alban's job just yet, Mr Speaker.

We all welcome the funding that has been put into health. We cannot sniff at 37% over three years. We need to see that being delivered; we need to see the waiting lists being cut and bed blocking eradicated. Social funds must be freed to deliver better health care than we have at present.

I would like the Minister to ensure that there is equality in the distribution of moneys for health and that the Down Lisburn Health and Social Services Trust, in my constituency, receives the money that it is due under its capitation formula. At present, its funding is £2 million short.

What is the state of the Minister's forward planning in relation to the children's commissioner and the review of public administration? The review of public administration is due to commence in March or April 2002, but it has not been provided for in the Budget. The children's commissioner is due to be appointed in June, yet there is no provision in the Budget for that. I am concerned that there has been no forward planning for those matters.

Mr Durkan: The Member's last two points were dealt with previously. I have said, on the record, that the cost of the review of public administration will be covered by an in-year monitoring bid rather than by the Budget. That does not mean that there is no pre-planning, rather that the Executive are not taxing the Budget plans with the cost of the review of public administration at this stage. If anything, the amount of money from the Budget that is wasted on such reviews would be remarked on. Therefore, we are making the call for the review of public administration in that way.

Similarly, I have dealt with the question about the children's commissioner previously. I am getting repeat questions on some issues. I welcome the Member's recognition of the fact that since devolution we have been able to increase significantly our spending on health.

The precise distribution of that is not a matter for the Department of Finance and Personnel, but for the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety.

1.30 pm

Reference was made to the increase over the period of devolution. To return to Ms Lewsley's point on health and education, if the cash budget for health and personal social services and the cash budget for schools in 1999-2000, are compared with the resource budgets for 2002-03, it will be seen that there are rises of 31% and 27% respectively.

The Chairperson of the Committee for Regional Development (Mr A Maginness): I welcome the increased allocation of 14.8% for the Department for Regional Development. That recognises the underinvestment in infrastructure that has occurred over the years, especially in roads and transport. I also welcome the Minister's announcement that the Department for Regional Development will have a cost saving through the Chancellor's decision to phase in the aggregates tax. I congratulate the Executive on persuading the Chancellor to do that. Will that cost saving be retained

within the Department to help address other departmental pressures?

Mr Durkan: The 14·8% increase was provided for in the draft Budget. That is a significant commitment, which reflects, as the Committee Chairperson rightly pointed out, the historic underinvestment that we are trying to overcome.

As I said, there will now be some easement for the Department for Regional Development as a result of the Chancellor's decision to phase in the aggregates tax. The benefits of that easement will fall entirely to that Department's programme. There will be no attempt to move those benefits to another Department. That, of itself, is a further benefit. It should mean that, for the same significant 14·8% increase, people will see more programme outcome.

Mr Savage: I too welcome the Minister's statement on health care, money for the homeless and housing, but I shall not comment on those issues. I am concerned about paragraph 40 of the Minister's statement, dealing with agriculture, which reads:

"In addition to these six evaluations, we are also going to take account of the work of the Vision Steering Group on the future of the agri-food sector".

That would be all very well if we were living in normal times, but the agriculture industry has come through a difficult period in recent years. I have read the vision group's report, and I do not believe that its recommendations will resolve the problems.

The vision group will have to report back to the Committee for Agriculture and Rural Development. I hope that the Minister of Finance and Personnel, and the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development, will take account of the Agriculture Committee's views and that the vision group's views will not overrule those of the Committee. The vision group is fine in its place, but it is employed by the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development to do a job. The members of the Agriculture Committee also have a job to do. The important aspect of that job is to ensure a viable agriculture industry in Northern Ireland. That must be the end result.

Mr Durkan: The vision group's report is now under consultation. The Executive anticipate that they will give the group's work further consideration in the future; consideration of resources will also feature in that. I understand why people criticise the Executive for trying to pre-empt the vision group's recommendations by fixing an allocation.

Therefore, what is happening with the Budget in the vision group is no different from what will happen with, for example, the Hayes review or the Burns report. Because consultation and consideration are still taking place, we cannot begin to specify what the resource

implications of such reviews will be. When the Executive take decisions, Ministers usually reflect the views and priorities of the Committees, and the Executive as a whole try to pay attention to them. None of us can pledge that everything advocated by every Committee will form part of the outcome. We could not afford to do that financially, never mind in respect of administration or legislation.

Dr McDonnell: I welcome the Minister's lengthy and detailed statement and congratulate him and his staff for all the hard work that has gone into it.

I draw attention to the Minister's extra expenditure in the past two years on health and education. Is it possible to have scrutiny of that expenditure, especially in the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety, to ensure that there is no waste or overspending? I refer particularly to some subsections —

Mr Speaker: The Member has expressed so much effusive thanks and congratulations to the Minister that he was unable to complete his question. I must ask the Minister to respond in writing to the question because time is up.

NORTH/SOUTH MINISTERIAL COUNCIL

Food Safety and Health Sector

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety (Ms de Brún): Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. Is mian liom tuairisc a thabhairt don Tionól faoin Chomhairle Aireachta Thuaidh/Theas a tháinig le chéile i bhformáid earnáileach i mBéal Feirste Dé hAoine 16 Samhain. Bhí gnóthaí a bhain le sábháilteacht bia agus le comhoibriú i gcúrsaí sláinte faoi chaibidil ag an chruinniú.

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

I ndiaidh domh féin agus don Uasal Dermot Nesbitt, CTR, Aire in Oifig an Chéad-Aire agus an LeasChéad-Aire, a bheith ainmnithe ag an Chéad-Aire agus ag an LeasChéad-Aire, d'freastail muid an tríú cruinniú den Chomhairle sna hearnálacha shábháilteacht bia agus sláinte. Bhí an tUasal Micheál Martin, an tAire a bhfuil cúram na Roinne Sláinte agus Leanaí air agus a chomhghleacaí, an Dr Thomas Moffatt, Aire Stáit, a bhfuil cúram Sábháilteacht Bia agus Daoine Scothaosta air, ag feidhmiú ar son Rialtas na hÉireann.

Cheadaigh an tUasal Dermot Nesbitt an ráiteas seo, agus tá sé á dhéanamh ar a shon fosta.

Fuair an Chomhairle tuairisc ar an dul chun cinn atá déanta ag an Bhord um Chur Chun Cinn Sábháilteachta Bia sna nithe seo leanas: caiteachas don bhliain 2000, cóiríocht, fostú foirne, forbairt suímh ghréasáin, feachtais feasachta, na conarthaí taighde a bronnadh agus fóram ar chúrsaí cothaithe. Cheadaigh an Chomhairle straitéis chorporáideach agus plean eatramhach an bhoird don bhliain 2001 agus thug dá haire an moladh go gceapfar plean ilbhliantúil trí bliana, rud a chuirfear faoi bhráid na Comhairle nuair a bheas sé réidh. Cheadaigh an Chomhairle an grádú agus na tuarastail a bheas ag an chéad ghrúpa de 20 ball foirne atá le fostú agus thug dá haire moltaí go ndéanfar measúnú ar na riachtanais foirne i gcomhthéacs an phlean trí bliana. Sa reachtaíocht faoina rialtaítear an bord, déantar socrú do choiste comhairleach atá le ceapadh ag an Chomhairle Aireachta Thuaidh/Theas, coiste ar a mbeidh saineolaithe eolaíocha agus ionadaithe ó réimse leathan de pháirtithe leasmhara a bhaineann le sábháilteacht bia.

Ag an chruinniú dheireannach a bhí aici, phléigh an Chomhairle an ról agus an déanamh a d'fhéadfadh a bheith ag coiste comhairleach de chuid an Bhoird um Chur Chun Cinn Sábháilteachta Bia; coiste a chuirfidh comhairle eolaíoch agus theicniúil ar fáil don bhord. Ag an chruinniú seo d'aontaigh an Chomhairle gur cheart go mbeadh 16 ball ar an choiste arb ionadaithe iad ó éagsúlacht mhór de pháirtithe leasmhara agus de dhisciplíní, lena n-áirítear tomhaltóirí agus an tionscal

bia. D'aontaigh an Chomhairle ansin ar na bail a cheapfaí ar an choiste agus gurbh é an tOllamh Seán Strain a cheapfaí mar chathaoirleach. Cheadaigh an Chomhairle go gcuirfí dréachtscéim chomhionannais an bhoird agus an plean gníomhaíochta nua-aimsiú riachtanas sóisialta faoi chomhairliúcháin poiblí. Ag an deireadh, d'aontaigh an Chomhairle i bprionsabal go raibh an t-iarthóir a moladh mar phríomhfheidhmeannach, i ndiaidh phróiseas roghnúcháin don phost, inghlactha.

Fuair an Chomhairle tuairiscí breise faoin dul chun cinn a rinneadh san obair a bhain le feidhmiú an chlár oibre a cheadaigh sí ag na cruinnithe a bhí ann roimhe; clár oibre do gach ceann de na cúig réimsí a aimsíodh mar chinn a bheadh oiriúnach do chomhoibriú. Ba iad na tosaíochtaí a aimsíodh le haghaidh comhoibriú: seirbhísí taismí agus éigeandálaí, pleanáil le haghaidh olléigeandálaí, comhoibriú ar threalamh ardteicneolaíochta, taighde ar ailse agus cur chun cinn sláinte.

I réimse na seirbhísí taismí agus éigeandálaí, thug an Chomhairle dá haire na moltaí go gcuirfí le ballraíocht an ghrúpa um sheirbhísí ospidéal réigiúnach. D'iarr an Chomhairle ar an ghrúpa fosta tuarascáil an ghrúpa athbhreithnithe ar ospidéal ghéarmhíochaine sa Tuaisceart a bhreithniú.

Thug an Chomhairle dá haire an moladh gur cheart iarracht a dhéanamh réimsí seirbhíse/speisialtachtaí a aimsiú ina dtiocfadh le comhoibriú trasteorann nó uile-oileáin bheith le leas frithpháirteach na seirbhísí a bheadh i gceist agus le leas na n-othar.

Thacaigh an Chomhairle leis an obair a rinneadh go dtí seo agus leis na pleananna i gcomhair obair bhreise i réimse na pleanála le haghaidh olléigeandálaí. I dtaca le comhoibriú i gcúrsaí ardteicneolaíochta, thacaigh an Chomhairle le ceapachán na mball chuig grúpa comhpháirteach um theicneolaíocht sláinte. Thacaigh an Chomhairle fosta le clár oibre don ghrúpa.

Thug an Chomhairle dá haire an comhoibriú atá ann faoi láthair sa taighde ar ailse, go háirithe an comhoibriú i seoladh na tuarascála ar an líon daoine a bhfuil ailse orthu ar fud na hÉireann.

I dtaca le cur chun cinn na sláinte, thug an Chomhairle dá haire go bhfuil an dá Roinn ag obair i bpáirt le chéile le comhchlár do chur chun cinn na sláinte, a phleanáilfear go straitéiseach, agus acmhainn oiliúna a cheapadh.

D'aontaigh an Chomhairle go mbeadh an chéad chruinniú eile sna formáidí earnáileacha seo sa Deisceart i mí Feabhra 2002.

D'aontaigh an Chomhairle ar théacs na teachtaireachta a eisíodh i ndiaidh an chruinnithe. Cuireadh cóip den teachtaireacht i Leabharlann an Tionóil.

I wish to report to the Assembly on the meeting of the North/South Ministerial Council that was held in sectoral format in Belfast on Friday 16 November.

Issues relating to food safety and co-operation on health matters were considered at the meeting.

Following nomination by the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister, junior Minister, Mr Nesbitt, and I attended the third meeting of the Council in the food safety and health sectors. Mr Micheál Martin, the Minister for Health and Children, and his departmental colleague Dr Thomas Moffatt, Minister of State with responsibility for food safety and older people, represented the Irish Government.

The following statement was approved by Mr Dermot Nesbitt and is made on his behalf.

The Council received a progress report on the work of the Food Safety Promotion Board on issues covering the financial out-turn for 2000, accommodation, the employment of staff, development of the web site, awareness campaigns, the award of research contracts and a forum on nutrition. The Council approved the board's corporate strategy and interim plan for 2001 and noted a proposal to develop a three-year, multi-annual plan, which will be submitted to the Council when complete. The Council approved the grading and remuneration of an initial tranche of 20 staff and noted proposals to assess the overall staffing needs in the context of the three-year plan. The legislation covering and governing the board provides for an advisory committee that will include scientific experts and representatives of broader food safety interests who will be appointed by the North/South Ministerial Council.

At its last meeting, the Council discussed the possible role and composition of the Food Safety Promotion Board's advisory committee, which will provide scientific and technical advice to that body. The Council agreed that the committee should have a membership of 16, representing a wide variety of interests and disciplines, including the consumer and the food industry. The Council agreed the membership of the committee and that Prof Seán Strain should be its chairperson. It approved the board's draft equality scheme and the New TSN action plan for public consultation. Finally, the Council accepted, in principle, the candidate who was recommended following a selection process for the post of chief executive to the Food Safety Promotion Board.

1.45 pm

The Council received further reports on the progress made in implementing the programme of work that it had approved at the earlier meetings for each of the five areas identified as suitable for co-operation. Those areas are: accident and emergency services; planning for major emergencies; co-operation on high-technology equipment; cancer research; and health promotion.

With regard to accident and emergency services, the North/South Ministerial Council noted the proposal to expand the membership of the regional hospitals

services group. The Council requested that the group consider the report of the group reviewing acute hospital services in the North. It also noted the proposal to identify additional service areas or specialities in which cross-border or all-island co-operation could be of mutual benefit to the respective services and would help patients.

The North/South Ministerial Council endorsed the work that had been done so far and the plans for further work on planning for major emergencies. The Council endorsed the membership of a joint health technology group and agreed a work programme for it. It noted the present co-operation on cancer research and, in particular, the launch of the all-Ireland cancer incidence report. The Council also noted that the two Health Departments were working together to develop a joint, strategically-planned health promotion programme and training resource.

The North/South Ministerial Council agreed that its next meeting in those sectoral formats would take place in the South in February 2002. The text of the communiqué that was issued following the meeting was agreed, and a copy has been placed in the Assembly Library.

The Chairperson of the Committee for Health, Social Services and Public Safety (Dr Hendron): I thank the Minister for her statement, and I welcome the fact that the North/South Ministerial Council noted that the two Health Departments were working together to develop a joint, strategically planned health promotion programme.

On page 2 of the Minister's statement, it reads:

"The Council received further reports on progress in implementing the programme of work it had approved at the earlier meetings in each of the five areas identified as suitable for co-operation."

One of those areas is accident and emergency services, which are under massive pressure throughout Northern Ireland. The Royal Victoria Hospital, which is the main trauma hospital for Northern Ireland, is not coping — it is falling well below the level at which it should operate, through no fault of the staff. Elderly people with fractures of the neck or femur must wait five or six days for surgery. A patient with such a fracture should be operated on within 24 hours. Given those facts, and bearing in mind the further reports that the Council received about accident and emergency services, what progress has been made on co-operation between Altnagelvin Hospital and Letterkenny General Hospital, between Sligo General Hospital and the Erne Hospital and between Daisy Hill Hospital and Louth County Hospital?

Ms de Brún: At the bilateral meeting that replaced the North/South Ministerial Council meeting that had been due to take place but did not, we heard a report from the co-operation and working together (CAWT) partners on the work done to date and the development of further work relating to the hospitals that Dr Hendron

mentioned. The issue did not arise again in detail at the meeting on which I am reporting. The report at that meeting referred to the North/South regional hospital services group and the discussions that it has been involved in because of its members' expertise in certain cross-border, specialised areas of service. The report also said that, at its next meeting, the group would review progress and set an agreed programme of work for next year. CAWT would have the opportunity to provide an update on its work.

I am sure that we shall hear more about that at the next North/South Ministerial Council meeting.

Mr McCarthy: I welcome the report. Further to the Chairperson of the Health, Social Services and Public Safety Committee's comments on accident and emergency services, and on planning for major emergencies, does that planning include an examination of the possible provision of an air ambulance for use throughout the island. I understand that that matter was on the agenda at an earlier North/South Ministerial Council meeting?

Ms de Brún: Yes, the working group has examined the suggested survey relating to the feasibility study on commissioning an air ambulance. When the North/South Ministerial Council reconvened, it was able to endorse the work to date of the emergency planning group and, specifically, the joint commissioning approach to a feasibility study. In the next few weeks, we shall invite companies to submit tenders for the air ambulance feasibility study, with the aim of getting it under way by March 2002 and of having the completed report by May 2002. That report will also examine possible locations for such a service.

Mrs Courtney: I welcome the Minister's statement. My question about the progress that has been made towards establishing an air ambulance service has already been answered. When the air ambulance service is set up, all areas should be investigated as a possible location, and the service should be centrally funded.

Ms de Brún: We shall examine the feasibility of providing such a service when we get the results of the study. 'The Report of the Strategic Review of the Ambulance Service' concluded that the financial implications of running a dedicated air ambulance service were substantial and that, in the face of so many competing priorities, the service was unlikely to attract Government funding. The feasibility study being commissioned will provide an objective assessment of the costs and benefits of an air ambulance or helicopter emergency medical service to be run on an all-island basis and of whether we could provide such a service. The results of the feasibility study will inform future decisions on the profile of ambulance services.

Ms Morrice: Does the Minister intend to follow up the recommendations of a North/South report into

inequalities between Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland in respect of health? As a result of that report, does she intend to commission any study aimed at reducing those inequalities?

Ms de Brún: The Council did not discuss such details at its most recent meeting. We examined health promotion, and the issue of inequality arose in the context of nutrition during our discussion on the Food Safety Promotion Board. I am sure that at future meetings we shall re-examine the work of the all-island Institute of Public Health in Ireland. The institute was not set up specifically under the remit of the North/South Ministerial Council, but it is viewed in that context. I am sure that we shall advance the work of the institute, specifically its priorities in regard to health inequalities. That is a major point in the Executive's Investing for Health strategy, which we are progressing.

Mr Hussey: With regard to accident and emergency services, I note that the Council is asking the regional hospital services group to consider the report of the Hayes review group in Northern Ireland. Does the Minister agree that the Hayes group should also consider developments in accident and emergency cover in Sligo and Cavan and the south-west area in general?

The Council endorsed the work so far and the plans for further work on planning for major emergencies. When we see major emergencies worldwide, we see the wide range of bodies that are brought in to assist — whether those be emergency services, military or policing services. Can the Minister inform us of the range of consultation involved in planning for major emergencies?

Ms de Brún: First, Members will be aware that I had to put the Hayes report out for an initial period of consultation. Officials are looking at the substantial responses, and after consideration by Executive Colleagues of matters that arise, the proposals will go out for consultation. However, it was also clear that it was worthwhile for the regional hospital services group to look at the report also. Although not discussed at the meeting, I understand that the review group considered the potential for hospitals in the South to complement a new hospital in the south-west. I shall look carefully at that aspect of the group's report along with views expressed during the initial consultation period.

The meeting on 16 November looked at planning for major emergencies and noted the initiatives that are underway. A programme of cross-border emergency planning training courses to cover the medical response to a major incident is already in place. We are developing integrated communication protocols to activate hospital and community responses in a major emergency. Costing proposals are being drawn up for further work required for hospital and community emergency planning. Those proposals will include the development of

comprehensive resource mapping analysis for the trusts and health boards along the border, joint planning for cross-border live exercises and the development of a language register, which is a list of interpreters available to attend at emergencies. They will also include the work being done by the Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure, which is taking the lead on the matter of interpreters and language.

We are developing an agreed template and glossary of terms for major emergency plans, proposals for the introduction of first responder schemes and an evaluation of the helicopter emergency medical service. We talked about the development of a road traffic accident response strategy for fire brigades in border areas and looked at proposals for, and the cost of, piloting fire safety awareness education in schools in all border area education authorities.

Dr McDonnell: Although I strongly welcome the many wonderful ideas in the Minister's statement and the progress that has been made, I just wonder if at some stage we could get down to practical matters that would make a difference to ordinary people's lives. There are a couple of things that I would like to see done.

2.00 pm

Will it soon be possible to have mutual recognition of medical licensing, North and South? Medical people register with separate bodies; although movement between North and South is possible, it is not easy, and they need to reregister. I wish to see registrars and senior registrars who work in Dublin being able to work in Belfast and vice versa, because that would be of mutual benefit.

People in Donegal should be able to avail themselves of services at Altnagelvin Hospital, and cancer patients from Donegal should be able to access the world-class services at the Belfast City Hospital. My colleagues in Donegal have expressed interest, but the bureaucracy is extremely complicated. They would also like to have some funding mechanism that accompanies patients so that they can avail themselves of services in the North. However, that question needs to be addressed in the South.

Ms de Brún: The question of obstacles to mobility was addressed by the North/South Ministerial Council on 30 November and could possibly be taken up again. We noted the progress in joint training, staff development and exchange opportunities in radiotherapy services, for example. We also noted the proposal to identify additional service areas and specialities for which cross-border or all-island co-operation could be of mutual benefit to patients, and any suggestions are welcome.

Mr M Murphy: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. The Council noted that the two Health Departments are working together to develop a joint

strategy on health promotion and training resources. What are the proposals and when will they be in place?

Ms de Brún: The two Departments and the Health Promotion Agency are specifically developing the programme and training resources at present, and, therefore, I cannot give the Member a full outline of the proposals until a later date.

The Council noted at its meeting on 16 November that the folic acid campaign, which was jointly launched, has been very successful, especially in the North. The jointly launched physical activity campaign, which ran from May to June and again in the early autumn, has also just finished. There is collaboration on smoking. We are considering an all-Ireland healthy eating circle award scheme, which could include people's homes as well as specific catering establishments.

The Council noted concern about the suicide leaflet, which was originally developed here, but which the Irish Association of Suicidology agreed should be launched on an all-island basis. Mr Martin, the Irish Health Minister, and I jointly launched the leaflet on 10 October 2001, which was World Mental Health Day.

We have been able to work together in those areas, and we hope to develop strategically in the future. The Department of Health and Children has nominated a representative, Mr Kevin Devine, to sit on our working group on tobacco, which is developing an action plan to tackle smoking. There is a considerable amount of work at present, and the Departments will meet in the next month to discuss opportunities for all-Ireland research into public health. Officials will meet in the new year to advance the development of the programme that the Member mentioned.

Ms Gildernew: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I welcome the Minister's statement this morning and the fact that she is now able to carry out that crucial area of work after her exile from the North/South Ministerial Council. I also welcome the present co-operation on cancer research, particularly in the light of the high rate of cancer in my constituency of Fermanagh and South Tyrone. How does the Minister expect that area of work to develop?

Ms de Brún: We shall develop the issue of cancer research in the context of the tripartite arrangement, and particularly in the context of the memorandum of understanding. That memorandum was launched following its signing in October 1999 by the National Cancer Institute in the United States, the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety in the North and the Department of Health and Children in the South. The memorandum was a result of detailed consultation between the various Administrations and recognised that cancer is a major public health and healthcare problem causing premature morbidity and mortality in all three jurisdictions.

The consortium will, in the first instance, exist for five years. The type of work that we shall undertake will be in that context — for example, we are making progress toward the development of an all-Ireland clinical trials network. It is important to have access to that, as clinical trials become the global standard for effective cancer prevention and care. We have an ongoing successful scholar exchange programme, which commenced during 2000, to help develop a core of well-trained cancer research specialists. In addition, a number of epidemiology fellowships have been established, which will continue to develop.

Through the consortium, the informatics infrastructure in both parts of the island is being enhanced to support co-ordinated clinical trials between hospitals and cancer centres. A valuable tool in that exercise is the introduction of telesynergy. I was delighted during the summer to announce funding totalling £150,000 for the Belfast City Hospital arm of that resource. That is the way in which we are trying to move forward following the Campbell report. At the meeting of 16 November, the Council endorsed the steps to date: the development of the hospitals infrastructure; the conducting of high-quality cancer clinical trials; the planned developments to co-ordinate all-Ireland clinical trial activity; the development of the telesynergy communications link structure; and the scholar exchange programme. That programme has already been established, and, as I have already said, we hope to extend it.

The sitting was suspended at 2.08 pm.

On resuming (Mr Speaker in the Chair) —

2.30 pm

Oral Answers to Questions

ENTERPRISE, TRADE AND INVESTMENT

Mr Speaker: I have received written notification from the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment, Sir Reg Empey, that he is absent on departmental business and that Dr Farren has agreed to answer questions on Sir Reg's behalf.

Question 4 in the name of Mr Byrne has been withdrawn and will receive a written answer. Question 7, in the name of Mr Derek Hussey, has been transferred to the Minister for Regional Development and will also receive a written answer.

Social Economy

1. **Dr Birnie** asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment how he is developing his policy on the social economy. (AQO 470/01)

The Minister for Employment and Learning (Dr Farren): As was mentioned, Sir Reg Empey, the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment, is unable to be here as he is leading an important trade mission to China. While agreeing to respond to the questions on his behalf is an example of the joined-up approach to Government that we are trying to promote, Members will understand that my knowledge will not be as extensive as Sir Reg's when specific points are raised. If I am unable to answer a point, a written answer will be provided by my Colleague.

With respect to question 1, the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment, working in collaboration with the Department for Social Development, other interested Departments and the community and voluntary sectors, commissioned a policy review of the social economy, which was completed by Colin Stutt Associates in June 2001. The Executive agreed to the process recommendations, which are being carried forward by the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment. An interdepartmental steering group, chaired by the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment has been established and will meet on 5 December 2001.

Dr Birnie: It is, perhaps, fitting that the Minister for Employment and Learning now seems to have two jobs, but I trust that it is only a temporary development.

Does the Minister agree that to get value for money from the total industrial development budget, the

Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment should have costs-for-jobs-created figures for, on the one hand, the so-called social economy and, on the other hand, for the more traditional methods of industrial development?

Dr Farren: I will take that as a recommendation to the Department, and I will convey the Member's point to my Colleague, who will be in a position to make a response. I do not have advice to indicate whether what is recommended is current practice.

Mr O'Neill: Can the Minister say whether money will be available for social economy projects?

Dr Farren: Again I plead ignorance. That will be a matter to be considered in the light of the action plans which will come from the interdepartmental steering group to which I have already referred. Any expenditure necessary will be determined then, and any additional provision which has to be made within the Department's allocations will be made.

IDB Assistance (Larne)

2. **Mr Beggs** asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to detail the level of IDB assistance and visits by potential investors to the borough of Larne during 2000-01; and to make a statement.

(AQO 487/01)

Dr Farren: No new selective financial assistance was offered by the IDB to client companies in the borough of Larne during 2000-01, and there were no visits by potential investors. It is important to point out that the IDB has six client companies in the borough of Larne, employing almost 1,800 people. Four of those companies are currently undertaking investment supported by the IDB. That is a clear indication that the IDB is active in promoting future investment in the Larne area.

Mr Beggs: Does the Minister acknowledge that unemployment is a problem in the east of the Province, in areas such as Larne, and that it does not occur only in the west? Does he accept that although unemployment in the borough of Larne has declined in the last decade, the increase in unemployment there in the past year has been greater than that of any other borough in Northern Ireland? There has been a 6.3% increase in unemployment in Larne borough, by comparison with an average decrease of 6.5% in Northern Ireland.

Does the Minister believe that increased focus from Invest Northern Ireland will have to be directed at indigenous companies, perhaps in particular to smaller enterprises?

Dr Farren: The Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment, which collates and publishes unemployment figures, is fully aware of the situation in each of the 18 constituencies and in every district council area. It monitors the situation constantly.

The Department is anxious to promote and, in doing so, to support indigenous investment. The Department and the Executive recognise that we must ensure that our indigenous entrepreneurs are given all possible encouragement and financial support. Given that the downturn in overseas investment in Northern Ireland is affected by the general global situation, we might find that it is to our indigenous investors that we will turn most often. However, the question of where investment is made is one of balance.

Overseas investors will always be welcome, and we must continue to try to attract them. However, we must also provide indigenous investors with the support that I have outlined. There is a need to attend to the areas where unemployment is greatest. The Member will see from the activity of the Government and in the Programme for Government a clear reflection of the Executive's concern to do just that.

Electricity Supply Market

3. **Mr M Murphy** asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment what benefits will accrue to domestic users from opening up the electricity supply market.

(AQO 471/01)

Dr Farren: The objective, in line with the European Directives on gas and electricity liberalisation, is to open up the market fully in a way that will enable users, including domestic consumers, to purchase competitively priced electricity from the supplier of their choice.

Mr M Murphy: The Northern Ireland Consumer Committee for Electricity states in its report that the big users in Northern Ireland will see a downward movement in prices. However, the committee fears that the cost of standard contracts for franchise customers would impact adversely on more small-scale commercial and domestic consumers. They have been unable to obtain from the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment a definite response on the matter. Can the Minister give me an answer?

Dr Farren: Most Members will be aware that the Northern Ireland electricity industry and its customers are, for a variety of reasons, burdened with above-market costs. The Department is, therefore, considering the possibility of buying out the above-market costs of the industry by means of a long-term bond of costs, which could be met by consumers. However, much work is required before definitive conclusions can be reached. Any firm proposals, which would require legislative backing, will be included in the forthcoming consultation exercise on possible changes to the existing electricity and gas legislation plan.

In that context, the concerns of the whole range of electricity consumers, not just those categories mentioned by the Member, will be addressed.

Mr Shannon: Can the Minister tell the House what targets the Department has set to ensure that electricity prices for business and domestic use are brought down, in line with those in other parts of the United Kingdom and Europe?

Dr Farren: I did not catch the initial part of the Member's question.

Mr Speaker: Would the Member give the initial part of the question again, as the Minister did not hear it clearly?

Mr Shannon: What targets are being set by the Department to ensure that electricity prices are brought down, in line with those in other parts of the UK and Europe, for the benefit of domestic and business users?

Dr Farren: I must confess ignorance about that matter, as I am unaware of the targets that are being set. However, I shall refer the Member's question to the Minister for a written answer.

Tourism

5. **Mr Armstrong** asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment if he has any plans to introduce incentives to encourage major airlines to use airports in Northern Ireland as the main entry point for tourists visiting Ireland, both North and South. (AQO 450/01)

Dr Farren: The Northern Ireland Tourist Board has commissioned a review of the role of air services in the development of tourism in Northern Ireland. That will help to inform the tourism sector's input to the UK Government's aviation policy White Paper.

Mr Armstrong: Can the Minister assure the House that active steps are being taken by the Administrations here and in Dublin on joint planning of the tourism infrastructure, of both parts of the island of Ireland, to ensure that a fair balance of long-haul flights are ducted through Northern Ireland's airports?

Dr Farren: I can assure the Member that there has been considerable consultation and discussion, particularly in the context of the establishment of Tourism Ireland Ltd. The outcome of those discussions on the matters that the Member is concerned about has yet to be seen. In view of the significance of air travel in the promotion of tourism in both parts of Ireland, there is considerable anxiety to facilitate it in the best possible way. The way in which we plan strategically to use our facilities in the different airports around the whole of the island is under active consideration by the Executive, through Sir Reg Empey, and by his counterpart in the South.

Natural Gas Pipeline

6. **Mr Ford** asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to detail the role of Questar in relation

to the building of the natural gas pipeline to the north-west. (AQO 476/01)

8. **Mrs Courtney** asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to provide an update on the proposed gas pipeline to the north-west, given the recent threat from one of the developers to pull out of the project. (AQO 482/01)

Dr Farren: On 28 November the Regulator General for Electricity and Gas and the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment were informed that Questar had decided not to participate with Bord Gáis Éireann in the gas pipeline project.

Mr Ford: I thank the Minister for the brevity of his reply; it was somewhat briefer than we are used to. Given the importance of the gas pipeline for Derry — and many other towns on the route — and for underpinning Coolkeeragh power station, can the Minister tell us what actions are being taken by Executive Departments to ensure that another partner is found and that the project proceeds with all possible speed?

Dr Farren: Perhaps I should have indicated at the outset that I was taking questions 6 and 8 together, as they concern the same issues.

I assure the Member that Questar's withdrawal relates to its strategic planning and its own view of the future emphasis of its involvement in such projects. The proposed gas pipeline project is not in doubt. I assure the Member that it will not negatively affect progress on the implementation of the north-west pipeline.

2.45 pm

Mrs Courtney: I note the Minister's response to question 6 and his confirmation that Questar has withdrawn from the project. Will he ensure that the project still goes ahead and that any information to the contrary will be brought urgently to the attention of the Committee for Enterprise, Trade and Investment?

Dr Farren: On behalf of my Colleague, Sir Reg Empey, I give that assurance. Questar has indicated its confidence in the financial viability of the project, but its strategic plans in the medium and long terms have led to the decision to withdraw. In doing so, Questar is not casting any reflection on the viability of the project.

The Chairperson of the Committee for Enterprise, Trade and Investment (Mr P Doherty): Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. On 28 November the Minister assured the Committee that the Bord Gáis Éireann licence application is going ahead with the regulator. He also said that, following Questar's withdrawal, Bord Gáis Éireann would most likely seek another strategic partner. Can the Minister give any updated information on who that partner might be? Will it be the same partner that Bord Gáis Éireann is seeking for the Scottish interconnector? We do not

have any direct bearing on that interconnector, but we have an interest in the gas that flows through it.

Dr Farren: I have not been advised about any other partner. Again, I make it clear on my Colleague's behalf that the project will go ahead and that Questar's withdrawal does not cast any doubt on that.

Mr McClarty: Are the deadlines for the gas pipeline project in any doubt as a result of Questar's withdrawal? Are there grounds for assuming that the level of confidence in the scheme has been exaggerated?

Dr Farren: I repeat what I have already said: there is no question mark over the project. I have not been advised about particular dates and, therefore, will have to refer that part of the Member's question to the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment for a written reply.

Mr Speaker: Question 7 has been transferred. Question 8 was grouped with Question 6 and has already been answered. Question 9 is in the name of Mrs Nelis, but she is not in her place.

LEDU (Budget)

10. **Ms Lewsley** asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to detail LEDU's budget for the last three years. (AQO 485/01)

Dr Farren: LEDU's budget for the last three years was £26,922,000 in 1998-99, £25,712,000 in 1999-2000 and £29,806,000 in 2001-02.

Ms Lewsley: Further to that, can the Minister detail how much was spent on internal administration in LEDU and how much was spent on small businesses over the last three years?

Dr Farren: I have been advised of the following figures: the administrative costs in each of the three years were £7,600,000; £7,159,000 and £7,519,000. Expenditure on the programme and clients over those three years was £19,265,000, £18,553,000, £22,287,000, making a total of £60,105,000.

Mr K Robinson: Can the Minister confirm that proportionately less of the budget allocation over the last three years has been spent in the boroughs of Larne, Carrickfergus and Newtownabbey in the east of the Province than has been spent in areas west of the Bann? How does his Department hope to remedy that situation?

Dr Farren: Again, I must admit my ignorance of those details. I will refer the question to my Colleague, the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment.

Mr S Wilson: I suspect that the Minister will also have to refer my question to his Colleague. Is he aware that since 1996 there has been a decline of 12% in employment in east Belfast? If the Minister has the

details, can he tell the House how much LEDU has spent in east Belfast on job promotion in the past year or, better still, in the period from 1996?

Dr Farren: I am afraid that the Member is looking for a level of detail that even my good Friend the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment might not have had immediately available had he been answering the question. I will refer the question to the Minister for a written response.

Mr Speaker: We have come to the end of the time for questions to the Minister. Although the Minister for Employment and Learning is here to don his own departmental hat for the next set of questions, those who may wish to ask supplementary questions may not be present. The House will, therefore, by leave, suspend, resuming at 3.00 pm with questions to the Minister in relation to his own Department — the Department for Employment and Learning.

The sitting was suspended at 2.52 pm.

On resuming —

3.00 pm

EMPLOYMENT AND LEARNING

Tourism Training Programmes

1. **Mr McMenamin** asked the Minister for Employment and Learning to detail the number of businesses that participated in the tourism training programmes which were established following the foot-and-mouth disease crisis. (AQO 465/01)

The Minister for Employment and Learning (Dr Farren): Three joint North/South tourism training programmes were agreed at the meeting in the tourism sectoral format of the North/South Ministerial Council in Coleraine on 29 June. The first of those programmes, which is a short-term business renewal programme aimed at chief executives, managers and owner-managers, is under way. Four seminars have been held — two in the North and two in the South. A total of 83 people from 74 businesses attended the seminars. Of those businesses, 57 were from Northern Ireland and 17 were from the Republic.

The second initiative, which is an operational skills development programme aimed at owner-managers of small businesses, began today with 30 participants. An exchange of teacher and trainer programmes will begin in January.

Mr McMenamin: It is important for businesses to participate in tourism training programmes. However, what is the cost of those programmes?

Dr Farren: The total cost will exceed £1 million. My officials, together with their Southern counterparts, will identify the most appropriate sources for the required funding. Those may include the International Fund for Ireland and EU programmes. To date, the programmes have been successful, and we are pleased with the way in which the North/South aspect is working.

Mr Speaker: Question 2, in the name of Mr Neeson, and question 7, in the name of Mr Ford, have been withdrawn.

Employment of Older People

3. **Mr McCarthy** asked the Minister for Employment and Learning what steps he is taking to encourage the employment of older people. (AQO 462/01)

Dr Farren: The Department is keen to encourage employers to utilise the available skills of all workers, irrespective of age. Departmental policy is outlined in a code of practice issued by the former Department of Economic Development in June 1999. My Department introduced New Deal 50 plus to help people who are looking for or considering a return to paid employment.

Mr McCarthy: It is essential to employ a balanced workforce — young people with fresh ideas and more senior people, regardless of age, with years of experience. However, does the Minister agree that it is important that employees have a choice between continuing to work and retiring? Members of the Fire Service must retire at a certain age, and that is probably the case with other organisations. Will the Minister encourage his Executive Colleagues to support an end to age discrimination in all Departments?

Dr Farren: The code of practice for age diversity in employment was developed by the then Department for Education and Employment in Great Britain and issued in Northern Ireland by the former Department of Economic Development in June 1999. It is a voluntary code that sets the standard for non-ageist approaches to employment. The code covers good practice in six aspects of the employment cycle: recruitment; selection; promotion; training; redundancy; and retirement. I agree in principle that a balanced workforce is desirable. However, the nature of that balance must reflect the skills needs of a particular enterprise. Therefore, we must allow employers to exercise their judgement on what skills are needed and from which part of the labour market the people with those skills can be recruited.

Further and Higher Education Colleges (Staff Salaries)

4. **Mr Hamilton** asked the Minister for Employment and Learning what proportion of staff salaries in each of the further and higher education colleges is paid to senior staff and accountants with no direct subject area of responsibility. (AQO 475/01)

Dr Farren: Based on information provided by colleges for the 2000-01 financial year, the average proportion of salaries paid to senior staff and accountants with no direct subject area of responsibility amounted to some 5% of total salary expenditure.

Mr Hamilton: Can the Minister institute a survey to examine what many consider to be the detrimental effects of incorporation on further education colleges? The drift has been towards functional management — as is found in industry — rather than towards proper education-driven management of academic programme areas. Functional management has a tendency to undermine proper educational decision making and quality delivery in favour of domination by accountants.

Dr Farren: I assure the Member that my Department continually monitors all its areas of responsibility, including the further education sector, to ensure that they deliver on their mission statements and that those statements meet the overall educational aims, training aims and objectives of our society, especially those set down in the Programme for Government. The Member's question contains many value judgements that would have to be supported by strong evidence before they could be accepted both as an indication of certain trends in expenditure or in the manner in which administrative functions are being delivered. Administrations are there to serve the needs of our institutions. Some level of expenditure must be directed towards them — an overall average of 5% could not be considered excessive in anyone's book. Of course, in individual colleges, there may be balances that should be subject to scrutiny and questioning.

Further Education Colleges (Board of Governors)

5. **Mr K Robinson** asked the Minister for Employment and Learning if he has any plans to review the composition and role of the boards of governors of FE colleges. (AQO 467/01)

Dr Farren: I am currently reconstituting governing bodies for the further education colleges, and I shall undertake a review of the composition and role of the governing bodies in line with the next intended reconstitution in 2006.

Mr K Robinson: Does the Minister agree that educational establishments such as further education colleges play an important role as one of the main exemplars of successful integrated education and, to that end, should have a strong local democratic element in their boards of governors, possibly in the wake of pending local government reforms?

Dr Farren: Under current legislation — the Further Education (Northern Ireland) Order 1997 — at least half of the membership of governing bodies comprises

individuals from the business and professional communities. Other members include the principal of the college, staff and student representatives and up to two nominees of the local education and library board. The governing body can co-opt up to two other individuals. That spread of representation shows that the governing bodies are intended to reflect many of the general and specific interests that the courses they provide are intended to serve. The Member's point that note should be taken of any review of public administration will be considered when that review is under way.

Labour Relations Agency

6. **Dr Birnie** asked the Minister for Employment and Learning to outline the progress to date in respect of the review of the Labour Relations Agency. (AQO 466/01)

Dr Farren: Consultants have been appointed, and the review commenced on 1 October. A wide range of organisations and groups has been consulted, and their responses are being analysed. The consultants have carried out extensive interviews with the principal stakeholders, and they are on target to present their report by 31 December.

Dr Birnie: What does the Minister feel will be the impact on the review of the recent Department of Trade and Industry consultation on industrial tribunals and the associated Employment Bill, which is going through Westminster at present? Both seem to give a much expanded role to the Advisory, Conciliation and Arbitration Service (ACAS), which is the Labour Relations Agency equivalent in Great Britain.

Dr Farren: It would be inappropriate for a Minister to offer comment of the kind that the Member is inviting during a consultation exercise. The Member will be aware that we have a substantial body of employment legislation that is particular to Northern Ireland. Obviously, we shall consider any recommendations that would suggest alterations, changes or developments and additions to that legislation in the light of developments across the water, especially in the light of the responses we receive locally to our own consultation exercise.

Further Education Colleges (Financial Difficulties)

8. **Mrs Carson** asked the Minister for Employment and Learning to detail (a) those further education colleges that have experienced financial difficulties following the transfer of responsibility from the Department of Education to his Department and (b) what action has been taken to alleviate the situation. (AQO 474/01)

Dr Farren: In the colleges' financial year August 1999 to July 2000, during which the transfer of responsibilities took place, Castlereagh College of Further and

Higher Education and Lisburn Institute of Further and Higher Education experienced financial difficulties. In both cases, the Department engaged directly with the senior management of the college and the chairperson of the governing body, and the college was required to submit a detailed analysis of the causes of its difficulties and the action being taken to deal with the situation. We also required both colleges to develop and implement a formal financial recovery plan and helped to provide financial expertise to support the colleges to develop a recovery plan.

Mrs Carson: Is the Minister convinced that, in every case, the boards of governors adequately discharged their responsibilities to scrutinise the financial arrangement in their college?

Dr Farren: I wish to indicate that the Department monitors the financial circumstances of colleges each quarter. From the data supplied, the Department takes prompt action when there is a need to do so. The Member's question invites me to pass judgement on the colleges' management, but it would be more appropriate for me to indicate the action that we take when difficulties arise. Difficulties can arise for a variety of reasons, and it is important that the Department investigates and supports colleges when they do.

In my initial response, I indicated the general nature of the action we take to provide that kind of support to enable our colleges to function and carry out their mission appropriately — complying with the general financial requirements as set down.

Mr S Wilson: Can the Minister tell us whether there has been continual monitoring of the two colleges that he mentioned were in deficit? Can he also tell us the level of the current deficit and when it is envisaged by the two colleges that they will no longer be in deficit?

3.15 pm

Dr Farren: I am not in a position to give the details of deficit levels that the Member requests, but I shall endeavour to provide that information. With regard to the two colleges — one of which is in the Member's constituency — the action that has been taken requires the Department to maintain regular and close contact with any college that experiences financial difficulties. I assure the Member and the House that my Department is actively involved with the colleges that I named in my initial response.

Employment Support Programme

9. **Mr McGrady** asked the Minister for Employment and Learning to detail the number of people engaged on the employment support programme at the time it was suspended in June 2000; and to make a statement. (AQO 455/01)

Mr Farren: The employment support programme was never suspended. A moratorium on new applications for places was introduced in October 2000. At that time, 793 people were employed under the programme, and there was a substantial waiting list. The Executive approved funding for 50 additional places from 2001-02 to increase the number of places to 850. As a result, the waiting list has been cleared, and new applications are once again being accepted.

Mr McGrady: The Minister advised me in writing about the 50 additional places. However, I am aware of last year's substantial waiting list for places on employment support programmes, and I am pleased that that backlog has been cleared. According to my experiences in my constituency, many people would like to enter the employment support programme. How is that measured in relation to real need, and is there a possibility of meeting that need?

Dr Farren: I am pleased to tell the Member and the House that the waiting list has been cleared as a result of the additional 50 places and normal turnover in the programme. New applications have been accepted again since October, and people with learning disabilities will be able to gain places on the programme.

The Executive approved funding for 50 additional places from this year. There are many competing demands on the Department's funds, and additional funds had to be sought to cover the increasing costs of maintaining those on employment support in the future. The available funds will not allow a significant expansion of the scheme, but it is important to note that applications are being accepted. I trust that the people in the Member's constituency, about whom he is concerned, are applying for places on the programme.

East Antrim Institute of Further and Higher Education

10. **Mr Beggs** asked the Minister for Employment and Learning how he is assisting the East Antrim Institute of Further and Higher Education to develop an accessible further education campus on the site of the former Larne Technical College. (AQO 488/01)

Dr Farren: The development of provision at Larne is a matter for the governing body of the East Antrim Institute. My officials have offered advice when it has been required. My Department also made a payment of £359,000 in December 2000 in connection with the closure and demolition costs of the previous, now derelict, campus.

Mr Beggs: Does the Minister acknowledge that the current temporary setting of the Larne further education campus away from the centre of Larne creates access difficulties and that East Antrim is one of the few constituencies without a permanent further education

campus? It is also one of the few constituencies that currently do not have a learndirect centre, and none of the seven educational guidance services for adults is centred in the borough.

Given that background and the renewed commitment in the Programme for Government to providing everyone with the opportunity for lifelong learning, can the Minister assure me that the resources of his Department — and of other Departments, if necessary — will be used to assist in the sale of the existing campus? That money could then be used to provide the modern campus that is necessary.

Larne has sustained the highest increase in unemployment. Is that increase related to the fact that there is insufficient further education provision in the borough?

Dr Farren: We have been over this ground if not at every Question Time, then at every other Question Time. The Department has offered the assistance that I mentioned in my initial response. Formal approval has been given for the sale of the site in question, and there are several complex sale options to be considered by the commercial estate agent to ensure that we achieve best value for money for the institute.

It is my Department's responsibility to ensure that everyone in Larne who seeks training or further and higher education can find it. The work of the East Antrim Institute of Further and Higher Education demonstrates that it provides a range of courses that attract many people from the borough of Larne. Further education institutions elsewhere, such as the North East Institute of Further and Higher Education in Ballymena and the university campus at Jordanstown, are also within immediate reach. We are anxious to ensure that, when the site has been sold, provision will be made in accordance with the needs of the area.

College Students (Careers)

11. **Mr Armstrong** asked the Minister for Employment and Learning what further steps is he taking to ensure that colleges encourage talented students to continue their careers within Northern Ireland. (AQO 489/01)

Dr Farren: My Department is carrying out a review of careers education and guidance, under the chairmanship of Prof Sean Fulton. The review will make recommendations designed to enhance the system of careers guidance and will specifically consider, among other issues, the structure and nature of careers guidance in the further education sector.

Mr Armstrong: Will the Minister consider launching and funding awards for young inventors and young entrepreneurs to encourage lateral thinking in our educational institutions? We must do more to encourage the development of the necessary qualities in our young people.

Dr Farren: A range of such awards is available. If there are gaps for awards that would more effectively meet the needs that the Member has identified, we would be only too pleased to assist. I attend award ceremonies regularly, and they suggest to me that young people — indeed, people of all ages and from many different backgrounds — are being encouraged to be more entrepreneurial and inventive. Many opportunities are provided for people to display their talents in both respects. However, if gaps are identified, we shall consider how to fill them.

Task Force on Employability and Long-term Unemployment

12. **Mr Dallat** asked the Minister for Employment and Learning to detail the number of responses received as a result of the consultation document issued by the task force on employability and long-term unemployment.
(AQO 463/01)

Dr Farren: The task force on employability and long-term unemployment has met on six occasions and has circulated 2,100 discussion documents. A total of 65 written responses have been returned. We have completed a series of 30 engagement meetings with a wide range of organisations, and bilaterals with all the other Departments. The task force is considering the information gathered with a view to preparing an action plan by 31 March 2002.

Mr Dallat: I am delighted by that response. Can the Minister assure the House that the views of those who are socially excluded are represented on the task force? Are there any particular views emerging from the consultation process at this early stage?

Dr Farren: I assure the Member, and the House, that the views of those who are socially excluded are at the heart of what the task force stands for. We have met with various organisations, including the Organisation of the Unemployed (NI) and the Belfast Unemployed Resource Centre, and have consulted widely with community organisations, voluntary groups, trade unions and employers.

I shall have an early opportunity to meet people who are long-term unemployed through the auspices of the Organisation of the Unemployed (NI). A wide range of views will be available to us. Key issues are emerging, and they may not come as a great surprise. The benefits trap, urban and rural transport, training and the development of the social economy are some of the issues and aspects highlighted by the task force's work. I hope to announce practical recommendations by the date stated.

(Madam Deputy Speaker [Ms Morrice] in the Chair)

PhD Students

13. **Mr McClarty** asked the Minister for Employment and Learning to give the percentage of higher education students who are currently studying for a PhD.
(AQO 468/01)

Dr Farren: During the 2000-01 academic year, 3.3% of students who were enrolled at Northern Ireland higher education institutions were studying for a PhD.

Mr McClarty: The figure quoted is in stark contrast with that of other European countries. The figure for Austria and Switzerland is 9.9%, Finland, 8.1%, Sweden, 6.2%, the Czech Republic, 5.9%, and France, 5.5%. What is the Department doing to redress the situation?

Dr Farren: The Department and its higher education advisory council have been reviewing the provision of financial support for those who are undertaking higher degrees, which includes people who are pursuing doctoral programmes. The aim is to identify recommendations that will provide more effective support for students pursuing research programmes. I have made general points to the House on initiatives that have been taken. Members will recall the support programme for university research (SPUR) initiative announced last year. That initiative was designed to enhance research facilities in particular areas of university work. I have expressed concern to ensure that we have a more effective research constituency available to us, and the key to that is to have students who are prepared to pursue research programmes such as doctoral courses.

The results of that review will be made known in the near future.

3.30 pm

College Students (Financial Aid)

14. **Mr M Murphy** asked the Minister for Employment and Learning what steps he is taking to increase financial aid for college students.
(AQO 479/01)

Dr Farren: Following my review of student support, I announced a £65 million package of proposals. Over the next three years this additional funding will help students from lower-income families to enter higher and further education. More financial help will be directed towards students most in need.

SOCIAL DEVELOPMENT

Dungannon: Regeneration

1. **Mr Gallagher** asked the Minister for Social Development if he has any plans for the regeneration of Dungannon's west end.
(AQO 481/01)

The Minister for Social Development (Mr Dodds): As the Member is aware, the Department for Social Development has already been involved in two substantial projects in Dungannon West. In 1996, under the community economic regeneration scheme, the Department co-funded with the International Fund for Ireland a

business complex at Ballysaggart costing £700,000. In 1998, under the special support programme for peace and reconciliation, the Department supported the provision of nursery school and community facilities at Ballygawley Road at a cost of approximately £200,000.

There are no specific plans for the future regeneration of Dungannon's west end. However, my officials have encouraged Dungannon and South Tyrone Borough Council to prepare such plans. I understand that a regeneration strategy for Dungannon, including the area known as Dungannon West, has been drawn up by consultants employed by the Dungannon regeneration partnership. This group, which is supported by the council, has just received the final draft report from the consultants. When the strategy is adopted, my officials will engage with council officials to see what role the Department for Social Development can play in implementing the strategy.

Mr Gallagher: The Minister has made reference to funding thus far. Does he accept that, as in other towns, pockets of severe neglect and deprivation still exist? Does the programme that he has mentioned include measures to improve the immediate environment for residents and restore neglected and abandoned business premises in such areas?

Mr Dodds: The Department for Social Development awaits the final draft report from the consultants. With regard to specific matters, we will have to sit down with council officials to see what role we can play. Existing regeneration tools include comprehensive redevelopment schemes such as have taken place in Lurgan and environmental improvement schemes such as have taken place in Banbridge. The Member will be aware that a new neighbourhood renewal strategy has been prepared and is being assessed. It is the subject of discussion with other Departments, following considerable consultation. We will look carefully at what is being proposed and talk in detail to the council about those matters once we have seen the final report.

The Deputy Chairperson of the Committee for Social Development (Ms Gildernew): A LeasCheann Comhairle, given the decrease in objective C spending announced today, will the Minister tell the House why surplus funding was not put into such a deprived area as Dungannon West to try to alleviate years of discrimination? He will be aware of the extreme cases of dereliction and deprivation in Dungannon West. They are among the worst in the North. Does he intend to put any real resources into this community?

Mr Dodds: If the Member had been listening, she would have heard the reply that I gave to Mr Gallagher in which I stated that officials from the Department for Social Development stand ready, when the final report is received, to discuss with council officials the role our Department can play. The Member mentioned

discrimination. Coming from the party that she does, she will know all about discrimination against sections of the community in Northern Ireland.

As part of the overall strategy for future urban regeneration in Northern Ireland, the Department has a town centre reinvigoration strategy, which will help to ensure that regeneration of our town centres will be better co-ordinated in future. The Department for Social Development will do what it can, with the resources that it has, to reinvigorate as many town centres and areas of decline as possible. However, we must await the report from the regeneration group, supported by the council. We will then discuss it with officials.

Housing Executive (Staffing)

2. **Mr Campbell** asked the Minister for Social Development what plans the Housing Executive has to promote fair participation in employment opportunities in the light of an internal Housing Executive document that outlines the imbalance in the religious breakdown of Housing Executive staff throughout Northern Ireland. (AQO 453/01)

Mr Dodds: Where monitoring shows that the Housing Executive's recruitment processes deliver differential outcomes, it initiates an affirmative action programme that aims to encourage the full participation of the community in securing employment in the organisation. While recent research shows that 62% of the public feel that the recruitment processes are fair, the Housing Executive will shortly undertake public consultation on the results of its review of its appointment and promotion procedures. That will provide an opportunity for people to say where there are obstacles and to suggest possible solutions. I will look carefully at the results of the review and at the action taken by the Housing Executive to address any imbalances in its workforce.

Mr Campbell: I thank the Minister for his response and for his commitment to monitoring the review. I ask him to keep the matter under review, given the substantial under-representation that exists in the Housing Executive and in other bodies. In the Child Support Agency (CSA), for example, there is an outrageous under-representation of Protestants. Only 30% of the people recruited last year to the CSA were Protestant. It is obvious that there is a major problem in parts of the public sector. I thank the Minister for his commitment to keeping the matter under review, and it is hoped that he will continue to do that.

Mr Dodds: I assure Mr Campbell that I will keep the matter under review, and I will be looking to the outcome of the review that has been initiated by the Housing Executive. There will be an opportunity for

public comment when the review is launched before Christmas for consultation.

Mr Campbell mentioned the situation in the CSA. Under fair employment legislation, the Northern Ireland Civil Service is treated as a single entity. Equality of opportunity and fair participation is assessed by examining the religious composition of the Northern Ireland Civil Service at occupational group and grade level. The composition of individual departments, in respect of community background and gender, will vary for many reasons. However, the profile of the Northern Ireland Civil Service as a whole compares well with the estimated economically active population of Northern Ireland.

Mr B Hutchinson: Can the Minister give the House a breakdown of the composition of the Department for Social Development? Will he make any changes if one section of the community is under-represented? Does the Minister agree that the Housing Executive has a number of measures in place to overcome the problem of under-representation, and does he agree that the Housing Executive has worked in an unbiased manner over the past 30 years?

Mr Dodds: I will deal with the Member's last point first and affirm what he said about the action taken by the Housing Executive. The affirmative action programme includes: the extension of external recruitment to cover key recruitment grades; the promotion, through 'Housing News', of careers in the Housing Executive in districts where there is under-representation; and the targeting of career work at schools in areas where under-representation exists. That includes the provision of work experience, presentations on housing-related issues and support for school projects.

The Member asked for a breakdown of the composition of the Department for Social Development. Information on the composition of the core Department, the Social Security Agency and the CSA by community background is set out in the second supplement to the seventh report of the Equal Opportunities Unit, which was published in June 2001. Copies of that report were sent to every Member, and a copy was placed in the Assembly Library. It is also available on the Internet.

Mr Dallat: The Minister will be aware that following leaked information alleging discrimination in the Housing Executive, Catholic workers employed on Housing Executive sites in Derry were threatened by Loyalist paramilitaries. Is the Minister concerned that selective disclosures of this type may well be putting the livelihood and, indeed, the lives of Housing Executive workers in danger?

Mr Dodds: Threats against any workers or individuals are to be utterly deplored. However, one cannot say that there is any link between those threats and the

publication of information. As I have already stated, this information is widely available in the public domain. The Housing Executive made that clear in response to the issues that were initially raised by Mr Campbell; it is invidious to draw a link. Nevertheless, I reiterate that threats coming from any section of the community towards workers employed by the Housing Executive or anywhere else are to be deplored.

The Member is way off track in trying to link this to something that is already in the public domain. Fair employment, the make-up of the workforce and other pertinent issues have been raised by Members of his party about other organisations and firms in the past.

Fuel Poverty

3. **Mr McGrady** asked the Minister for Social Development what steps he has taken to eradicate fuel poverty; and to make a statement. (AQO 456/01)

Mr Dodds: I have introduced a warm homes scheme that provides a comprehensive package of insulation measures for vulnerable private sector householders in receipt of an income- or disability-based benefit. The programme includes improvements in insulation and heating standards for private householders over 60 years of age on income-based benefits. EAGA Partnership was appointed as scheme manager, and the physical installation of insulation and heating measures began on 1 July 2001.

In partnership with a number of organisations, my Department has been operating fuel poverty pilot schemes in parts of Belfast, Londonderry, Armagh and Dungannon, which suffer severe social and economic deprivation. One such scheme is nearing completion in Beechmount, west Belfast, and similar schemes in Foyle and Willowfield in east Belfast have begun.

In addition to the warm homes scheme, which will contribute to the eradication of fuel poverty, other measures for tackling fuel poverty that the Department for Social Development and the Housing Executive are taking forward include: new build social housing programmes with 1,200 dwellings this year; £42 million in private sector grants allocated this year; the Northern Ireland Housing Executive heating policy, with over 700 new or converted systems this year; and winter fuel payments amounting to £200 annually to pensioners.

Mr McGrady: I thank the Minister for a fairly comprehensive reply. In a departmental press statement dated 24 October, the Department commented that, statistically, there will be 600 deaths attributable to cold-related illnesses this winter. Can the Minister outline how many of these deaths will be prevented by the new domestic energy efficiency scheme?

Will the Minister also comment on the fact that energy efficiency measures will not assist those on

low incomes to purchase oil and winter fuels? Does he envisage any means whereby funding can be provided for those who do not benefit from energy efficiency to enable them to have the fuel to keep warm this winter?

Mr Dodds: Mr McGrady and many other Members are deeply concerned and share my concern about illness and death as a result of fuel poverty in Northern Ireland. It is a very serious issue. Therefore, although my Department is spending £4.38 million in the first year, with almost £8 million targeted next year for the warm homes scheme, it wants to spend more on this and reach more homes to deal with the issues that the Member has highlighted. I am somewhat disappointed at the refusal of the Department of Finance and Personnel to make this a greater priority. Nevertheless, I will continue to strive carefully and assiduously to get as much money into the warm homes scheme as possible.

3.45 pm

I am convinced that the work being carried out this year in 4,000 households, and thereafter in 6,000 households per annum, will make a major contribution to reducing the number of deaths as a result of fuel poverty. That has to be a priority of the Government in Northern Ireland.

Mr K Robinson: Will the Minister acknowledge that fuel poverty results in many tenants being tempted to use any source of flammable material to try to keep warm? As a result, personal safety is compromised and the risk of fire is increased. Will the Minister instigate a policy of installing smoke alarms in all Housing Executive homes, and will he encourage all private landlords to follow suit?

Mr Dodds: The Member raises an important matter. I agree that some examples of the installation of heating appliances are deplorable and dangerous. That must be addressed. The Member will be aware of the Housing Executive's policy on this, and I encourage private householders, where possible, to install smoke alarms, which can go a long way towards preventing deaths through fire. Perhaps we can pursue the matter in greater detail in future.

Mr Shannon: Today the local press published figures to show that 2,000 people died last year because of fuel poverty. What is being done to address that issue in the public sector?

Mr Dodds: Ninety-two per cent of houses owned by the Housing Executive already have central heating or whole house heating. The executive's new heating policy will replace solid fuel and economy 7 heating with natural gas where available, and oil elsewhere, over a 15-year period. All new housing association properties are built to modern insulation and heating standards, with similar standards for major repair schemes.

Madam Deputy Speaker: Question 4 is in the name of Mr O'Connor, but he is not in the Chamber.

Multiple-occupation Houses

5. **Dr Birnie** asked the Minister for Social Development to outline the development of his policy on houses in multiple occupation. (AQO 469/01)

Mr Dodds: The new policy for houses in multiple occupation is aimed at increasing the protection given to tenants in such establishments by ensuring that the accommodation provided is safe and of good quality. It will enable the Housing Executive to introduce a mandatory scheme for registering houses in multiple occupation, and only properties that meet an acceptable standard will be permitted to register. The necessary provisions will be included in the forthcoming housing Bill. In the interim a voluntary registration scheme has been launched which will further enhance the Housing Executive's powers to ensure that houses in multiple occupation meet the necessary standards.

Dr Birnie: Pressures are heaped on long-standing residents through the continued growth in the number of houses in multiple occupation in parts of Greater Belfast. Is it the Minister's judgement that, with respect to anti-social behaviour, tenancy management standards for houses in multiple occupation licensing have become recommended best practice rather than a precondition for such a licence?

Mr Dodds: I understand the Member's interest, given the concern in his constituency about the spread of houses in multiple occupation. That is essentially a planning matter and beyond the remit of my Department. From my experience I know some of the issues that have arisen, and there will never be an ideal solution to these problems. The Department has a voluntary scheme that goes some way towards allowing people to see who is registered and decide who is meeting certain standards. The mandatory scheme that will be introduced by the housing Bill, which has been the subject of recent discussion in the House — in which the hon Member took part — will take things forward. The matter that the hon Member raises can be discussed at greater length as the housing Bill makes its way through the House.

Mr Gibson: What arrangements are in place to allow the Housing Executive to determine whether safety standards are met in houses in multiple occupation? How often does the Housing Executive inspect premises to ensure that those standards are met and that the safety features are in place and working?

Mr Dodds: The current arrangements allow the Housing Executive to inspect houses in multiple occupation and to specify health and safety improvements. The Housing Executive has set a range of standards for

matters such as facilities for the storage, preparation and cooking of food, the number of suitably located water closets, the provision of an adequate number of baths, showers or washbasins, a means of escape from fire and other fire precautions. Student accommodation is exempt from the inspection process because of a legal technicality, but that will be rectified by the proposed housing Bill.

In the past financial year, the Housing Executive carried out over 500 inspections of houses in multiple occupation, which resulted in the issue of 230 notices to improve.

Home Safety Measures

6. **Ms Lewsley** asked the Minister for Social Development what steps is he taking to provide elderly Housing Executive tenants with appropriate safety measures at their homes. (AQO 484/01)

Mr Dodds: The Housing Executive operates a range of measures designed to make elderly tenants' homes safer. Many of those measures also apply to non-elderly tenants. They fall into three broad categories. The first category covers work done inside tenants' homes — for example, the fitting of additional handrails, grab handles for tenants with disabilities, or smoke alarms to make homes safer in general. The second category covers works done outside tenants' homes, including marking steps clearly and providing additional external lighting and handrails. The third scheme is designed to improve tenants' sense of security in their homes through preventative measures such as designing areas for safe living and the use of neighbourhood wardens.

Ms Lewsley: On Saturday night, an elderly person was assaulted in her home in my constituency, the fifth such incident. The Minister should consider the provision of locks for people's homes. Will he consider a scheme to provide a monitor or some sort of small CCTV camera on the front door of elderly people's homes so that they do not have to answer the door in the first place? That would reduce the chances of someone forcing entry.

The Department should develop an inter-agency approach to the care and protection of elderly people, along with the trusts, the police and charitable organisations?

Mr Dodds: I share the Member's concern about attacks on elderly residents. It is deplorable that so many of our most vulnerable citizens suffer attacks in their own home. For many, such attacks have an extremely traumatic effect. The attacks are despicable, and I am sure that all Members will join the Member and me in deploring them. Unfortunately, the incidence of such behaviour seems to be increasing and spreading across all areas. I take on board the points that the Member has made and would be happy to discuss them with her in detail.

In June, the Housing Executive approved a three-year strategic plan, which will help to develop initiatives to deal with community safety. That commits the Housing Executive to working with other agencies and landlords, including the Community Relations Council, the Northern Ireland Office, the Community Safety Centre, Groundwork Northern Ireland, the Northern Ireland Voluntary Trust and my Department's urban regeneration and community development group.

The Housing Executive has implemented the anti-social behaviour unit, neighbourhood wardens, the 10 estates crime reduction initiative, inter-agency training, the greencare programme and the mediation development group. It will carry forward its three-year plan, which it will monitor and evaluate. I take on board the Member's points, because they are matters of vital concern.

Homelessness

7. **Mr Hamilton** asked the Minister for Social Development what specific action his Department has taken in the past two years to deal with the problem of homelessness. (AQO 473/01)

Mr Dodds: During the past two years, the Housing Executive, which has a statutory duty to deal with homelessness, has continued to provide a programme of permanent housing, temporary accommodation, advice, assistance and support. That support includes funding the voluntary sector to deliver a range of services, such as accommodation and preventative measures. Most recently the Housing Executive has funded research into young people leaving care, disability and homelessness and homelessness and families. An educational package called 'Housemate', published by the charity Shelter, provides homelessness advice in the school curriculum. Other initiatives include the Simon Community's peer education and outhouse projects.

On 24 September, the Housing Executive launched a review of its homelessness strategy and services. Statutory and voluntary agencies that work in housing have been consulted, as have probation, health and social services and community groups. The consultation finishes on 31 December. The review will be finalised in March 2002, and an implementation plan will be produced to progress work on the various recommendations.

Finally, the Housing Executive spends some £11.5 million per annum on homelessness services, including administration costs.

Mr Hamilton: Does the Minister agree that the figure of over 2,000 homeless people in Northern Ireland represents a social problem of mounting importance, especially as the problem can often be linked to a subculture of drugs, petty crime and, as we suspect in one case, murder? What has he done to liaise with law

enforcement agencies to help to eradicate the problem before it worsens?

Mr Dodds: Essentially, homelessness is a social problem. I accept the Member's comment on the related issues of law and order and policing. As I said in my initial answer, my Department and the Housing Executive are examining a broad range of measures to tackle the problem. The seriousness of the issue and the concern that we deal with homelessness were the motivations behind the launch by the Executive of a review of its homelessness strategy and services.

Envisaged in the review are considerable joint working and inter-agency planning. The intention is to improve the service to the homeless in Northern Ireland. The recommendations of the review will have resource implications, and the House will have to address those. I am sure that the Member will want to express his views in the consultation process, and the Housing Executive will be glad to hear his views on law and order.

Mr McNamee: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Despite the measures that the Minister has outlined, and the Budget allocations to deal with homelessness, the number of people who are registered as homeless has increased in the past couple of years.

Will the review of the Executive's homelessness strategy set a target for a reduction in the number of homeless people? What further measures does the Minister intend to introduce to deal with that increasing problem?

4.00 pm

Madam Deputy Speaker: I ask the Minister to be brief, as there are only 30 seconds left.

Mr Dodds: Homelessness is a serious issue. The review proposes the development of various support packages to prevent homelessness and to assist in resettlement and tenancy support. All Members have received a copy of that report. I urge all Members who have an interest in the matter to respond to that review. At the end of December, when that has been done, we shall be able to make recommendations.

EXECUTIVE PROGRAMME FUNDS

The Minister of Finance and Personnel (Mr Durkan): I shall make a statement on behalf of the Executive on the second set of allocations from the Executive programme funds. The allocations come from three of the five funds and are summarised in the table attached to the copies of the statement that have been given to Members. The details are also included in the Budget document that was presented to the Assembly today.

The Assembly will recall that our aim in establishing the Executive programme funds was to assist the development of new policies and programmes and to improve public services in accordance with the priorities that were identified in the first Programme for Government. We also set up the funds to help us to break away from the patterns of spending that applied under direct rule, so that local solutions could be applied to local problems.

There are five Executive programme funds: the social inclusion and community regeneration fund; the new directions fund; the infrastructure and capital renewal fund; the service modernisation fund; and the children's fund. In total, more than £370 million has been made available for the five funds in the three years from 2001-02 to 2003-04.

The Executive decided to have two rounds of allocations this year to allow time for experience to be gained in the operation of the funds and to avoid committing all the available resources in the first round of allocations. It was our intention that there should simply be one allocation round each year, after this first year of operation. In the case of the infrastructure and capital renewal fund, it was necessary to commit resources in good time earlier this year to permit investment to proceed in 2001-02. Hence, the Executive decided at the outset not to make any further allocations from that fund, even in this first year.

The Executive are making no allocations from the children's fund now, as we have agreed to consult widely on the arrangements for involving the community and voluntary sectors in that fund operation. Further allocations will be made next year, when we have considered the results of the consultation, which closes on 11 January 2002.

The purposes of the funds have been set out fully in the Programme for Government and Budget documents. Details of the criteria that we adopted to guide bidding and selection process have also been issued to Assembly Committees. Bids were sought in July, with a deadline of 24 September. Clear guidelines were issued to Departments on the principles underlying the funds, including the general criteria applicable to bids for any fund and the more specific criteria for each fund.

Departments lodged 89 bids across the three funds, totalling almost £144 million over three years. All bids have been scrutinised carefully against the criteria to receive funds by the Department of Finance and Personnel, the Economic Policy Unit and the Equality Unit, working closely with all Departments. Among other things, an assessment was made as to whether the proposals were consistent with the principles of New TSN and the statutory equality duty imposed by section 75 of the Northern Ireland Act 1998. The Executive have been able to draw on that analysis in considering all the bids.

For the second tranche of allocations in the 2001-02 financial year, the Executive have decided that 31 proposals, amounting to slightly more than £39 million over three years, should be supported from the three funds. That figure includes the extra £1.4 million made available to the social inclusion fund from the revised Budget announced earlier today.

Rather than go into detail on every project I shall concentrate on how those allocations will support the priorities collectively agreed by the Executive. The establishment of the new directions fund signalled the Executive's determination to promote new and innovative ways to develop and deliver public services. We received 31 bids and propose support for 12. Those funds amount to £16.7 million over the three years 2001-02 to 2003-04.

The allocations announced today will provide innovative and modern technology for the Fire Service and the Ambulance Service. The digital trunk radio system will enable an integrated response to emergencies and facilitate closer co-operation between the police, fire, ambulance and coastguard services. It should also lead to a more equitable provision of emergency services in rural areas.

New technology will also be provided in the Health Service to promote interdependence among vulnerable groups through the Department of Health, Social Service and Public Safety's and the Department for Social Development's joint venture, Getting Home Staying Home. Hospital appointment booking will be improved by better information and communication technology (ICT) equipment, and better sharing of data among different professional groups will enable care professionals to deliver services more efficiently.

The survival rate of victims of head injuries should be significantly enhanced by provision of funding for the acquired brain injury unit, while an allocation for the community psychological service should reduce referrals to primary and secondary care services.

We shall invest in education in several ways. The purchase of recently developed equipment will improve support for children with severe learning and physical difficulties, enabling many to communicate, often for the first time.

The employers for children scheme provides a bridge between employers and employees. It funds a range of innovative childcare solutions to enable more parents, especially women, to take up, and stay in, jobs. The funding announced today will provide the 35% required to match the European building for sustainable prosperity (BSP) contribution to this scheme.

Funding will be provided for the Department for Employment and Learning to introduce a rapid advancement programme in electronic engineering, which will be targeted at unemployed graduates.

The emerging soccer strategy is currently the subject of public consultation, and we shall provide support for that. The strategic proposals put forward by the Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure seek to provide an infrastructure for soccer development. On completion of the current consultation exercise early in 2002, funding commitments must be further assessed in the light of the draft strategy and accompanying business plan.

In respect of the service modernisation fund, we have sought to find the means to promote efficiency and innovation in the delivery of public sector services. Our focus has been on how to make a difference in the management and delivery of services for the ultimate benefit of the public. A total of 27 bids for the fund were presented by nine Departments, and it is proposed that seven should be supported in that tranche at a cost of £7 million over three years.

The development of e-government was a major theme supported in the first tranche of this year's funding. The five proposals supported in that tranche should further enhance its progress. The bid by the Department of Culture, Arts, and Leisure to provide for the integration of information management across public services will meet the requirements of freedom of information and will provide the public with electronic access to records held in the Public Record Office. The Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment will also advance the theme through its project for the electronic management of document records.

The modernisation of health services is a major feature of the recommended bids. The electronic management of materials in the Health Service will free up both finance and staff time for the provision of services to the public. The dedicated medicines risk management function in six major hospitals should become self-financing. That will provide better and safer services for patients.

Two further allocations will lead to significant improvements in the Health Service. The introduction of a team of "rapid responders" in each health board area will significantly enhance services to the public by reducing ambulance response times in rural areas. The purchase of one replacement and one additional

MRI scanner will also enhance services by reducing waiting times and providing a consequential reduction in the number of operations.

We provided support for the electronic libraries private finance initiative (PFI) project in the first round of the fund, and, as we indicated then, we now seek to build on that initiative and significantly improve the service that school libraries can provide.

The purpose of the fund for social inclusion and community regeneration is to support actions against poverty and the development of effective community measures in urban and rural settings, as well as to support actions on community relations and for cultural diversity. Some 12 of the 31 bids submitted will be supported. Of those, three allocations will tackle different forms of disadvantage and exclusion.

We are allocating funds to the Department of Education to match funding provided by the Department of Education and Science in the South to build a centre of excellence for action on autism. That project will provide a unique and innovative centre to assist those with severe autistic disorders.

Funding is being provided to support cross-cutting outreach work, involving health trusts, youth and community groups, the police and the Probation Board for Northern Ireland. The programme has a proven track record in the Shankill and in other parts of west Belfast. The Executive's assistance will enable the scheme to continue to be extended to north and east Belfast. Subject to further evaluation, we may consider extending the programme to south Belfast and other areas.

We are also providing some support to extend the successful Making a Good Start scheme from primary one to primary two in those schools with the lowest performance figures. That will provide funds to recruit additional classroom assistants in those areas with greatest need.

Several measures are proposed to promote equality at different levels in society. The provision of match funding for the Department for Employment and Learning's EQUAL programme will test new ways of combating inequalities in the labour market.

Support for the cross-departmental Investing for Health group will help to establish four investing for health partnerships with the goal of reducing health inequalities. Support will also be provided to develop better language translation services, so that ethnic minorities may find it easier to use the Health Service. That scheme offers the potential to meet wider needs across public services.

Under the auspices of the Department for Social Development, the outer north integrated development operation in Derry will advance the pilot project — funded by the first tranche of Executive programme

funds — and take account of the experience gained. Elsewhere, through the development of an outreach strategy, the programme will target those communities that are most in need. By making full use of existing skills and information in the public and voluntary sectors, it has the potential to minimise consultancy costs. The programme will be enhanced by the provision of timely and consistent statistics at neighbourhood level.

We are providing resources for the creation of a victims' fund to support the forthcoming cross-departmental victims strategy. The fund will be orientated at encouraging the development of partnerships.

4.15 pm

After two rounds of bids, the Executive have agreed that it would be timely to reflect on the way that the funds have operated so far. The funds have the potential to provide one of the most effective ways of promoting cross-cutting work and supporting initiatives introduced by groups of Ministers working together. However, we must be sure that the resources that we have set aside are being directed effectively towards the objectives that we hope to achieve.

The first round of allocations is already making a significant impact, and that will be enhanced by the allocations announced today. However, we have concluded that it would be sensible to take stock and complete a short review of the arrangements before we make any further allocations. That will ensure that we deliver on our priorities and commitments.

In that context, we have looked carefully at the Committee for Finance and Personnel's constructive report on the Executive programme funds, which Members will have read. The Committee provided a useful commentary on the funds and offered some positive proposals for improvement.

Informed by the report, the Executive have agreed to undertake a review that seeks to improve on current arrangements. We shall consider improvements such as a more top-down approach, which may give more direction to the development of future allocations. That could be done through the establishment of ministerial subcommittees or by other means. We may also wish to review of the number of funds and their remits. There may be scope to merge two or more funds. The Executive wish to set out the strategic direction and intent of each fund as clearly as possible. We may need to place a greater emphasis on ensuring that bids are made with clear Executive and departmental priorities in mind. The funds were designed around Executive priorities and are not for luxuries. We also want to streamline procedures to reduce bureaucracy and speed up the allocation process. The Committee for Finance and Personnel made particularly pertinent points in relation to that.

In addition to improving procedures in Departments and the Executive, we shall be giving further consideration to the role of departmental Committees and responding substantively to the proposals from the Committee for Finance and Personnel. We have agreed to consult the Committee further on that and take its views into account before making any decisions.

The Executive set out to make a difference through the creation of the Executive programme funds. The allocations that we announce today are further evidence that we are beginning to work in new and distinctive ways. We have been able to address needs in a range of services and provide support for the development of improvements, especially in the Health Service. There is widespread support for that. It is important to maximise the opportunities provided by the funds and to make the most of the resources that we have.

I shall discuss the proposals that I have announced today with the Committee for Finance and Personnel. In particular, the Executive shall consult that Committee on the review that we are undertaking.

I commend the proposals to the Assembly on behalf of the Executive.

The Chairperson of the Committee for Finance and Personnel (Mr Molloy): Go raibh maith agat. I welcome the additional allocations and the decision to conduct a review of how the funds are operating. Have the Executive programme funds been unsuccessful because cross-cutting measures have not been introduced and because they have failed to generate innovative ideas? What evaluation process has been built into the allocation process to determine any positive impact that the funds are having?

Mr Durkan: The funds have been successful as a means of driving a wedge into our spending patterns. They have enabled us to move away from the patterns that we inherited and to create new ones.

We want to improve aspects of the Executive programme funds, and that was positively and constructively reflected by the Committee for Finance and Personnel. We want to encourage more cross-cutting, interdepartmental bids and proposals than we have had to date, and one way to achieve that could be through the use of Executive subcommittees that could, in turn, stimulate much more interdepartmental planning and collaboration in raising proposals.

However, although there may not have been as many cross-cutting proposals as we would have liked, many of the measures being proposed by Departments not only have an impact on their own departmental programmes but offer consequential benefits to other programme areas. In future, we want to ensure that we maximise the benefits from Executive programme fund allocations.

In the context of the review work that we are undertaking, we shall try to establish what more can be done to ensure that we benefit fully from better evaluation of any measures that are funded. Given that some of the projects that we have funded in advance have been pilot projects, good evaluation will be a key element. In today's announcement, we can already see how further allocations, such as the outer north integrated development operation allocation to Derry through the Department for Social Development, follow through on earlier pilot schemes that received funding in a previous round. Again, that shows the importance of good evaluation on good pilot schemes.

Mr Hussey: Like the Chairperson of the Committee for Finance and Personnel, I welcome the programme that has been set out. I agree with his remarks about what has been said in Committee. The Minister is aware of our belief that a genuine cross-cutting element should be developed as the use of those funds develops.

However, I wish to express my disappointment at one of the allocations. Paragraph 25 notes the introduction of a digital trunk radio system. I welcome that, but there is concern about the need for digital hearing aids in the Health Service. I wonder how the Health Service can be awarded support for one digital technology, while at that same time being denied finance for another digital technology essential to the service that it provides.

The Minister's statement mentions equity, New TSN, service modernisation, and innovative and modern technology. I urge him to tell me whether he will be able to advise his successor that that matter must be considered in the near future — be it as part of the Executive programme funds or in a future monitoring round.

Mr Durkan: Given the amounts of money that we allocate, we clearly cannot meet all the bids. The Member has identified one bid that, at this stage, we have not met. Obviously, Departments are not precluded from re-examining their own prioritisation when providing services to those people who would have benefited from the equipment that was bid for on this occasion. We cannot be made to feel obliged to meet all digital bids simply because we have made provision for one form of digital equipment in response to one bid.

We simply could not make allocations on that basis. I am confident that the bid we have met for the fire and ambulance services will help to improve services to many people, especially in rural areas.

It is not possible to meet all of the bids at present. I cannot argue against the bid to fund the modernisation of audiology services. That would provide a worthwhile service, and I am sure that the Executive will want to look at that in the future. I am also sure that the Department will want to examine that as well. However, if the service is as essential as everybody

says, the question is whether it should be an Executive programme funds bid anyway?

We get the cyclical argument from people that there should be cross-cutting bids — and then the bids they identify come from a particular Department. I have no problem with looking at any bid in the context of Executive programme funds allocations.

The Chairperson of the Committee for Health, Social Services and Public Safety (Dr Hendron): I welcome the Minister's statement, particularly the innovative and modern technology proposed under the new directions fund for the fire and ambulance services, which will lead to a more equitable provision of emergency services in rural areas. The same applies to intensive care treatment in hospitals. The Minister mentioned head injury survival rates, and rapid response units in each health board, which will help the ambulance service to help people in remote areas. Those services are extremely important.

In paragraph 35 of his statement, the Minister mentions the purchase of one replacement and one additional MRI scanner — that is magnificent news. I understand that the replacement scanner is for the Royal Victoria Hospital, and many people from across the Province who attend that hospital will welcome that. I understand that the new scanner is for the Belfast City Hospital, which is where the new cancer unit is to be. I am sure that the Minister will join me in congratulating the Friends of Montgomery House — the old Belvoir Park Hospital — because Mrs Christine Lynch informed me on Friday evening that they have now acquired funding, over time, for a new MRI scanner for Belvoir Park Hospital. That, together with the Minister's announcement of a new scanner for the Belfast City Hospital and a replacement scanner for the Royal Victoria Hospital, is a major step forward for cancer services. I am sure that the Minister will agree.

Mr Durkan: I appreciate the particular interest that the Committee for Health, Social Services and Public Safety has taken, particularly on cancer services and the implementation of the regional cancer strategy. The Chairperson has a dedicated interest in that area, and I welcome the fact that, on behalf of the Committee, he is able to welcome the various allocations we are making to the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety through Executive programme funds.

I appreciate the important contribution that scanners provide, especially in cancer services. I hope that the fact that we are able to replace a scanner, and fund a new one, will go some way to making good some of the pressures that we have identified. We hope that that will help reduce waiting times, times of worry for patients and the number of operations. No matter where such scanners are located, they make a significant contribution, not only to patient care, but to hospital performance.

4.30 pm

The Chairperson of the Committee for the Environment (Rev Dr William McCrea): As Chairperson of the Environment Committee, I must record my disappointment that the Department of the Environment's services modernisation fund bid to enhance the efficiency, effectiveness and economy of the Planning Service has not been approved. Several representations from organisations and individuals have been made to the Committee, outlining the need to enhance and reform the planning system to enable the Department to complete the work of dealing with the backlog of planning applications. During a meeting with the Confederation of British Industry, the business community expressed concern regarding the Planning Service's capacity to cope with the current levels of economic activity. The bid has, however, been unsuccessful.

The Committee is also disappointed that the new directions fund bid to establish and resource a Northern Ireland coastal forum has not been successful, especially as the proposal received widespread support in the Assembly and from the Minister.

The Committee is disappointed that the Department of the Environment's bid to promote sustainable development was not approved. I cannot understand why such a practical, innovative bid, which would help all Departments to integrate social and environmental objectives for the development of the Northern Ireland economy in a sustainable way, has not been met. The Department of the Environment's bids do not feature at all in today's list of Executive programme funds. Since April, only the road safety bid has been successful. Surely that is unacceptable treatment of the Department of the Environment. Can the Minister inform the Committee how those matters will be taken forward?

Mr Durkan: I remind Members that these announcements are taking place against the backdrop of this morning's Budget announcement, which includes an increase of 10% for next year in the budget for the Department of the Environment. That follows a high increase in this year's budget, so over two years there is a 25% increase in the Department of the Environment's budget. That provision includes increased allocations aimed specifically at making good many of the identified pressures in the Planning Service. In the context of possibly re-examining some of the criticisms and questions that have been raised about the Executive programme funds — how far they are meeting new and distinctive needs and how far they are meeting cross-cutting needs — people may wish to look at the points raised by the Member.

On the Planning Service, some issues arose in relation to the costings that were provided and whether they were containable. Given that the bid appeared to relate to policy and strategy issues, it was felt that it should be

seen more as part of normal departmental work. Also, the bid was not supported by a business case. I make the point again, however, that the Planning Service is benefiting from a 25% increase in funding. I hope, therefore, that it can find ways of addressing the issues that were identified in the context of the modern office bid.

On the coastal forum, it has not yet been possible to establish any quantification of outcomes, so no allocation has been made at this stage. That does not mean that consideration in future bidding rounds might not be appropriate once the results of the scoping exercise currently being undertaken by the Department are known. I point Members to the report by the Committee for Finance and Personnel. It clearly states that we should not allocate moneys from the Executive programme funds on a speculative basis. There must be a clear case, and clear expectations as to outcomes, when we make allocations.

Mr Close: I welcome the Minister's statement and his attempt — which was not totally fruitless — to throw some light on what is increasingly being perceived as a rather grey area of public expenditure. Is he really satisfied that Executive programme funds are achieving the purposes for which they were established? He has made references to the need for cross-cutting. However, there is a large cloud of confusion surrounding these funds. Does he not agree that to have Departments operating on allocations of Executive programme funds while simultaneously dealing with budget allocations and monitoring rounds only adds to the confusion?

It also adds to the bureaucracy surrounding the implementation of these funds and thus clouds their purpose and intent. It diminishes any possibility for proper accountability and transparency. Does he not further agree that in dealing with Executive programme funds, to spread the butter too thinly leads to a rather tasteless and bland sandwich?

Mr Durkan: Mr Close has raised a number of points. First, I do not accept that the Executive programme funds are a rather grey area of public expenditure: they are one of the most transparent areas. They receive a degree of scrutiny and declaration. Executive programme funds decisions are fully discussed and agreed by the Executive and are, in turn, fully communicated and scrutinised in the Chamber. Executive programme funds represent a fraction of the Budget. Considering the allocations that go out through Departments — all of the precise and particular allocations made by Departments, which are not the subject of announcements or scrutiny in the Chamber — I do not accept the premise that Executive programme funds, which are washed through with more scrutiny than any other area of public expenditure, are a grey area.

The Executive programme funds can be improved. I have already reflected that the Executive recognise

that, and I have expressed appreciation for some of the points and suggestions that have come from the Committee for Finance and Personnel to that end. We want to improve things.

This year, the first year of Executive programme funds, we said that we would have two allocation rounds simply so that we could learn from the first and try to improve in the second. We would see what lessons could be learnt from both allocations and try to make improvements. In future there will be only one tranche per year from the Executive programme funds. The plan is to try to take them at a time when they are distinct from the Budget, although the allocations will have to be reflected properly in any Budget statements that come forward. Those plans are afoot.

At the start, many people asked whether we needed Executive programme funds and questioned their value. People are now asking how we can improve the funds and make them work more effectively and meaningfully. That is the right question for us to ask. We have work to do in that regard.

The Chairperson of the Committee for Employment and Learning (Dr Birnie): The Minister in his previous replies has partially addressed my concern about the lack of a significant number of multidepartmental activities in the current round of Executive programme funds.

I have two questions relating to the Department for Employment and Learning. First, when did the Minister receive the Department's bid relating to the rapid advancement programme? I ask that because this particular outcome has come as a surprise to my Committee since the bids detailed to us by the Department as recently as September made no mention of the rapid advancement programme bid.

Secondly, does the Minister agree that the problems surrounding adult basic skills are still such a fundamental social and economic problem that they deserve further Executive programme funding? I recognise and welcome what they received in the first round — albeit a small amount.

Mr Durkan: Anything that helps to improve adult basic skills is worthy of funding — by whatever means we can afford it, whether it is through standard Budget rounds or Executive programme funds. Improvements in that area involve the work of more than just the Department for Employment and Learning and will have benefits that extend to programmes and services outside that Department. However, that area will continue to be an eligible candidate for support from the Executive programme funds. I will get back to the Member on the precise date for receipt of applications, and he might also check with the Department for Employment and Learning.

New issues emerge in these rounds, and even though there are clear deadlines and cut-off dates, consequential developments emerge. While not running a loose regime, we have to be alert and adept in addressing other points that emerge. I hope that that clarifies matters with regard to the calendar of bids.

Mrs Courtney: I welcome the statement and the additional resources in the Executive programme funds. I particularly welcome the provision of funding for the acquired brain injury unit and the introduction of a dedicated medicine risk management function in six major hospitals.

I also welcome the resources being made available to the Department of Education to extend the Making a Good Start scheme for primary two children. Will the Minister confirm that investing in children is consistent with the principles of building for the future and also consistent with his actions in caring for the children in Holy Cross Girls' Primary School in north Belfast?

Mr Durkan: I appreciate Mrs Courtney's welcome for the measures supported by these allocations, not least those in the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety, in which she has a particular interest. I also welcome her support for the allocation to extend the Making a Good Start scheme. The Minister of Education and his Department attach a great deal of importance to this programme. The Executive have agreed that supporting children in schools at that young age — particularly in areas of greatest need — and trying to make a difference to the educational achievements and outcomes that they can expect is a worthwhile investment.

The Deputy Chairperson of the Committee for Regional Development (Mr McFarland): It was encouraging to note in the Minister's statement this morning an increase of 14·8% in the budget for the Department for Regional Development. However, a massive gap remains in the Department's funding if it is to address the infrastructure maintenance backlog. Perhaps the only way this can be tackled is by identifying other methods of funding.

It is disappointing to note that the Department for Regional Development was not successful in its bid to set up a central unit to examine alternative methods of funding. Does the Minister agree that this small amount of funding would have been money well spent, given the potential revenue it could generate? If further funds become available in the future, can the Department for Regional Development's bid be given sympathetic consideration?

Mr Durkan: The Executive have allocated money to try to ensure that they can do more to maximise the potential for public-private partnerships and to make sure that they make the most of whatever alternative

sources of funding may be available. They have also established a working group on public-private partnerships on behalf of the Executive, and that involves representatives of different Departments, including the Department for Regional Development.

4.45 pm

Its aim is to establish an overall framework for our approach to the issue. Depending on the outcome of that approach, it is possible that further departmental measures might be supported through Executive commitments. However, at this stage, the Executive are ensuring that there is a joined-up approach to developing and exploring the possibilities for alternative sources of funding and public-private partnerships. Several Departments have presented their own ideas, and we welcome their initiative and interest. However, we believe that those are best followed through in our collective effort. That does not preclude further distinctive approaches being taken by different Departments.

Although the Department for Regional Development will be disappointed at its lack of success in this round of Executive programme funds — the Deputy Chairperson of the Regional Development Committee has already registered his disappointment in that regard — that Department is a significant bidder for the infrastructure fund, which is not the subject of allocations at this stage.

The Chairperson of the Committee for Culture, Arts and Leisure (Mr O'Neill): I welcome the Minister's statement, particularly because the three bids by the Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure were successful. The freedom of information (Public Record Office of Northern Ireland) and the Culture Northern Ireland web site bids were significant. However, the support for the soccer strategy must be seen as a major encouragement to all those who have contributed to that strategy and are working so hard to do something about soccer in Northern Ireland.

Does the Minister agree that this good work, and the funding in particular, represents further evidence that, with care and wisdom, we can work together, irrespective of our parties, for the common good? The Minister has been particularly prominent in this regard.

Mr Durkan: I welcome the Member's support for some of the announcements in today's statement. All Departments carry out important work. Not every initiative could be so well developed without a facility such as the Executive programme funds, a distinctive concept that was created by the Executive last year in their first home-grown Budget as a way in which to open up the strategic opportunities available to us. As well as allowing us to have more strategic discretion than we might otherwise have as an Executive, any opportunity that the programme funds give us for

deliberating together on the best use of such moneys is beneficial politically.

Mr Armstrong: The Minister stated that the £16.7 million to be allocated over the next three years to the new directions fund marks the Executive's determination to promote new and innovative ways to develop action against poverty in rural and urban areas. Will young farmers benefit from this regeneration fund? If so, what percentage of those funds are they likely to receive?

In regard to health, is the Minister aware that the funding needed to buy a scanner for the South Tyrone Hospital has been available for many years, but that there are no staff available to maintain that equipment? It is important that hospitals have up-to-date equipment, but it is of little use without staff. We need change that will benefit the entire public.

Mr Durkan: On the first point, the Executive have made it clear that they want to support actions in urban and rural areas through the social inclusion and community regeneration funds. That applies also in regard to the new directions fund. I cannot, however, pre-specify the proportion of the fund that will be allocated to rural or urban areas.

In many cases such decisions will be for the Departments or whoever is handling the money in the course of implementing the allocations. It will also be relevant to the Departments' consideration in preparing bids. If Departments could articulate more clearly occasions where particular bids would have a beneficial impact on needs in rural areas, I would be happy for that to be made more manifest when the bids are made.

I am not au fait with the funding that was available in the past for the South Tyrone Hospital. Details about hospital services fall to another Department so it is not for me, as Minister of Finance and Personnel, to address those issues. However, the Executive, through several in-year monitoring rounds — and announced by me on the Executive's behalf — made allocations to deal with some of the consequential impacts of the South Tyrone Hospital situation because it has put pressures on services elsewhere. Although we have been dealing with some of the financial consequences of the South Tyrone Hospital situation, it is not for my Department or me to deal with the hospital issue itself.

The Chairperson of the Audit Committee (Mr Dallat): Will the Minister confirm that there are still some hard choices to be made and that the Committees have an important role to play in scrutinising their departmental budgets to ensure that money is spent effectively? Will the Minister go further and urge that all Committees should, as a matter of policy, closely consider reports from the Comptroller and Auditor General and the Public Accounts Committee? Many of their reports have been highly critical of departmental

spending, particularly during the years of direct rule when proper scrutiny was not possible.

Mr Durkan: In my Budget statement today I said that I hoped Committees would do their bit and exercise their responsibilities by scrutinising spending and the quality of the targeting and planning of public expenditure.

The announcements that I make in the Chamber and the type of scrutiny that such statements are subjected to by questioning, and the subsequent scrutiny in Committees, scratches only the surface of major issues of public expenditure. The more scrutiny that can be applied at departmental level, the more effective it will be.

I remind Mr Dallat of the point I made earlier in relation to Seamus Close's assertion that Executive programme funds are a grey area of public expenditure. They receive more scrutiny and accountability in the Assembly than the much bigger allocation decisions that are routinely taken by Departments. However, anything more that Committees can do to ensure greater scrutiny of public expenditure and to assure the public that best use of public money is being made would be well placed.

It is right that the relevant Committees should pay close attention to the reports from the Comptroller and Auditor General and the Public Accounts Committee, particularly in relation to the future work on audit and accountability.

I would like to see whether the Executive could provide more joined-up scrutiny in the Assembly by allowing the Public Accounts Committee to highlight budget lines where there have been particular concerns. In turn, the relevant Committee, knowing that there has been an issue, could follow up those budget lines over a period of some years. One must consider that in little over a year and a half there could be significant changes in the Chamber and in Committee memberships. This device would ensure that a concern raised at one point could be followed through over some years to ensure that recommendations are followed and implemented properly, which would be beneficial. More joined-up scrutiny would be an achievement for the Assembly.

Mr McGrady: I join other Members to welcome the Executive programme fund spending for next year. It is interesting that this innovative manner of dealing with cameo spending has been introduced in the Assembly and that it comes as a consequence of devolution.

It is also interesting to note that there has been a great acceptance of this process, contrary to that evidenced in the Chamber when it was first introduced. I congratulate the Minister in presenting a clear budget for the Executive programme funds.

I want to ask a rather oblique question. Is there any mechanism by which bids can be made for Executive programme funding other than through Departments?

In other words, can community groups apply directly to the Executive for funding? I have some experience of the particular requirement of cross-cutting departmental boundaries, where Departments are reluctant to take a lead in getting together. The area of New TSN is highly significant; it involves section 75 of the Northern Ireland Act 1998, and it is cross-cutting — so how can we handle this if a Department is not prepared to take the lead on a particular issue?

Mr Durkan: I acknowledge the positive observations made by Eddie McGrady about how the role of Executive programme funds is now better understood, and I recognised that earlier.

Given the amounts of money involved in some of the tranches, it would not be feasible to open up the Executive programme funds to random bidding. Due to the fact that they are Executive programme funds, it is right that we ask Departments to advance bids, either on their own or working together.

However, when bids are brought forward, there is no reason why a Department would not effectively be acting as a sponsor for another group, whether they are non-departmental public bodies or, in some cases, relevant partners in the community and voluntary sector. We are taking that approach partly to avoid creating a bureaucracy around these funds. Some members of the Committee for Finance and Personnel appear concerned that there is a degree of bureaucracy even with the current shorthand approach. Those concerns would be more real if we were to open up the programme funds to general bidding. It would also make us less efficient in our allocation time.

The one exception to that in the Executive programme funds has been the children's fund. When the children's fund was established, we deliberately said that an arm of the fund should be directly amenable to bidding by the community and voluntary sector. We are making good that commitment through a current consultation exercise to find the best way of providing for that — whether through some kind of intermediary funding body arrangement or through several other mechanisms that are set out in the consultation paper. It is important to do this and not just copy the Chancellor's children's fund across the water, as we are putting more money into it than would carry across from the Chancellor's children's fund.

However, we believe that when it comes to innovation in children's services and dealing with children in need and youth at risk, the community and voluntary sector are in a position to make distinctive proposals. The result of that consultation will inform the next allocation from the children's fund.

5.00 pm

The Deputy Chairperson of the Committee for Education (Mr S Wilson): On behalf of the Committee, I welcome the provision for children with severe learning

and physical difficulties to have access to information and communication technology. The Committee believed that that provision should have been an important feature of the Executive programme funds, and it is welcomed that the Minister has found funds for it.

I am also pleased that the Minister has provided money for outreach workers in the upper Shankill and west, north and east Belfast. However, is the Minister aware that the Committee expressed concern at the inequality of provision, in view of the problems with youths right across the city? The unattached youth workers who will be funded by these programmes are an important component in dealing with that problem. There will be nine workers for upper Shankill and west Belfast and only five to cover all of east and north Belfast. The Committee asked for equality of provision, and I want to know why that was not listened to.

Mr Dallat said that Committees ought to scrutinise how Departments spend money, and he is quite right. In the Executive programme funds I notice that, once again, the Minister is targeting money on the youngsters who are most vulnerable in the education system, with the Making a Good Start scheme being extended from primary one to primary two. That is in line with how the Minister has targeted money in previous announcements. However, is he aware that, despite all the extra money being spent, the Department of Education has reduced its targets for youngsters achieving satisfactory grades at Key Stage 2? The extra money is designed to help those children and youngsters who are truants at secondary school level. What scrutiny has the Minister's Department undertaken to ensure that the funds help to raise targets? Targets should not be reduced at the same time that money is given.

Mr Durkan: Some of the Member's points are not for my Department, but rather for the Minister of Education and his Department. I reiterate that just because the Executive allocate money, the Department of Finance and Personnel recommends those allocations and I am presenting this statement, that does not make us responsible for micromanaging and micromonitoring every area of expenditure in each programme. It is up to the Departments to undertake and discharge their responsibilities. The Committees can make a contribution.

We understood and were conscious that the Making a Good Start scheme was well supported by the Committee. We hope that we are making a contribution to improving prospects for children's achievements and educational outcomes. We will pay attention to any evidence that the Committee or anyone else provides.

With respect to the outreach youth workers, the provision for upper Shankill and west Belfast is continued funding for something that is already there, and I note the Member's appreciation for the work involved. The funding for north and east Belfast is to

extend the programme. At this stage I cannot prejudge whether there will be further allocations to develop that programme in the future.

The Committee may wish to look at the wider issue of whether money is being used effectively. As I pointed out this morning, there are several needs and effectiveness evaluations under way, and one of those relates to schools. The Department of Education, the Department of Finance and Personnel and the Economic Policy Unit are considering some of these matters. I hope that, when we produce work on needs and effectiveness, the Committee will make some useful contributions to our thinking.

REPORT OF THE AD HOC COMMITTEE ON THE DRAFT JUSTICE (NORTHERN IRELAND) BILL

The Chairperson of the Ad Hoc Committee on the Draft Justice (Northern Ireland) Bill (Mr Dalton): I beg to move

That this Assembly agrees that the date for the report of the Ad Hoc Committee set up to consider —

- (a) the proposal for a draft Justice (Northern Ireland) Bill; and
- (b) the criminal justice review implementation plan be changed from 11 December 2001 to 14 January 2002.

Following the resolution of the Assembly on 19 November 2001, the Ad Hoc Committee held its first meeting, and I was elected Chairperson.

At that meeting, the Committee discussed its terms of reference and came to the unanimous conclusion that, as a Committee, we could not properly discharge our responsibilities to the Assembly — and to our constituents — if we were to consider such crucial and detailed proposals and report within the timescale that was set down. Mr Des Browne, the Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State, has extended the consultation date to 7 January; that timescale is still unworkable.

The Committee is not oblivious to the bigger picture. It has considered that it can best make its input if it is given the opportunity to make its report by 14 January 2002. I believe that we can make our proposals and report by 14 January. That will give time for the views of the Committee and the views of this House to be taken into consideration in time for any necessary amendments to the Bill at Westminster.

The Secretary of State gave the House an extremely limited period in which to consider crucial reforms to the system of criminal proceedings in Northern Ireland. The reforms will be of enormous significance for many years. It was absurd to bounce the House into dealing with the matter in three to four weeks. Rightly, the Committee felt that the Government should be told that the House would not be bounced in that way. We will take the time that we feel is necessary to deal appropriately with such matters.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That this Assembly agrees that the date for the report of the Ad Hoc Committee set up to consider —

- (a) the proposal for a draft Justice (Northern Ireland) Bill; and
- (b) the criminal justice review implementation plan be changed from 11 December 2001 to 14 January 2002.

Adjourned at 5.09 pm.

NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

Tuesday 4 December 2001

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

Members observed two minutes' silence.

NORTH/SOUTH MINISTERIAL COUNCIL

Inland Waterways

Mr Speaker: I have received notice from the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure that he wishes to make a statement about the North/South Ministerial Council on inland waterways meeting held on Friday 23 November 2001 in Carrick-on-Shannon. I call the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure.

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure (Mr McGimpsey): I wish to report to the Assembly on the fourth meeting of the North/South Ministerial Council on inland waterways, which was held in sectoral format in Carrick-on-Shannon, County Leitrim, on Friday 23 November.

Following nomination by the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister, Dr Seán Farren and I represented the Administration at the meeting. In the absence, due to illness, of Minister de Valera, the Irish Government were represented by Ms Mary Coughlan TD, Minister of State at the Department of Arts, Heritage, Gaeltacht and the Islands, who chaired the meeting. This statement is made on behalf of Dr Farren also and has been approved by him.

The meeting opened with a progress report from the chief executive of Waterways Ireland, Mr John Martin. The Council noted that Waterways Ireland has continued with its new works and maintenance programmes. Three major navigation projects at Limerick, Ballinasloe and Boyle have been completed and opened to boats. Other major capital projects on the Grand Canal, the Royal Canal and the Lough Erne moorings are progressing, and a contract for a major road bridge on the Royal Canal was let recently.

The Council noted that work on the Erne system and the lower Bann continues to be undertaken on behalf of Waterways Ireland by the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development's Rivers Agency under a

service-level agreement which has been extended until the end of December 2001.

The Council noted that consultants had been appointed to prepare a marketing and promotions strategy. To complement this initiative, Waterways Ireland will arrange for a series of consultation seminars at various locations to encourage input on relevant user issues by interested parties. In parallel, consultants have also been appointed to develop a corporate image for Waterways Ireland.

Organisationally, Waterways Ireland has continued to establish itself, with 250 staff currently in post. A newly appointed director for finance and personnel has joined in recent weeks, and two other new directors will be taking up their posts shortly. Consultants have also been engaged to manage the recruitment process for the remaining administrative and technical posts.

The Council received a progress report on accommodation matters, which focused on the acquisition of permanent accommodation in Enniskillen, Scariff, Carrick-on-Shannon and Dublin. It is envisaged that the full process from selection of the preferred Enniskillen headquarters option to occupation of the chosen building will be completed by the end of 2003. Separate negotiations for permanent regional offices in Scariff, Carrick-on-Shannon and Dublin are also well advanced. The Council noted that the projected expenditure to the year ending 31 December 2001 is £20.24 million, representing an estimated underspend in 2001 of £3.88 million. That projected underspend was attributed to a combination of delays in staff recruitment and information technology implementation, and reduced capital works on account of planning appeals in the Republic of Ireland.

The Council noted Waterways Ireland's first annual report covering the period 2 November 1999 to 31 December 2000. The report will be published shortly. The Council approved Waterways Ireland's operational plan for 2002. It contains specific targets and incorporates the following main objectives: the effective management and operation of the inland navigations for which Waterways Ireland is responsible; the full establishment of the organisation; the starting of work on new headquarters and regional offices; and the implementation of the capital development programme.

The chief executive has undertaken to present the North/South Ministerial Council with a draft corporate plan at the next sectoral meeting. The chief executive provided the Council with an illustrated presentation of the existing inland waterways infrastructure. The Council received a report on the outcome of the recent competition to select a chief executive for Foras na Gaelige. The Council agreed to meet again in sectoral format in March 2002.

The Chairperson of the Committee for Culture, Arts and Leisure (Mr O'Neill): As Committee Chairperson, I express my pleasure at the progress made on

the organisational and administrative aspects, and on the project work.

One of the most exciting projects, with far-reaching implications for major tourism development on the island, is the Ulster Canal project. Can the Minister update Members on the progress of that project since the last Council meeting in June?

Mr McGimpsey: The Member is aware that the two Governments received an updated feasibility study report, and Waterways Ireland's assessment of it, for detailed consideration at the previous North/South Ministerial Council sectoral meeting held on 27 June. It is a substantial report with major financial implications, and we have embarked on a comprehensive assessment process.

We all agree that the project is exciting. It has clear financial implications, which means that we faced the difficult challenge of determining how to provide the necessary resources to develop it. An important aspect of the project is the route of the Ulster Canal. It flows through one of the most socially and economically disadvantaged areas, not only in Northern Ireland but in the Irish Republic. There is a strong case to be made with regard to targeting social need that would outweigh any negative impact of a viability study. The project will not stand up to a scrutiny that is concerned purely with pounds and pence or with viability. However, there is a strong argument to be made in favour of the project when the wider benefits are taken into account. We are currently making a detailed assessment of the feasibility study report. We are taking it one stage at a time. I remind the House that work on the section of the Ulster Canal that runs from Lough Neagh could be undertaken reasonably cheaply. We are carefully considering that at present. We could do that work quickly and with minimal cost, and that would indicate our commitment to developing the whole canal. However, it is a major project that will take many years to implement.

Mr Hilditch: Regarding new works and maintenance programmes, can the Minister assure us that all measures are in place to protect areas of special scientific interest, endangered species, protected breeding grounds and other environmental issues relating to inland waterways and increased cruising?

Mr McGimpsey: Those environmental considerations are, of course, important factors for waterways. Looking at the ecosystem around each waterway is vital. For example, a detailed environmental impact assessment of the Ulster Canal will be carried out before a consensus is reached. An environmental scoping operation has already been completed. That applies continuously to all the waterways for which Waterways Ireland is responsible. Waterways Ireland is responsible for the management, maintenance, development and restoration of inland navigable waterways. The Member's points

are well made and are important for the operation of that body.

Mr McMenamin: My local council, Strabane District Council, recently carried out a feasibility study on the reopening of Strabane Canal, which runs from Strabane, through Donegal, to Derry. I ask the Minister's Department to assist my constituency in every way to reopen that historic canal and potential major tourist attraction.

Mr McGimpsey: I am not aware of the details of the Strabane Canal, but I will certainly enquire about it in the Department, to find out what it knows and what are its plans for the canal. Obviously, we have a long way to go with regard to inland waterways and potential navigable waters in Northern Ireland to catch up with the Irish Republic. While the focus is currently on the Ulster Canal and the Lagan navigation, the Strabane Canal undoubtedly merits a closer look.

PERSONAL SOCIAL SERVICES (AMENDMENT) BILL

Second Stage

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety (Ms de Brún): I beg to move

That the Second Stage of the Personal Social Services (Amendment) Bill [NIA1/01] be agreed.

Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. Molaim go dtugtar a Dhara Céim don Bhille Seirbhísí Sóisialta agus Pearsanta (Leasú).

Is é is aidhm don Bhille measardha goirid seo cuidiú breise agus tacaíocht a bhfuil an-ghá leo a sholáthar do chúramóirí. Mar a fógraíodh sa Chlár do Rialtas, tá mo Roinn ag forbairt straitéise do chúramóirí i gcomhar le forais reachtúla éagsúla, eagraíochtaí deonacha agus le cúramóirí iad féin. Tá súil agam go bhfaighidh mé an tuairisc agus na moltaí roimh dheireadh na bliana. Is é is aidhm don straitéis bearta praiticúla a aimsiú a dhéanfaidh difear suntasach i saol cúramóirí. Idir an linn, ceadóidh an Bille seo go gcuirfear tacaíocht ar fáil ar dhóigh nach féidir faoin reachtaíocht reatha.

Eisíodh cáipéis chomhairliúcháin dar teideal ‘Moltaí le haghaidh Bille do Chúramóirí agus Páistí Míchumasacha’ (arbh é bunteideal an Bhille é) i Márta seo chuaigh thart do réimse leathan de pháirtithe leasmhara. Léirigh na freagraí a fuarthas ar an chomhairliúchán fáilte leathan roimh na moltaí, go háirithe ó eagraíochtaí a ionadaíonn cúramóirí.

Tá ról barrthábhachtach ag cúramóirí ag tabhairt aire dóibh siúd atá tinn, faoi mhíchumas, leochaileach nó anbhann. Meastar go bhfuil 250,000 cúramóir anseo agus go bhfuil cúramóir i 18% de theaghlaigh. Gan an cúram forleathan seo, bheadh tacaíocht ó na seirbhísí reachtúla de dhíth ar i bhfad níos mó daoine scothaosta, ar dhaoine anbhanna, tinne nó míchumasacha; agus b’fhéidir go mb’éigean dóibh dul isteach i dteach cónaithe nó altranaís nó chun otharlainne.

Féadann an soláthar cúraim a bheith an-strusúil; tagann oícheanta gan chodladh agus tnáitheadh fisiciúil agus mothúcháinach in éineacht leis. Más maith linn go leanfaidh cúramóirí ar aghaidh ina ról cúraim caithfimid a chinntiú go bhfuil a fhios acu go bhfuil meas agus urraim orthu agus go bhfuil teacht acu ar thacaíocht ardchaighdeáin, iontaofa, fhreagartha ó na seirbhísí reachtúla agus deonacha. Tá sé ríthábhachtach go mbíonn cúramóirí ábalta roghanna eolacha a dhéanamh maidir le réimse a róil chúraim. Tá sé ríthábhachtach fosta go gcothaíonn siad a sláinte agus a ndea-bhail agus go bhfuil go leor saoirse acu caidrimh, caitheamh aimsire agus gealltanais eile taobh lena bhfreagrachtaí cúraim a chothú. Tá sé riachtanach go mothaíonn

cúramóirí go bhfuil siad ar an eolas, go bhfuil siad ullmhaithe agus, más gá, go bhfuil siad oile ar na tascanna a bhaineann le cúram. Caithfidh siad cead cainte a bheith acu ar conas a sholáthraítear cuidiú; caithfidh siad fios a bheith acu go dtugtar aitheantas dá n-oilteacht mar chúramóirí.

Is féidir le hiontaobhais sláinte agus seirbhísí sóisialta cuid mhór a dhéanamh cheana féin faoi réir na reachtaíochta cúraim phobail le cur le solúbthacht agus le roghanna cúramóirí; ach tá constaicí reachtúla ann a chuireann cosc orthu soláthar a dhéanamh a rachadh go díreach chun sochair do chúramóirí.

10.45 am

The aim of this relatively short Bill is to provide much-needed additional help and support for carers.

As announced in the Programme for Government, my Department is developing an overall carers’ strategy in consultation with various statutory bodies, voluntary organisations and carers. I expect to receive the report and strategy proposals by the end of the year.

The aim of the strategy is to identify practical matters that will make a real difference to the lives of carers. In the meantime, the Bill will allow support to be provided to carers in a way that is not possible under current legislation. The original title of this Bill was ‘Proposals for a Carers and Disabled Children Bill’, and a consultation document with that title was issued last March to a wide range of interested parties. Responses to the consultation indicated a broad welcome for the proposals, particularly by organisations representing carers.

Carers play a vital role in looking after those who are sick, disabled, vulnerable or frail. It is estimated that there are 250,000 carers here, and that 18% of households in Northern Ireland have a carer. Without them, many more elderly, frail, sick or disabled people would need the support of the statutory services, and might need to enter a residential or nursing home or go into hospital.

Caring can be stressful and can involve sleepless nights and physical and emotional exhaustion. If we want carers to continue in their role we must ensure that they feel valued and that they have access to high-quality, reliable and responsive support from the statutory and voluntary services. It is crucial that carers can make informed choices about the extent of their role. It is also vital that they maintain their own health and well-being and have sufficient freedom to maintain other relationships, interests and commitments alongside their caring responsibilities.

Carers need to feel informed, prepared and, where appropriate, they must be trained for the tasks involved in caring. They must have a say in the way that help is provided and have their expertise recognised. Health

and social services trusts can already do much within existing community care legislation to increase flexibility and choice for carers, but legislative obstacles prevent them from making provision that could be of direct benefit to carers.

The way in which the current legislation is cast prevents carers from receiving help in their own right. For example, where a person who needs care has been offered, but has refused, a community care assessment, it is not possible for a trust to assess the carer's needs, even if that is what the carer wants.

The Bill will give carers a statutory right to

“an assessment of their ability to provide and to continue to provide care for the person cared for.”

Under the Bill, health and social services trusts must take into account the results of that assessment when deciding what services need to be provided to the person being cared for and to the carer. For the first time, therefore, trusts will have the power to provide services to a carer directly, and that power will prevail even if the patient cared for has refused an assessment or actual services. The services can be wide-ranging and can include any provision that a trust considers would help the carer to provide care. That might take the form of physical help such as assistance around the house, a mobile phone or other forms of support such as training or counselling.

The Bill includes provision to enable the Department to make regulations that allow health and social services trusts to issue vouchers for short-term breaks for carers. Vouchers will enable the carer to take a break while someone else provides the services for the person cared for. To allow flexibility the regulations will include provision for the vouchers to be expressed either in money or by the delivery of a service for a certain period. That creates flexibility so that the carer can arrange for replacement care in ways and at times that are best suited to his or her needs.

The Bill will also amend the Children (Northern Ireland) Order 1995, giving someone with parental responsibility for a disabled child the same statutory right to an assessment of his or her ability to provide and to continue to provide care for the child. A health and social services trust must take into account the results of that assessment also when deciding what services to provide under the Order. The voucher scheme will allow the carer of a disabled child to take a break also.

The Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety introduced a direct payment scheme in 1996. Direct payments are cash payments given to persons in lieu of services that would otherwise have been arranged for them by trusts, so that they may arrange the provision of their own services. Direct payments give greater flexibility to service users, allowing them

to make arrangements with providers of their choice and at times that are convenient to them. So far, the scheme has covered only those personal social services for adults provided under the Health and Personal Social Services (Northern Ireland) Order 1972. The Bill will make the scheme available to carers also. Other service users who will be entitled to direct payments following an amendment to the Children (Northern Ireland) Order 1995 include a person with parental responsibility for a disabled child, a disabled person with parental responsibility for a child and a disabled child aged 16 or 17.

Clauses 8, 9 and 10 contain technical and formal provisions relating to the commencement and interpretation of the Bill, and which enable the Department, through the regulations, to make any necessary or consequential provision.

I am sure that Members will have points to raise, and I will try to answer as many of them as possible in my winding-up speech. If there are any points to which I cannot respond, I will write to the Member concerned. The Bill is targeted at improving the well-being and quality of life of those receiving care and of carers, who make sacrifices to care for relatives or friends. I commend it to the Assembly.

The Chairperson of the Health, Social Services and Public Safety Committee (Dr Hendron): I apologise for missing the initial part of the Minister's address. The brevity of the discussion on the statement about the North/South Ministerial Council meeting caught me out.

As Chairperson of the Committee for Health, Social Services and Public Safety, I welcome the introduction of the Bill, and I look forward to considering it during the Committee Stage. As with all proposals for legislation, the Committee is carrying out its own consultation exercise. Although the legislation was welcomed generally, several points were raised about its implementation. It would be inappropriate of me to mention those in great detail today, but it might be helpful to the Minister if I were to mention some of them briefly.

The Bill proposes to give boards and trusts the power to provide services for carers, but there is no requirement for them to do so. The power to supply services is meaningful only if there are sufficient resources to meet the demand. The Committee will wish to consider this matter carefully. The Department claims that the proposals are broadly cost-neutral, but significant resources may be required to undertake assessments of carers' needs. Resources will also be needed to finance the extra services that will be required following the assessments. The administration of the direct payments scheme will also add to the cost.

The voucher scheme is to be welcomed, but the availability of sufficient high-quality respite care

places is a concern. Before the voucher scheme is introduced, we must be sure that enough places are available, or expectations will be raised that cannot be met.

The general opinion of boards, trusts and interested organisations is that the proposals will not prove to be cost-neutral as the cost of administering the assessment process must be met within existing resources. Current resources do not meet the identified need, so the expectations of carers may be raised at the assessment stage but may not be fulfilled because of financial constraints. The legislation must be backed by adequate finance. Increased workloads without increased funding will lead to cuts in services elsewhere.

The complexity of general and financial accountability, which accompanies the co-ordination of direct payments, would require a change in the structures and an increase in personnel to manage the payments. Uptake for the introduction of direct payments has been low. The Bill does not make any reference to the provision of support services for clients or carers who receive direct payments. An independent living support group might be needed to support carers.

Although the legislation gives the trusts the power to provide service for carers, it does not impose a duty to do so. Carers' views and their ability to care form an important part of all assessments in social care. When a social service is provided it is done so in agreement with clients and carers. Some trusts feel that the proposal to give them the power to run short-term voucher schemes must be explored in more detail. Pressures in the social care market might limit carers' and clients' choice. It is interesting that Mencap Northern Ireland is not sure whether any real change can be achieved by imposing a duty to provide services based on carers' assessments.

Carers should be offered an assessment of their needs, rather than their having to ask for one. Efforts should be made to ensure that carers are aware of their right to an assessment. The Carers' National Association (Northern Ireland) says that, since the introduction of 'Guidance on Carers' Assessments' in 1996, experience shows that most carers who are in touch with health and personal social services have not been informed of their right to ask for an assessment. Since the onus is on the carers to ask for an assessment, they do not have a proper opportunity to avail of the provision. This seems to be the real difficulty with the current provisions — even more than the fact that the right to an assessment is based on guidance, rather than statute. Carers and carers' groups feel that, rather than the onus being on carers to request the assessments, trusts should be required to offer an assessment when they identify someone who is providing, or intending to provide, regular and substantial care.

The Carers' National Association (Northern Ireland) welcomes the recognition that carers need proper support

to undertake their work and continue in their roles. It also welcomes increased access to creative and responsive support services that enable carers to be confident and effective in their roles and maintain a life outside of caring. However, if most carers are to continue to fulfil this function effectively, they will need good-quality, tailor-made services to be delivered to the person being cared for. Most critically, that may include services that enable carers to take short breaks or have respite from caring. It is difficult to envisage a large range or volume of services that would support the carer.

11.00 am

It seems that the proposals for young carers and disabled parents are designed to support young carers as children, rather than carers. The Carers' National Association (Northern Ireland) wholeheartedly welcomes that approach. Advocacy might be needed to ensure that support is genuinely geared towards freeing young carers up rather than tying them down. It is interesting that the Carers' National Association (Northern Ireland) feels that it would be valuable for everyone, including the Health Committee, to hear directly from young carers and the organisations that work closely with them in Northern Ireland.

The Children's Law Centre broadly supports the Bill, but it made several comments on the provision of services to young carers. The Bill is not resource-neutral and must be backed by adequate finance. Ring-fenced budgets are needed to meet the needs of young carers aged 16 and over who would be entitled to an assessment under the proposed Bill, and of young carers who are assessed as being children in need under the Children (Northern Ireland) Order 1995. The proposal to entitle 16- and 17-year-olds to request a carer's assessment and to receive direct payments is welcome, and I hope that it will lead to more flexibility and choice for young people. I look forward to discussing those and other matters with my Committee colleagues during the Committee Stage of the Bill.

Mr McNamee: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. Cuirim fáilte roimh an Bhille seo ón Aire Sláinte agus ba mhaith liom a rá ar dtús go bhfuil géar-ghá leis.

I welcome the Bill. There is a real need for such a Bill, given that successive Government policies have been aimed at reducing the number of people in residential care. One such policy was aimed at improving the quality of life of those who need care by encouraging their families to care for them at home with professional assistance. However, to date, the Government have not provided the necessary assistance to enable carers to provide that support, nor have they properly recognised the enormous commitment and dedication of carers.

We must examine briefly the role of carers, particularly of individuals who care for a family member. Although

caring might not involve constant attendance, it is a 24-hour responsibility, which, for those providing long-term care, is ongoing. The state does not give sufficient recognition to their role and their contribution to the welfare of the person whom they care for, nor has it recognised the economic value of those carers to the Health Service. When a person is cared for at home as opposed to a residential institution, the state makes an enormous saving.

I welcome the Bill and its provision of support and training for carers to enable them to continue their good work. I especially welcome — and perhaps the Minister can clarify this issue — the financial assistance to enable those who provide long-term care to take a break. Carers carry a heavy burden, because caring is a 24-hour responsibility that can last for weeks, months or years.

Will the Minister ensure that financial assistance, training and support will be available to all carers and that the system of assessment will be clear and easily understood? When undergoing assessment, carers should not feel that they are being scrutinised, examined, or questioned about their ability. They should be encouraged to avail of the help being provided. Go raibh maith agat.

Mrs Courtney: I apologise for not being in the Chamber at the start of the debate. I welcome the Bill. It is taken for granted that carers play a vital role looking after those who are sick, disabled, vulnerable or frail. As the Minister has stated, there are over 250,000 carers in Northern Ireland, and 18% of households here contain a carer.

The Bill's objective is to give a statutory right to a carer's assessment, and that will enable them to receive adequate payment for caring. This is a change. Many families never got that type of support and depended on the younger members in the family to look after a parent or relative who was disabled or incapable of looking after themselves. Often, children had to look after a person and make sure their needs were attended to before they went to school or could even think about their own needs. That is why it is important that the Bill is passed.

Trusts will have a statutory obligation to carry out assessments, and there will be an onus on them to provide the necessary help for carers. That is why we should support the Bill.

We must recognise that the finances are not something that we can run away from — they must be provided. Training for the carers must also be provided. We must be careful that carers who are in a vulnerable position, especially 16- and 17-year-olds and parents with disabled children, have sufficient training and financial support to enable them to do what they are trying to do.

The short-term voucher scheme will be welcome, but the problem is that there are not enough respite

care spaces available. It is all very well to give the carer a break, but if there is nobody to provide cover, or there are no respite care spaces available, it becomes extremely difficult to provide that break. Nevertheless, this is a step in the right direction. I ask the Minister to take on board the fact that there must be some kind of financial compensation given to trusts to enable them to carry out assessments accurately, and with the knowledge that the carer will get the help required. If it is necessary to bring someone in to care for a person on a short-term basis, that is what should happen.

If we get these things into place, and if the Minister and the Committee take responsibility for ensuring that finance and training are available, I welcome the Bill. It will make a big difference to people's lives. We all are aware of family members who have cared for people without any recompense. Their task has been made much more difficult by what seems to them to be an uncaring health board that was unwilling either to give an assessment or to go along with the terms of an assessment that was given. I am happy to support the Bill, and I look forward to its introduction.

Sir John Gorman: With the death of George Harrison last week I will quote the words of one of the songs he was responsible for

"Will you still need me, will you still feed me, when I'm sixty four?".

For somebody who is 79 that seems a long time away. However, many of my constituents fall into that category, and the number is increasing. As the years go by, there will be a higher proportion of people in their seventies, eighties and nineties, provided that we have people who need them and feed them. Those people are nearly always family members, and the Bill recognises their sacrifices. It would be churlish and lacking in understanding were we not to support the Bill and its motivation.

Many people in my constituency worry about having to sell their homes in order to provide funding for commercial care. That is an enormous problem. I understand why people who struggle to pay their mortgages and support their families resent that owners of a valuable asset, in the form of a home, do not necessarily fund their own care. It is politically impossible to accept that funding should be given under those circumstances, but perhaps a compromise could be reached, one that represents good value and the wishes of elderly people and their families and allows them to stay in their own homes for as long as possible. The provision of assistance could prove advantageous for the families, the old people and, indeed, society.

I do not have a magic answer as to how that could be achieved, however, perhaps an understanding of its concept, which is demonstrated so well in the Bill,

could be developed to the greatest degree possible. Thank you.

Ms de Brún: I thank the Members for the interest shown in the debate. I was delighted to hear that the Committee for Health, Social Services and Public Safety will discuss at Committee Stage the important points that were raised by Dr Hendron. In the past, I have been grateful to the Committee for its assistance in bringing forward legislation.

The Department will publicise widely the right to a carer's assessment and will make carers aware of their rights. That is important.

Sir John Gorman raised the issue of nursing care. I shall introduce legislation in the future regarding nursing care, so I shall answer his question then. Following the Budget announcement, free nursing care will be available once the legislation is in place.

11.15 am

Mr McNamee raised the issue of recognition of the role that carers perform. The Bill goes some way towards recognising that role. I was happy to make that point this morning; it is important that such a point be made. We specifically sought to give recognition to the important role of carers by enshrining their right to an assessment in law.

The carers strategy, which is being developed in full consultation with carers and their representative organisations, will seek to make a practical difference to their lives by putting in place some of the support structures that they need. In the context of that developing strategy and the proposals that I hope to have brought forward to me by the end of the year, we will look at many of the other resource questions raised by the Chairperson of the Committee for Health, Social Services and Public Safety, Dr Hendron, and Mrs Courtney.

On the issue of young carers, it is important that young people are not faced with such responsibility for the provision of care that their own welfare is prejudiced. Trusts need to ensure that the person cared for is receiving sufficient services so that no one aged under 18 is undertaking a regular and substantial caring role that adversely affects his general welfare. Services should be provided to parents to enhance their ability to fulfil their parental responsibilities. Existing departmental guidance on the assessment of need under the Children (Northern Ireland) Order 1995 draws attention to the needs of young carers. Guidance that will be prepared under this legislation will reinforce this important point.

Mrs Courtney also raised the question of respite care spaces. Before the voucher scheme is introduced, we will consult further on the type of respite care needed. Not all of this will be residential, because carers also need access to short-term and emergency respite care.

This will be addressed. People will be made aware that this is happening before the vouchers are brought forward. It is important that people know what is available.

In relation to the imposing of duties on trusts, the resources will always be finite, and they must be prioritised toward those whose needs are greatest. It is important to know that if there is no similar duty on trusts for other services, it would be difficult to bring that forward here in this respect.

I hope that that covers the variety of the points that Members raised today. If I have missed any points, I will write to the Member afterwards.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That the Second Stage of the Personal Social Services (Amendment) Bill (NIA 1/01) be agreed.

INDUSTRIAL DEVELOPMENT BILL

Further Consideration Stage

Mr Speaker: As Members are aware, the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment, Sir Reg Empey, is currently in China on ministerial business. He has written to advise me that in his absence the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure, Mr Michael McGimpsey, has agreed to represent him during the Further Consideration Stage of the Bill.

No amendments have been tabled to the Bill. However, two Members have indicated a wish to speak to schedule 1. I therefore propose, by leave of the Assembly, to group the eight clauses, followed by schedule 1, then schedules 2 to 4 and finally the long title.

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

Schedule 1(Invest Northern Ireland)

Question proposed, That schedule 1 be agreed.

Dr O'Hagan: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. I am concerned about appointments to Invest Northern Ireland, the agency that is being set up under the Bill. Last week it was reported in 'The Irish Times' that the posts of director of business international and director of corporate services for Invest Northern Ireland would not be publicly advertised. Equality Commission guidelines state that all new posts should be advertised as widely as possible and should be subject to open competition. This is a matter of serious concern and disappointment.

The Transfer of Undertakings (Protection of Employment) Regulations 1981 (TUPE Regulations), which cover the protection of contracts with transferred employees, has been cited by the Department as justification for not advertising these posts. Although we all support workers' rights, TUPE Regulations should not be used to sidestep equality obligations. No doubt the Department has checked out the legal position and will be able to say that the law has not been broken. However, we must move away from a minimalist position and attitude, and remember that we are leaders in society. The Assembly and Government Departments need to set and maintain the highest standards. Is this the new beginning that we were all promised? What message is being sent out? Fair employment and equality issues have been at the centre of politics, and indeed at the centre of the political conflict in the North of Ireland, for a long time. Those issues have been central to the make-up, activities and policies of the development agencies, particularly the IDB and LEDU. What does the Department do? It simply continues on in the same old failed ways of the past. That is not good enough.

Invest Northern Ireland will play a central role in industrial development in the future, and it is crucial that we start with a clean slate and get the structures right from the beginning. Equality obligations and the need for openness and accountability have been the subject of numerous discussions with the Minister and with departmental officials. They are all well aware of the concerns of Members on this issue. It appears that those concerns have once again been ignored, and instead we are being given empty promises and empty rhetoric on the issues of equality, fairness, openness and accountability.

I urge the Minister and the Department to rethink the matter and to open up these two posts to open competition as obliged by the Equality Commission guidelines and section 75 of the Northern Ireland Act 1998. Go raibh maith agat.

Mr Wells: Mr Speaker, it amuses me that every time you call for Ayes and Noes, you seem to look over here for the Noes. I do not know why that is. Almost subconsciously, you look over at these Benches.

Mr Speaker: It is a matter of habit.

Mr Wells: I do not oppose this important Bill. We have had several opportunities to discuss the amalgamation of the industrial promotion agencies. All parties in the House have given the matter their full support and wish it every success. The sooner the legislation is passed, the better. Anything that the House can do to encourage that should be taken on board.

The Committee for Enterprise, Trade and Investment has already met with the new board. However, Committee members have not yet met with the chief executive designate, Mr Morrison, and we look forward to that. I am concerned about the make-up of the board. I am surprised that of the eight members who have been appointed so far, only one is a woman — and a very capable woman at that. The reason we were given was that there had been very few applications from women. I subsequently discovered that at least one very capable woman from my constituency of South Down had applied, and I am surprised that people of her calibre were not considered.

I am also concerned that there is an urban bias in the make-up of the board. I hope that this is a temporary hiatus, and that when new members are appointed an attempt will be made to spread the positions around the Province. We still have this "the world ends at Glengormley" syndrome, or if we are feeling really adventurous, the world ends at Dunmurry. Many might believe that to be true, but there is much talent in rural Northern Ireland.

I would like to see people from Fermanagh, north Antrim or south Down being considered for appointment to this board. I am concerned that the great and the

good and the usual suspects will be appointed, and much of the talent that is out there will not be harnessed. I urge the Department, when it considers the additional appointments, to try to ensure a spread.

Apart from that one concern, this is very good news for industrial promotion in Northern Ireland. It is long overdue, and the sooner it is implemented the better.

Dr McDonnell: In common with Dr O'Hagan and Mr Wells, I want to see Invest Northern Ireland up and running and functioning at full speed. We need it badly, and we need it yesterday. In the light of the events of 11 September, we need to redouble our efforts on jobs.

I share the concerns about directors or key executives being appointed without public advertisement. While we must protect jobs, and while the acting director of IDB and the chief executive of LEDU are very worthy and capable people who perhaps deserve the jobs, it would have been better if the appointments had been made after a process of public advertisement.

I am also concerned about the ability of civil servants to join Invest Northern Ireland and then change their minds two or three years later. That might not be in the best interest of Invest Northern Ireland. It might create a situation of instability that would last three or four years. We should be looking to the long term, and trying to ensure that the people who take the jobs today will stay in them as long as they have a contribution to make.

Like Mr Wells, I am concerned about the membership of the board of Invest Northern Ireland. I do not wish to show disrespect to the very worthy people who have already been appointed, but we need to ensure that the very best and most able people in Northern Ireland, or indeed elsewhere, are on that board to make sure that it can engage in business development at a world-class level. If we miss that opportunity, Invest Northern Ireland may not function in top gear. I urge those responsible to appoint to the board the best people available to ensure that the organisation hits the ground at full throttle in April 2002.

Mr Speaker: Before calling the Minister to do the winding-up, I remind Members that they are here to debate the Further Consideration Stage of the Bill, not its implementation. The Minister may wish to respond to some of the matters that have been raised about implementation, but that is not the main purpose of today's debate.

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure (Mr McGimpsey): On behalf of Sir Reg Empey, I welcome the remarks made by Dr McDonnell and Mr Wells on the concept of a single agency and the important role that it will play in ensuring the future well-being of Northern Ireland. The specific issue that Dr McDonnell, Mr Wells and Dr O'Hagan raised is a matter for the Office of the First Minister and the Deputy First

Minister. The Committee for Enterprise, Trade and Investment, of which Dr O'Hagan is a member, has already acknowledged that. Sir Reg Empey informed the Assembly during last week's Consideration Stage that he had referred the correspondence he had received on the matter to the Office of the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister for consideration. I have no further comment to make on that, other than to say that this is not a case of empty rhetoric and empty promises. This is about everyone doing their best to fulfil certain principles of openness and transparency.

As far as equality and fair employment are concerned, all staff are treated in accordance with employment law.

The Department and the Minister have referred one issue to the Office of the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister. When the Minister gets consideration from that Office he will discuss it with the Members concerned.

Schedule 1 agreed to.

Schedules 2 to 4 agreed to.

Long title agreed to.

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

11.30 am

THRESHOLD ASSESSMENT (NI)

Mr B Hutchinson: I beg to move

That this Assembly believes that the threshold assessment (Northern Ireland) does not give equality to all members of the teaching profession.

I shall set the scene by quoting from ‘Threshold Northern Ireland’. It states that

“Threshold Northern Ireland sets teachers eligible for threshold assessment a new challenge, but it also offers them a new opportunity.”

“It is designed to raise the status and professionalism of teachers.”

“Threshold assessment in Northern Ireland should give recognition to the high calibre of Northern Ireland teachers.”

It further states that

“Threshold assessments in Northern Ireland should promote equality of opportunity throughout the profession”.

Those are quotations from the document, but I shall illustrate that none of those statements stand.

I am sure that all Members would agree that the following remarks by teachers sum up the profession. The teaching profession is charged with the education of all our young people to carve them into citizens of the twenty-first century and the demands that society will put on them. It is recognised by us all that teaching is by its very nature a vocation. Teachers in schools are vital contributors to the future. A male teacher said that

“A teacher affects eternity. He can never tell where his influence stops”,

while a female teacher said:

“I touch the future. I teach.”

That is all very well until one sees how the threshold assessment discriminates against young teachers and does not give them equal opportunity.

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

To be eligible for the threshold allowance, teachers must be on point 9 of the pay scale for experience and qualifications before or on 1 September 1999. That assumes that long service equals quality teaching. All Members know that that is not always the case. Young teachers who are newly qualified or have up to six years’ experience are not eligible for the threshold allowance. The Government have launched a highly publicised campaign to draw graduates into the teaching profession and to attract more male teachers into primary schools. However, the Government then introduce a threshold

allowance for which those teachers cannot qualify because they do not have enough experience.

The threshold assessment (Northern Ireland) does not give young teachers the opportunity to apply for the salary uplift. Graduates are being encouraged to join the teaching profession, only to be told that they are too young — that is a nonsense. We need to decide what we want from young teachers. Everyone knows young teachers who are well qualified, and that their inexperience does not inhibit them from being good teachers. That must be recognised, yet it is not.

Some young teachers are studying for professional qualifications so that they can become head teachers. That means that they will be the future leaders of our schools. Despite that, they are told that they cannot be rewarded under the threshold assessment. Young teachers’ pursuit of further qualifications shows their commitment. They return to university to obtain diplomas in education or masters degrees, in their own time and at their own expense, because they want to enhance their qualifications. Such people, who are hungry for further educational awards, are being told that they do not qualify for the threshold allowance. This is disappointing to young teachers and has the potential to demotivate them.

We must recognise that the assessment also affects principals and vice-principals, who are not entitled to a threshold payment even though they assess other teachers. A decision by them that a teacher is not eligible for the threshold payment can be overruled by an external verifier. We are paying such verifiers £240 per day to decide whether to pay teachers £2000. We must recognise those points. The reason that I raised the issue of young teachers rather than that of principals and vice-principals — and most people would agree with me — is that the latter case has been well argued. Principals and vice-principals should receive the payment also. We have not focused on young teachers, and we must do so.

As regards redundancy, teachers who reached point 9 by 1 September 1999 can take a redundancy package or qualify for the threshold payment. A long-term substitute teacher can qualify for the payment, but a young teacher cannot. That does not make any sense, and there is no equality of opportunity.

Teachers who have accepted redundancies or who have been substitute teachers for a long time were assessed according to their length of service. It was not about the quality of their teaching, as mentioned in the quotations that I cited from ‘Threshold Northern Ireland’ earlier. The length of time that a teacher is in a job suggests nothing other than a commitment to that job. One person is not necessarily better than another because he has been in his job longer. We have to examine the matter from the young teachers’ perspective and consider why we use this type of assessment.

Four core standards have to be met: core values, understanding of the curriculum and professional knowledge; teaching and assessment of learning; contribution to raising standards through pupil achievement; and effective professional development. When teachers qualify, they sign up to the Jordanstown agreement, irrespective of their age, and each of the core standards is written into that agreement. Therefore, when a newly qualified teacher signs up to the agreement he is effectively stating what he wants to achieve. He has decided to teach in order to achieve those four standards. However, when it comes to giving someone a threshold payment, a teacher is told that because he had not reached point 9 on the salary scale on 1 September 1999 he is not eligible. Once again, this is about length of service; it is not about quality of teaching.

There is the feeling that some perverse judgement is taking place. The Regional Training Unit is seen as having set up the scheme to acknowledge length of service by teachers. Once a person qualifies as a teacher and goes to a school, he signs up to the Jordanstown agreement, which incorporates the four standards.

I want to return to principals and vice-principals, as I know there are several of them in the Chamber. In smaller schools, the wages of a senior teacher can be very close to those of the vice-principal or principal — the difference can be only £200 per annum. It is a disgrace, particularly given the duties and responsibilities of vice-principals and principals. That nonsense must be changed. There is no justice, equality, or opportunity for vice-principals and principals. To add insult to injury, a principal's assessment of applications for threshold payments can be overruled by someone who is paid £240 a day to carry out assessments. We need to value the leaders in our schools — the principals and vice-principals. They are there because of their qualifications and experience. They have shown that they are good teachers and have gone on to become leaders in the schools. We must recognise that by recompensing them appropriately.

Boards of governors, who have the responsibility for managing schools, have no authority in relation to the threshold assessment. They are not asked for their opinions, nor are they allowed to give them. This is a dichotomy, and it raises the question of where the money will come from for future assessments. The Department of Education is funding threshold payments and will continue to do so for a two-year pilot period. After that we do not know what will happen.

People are concerned that schools are being run on local management of schools (LMS) budgets — and I know that the Minister is examining that aspect at the moment. However, many schools are strained, and it would be unthinkable to fund threshold payments from LMS funding. Two difficulties would result: first, that of teachers making other teachers redundant, secondly,

in many cases the redundancies would be those of young, vibrant professionals who were not eligible for the threshold payment.

I ask the Minister and the Department to deal with the problems so as to recognise the value of the young people who are being educated in our schools and universities to be teachers and leaders. It is a case of denying them £2000 because they were not at point 9 on the scale by September 1999. It is a disgrace that we are not looking at the quality of teachers but simply saying whether they are experienced enough.

Mr McHugh: I beg to move the following amendment: Delete all and replace with

“That this Assembly acknowledges the serious concerns surrounding threshold assessment, including equality, and urges the representatives of the teachers and employers to review all aspects of it.”

Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. The Minister of Education has tendered his apologies for his absence. It was his intention to be present for the debate at the time listed, which was 2.00 pm. He hopes to attend, but if he cannot he will read Hansard and will answer Members' points in writing.

In moving the amendment I was endeavouring to highlight the need to deal with the problem facing young teachers. Billy Hutchinson covered many of the points. It is important that those who negotiated to reach this position should take another look at what we are being told by young teachers who feel that they will not receive equality of treatment. They want to know what they should do, and what will happen in a couple of years' time. I would like a review of the matter soon. Talking about the situation might help, but it may not be enough to assist those who have been speaking to us and who wish to be heard.

11.45 am

The current threshold arrangements were agreed last January by the teachers salaries and conditions of service negotiating committee. No doubt, teachers looked forward to a significant pay rise after years of erosion of their salaries. However, several teachers have expressed serious concerns about the agreed threshold arrangement.

Teachers pointed out that the completion of the application form added another bureaucratic task to their considerable workload. In addition, new teachers receive no incentive for the first eight years of their career. Some regard the threshold as a form of performance related pay. That is a dangerous road to go down, because teachers' results depend upon a wide variety of factors, including pupils' social and educational needs at the start of the period under examination, the circumstances of the school and the neighbourhood.

The Department of Education has yet to publish its views on educational added value, which would be

useful as a means of measuring the true educational performance of a given school.

Another fear that teachers expressed about the threshold arrangements was the prospect that a quota to limit the number of teachers who would be eligible for the payment might be introduced. They feared that that would lead to jealousy and destroy team spirit in schools. We know how essential it is that teachers work together. Gone are the days when a teacher worked alone in the classroom.

Finally, teachers said that they needed to carry out much more research on the issue, and that the Department should examine where the money would come from to meet the needs of younger teachers, who might otherwise be put off the idea of working at a school at all. We do not want to affect those entering a profession that has such important outcomes. Education influences everything from industry to pupils' well-being and ability to survive in life. Therefore, teachers' jobs are of prime importance.

We have been examining the LMS system in the context of the overall schools' budget. At present, the schools' budget is a so-called flexible budget. However, no matter how flexible it is, the budget comes from the block grant, and it is inadequate. Considerable top-slicing occurs before the funding reaches us. It is a question of money and then value for money.

Members who are on the Committee, or who have an interest in education, must examine the issue from the point of view of the pupils, in particular, and parents and teachers. Delivery in the classroom is of prime importance. It will not happen if teachers are under pressure, if they are jealous of one another or if principals are given total power. The relationship between a teacher and a principal for seven or eight years is crucial, and its failure will have an impact on individual teachers. Many teachers have told me that that is a dangerous road to go down.

We spoke to officials in Scotland about their budgetary provision. Scotland's system for delivering the budget seems to be more in keeping with the needs of the schools and teachers than Northern Ireland's. School principals in Scotland seem to be happy with the arrangements, and the money is ring-fenced. Their whole budget process seems to be much better than ours. Every teacher should be paid on an equal basis. Young teachers feel that they are equal to those who have been teaching for some length of time. They should not have to face the difficulties of keeping things together for eight years until a decision is made about whether they have the right to an extra £2,000. Teachers, and young teachers in particular, will be going through a time of considerable change after the replacement of the 11-plus. Teachers' pay is one thing that they like to be able to rely on, at all ages. They like to know what the outcome will be.

I introduced the amendment to take the Assembly to a point at which we can review the situation. I take into account the fact that the negotiating bodies — the management and the unions — are best placed to decide their own future. However, the interest of the House is the need to look at the matter from the point of view of those teachers who are being neglected at present.

Mr K Robinson: I am unsure as to whether I should declare an interest. I was once a principal, but I was once a young teacher as well.

Mr B Hutchinson: Did you get any threshold pay?

Mr K Robinson: I did not. I remember starting off as a young teacher in a school in the north of the city. I was envious of a senior member of staff who was paid the wonderful sum of £1,400. He was at the top end of the scale. I was paid just £42 per month. In those days there was no talk of threshold payments.

I have taken many of Billy Hutchinson's points on board. Young teachers are the lifeblood of schools. With the current LMS arrangements that Mr McHugh referred to, the possibility of recruiting and retaining young teachers is diminishing every year. Young teachers have the opportunity to influence people far beyond the walls of the school. However, the benefits of that to the profession, and to education, are being minimised each year.

Young teachers bring several benefits to a school. They are invariably the staff members who are involved in games, who take the children away on trips, who stay behind to ensure that the school choir is on song for Christmas, who work night and day, and who cut up pieces of cloth and turn out those wonderful angels that we see in Nativity plays at this time of the year. They do it because they are committed to their profession. At that point in their careers they are full of enthusiasm and do not seek rewards.

As they grow older, however, marriage and other factors intervene. They have responsibilities. They need money in order to bring home the bacon. Money, therefore, becomes important. I sympathise with what Billy Hutchinson is suggesting. Young teachers do need some financial reward. However, I am not sure what the purpose of introducing threshold payments really is. Is its purpose to retain staff in schools? Older teachers get tired, but they bring experience to schools, and schools need to retain that experience, to blend the enthusiasm of young teachers with the experience of older teachers. Is it to reward staff for outstanding accomplishments, for moving through a threshold, as it were?

My understanding of the threshold was that when teachers reached point 9 — the top of their scale — they then had to apply to move through the threshold. They would then be assessed on whether they bring

something extra to the school. If that assessment were positive, they would then be rewarded at that scale. I am not sure that that is the perfect way to reward either the enthusiasm or the expertise of those who have reached point 9 and the threshold.

The assessment has brought to teachers' attention what other teachers are earning. Members of a team, therefore, start looking around and wondering how much their colleagues are getting paid and whether they are earning less themselves. The old green-eyed monster starts to prey. That is not good for education.

Principals and vice-principals are taking on an ever-increasing role. They have held the education system together for the past 15 years. Many of them have grown weary of that task and have retired. Some of them are fortunate enough to still be alive, despite the awful toll on their health. That has not been recognised by the introduction of threshold payments. The differential between the salary of a senior teacher on point 9 of the scale, who then moves on to a threshold payment, and a vice-principal or, in many cases, a principal is minuscule. The outcome — whether it was perceived or not — is that principals and vice-principals are asking themselves if the extra work is worth it and if it is appreciated.

Principals are vital in assessing teachers who are moving through the threshold. Again, they are put in an invidious position. The threshold assessment was badly thought out. I do not know its real purpose, but the outcome has been to cause further dissension in the teaching profession and in schools. That is the last thing that we want.

Ms Lewsley: I will start by stating the obvious: education is a vital element in society, coming close in importance to food and shelter. It is a basic human right. I do not need to tell the House of the key role of education in the development of young members of society. It is second in influence only to the family and the values that are taught there.

Teachers are an intrinsic part of the education system and, as such, are entitled to equality. The threshold assessment exercise most definitely does not provide equality for all members of the teaching profession. It is yet another example of the Department of Education applying English solutions to Northern Irish problems. Education in Northern Ireland is very different to that in England.

The teaching force here is of the highest quality. For example, an entrant to a higher education institution for teachers in Northern Ireland requires 21 points at A level, while the English entrants require 13 points. Teachers here are highly trained and motivated. The slavish duplication of English solutions to English problems merely exacerbates the position of teachers here, yet the Department of Education argues that it must maintain parity of teachers' pay here with England and Wales.

There should be financial parity. Northern Ireland should be given the equivalent resources on a pro rata basis. Surely, the whole point of devolution is that we have the wit and intelligence to spend resources better without sacrificing the "parity at least" principle that is espoused by the Northern Ireland Teachers' Council.

How do teachers reach the threshold assessment? Over 8,000 teachers have been denied access to the upper range or the so-called threshold assessment during their first seven years in the profession. The threshold assessment is supposed to be about the quality of teaching and learning experience that is provided by the teacher. What magical manifestation deprived teachers in the first seven years of their teaching career from crossing the threshold? The exclusion of 8,000 young teachers from the threshold assessment is an affront to equality, decency and justice. On that basis alone, the Assembly should pass this motion.

Other Members said that the introduction of the threshold assessment in Northern Ireland has also led to a major increase in workload and bureaucracy, not just for teachers, but also for principals. The Department for Education and Skills, in its evidence to the School Teachers' Review Body, stated that an average teacher must spend 20 hours completing a threshold application form and gathering evidence in support of it. Principals must then read all the applications and make critical judgements that can quite easily jeopardise the industrial relations in their school if they get them wrong.

The training of principals in a large one-day seminar was plainly inadequate for the task. The process was, and is, bureaucratic. As Billy Hutchinson said, it is expensive both in teaching time and resources. It has succeeded in lowering the morale of teachers in Northern Ireland. That, in our awful circumstances, is a unique achievement.

In previous responses to my questions, the Minister of Education has confirmed that the bureaucracy of the threshold process will cost £1 million. Fifty-three assessors have been employed — mostly retired principals and education and pension administrators — to gainsay the professional judgements of principal teachers. Given the need in our school system for the professional development of all our teachers, the long delays in attending to the maintenance of the school building estate, and the current reliance on public-private partnerships to resolve the crisis in school capital building, is that expenditure not excessive?

12.00

The introduction of threshold payments erodes the differentials between the pay of principals and vice-principals and that of teachers. That was not difficult to foresee. One wonders about the judgement of the Department of Education and the employing authorities if they did not realise that the erosion of differentials

would cause serious problems with principals and vice-principals.

That unnecessary problem is caused by the slavish adherence to parity with England. The English school system is in crisis, with a massive shortage of teachers and of applications for vacant principal posts. Why is our Department of Education not thinking smart, thinking differently and creating an environment in the Northern Ireland school system that does not replicate the manifest failures in the English system?

In June 2001 the Assembly's Education Committee endorsed the Northern Ireland Teachers' Council's claim for an independent inquiry into teachers' salaries and conditions of service. A similar inquiry was approved by the Scottish Executive to cover teachers in Scotland. I am dismayed to learn, from reports provided by teachers' union representatives, that employers on the management side have been dismissive of the determination of the Assembly Education Committee. At best, that perspective represents naivety. Demonstrably, threshold assessment does not provide equality for the Northern Ireland teaching profession.

I stand by the Education Committee's determination for an independent inquiry into teachers' salaries and conditions of service. That is the best route, rather than to review the inequality of the threshold assessment. I support the motion.

Mr Hamilton: I will not take too long because much has already been said and very eloquently put. There is, however, one matter to which I wish to draw attention. Ms Lewsley made reference to the shortage of principals and vice-principals in England. There is already a shortage of principals and vice-principals here in Northern Ireland. I know of many schools which have advertised for principals but have received very few applications. In some cases, no applications were received.

That shortage may be made worse by the threshold payment. If a senior teacher were earning more — or only a few hundred pounds less — than many vice-principals, a case would arise where many such senior teachers, who logically would wish to progress to vice-principal or possibly principal posts, may well wonder what is the point in progressing. What is the point of their taking on extra responsibility and an extra workload if they are going to be financially worse off than they are now, or perhaps only a few hundred pounds better off? If the situation is allowed to worsen, there is a danger that the filling of vice-principal and principal positions will become even more difficult than it is already. Many members of the teaching profession at that end of the scale are already reluctant to take on the extra workload associated with vice-principal and principal posts.

In reference to Billy Hutchinson's remarks, younger teachers have not approached me about threshold payments. However, many senior teachers have approached me, and next week I will meet with three or four principals and vice-principals from the Strangford area who wish to express concern about their salaries being eroded by the introduction of threshold payments.

Members must take the matter seriously, because teaching is the core element that provides the next generation with an education. I commend Billy Hutchinson for bringing the matter to the House.

Mr Gibson: The motion states that there is concern about equality in the teaching profession. A Green Paper, 'Teachers: Meeting the Challenge of Change', was introduced in England three years ago. At that time, over 197,000 teachers applied for threshold payments. Concern was expressed, and the National Union of Teachers mounted a legal challenge to the process. The matter was reviewed, and it was only in November 2000 that threshold payments became a reality.

The main objective of threshold payments is to contribute to the overall process of improving the quality of teaching and learning in schools — to use an anachronism, to improve teacher performance at the chalkface. A broad view was, therefore, taken that those teachers who could improve the quality of education should receive rewards.

As other Members have said, it is normal to reward teachers with posts of responsibility. That usually means that a teacher is appointed head of department, or he or she is given the responsibility of an extra-curricular activity. However, threshold payments would reward directly those teachers who are extremely good at their actual teaching duties. In other words, the payments would reward those teachers who could improve outcomes for their pupils. Billy Hutchinson rightly pointed out the core values that currently exist. They are the common core values that one would expect of any teacher.

The application of the process is causing some concern. Under LMS, all money is given directly to a school and is allocated by the board of governors. That includes the payment of teachers' salaries. Currently, the Department of Education excludes threshold money from that allocation. It makes the threshold payment of £2,001 directly to the eligible teachers. There is concern about how that will be handled in the future. Is it possible that threshold money could be included in the LMS budget, thereby limiting the ability of small schools, within their LMS budget, to reward those teachers who perform more than adequately?

Doubts have rightly been expressed about the assessment process. The Department issued a warning recently that

"all individuals involved in the assessment process must not act unfairly to any individual and, in particular, must not unlawfully

discriminate on the grounds of a person's sex, marital status, race or disability. Part-time staff should not be treated less favourably than a member of staff working full-time".

The application has caused some concern. Last year, the teaching unions agreed on the method. It is timely, one year later, for the House to point out that concern to the unions and make it a matter for public discussion. I worked in the teaching system. There was always one young, energetic and genuine teacher who had the ambition to strive to improve his professional standards. Having to wait to reach point 9 of the teaching scale can thwart teachers who have the ambition to be excellent in their field. I ask the unions, the Minister and the Department to examine the concept of the threshold point for consideration for that award.

I thank Billy Hutchinson for bringing the matter to our attention. It is worthy of discussion, and anything that can be done to enhance the position of those teachers who deliver levels of excellence well above the norm should be supported. Such teachers should be properly rewarded. We must take note of the matter and ask the unions, the Department and the Minister to look again for the inequalities, or the deficiencies, that arise in any new introduction. Those must be ironed out as quickly as possible to give the profession every chance in the future.

Mr O'Neill: I support the motion. There has always been a dilemma in the teaching profession as to how to recognise competence among its members. The old system of promotional points had many unsavoury qualities, not least of which was that it often set one colleague against another — it introduced the green-eyed monster that has already been referred to. If someone wanted to achieve promotion they could do so only by taking on more and more administrative duties. The result was that good classroom teachers were often not in the classroom — they were administrators, which was not why they had become professional teachers. After education had suffered the ravages of Thatcherism, many teachers were doing the work of a civil servant rather than the work of a teacher.

However, not all good classroom teachers were rewarded thus. Many teachers complained that there was always an opportunity for the professional, educational whizz-kids to zoom up the promotional ladder because of their ability to sell themselves well in interviews. Quite often, good teachers who did not have those particular skills, or who perhaps were not even interested in them, remained in the low bands of the scale and never got the recognition that many people felt that they were due.

12.15 pm

That kind of situation gave rise to the examination of the whole area and the attempt to introduce threshold payments. The Westminster Green Paper which led to all of this stated that the teachers in the classroom

were to be placed at the heart of the salary structure by ensuring that the vital importance of their work, as opposed to all the other activities in school, was properly reflected in salary terms.

That system has created considerable problems and, in many cases, has not solved the problems identified with the old system. From my long experience in teaching and in school management, I believe that to ask already hard-pressed principals and vice-principals to adjudicate in that way creates a serious problem and places a heavy burden on teachers. I note that, towards the end of October, some 232 schools had been through the system, and only 10 of those applications were rejected. I am surprised that the figure is even 10 — I would have thought that none would have been rejected as most principals and vice-principals would have been careful not to create problems with staff and morale. I am even more surprised and concerned that many schools must find the money for those already agreed threshold arrangements out of their own budgets. The boards do not, as yet, provide that money. I understand — and I am subject to correction — that the Department has not provided the boards with the funds to supply schools with the budget required to make the necessary adjustment. My information is that that situation is widespread, and it requires immediate attention.

There has also been much concern about the amount and quality of training available to those carrying out the assessment. If the current system continues — and I fear that we must endure it for some time — it should be our top priority to ensure that all those involved are properly trained.

An additional problem has emerged with regard to the backdating of teachers' salaries, in some cases, to September 2000 — the supply of money required to reinforce the LMS budget. Some teachers will also experience tax problems as a result of moving from one tax bracket to another because of excessive back pay. That problem should be more sensibly and sympathetically dealt with.

Members have already mentioned the differential that occurs between principals and vice-principals and the rest of the staff. In some cases that differential is unprotected under the new threshold arrangement. The Department must move to protect it.

The final problem, which has been well covered already by quite a few teachers, is the equality issue — particularly the problem about young teachers articulated by Billy Hutchinson at the outset. There is no doubt that we need a system, and the only credible way to do it is by the creation of a salary scale, high enough to attract able young people into the profession, which progressively rewards teachers as they move on in their professional career. I am not making it a big demand, but I am really concerned about the uncertainty

that faces professional teachers. A clear system would remove that, leaving people able to get on with their job of teaching and not being constantly concerned about fighting with each other and worrying about the promotion ladder. In no uncertain terms, this must mean that once teachers have manifestly shown their competence, they can move forward on a clear promotion ladder.

There are things about the amendment that are reasonable, but I am supporting the motion. The amendment detracts from the main impetus of the motion, and I want to be with the motion in this debate. As has already been pointed out, the present system has not been well enough thought out. It causes dissent and is already demotivating teachers. As Ms Lewsley said, it is not particularly applicable to teaching in Northern Ireland.

I hope that the Minister will re-engage with the unions, as he has either started to or is about to, in their call for an independent inquiry into teachers' pay and working hours. Through that we might get a system for teachers in Northern Ireland that could satisfy us — well, maybe not everybody, knowing teachers as I do. It could gain the greatest degree of satisfaction among the teaching profession, and remove this demotivating series of problems from the profession.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Luckily, the Minister was able to speed up and arrive three hours sooner than he expected.

The Minister of Education (Mr M McGuinness): Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I apologise to the House and to Billy Hutchinson for not being here at the beginning of the debate. I was on my way to an important event in a school in north Belfast when I was told that this had been brought forward. Unfortunately, quite a few people are waiting for me in north Belfast, and I will go there as soon as this is finished.

Equality is a central tenet of the Good Friday Agreement, and as Minister of Education I am fully committed to ensuring that my Department's policies and actions promote equality for all our citizens. In taking forward my Department's responsibilities for the education of our children, I am determined to provide all our children with the best possible education — one that, in all respects, equips them to be citizens of the future. Raising standards in all schools is one of my key objectives, and I am taking forward a range of initiatives with that aim firmly in sight. This includes capital investment in our schools — including investment in information and communications technology — and the school improvement programme. That programme is designed to raise standards in all schools. It addresses issues such as literacy and numeracy, discipline, target setting, school development, planning, low achievement and under-achievement, the massive expansion of pre-school education and the three major reviews of aspects of our education system — the post-primary review, the

curriculum review and the consultation on LMS commonality.

Of course, investment in educational resources for the purpose of raising standards counts for little without highly skilled and motivated teachers. It is for that reason that I place great importance on our ongoing work to maintain and enhance the quality of teaching.

Teachers are the key to good education, and we are particularly fortunate in the quality of our teaching force. I have met many teachers in my position as Minister of Education, and I have been impressed constantly with their professionalism and dedication. Teachers should have a career and salary structure which recognises their skill and commitment, encourages their professional development and offers a tangible reward for their achievements.

The pay award negotiated in January 2001 by the teachers' salaries negotiating committee put in place a new salary structure. This was not imposed by me or by my Department. It was achieved through discussion and agreement with representatives from the education and library boards, the Council for Catholic Maintained Schools, the Governing Bodies Association, the Council for Integrated Education and the five accredited teaching unions. It is applied irrespective of religion, race or gender and in all schools — special, nursery and primary, secondary and grammar, controlled and maintained, integrated and Irish-medium.

The new structure is intended to complement the professional development of teachers and to give them the opportunity to advance their careers while remaining in the classroom. New teachers are required to complete an induction period of one year and two years early professional development. Following that they are encouraged to avail of continuing professional development opportunities.

The professional development of younger teachers is complemented by annual progression on the main salary scale, until the maximum is reached, usually after seven years. The introduction of threshold assessment allows those teachers to progress to a new upper salary scale, giving them an immediate annual increase from September 2000 — £2,076 from 1 April 2001 — with opportunities for further progression.

Before moving from the top of the nine-point main scale to the new upper salary scale, teachers must demonstrate that they have developed the competences required to become a teacher in the first place, so, in a sense, it is a standard of competence which is derived directly from the initial teacher training competences.

Threshold assessment is available to all teachers who have been at the top of the main salary scale for one year, based on their qualifications and experience. Those who apply must meet the four agreed threshold

standards and produce practical evidence to show that they have met those standards for the past two or three years. The standards are core values — understanding of the curriculum, professional knowledge, teaching in assessment of learning, contribution to raising standards through pupil achievement and effective professional development. It is important that these standards are applied consistently and fairly and that the scheme is transparent, which is why the assessments are validated by external accredited assessors. Unsuccessful applicants receive feedback to help their professional development, and they have a right of appeal.

The assessors have been trained and accredited by the regional training unit (RTU). That unit also provided training for principals, who then trained the teachers in their schools. In most schools training was completed before the end of the summer term, and completed application forms had to be submitted to the principal by the end of September. Assessments by principals are now completed, and the external validation is under way. Several schools have already completed the assessment process, and many successful teachers have now received their increases, which were backdated to September 2000.

The assessment process for the first cohort of applications is expected to be concluded by Christmas. More than 13,000 of the 20,000 teachers here were eligible to apply in the first round, and almost all of them have done so. Indications from the applications processed so far are that the success rate will be high. Those teachers who were not eligible to apply this time may do so when they have progressed to the top of the main salary scale, and those who were unsuccessful may reapply.

Several issues were raised before I arrived. I will check Hansard and reply to the Members concerned. However, I want to mention some of the points raised.

12.30 pm

Éamonn O'Neill raised the issue of costs. The cost in the current financial year will be approximately £50 million, and that includes the cost of arrears from September 2000. The expenditure is being met from additional funds held centrally by my Department for this purpose. Provision for implementation costs and threshold payments was added to the Department's budget in the comprehensive spending review.

Tom Hamilton and Éamonn O'Neill raised the issue of principals and vice-principals. As we all know, the threshold arrangements do not apply to principals and vice-principals. However, the management side of the negotiating committee is considering their salary levels and differentials so that suitable candidates are not discouraged from seeking leadership posts. That is important.

Patricia Lewsley raised the issue of an independent inquiry. I think Éamonn O'Neill also mentioned it. The call for an inquiry was made by the teachers' side as part of the 2001 pay claim and is still progressing through the negotiating committee. I have agreed to meet with both sides on 13 December to examine whether I can help advance matters further.

It is important to emphasise that the threshold arrangements were negotiated between the management side and the teachers' side after detailed discussions through their existing negotiating machinery. I welcomed their agreement, which both sides worked hard to reach last January. I want to assure the House that I am committed to ensuring that our teachers are properly awarded for their important contribution to society.

Mr McHugh: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. People may not have entirely indicated their willingness to support the amendment, but its objective was to achieve an outcome. It mentions the serious concerns that have been brought to me by teachers about the threshold assessment. Those concerns include equality issues and urging representatives from both sides to reach a situation where everyone feels equal. That was the thrust of the amendment. If people do not feel that they want to support it, I want Billy Hutchinson's motion to bring the need for a review to the attention of the Department. I accept the points that the Minister has made concerning the meeting that is to take place on 13 December.

Earlier, I stressed the point that both sides have negotiated this position. It will cost a considerable amount of money, and some other area of education may have to lose out — at least that is the way budgets normally work. It is important that all involved take another look at this matter. Negotiation can bring people to a point where everyone is dissatisfied. As far as we are concerned, the issues are outstanding, and they are of prime importance.

The Minister mentioned that equality is central to the Good Friday Agreement and that we are working for the benefit of all citizens. Our Republican belief that we cherish all our children equally is one that we carry strongly. The Minister mentioned raising standards and he spoke about pre-school education. That is where young teachers often start their career. They must wonder where their future will lie, and they must be looking at this particular situation.

Ken Robinson asked whether the issue was about retaining older staff or rewarding people for long service or particularly good service.

I cannot agree with some of the points made by Mr Gibson about the differences in the delivery of service. It is hard to say whether a young teacher is delivering on an equal basis with someone who has been teaching for a long time. Quite often it is about teamwork, and

not about an individual teacher working in isolation in a school. Teachers must be able to work in an atmosphere where they are not at odds, and their future is not at odds, with what they do on a day-to-day basis. They want to be able to come up with good, new ideas, and not to have to keep them from others just in case those ideas would end up on the CV of another teacher who would get the extra £2,000 at the end of the year.

Teachers should be left to self-assess and to set their own targets. Female teachers are often overcritical of their own work and need support to self-assess positively. Teachers must be trusted to set targets and to self-assess with appropriate support that is unrelated to the immediate financial award. The outcome of the McCrone report in Scotland offers at least one alternative.

We have had a useful debate. Various issues have been raised, and I want to see them taken on board. I hope that the meetings with the Minister and those involved will achieve that. Go raibh maith agat.

Mr B Hutchinson: We have had a very encouraging and informed debate, and I thank all Members who took part and those who listened. I accept that the Minister had a reason for being late. I realise that he missed my opening remarks, and I hope that when he has read Hansard he will answer any points that he may have missed.

I am concerned at Gerry McHugh's opening remarks about the amendment. There seems to be some confusion about the debate. There is an assumption that the local management of schools (LMS) is about money only. We have two main problems with LMS. If a school has low pupil numbers and the teachers are on point 9 of the scale, that school is crippled because the top wage has to be paid. If there are 12 teachers and 10 of them are on the top wage, the bill is crippling. Teachers who have been at a school for a long time have to be paid more, and that causes problems with a shrinking school. That must be recognised. It is not just a question of money, but of how we assess where the teachers should be on the pay scale.

Today's debate is not about teachers' pay — it is about the bonus and what that should be based on. The bonus is based on the premise that anyone who has reached point 9, because they have served more than seven years as a teacher, is a good teacher, and they are going to bring the four standards that are outlined. My argument is that when young teachers qualify they sign up to the Jordantown agreement — I nearly said the Good Friday Agreement — and those standards are contained in that agreement. From the day that a teacher starts work, he or she has already signed up to those four standards and should be meeting them.

Éamonn O'Neill gave us some very helpful numbers — 232 and only about 10 rejections. A teacher who has been deemed unsatisfactory by the Department of

Education can be paid that money — not because he is a good teacher, but because he is on point 9 and has given a certain length of service.

There is an inequality and an injustice here that need to be resolved. A principal can fail a teacher as far as a threshold assessment is concerned, but he can be overruled by an external validator. I know that there are difficulties with principals and vice-principals carrying out this role. However, they know their teachers best, and they know how they are performing on a daily basis. It is wrong that an external validator can contradict a principal.

I thank Ken Robinson for his recognition of young teachers. He gave a graphic description, which I could not give, as I was not a young teacher. I believe that Ken was a young teacher — some time ago. It is important that we understand what young teachers do without remuneration. We should recognise their enthusiasm and their contribution to the lives of many children.

I accept Ken Robinson's explanation of the reasons for the introduction of the threshold. However, once point 9 has been reached, we are effectively saying that there is something different about those people, and that they have reached the standard. If they then take redundancy, they are still entitled to the threshold payment. There is something wrong with that. Long-term substitute teachers also qualify for the payment. Should it be that a threshold is set at point 9, and once a teacher reaches that point and accepts redundancy, he can have his redundancy and the £2,000 threshold payment that he has qualified for? There is a contradiction in that premise, and it must be re-examined.

Ms Lewsley is correct when she says that differentials are being eroded by the exclusion of principals and vice-principals. In my opening remarks I mentioned that in a small rural school, there might be a difference in salary of only £200 per year between a principal and a teacher. As Tom Hamilton commented, who would want to take on all of those responsibilities for an extra £200 per year?

Mr O'Neill gave us a timely history lesson. We should remember that the problems in teaching and in our schools go back to the era of Thatcherism. Thatcher destroyed the whole notion of education, even though she believed in "education, education, education". We now have people competing against one another. Education should not be about competition. It should be about producing fully rounded individuals and how we can get teachers to assist in that.

We have gone on about giving people bonuses. If this is a bonus, that is OK, but let us give people bonuses because they are good at their job, and not because they have been there for a long time.

Mr Gibson highlighted my point about improving teacher performance. Talking about threshold assessment in the same breath as improving teacher performance is making the assumption that length of service raises standards. Regardless of profession, excellence depends on the quality of the person and how good they are at the job, and it cannot be measured by experience or length of time in a job. It is handy to have experience, but it does not necessarily mean that you are better at the job than someone else.

Mr O'Neill made the valid point that schools have always been in a dilemma about recognising competence. How do we recognise competence? Mr O'Neill is correct, as was Ms Lewsley, on the issue of differentials. Differentials must be protected. Mr O'Neill's point about using a salary scale as a progressive reward is correct.

The only way to reward teachers is to provide that they may start at a particular point and end up at another. Teachers should be rewarded because of the work that they do and what they achieve in their school. A review of teachers' pay may be the way forward, but progressive reward should be re-examined.

12.45 pm

The Deputy Speaker is sitting upright in his Chair so I assume that he wants me to hurry.

I recognise the work that the Minister of Education has done since he took office. I do not want to take away from what he and the Department of Education have achieved. He has made some brave decisions. The Minister mentioned raising education standards, school improvements and pre-school education. Those are all recognised as being valuable, as is the notion of post-primary education and the recent review of that. However, the motion is about the threshold agreement for Northern Ireland. It does not give equality to all members of the teaching profession. The Assembly must focus on that.

I am disappointed that the Minister focused on the other good things that he has done. However, I recognise those and I am sure that all Members recognise them and would not want to take away from those achievements.

Nevertheless, the motion is concerned with equality, and the threshold assessment does not give equality to all the teaching profession.

There are a number of problems in the teaching profession, and I tabled the motion because of the lack of equality within it. I emphasised the inequality shown to young teachers. Members must recognise that young teachers are working hard to attain additional qualifications to those they had when they entered the profession. They do it without any financial reward or support from the Department of Education or others.

Experience does not necessarily make good teachers; we must lay that ghost to rest. Mr McHugh mentioned

that teachers meet the changes in the curriculum and everything else on a daily and yearly basis. It is therefore a difficult job, because the curriculum can change from year to year, or every couple of years.

Younger teachers bring new skills and new methods of teaching to the profession. A teacher should not have to wait seven years until he or she is on point 9 before receiving recognition for doing a good job in teaching. Young teachers are the leaders of the future and they will become leaders in our schools only because they themselves have qualified and have had the experience of teaching young people in classrooms.

Members must support the motion which will provide equality across the board, not only for vice-principals and principals, but for those young teachers who have to wait seven years before they qualify.

Question, That the amendment be made, *put and negatived*.

Main Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That this Assembly believes that the threshold assessment (Northern Ireland) does not give equality to all members of the teaching profession.

The sitting was suspended at 12.48 pm.

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

2.00 pm

SELLAFIELD NUCLEAR PLANT

Mr McCarthy: I beg to move

That this Assembly calls for the rundown and closure at the earliest possible date of the nuclear-processing activities carried out at Sellafield.

I thank my fellow Assembly Members for giving me the opportunity to bring this important issue to the Floor of the House. In so doing, they have allowed other Members to contribute to an important and ongoing debate.

From the outset, it has been acknowledged that the Assembly has no power or authority over what happens at Sellafield. However, we can at least express all our fears loudly and clearly. It seems that everyone in these islands and further afield is having his or her say, and demands are being made. If Prime Minister Tony Blair's statement in Dublin last week is anything to go by, many people still need to be convinced before there is real movement towards meeting the demands of this motion.

Sellafield is sited on the Cumbrian coast, a few miles across the Irish Sea from places such as Portavogie and Portaferry in east Down. When the plant first opened in the mid-1950s, it was called Windscale. Shortly after its opening, a reactor caught fire and created havoc, sending a dangerous cloud of fallout into the air over many towns in the north of England.

In the early 1970s, Windscale had another near miss. There was an accident in a plutonium-handling compartment, which had the potential to start a nuclear reaction similar to that experienced at Chernobyl. Swift reactions by staff prevented a full-scale disaster. After these mishaps, the site changed its name to Sellafield.

On this side of the Irish Sea, we have always had our suspicions about activities at the site and the possible consequences for marine life in the Irish Sea. In Northern Ireland, particularly along the east coast, we used to have a thriving fishing industry. Unfortunately, that is not the case today. It is possible that Sellafield may have had a hand in the demise of the fishing industry. There have been high levels of instances of cancer and leukaemia on the east coast, and the finger has been pointed at Sellafield.

On 3 October 2001, the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (DEFRA) in London announced that the manufacture of mixed oxide (MOX) fuel is justified in accordance with the requirements of European

Community law. That statement is incredible, given that there has been widespread opposition to activities at Sellafield since the start of its operations. That announcement, coming some three weeks after the horrendous events of 11 September, is beyond belief. Have people in the Government taken leave of their senses? They must be aware of the concerns of a great many individuals, not only those on this side of the Irish Sea, but also those who live near the Sellafield plant.

In response to a journalist's queries about the risks associated with Sellafield, I referred to the number of jobs at the plant and the economic benefits of the enterprise. That aspect of the problem must be considered, and efforts must be made to attract more and safer employment to that area.

There are inconsistent reports on the introduction of the new MOX plant. It is said that the economic benefits of the new operation have been distorted. There is insufficient evidence to prove that the plant can attract enough customers. The viability of the plant is in doubt. There are also concerns about past data falsification incidents. A recent report by the Health and Safety Executive's Nuclear Installation Inspectorate revealed that individual workers had faked safety records. Furthermore, the continuous transportation of large cargoes of this substance across the Irish Sea would be extremely dangerous. If there were ever to be an accident involving one of these vessels, the consequences would be unthinkable.

Further alarming revelations have come to light in relation to security at the Sellafield plant. It has been alleged that a firm employed to guard Sellafield is partly owned by someone with close links to the Afghan terrorists. It has also been revealed that the person in question has a stake in a firm that supplies security systems to Sellafield and has intimate knowledge and access to highly sensitive data about the running of that plant. If there are suspicions attached to security at Sellafield, surely the public have a right to know.

The Irish Government have recognised the problem and are working to convince the British Government of the consequences of any disaster at Sellafield. We welcome their efforts to halt its expansion.

Friends of the Earth, Greenpeace and other environmentalists are working to see the MOX operation at Sellafield cancelled. A senior director of Greenpeace said that expanding the global trade in plutonium was dangerously irresponsible, especially at a time of huge global insecurity. A Friends of the Earth director also said that it beggared belief that the British Government could give the go-ahead to a process involving the use and transportation of plutonium, which can be used to make weapons. Producing MOX at Sellafield will make the world much less safe.

Those of us who live on the Ards Peninsula, with Strangford Lough on one side and the Irish Sea on the other, are particularly alarmed at the proposed MOX expansion. After the events of 11 September, public representatives have a duty to enlist the support of everyone who values a clean, safe environment to get the message across to the British Government. I note that our own Minister of the Environment, Mr Foster, is present, and I hope that he will question the Government's actions. We hope that the appropriate Department in London will take seriously the outcome of this debate, withhold any new licence for further activities at Sellafield and start the process of rundown and final closure of the plant.

Members must recognise that we have a potential time bomb only a few miles across the Irish Sea. After the events of 11 September and even this weekend's suicide bombings in Israel, anything is possible. God forbid that Sellafield should ever become a target. Not only this country but the entire British Isles and even further afield could be obliterated. Let us stop it now. I ask for the Assembly's support.

Mr McGrady: I beg to move the following amendment: Delete all after "calls" and insert —

"for the withdrawal of the licence issued by the British Government to British Nuclear Fuels Ltd in respect of the full commissioning of the mixed oxide plant, and for the proper decommissioning of all nuclear reprocessing activities, leading to the rundown and closure of the plant at Sellafield in Cumbria."

I commend Mr McCarthy for giving us the opportunity to debate this important issue. It is very timely. The amendment stands in my name and that of my Colleague Arthur Doherty. I apologise on his behalf. He is absent, not out of disrespect to the House, but because his brother died yesterday.

The Sellafield nuclear reprocessing site has been the centre of controversy for decades; it is not a new problem. Many years have been spent trying to publicise the dangers inherent in such a site. Sellafield, with its multiplicity of operations, represents a potentially serious threat to these islands — to the environment, to public health and to safety.

My concerns about Sellafield include the continued reprocessing of spent nuclear fuels; the continued operation of old magnox reactors; the continued discharge of radioactive material into the Irish Sea; the storage on land of high-level radioactive waste in liquid form; the transportation of nuclear fuels up and down the Irish Sea to and from the site; safety management at the site, as mentioned by Mr McCarthy; and, particularly since 11 September, the risk of catastrophic accident or deliberate attack.

The commissioning of the mixed oxide plant — which is currently the subject of two legal cases, besides that which was heard at Hamburg last Monday — is an

unjustified and unnecessary expansion of nuclear operations at Sellafield. The British Government approved licensing on 3 October despite opposition from Ireland, the Nordic countries and non-governmental organisations. It was clear that the permission was driven by the Exchequer and the public purse in the UK. Believe it or not, the MOX plant has yet to obtain consent from the Health and Safety Executive, yet it has been licensed to operate.

When the British Government issued the licence, they took advice from a low-level section of the Department of Trade and Industry. They did not wait for the report of the committee that they had appointed for that purpose, which is called OSPAN. The report has not yet been published, but there is an interim report that is disadvantageous to the decision that was made.

According to eminent scientists, particularly those of the Oxford research group, who have consistently asserted that there is no economic case for MOX, there is no economic justification for commissioning the plant. We must remember that the British Government keep arguing for that economic case.

In a critique of the Arthur D Little report, nuclear consultant Mike Sadnicki pointed out that the data falsification incident in September 1999 that Mr McCarthy mentioned significantly reduced the likelihood that Japanese utilities will sign MOX contracts with British Nuclear Fuels Ltd (BNFL). He concluded that if "very plausible" assumptions are made about Japanese markets and, more appropriately, the discount rates now being used, the plant might fail to cover even its own operating costs.

Only last week, one of Sellafield's main customers told a parliamentary subcommittee at Westminster that it wants to terminate its reprocessing contracts with BNFL because they are too costly.

2.15 pm

British Energy told MPs that it

"has never re-used any of the material produced because it would be uneconomic to do so, and this is likely to remain the case in the short to medium term. Reprocessing fuel is an unnecessary and costly exercise that British Energy cannot afford. Reprocessing produces materials that have no current economic value. There is no technical need for reprocessing".

British Energy further stated that

"most countries do not carry out reprocessing, recognising the economic drawbacks, and propose to directly dispose of their spent fuel".

Those arguments have been enunciated by the Oxford research group as reasons why the British Government should not have commissioned the mixed oxide plant. In the light of such professional advice and evidence, we must ask why the British Government and British Nuclear Fuels Limited persist with the operation of the

thermal oxide reprocessing plant (THORP) and with the licensing of the MOX plant now coming into vogue. Available evidence from all sources flies in the face of the judgement made.

The Irish Government also believe that there is no economic justification of the commission of the mixed oxide plant. Their Minister for energy asserted last month that the British Government have

“bowed to spurious economic arguments by British Nuclear Fuels Ltd in favour of the MOX plant, and has ignored or rejected the real and genuine concerns about the plant expressed by over 2,000 respondents to the consultation process, including Ireland”.

The Government of the Republic of Ireland and all other non-governmental organisations are fully justified in bringing legal actions against the British Government in respect of Sellafield and the commissioning of the new MOX plant.

There is no doubt that the level of radioactive discharges into the Irish Sea will increase. In 1985 a House of Commons Environment Select Committee report stated that Sellafield pumped a quarter of a tonne of highly radioactive plutonium into the Irish Sea. How much has gone into the Irish Sea on a day-to-day, month-to-month, and year-to-year basis since the early 1950s? A leaked British Nuclear Fuels Ltd document from June 2001 indicated that radioactive discharges from Sellafield will increase over the next three years. Such discharges will increase either two-fold or four-fold, peaking in time for the next meeting of the Environment Ministers at the OSPAR (Oslo-Paris Commission) North Atlantic Convention in 2003. The increased discharges fly in the face of the commitments that the British Government gave in 1998 to the OSPAR conference in Sintra, Portugal, to undertake to reduce radioactive discharges.

At the subsequent OSPAR conference in Valencia in June 2001, the countries decided that the policies agreed at the previous conference — to review discharge authorisation from the reprocessing plants with a view to implementing the non-reprocessing options for spent fuel — should be carried out as a matter of urgency. However, significantly, the UK, French, and Swiss Governments abstained from the vote. It was in fact a veto of the implementation of the policies of reduced discharges, on which they had already agreed. It was a technical loophole by which the two major nuclear powers, France and Britain, frustrated the agreement that had already been made — a total lack of honour on their part.

In July, the UK Environment Agency published its long-awaited proposals for the future regulation of radioactive waste disposal from Sellafield. The consultation period for those proposals ended yesterday. That is why this debate is so timely. It has been argued that none of the new liquid discharge limits imposed by the

Environment Agency will in any way constrain British Nuclear Fuels Ltd from reaching full throughput in its two reprocessing plants. There must be progressive reductions in the actual discharges of radioactive and toxic wastes from Sellafield into the Irish Sea until they are totally eliminated.

Only last week, Britain's Minister of State for Industry and Energy, Brian Wilson, claimed that the Fianna Fáil advertisement in 'The Times' on 24 November against the MOX plant at Sellafield was not backed up by the Irish Government's own monitoring of Sellafield.

Mr Wells: I notice that the hon Member is drawing his remarks to a close — he will be glad to know that there is no time limit, so I am not cutting in on his allocation.

Mr McGrady has spoken eloquently on the motion, but I cannot detect any great difference between the thrust of his argument and that put forward by Mr McCarthy, nor has he yet addressed the reasoning behind his amendment. It may be a tactical amendment and if so, that is fine. Is there any difference between what he is saying and what Mr McCarthy is saying? Will the Member be pushing his amendment to a vote?

Mr McGrady: First, I assure the Member that the amendment is not tactical. In fact, I could have argued that the original motion was not competent because British Nuclear Fuels Ltd does not process materials at Sellafield — it reprocesses them. There is a huge technical difference.

Secondly, the amendment discusses the licence from the British Government to British Nuclear Fuels Ltd for the new MOX plant and calls for the complete rundown and closure of Sellafield. These are fundamental differences. I assume that my amendment would not have been accepted had it not been substantively different to the motion. I will proceed and not be presumed to be winding up, as Mr Wells thought.

The British Government accused the Irish Government of bad faith in that the former said that the latter, in their advert, had not heeded their own monitoring reports from Sellafield. It should be pointed out that the Radiological Protection Institute of Ireland (RPII) stated in its last report that discharges of radioactive waste into the Irish Sea from Sellafield continue to be a dominant source of contamination.

The RPII mentioned the re-mobilisation from sediments of historic discharges. That wonderful phrase simply means that the radioactive material that was theoretically meant to be embedded in the mud of the Irish Sea has been re-mobilised and is circulating. It was never intended that that should happen. There are several cases pending against the British Government, and I hope that they will come to fruition.

As Mr McCarthy said, this debate comes in the aftermath of the terrorist attacks in New York on 11 September. It is interesting to note that the World Information Service on Energy (WISE), which is a group of scientists based in Paris, undertook an assessment of the security risk at Sellafield prior to the terrorist attack in the USA. The report was published just after the horrific and horrendous events of 11 September. The report mentioned Sellafield as having one of the highest inventories of radioactive waste in the world. The report also presented Sellafield as an enormous security risk. That report was written before 11 September, although it was only published after that date.

For these reasons, and many others that would take too long to articulate, I commend the amendment to Mr McCarthy. At the end of the debate, there may be a composite motion that will be satisfactory to all Members.

Mr Shannon: Sellafield is an issue that concerns us all, not only because we live on the Irish Sea coast but because, as Mr McGrady said, it highlights our direct concerns. We in the Ards area have talked about Sellafield often in recent weeks, not because we have nothing else to talk about, but because it is of great concern to people in the area. Ards Borough Council has debated it on three occasions.

Since the tragedies of 11 September, our fear has been that Sellafield would become a target. Before then, some people might have thought that our fears were extreme. It might be thought outrageous to suppose that Sellafield would be attacked. However, the Americans thought it was so incredible that anyone should decide to attack the twin towers that they used the World Trade Centre as a flight simulator crash exercise. That is, perhaps, an indication that they thought it would never happen. But it did happen. Think how easy it would be to hire a light aircraft out of a small airport — Newtownards airport being one example — and to fly across the Irish Sea to the nuclear power station. Again, some would suggest that that is ridiculous, but it is not. It could happen.

A few weeks ago, the press reminded us of Sellafield's vulnerability. RAF fighter jets were scrambled to patrol the skies over the plant for some five hours. Had anything happened they might have been just a little late, but they did respond. The call turned out to be a hoax, but it highlights the fears and misgivings of people in our Province, particularly the residents of my Strangford constituency and of the Ards borough.

For years we have worried about the health problems that may have been caused by the plant's proximity to our coast, but no one ever thought in their wildest dreams that the plant could be used to wipe out Northern Ireland in one foul act of inhumanity. The fallout from a nuclear explosion would kill everyone in the Strangford constituency — and a brave few other people

as well. The land would be unable to sustain any life for hundreds, perhaps thousands, of years. That is the doomsday scenario, but it could happen if terrorists were to appoint themselves to carry it out. It is unlikely that any of us could survive the holocaust of a nuclear explosion and the resulting fallout.

Northern Ireland is one of only two parts of the United Kingdom without a nuclear bunker for shelter in the event of such an incident. That highlights — and is symptomatic of — how the rest of the United Kingdom views the people of Northern Ireland. In its debate, Ards Borough Council urged the Government to give strong, solid assurances that Sellafield is protected.

It is typical of the English to persist with a white elephant, even though the rest of the world tells them to stop. We have seen that stubbornness in the ruin of our National Health Service by an idiotic policy that has been pressed into service by Governments. The peace process in Northern Ireland is riddled with skulduggery and cheating to make it work and make it fit, even though the people can see that it is a fallacy.

The Government want to expand the Sellafield plant. They have tried to assure us that any emissions from it will be minimal and have no impact. I asked the Minister of the Environment that very question, and his response was that they are of “negligible radiological significance”. What does that mean if, in perhaps ten years' time, we find out that that “negligible radiological significance” is greater than scientists thought today?

The coast of County Down has the highest incidence of cancer in the United Kingdom. There are clusters of cancer groups where people feel a greater impact from cancer, more have the disease and more receive treatment than in other parts of the Province.

2.30 pm

Are the Government's statements as truthful as they would have us believe? They have a less than brilliant track record for honesty; Members need only look at the BSE crisis, which continues to cause trauma.

The reprocessing plant's emissions are in excess of the recommended European Union levels. Members must take that issue on board, because we are concerned about the fact that the emissions recorded along the coast of County Down and in the rest of the United Kingdom are above accepted levels in other parts of Europe and elsewhere. Can we, therefore, deduce that the Government are telling us one thing and the European Union is telling us another? Who should we believe?

Given the British Government's track record, we should consider the European Union's advice. We should support the motion and the comments that Members put forward. Members should agree with Mr McGrady's amendment; it is acceptable. We should collectively support the campaign for the closure of Sellafield.

The press have reported that the radioactive discharges from Sellafield are to increase, and that is of deep concern to us. The increase could be detrimental both to the communities that live near the Irish Sea and to the fishing industry. Mr McGrady, Mr Wells, Mr McCarthy and I represent areas with sizeable fishing communities, and we are concerned about the impact that increased emissions would have on them.

Sellafield poses an unacceptable risk to all those who live and work close to it. I have fears about the security around the site as the war on the Taliban threatens to escalate. The fact that the RAF scrambled jets is a good sign that the Government consider the threat to be real, but for jet fighters to appear after there has been a threat is insufficient to prevent an attack. If the threat had been real, the plant would have already erupted into flames, emitting radioactive material. The planes would have arrived too late, and the population of Strangford and the Down coast would have been decimated. The only way to prevent such an accident — whether that be as the result of human error or terrorist attack — is to close the plant until such times as the Government can be trusted to tell us the truth and guarantee us the safety that we demand.

The Chernobyl incident in the 1980s was a shock to us, yet we may have become a bit complacent about it. Were Sellafield to close today, we would still have to live with its legacy for thousands of years. However, were the move made to close it today, at least that would be a start.

Can any Member imagine people in other parts of the world campaigning for the children of Ards, Strangford and the Down coast in the way that they do for the children of Chernobyl? After Chernobyl, we were afraid, and we were told to be cautious about drinking milk in case radiation had filtered through the grass into the food chain.

In the past, we were eager to accept Government statements as to whether things were OK. However, recently the Government have proven to be unreliable, and we must demand that action be taken because we, as citizens of the United Kingdom, deserve to have our national security taken seriously. I agree with Mr McGrady's amendment.

Mr M Murphy: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I support the motion. It is welcome to see that the DUP and the Alliance Party are concerned about an issue that affects the people of Ireland. Perhaps, we will be able to convert them to an all-Ireland agenda.

I view the SDLP's amendment with deep regret. The Assembly should unite on the issue. Instead, for personal reasons, Mr McGrady has chosen to table an amendment that adds nothing to the debate. At the same time, I recognise that he has been at the forefront of those who have raised the issue of Sellafield over

the years. I welcome the fact that Ireland can unite on this important issue. However, it would be more effective if all parties could unanimously support the motion.

In the post-11 September climate, when the British Government are rightly working closely with other nations, the danger posed by their reluctance to close down the disaster-in-waiting known as Sellafield is too enormous for most rational people to contemplate. The British Government apparently think that, should a successful attack on Sellafield occur, the loss of possibly one million lives is an acceptable risk to take. Some argue that the number of lives that would be lost is unknown. However, what is known is the high incidence of leukaemia in children living close to Sellafield.

The facts contained in a recent report prepared for the European Parliament on the possible toxic effects of nuclear reprocessing plants at Sellafield and Cap de la Hague are damning. The rate of leukaemia in those children is eight times higher than normal. The report states that

"Radiation exposure due to radionuclides release from Sellafield cannot be excluded as a cause for the observed health effects."

Is that not an attack on the innocent? The report is the most damning ever produced on the operations of Sellafield. It challenges the economic activities of the reprocessing industry, as well as the extremely casual approach of the EU Commission towards its duty to verify activities at Sellafield.

Nuclides released into the air and sea contaminate the food chain, and people may receive radioactive contamination from radioactive aerosols, inhalation of radioactive gases and ground shine from nuclides deposited on land. The linear no-threshold model adopted by the scientific community states that there is no level of radiation exposure below which there is no effect. Even the smallest possible dose, such as a photon passing through a cell nucleus, carries a risk of cancer.

It is outrageous that the European Commission cannot even guarantee that basic safety standards will be met. Britain seems to think that it does not have to worry about such mundane concerns as safety, because it did not request the European Commission's opinion under article 34 of the Euratom Treaty.

There has been a reduction in radioactive emissions. However, other, more harmful, emissions are increasing. The increase of key radionuclides from Sellafield, and expected future discharges, are totally inconsistent with the obligations of the British Government under the Convention for the Protection of the Marine Environment of the North-East Atlantic (OSPAR Convention).

Ireland is not a distant land, although I often suspect that the British would like that to be the case. The fish along our coastline live in extremely polluted waters,

but the British dismiss Irish concerns about the dangers of such pollution as if a fish with two heads were something to marvel at.

On a clear day it is possible to see the Sellafield plant from the majestic Mourne — it is not a comforting sight. The Sellafield nuclear plant is closer to Belfast than it is to Glasgow, and it is closer to Dublin than it is to London. It is vitally important that all parties on this island work together to force the British Government to close this death trap at Sellafield immediately. Britain should suspend MOX plant operations until the full hearing of the Irish case in February 2002. No one group, person or political party will have all the answers or can win the battle alone, but if we work together in the Assembly and in the island of Ireland with the campaigners in Britain and Europe, we will all have a stronger mandate and a stronger voice. Go raibh maith agat.

Mr Boyd: Sellafield is a problem that directly impacts on the people of Northern Ireland. Located on the coast of Cumbria, it is almost directly across the Irish Sea from Belfast. It is known by many environmentalists as “the nuclear dustbin of the world”. The survey by the University of Bremen commissioned by Greenpeace states that

“The area around the Sellafield reprocessing plant (UK) is as heavily contaminated with radioactivity as the zone around the stricken Chernobyl reactor in Ukraine”.

Mike Townsley of Greenpeace International said that

“Sellafield is a slow-motion Chernobyl, an accident played out over the last four decades. While an area of 30 km radius around Chernobyl is prohibited access for people and any agricultural activity, there are no such restrictions around Sellafield”.

Worryingly, more than a third of the plutonium pumped into the Irish Sea from Sellafield over the past 40 years is said to be missing. Plutonium dust washed inshore is thought to be a potential cause of cancer and birth defect clusters.

A study by Dr Patricia Sheehan published in ‘The Lancet’ showed links between the fire at the Sellafield plant — when it was known as Windscale — and instances of Down’s Syndrome, stillbirths, Asian flu and cancer. Another study by a leading scientist, Gardner, showed that contaminated Sellafield workers could pass on genetic damage to their children resulting in leukaemia and stillbirths. Leukaemia clusters have been found near Sellafield and the Dounreay nuclear plant in Scotland.

Sellafield also has a notoriously poor safety record and, according to the Nuclear Installations Inspectorate, data on fuel given to Japan had been systematically falsified.

The opening of the MOX plant will herald a plethora of new disasters waiting to happen. A MOX plant

reprocesses plutonium, one of the most toxic substances known to mankind. Stephen Tindale, the executive director of Greenpeace in the United Kingdom, said that

“expanding the global trade in plutonium is dangerously irresponsible, especially at a time of huge global insecurity”.

Using the Irish Sea as a transport route to and from Sellafield puts Northern Ireland at even greater risk. It is clear that the Prime Minister, Tony Blair, is more concerned with the loss of jobs than with the health and well-being of the population. The Prime Minister is on record as saying

“I totally understand the concerns of people, but our difficulty is that we end up in a situation where there will be a lot of people who will lose their jobs”.

This is a totally irresponsible policy of the Prime Minister and the Government.

Mention has already been made of the potential for terrorist attacks and the possibility of terrorists obtaining MOX fuel. The fear, heightened by the recent terror attacks in the United States, is that terrorists could extract plutonium from MOX, which could be used in nuclear weapons or in “dirty bombs” — conventional devices containing the substance. They do not explode like a nuclear bomb but can spread radiation over a large area. Charles Secrett, director of Friends of the Earth, said

“The Government’s decision to allow the MOX plant to open....makes the world an even more dangerous place”.

I therefore support the motion.

The Minister of the Environment (Mr Foster): It seems as if the British Government are taking a bashing today from so-called adherents. I prefer to say “Her Majesty’s Government”. Mr Mick Murphy’s talk of an attack on the innocent was poignant; there was an attack on the innocent in this country for 30 years, and, in many instances, the silence was deafening.

2.45 pm

I am aware of the public concern surrounding Sellafield. For that reason, I am grateful for the opportunity to speak on this motion. It is extremely important that the Assembly and the Northern Ireland public are given clear information about Sellafield — about its discharges into the Irish Sea and how responsibility for the regulation of Sellafield has been allocated under the law of Her Majesty’s Government.

As most Members will be aware, responsibility for regulating the discharges from the Sellafield complex rests with the Environment Agency for England and Wales. Regulation of the wider security aspects is the responsibility of the Office of Civil Nuclear Security, an agency under the United Kingdom Department of Trade and Industry. The citizens of Northern Ireland, as of Cumbria and other parts of the United Kingdom, rightly look to these agencies to safeguard their health

and environmental interests. Those agencies, and the UK Ministers for Environment and Trade and Industry, bear a heavy responsibility towards the citizens of these islands.

The powers of the Northern Ireland Executive and Assembly are necessarily more limited. My Department has a vital role in monitoring the impact of discharges from Sellafield into the Irish Sea on the Northern Ireland coastline. We have had a comprehensive monitoring programme to assess these impacts for many years. My Department reviews this monitoring system annually to ensure that it is sufficiently robust, taking into account any changes at the Sellafield complex. I am glad to say that the results of the monitoring are published annually. The availability of objective scientific information is crucial to a clear understanding of the issues surrounding Sellafield. At this point, I should emphasise that the results of this monitoring have consistently shown minimal amounts of radioactivity, at levels that are consistent with normal background levels.

The Department has also undertaken joint studies with the Radiological Protection Institute of Ireland and with University College Dublin on the impact of discharges from Sellafield. These studies also consistently show low radioactivity levels on the Irish coastline in counties Down, Louth and beyond. It has been calculated that the most exposed members of the public would receive around 0.002 microsieverts per year from the operation of the MOX plant. This equates to around two seconds flying on a transatlantic flight. People in Northern Ireland receive, on average, 2,500 microsieverts of radiation per year from all natural and artificial resources. Fifty per cent of this is due to exposure to radon in the home, and 12% is from medical exposure. Nuclear discharges account for less than 0.1%. While we must never be complacent about the risks, equally we should avoid alarming people unnecessarily. For that reason, it is my duty to repeat the broad thrust of the scientific evidence so that the Northern Ireland public is made aware of it.

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

It is important to note that in addition to the regular monitoring of discharges on the marine environment, my Department continues to play a part with other Departments in planning for dealing with nuclear accidents. Following the Chernobyl accident, the Northern Ireland technical advice group was set up to oversee and advise on our response to an overseas nuclear accident. This group draws its membership from all relevant Northern Ireland Departments, including those responsible for countermeasures in regard to public health, drinking water and the food chain. My Department also has a radiological emergency response plan, which deals with a range of actions to be taken in the event of such an incident. Of course, the Northern Ireland emergency plan is fully integrated into the UK one.

That said, I want to emphasise to Members that I fully understand that there is widespread public concern about Sellafield. I realise that this concern has been heightened as a result of the recent terrorist incidents in the USA. The recent decision to approve the MOX plant at Sellafield was, of course, taken jointly by the Secretary of State for Health and the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs. Both carry important responsibilities to all citizens of the United Kingdom and beyond.

Mr Wells: Will the Member give way?

Mr Foster: No, I want to continue.

Consent from the Health and Safety Executive's Nuclear Inspectorate will also be required before plutonium can be introduced into the plant. These are important safeguards.

It is also of some relevance that the UN Tribunal on the Law of the Seas has recently refused the Republic of Ireland Government's case for having the Sellafield MOX project halted. The scrutiny of this important body should provide some further assurance to us. However, I have also noted its injunction that the UK Government should share information on Sellafield and that the UK Government has agreed to do so.

That is to be welcomed.

Mr Wells: Will the Member give way?

Mr Foster: I do not intend to give way. I will be kept fully informed about consultations between the two Governments following the tribunal's decision, and Sellafield will be a subject of consideration by the British-Irish Council.

After the attacks on 11 September in the United States, my Department contacted the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs in order to seek assurances that, amongst other things, the potential impact of a terrorist incident at Sellafield would be taken into account when the decision on the MOX plant is made. That correspondence will be copied to the Environment Committee of the Assembly. Recently, I also wrote to Margaret Beckett, the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs. A copy was sent to Stephen Byers, the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry, who is responsible for civil nuclear safety matters at Sellafield. My purpose was to seek further information and assurances about the regulation of Sellafield, particularly the security arrangements after 11 September. I look forward to receiving the UK Government's response in due course and will convey as much of it to the Assembly as national security constraints will allow.

I want to be satisfied that Northern Ireland's interests are taken into account and protected by the competent UK authorities. To that end, I will continue to pay

close attention to radiological monitoring and to seek information from the relevant UK authorities on the safety and security of operations at Sellafield.

Mr McGrady: I appreciate the contributions made by everyone, which will join the similar comments made by the proposer of the motion. There have not been many disagreements about the cause that we are pursuing, except that I have been accused of two things: first, bashing the British Government over the issue — and yes, I admit to that and plead guilty, and I will continue to do so; secondly, there was a rather strange alliance between Sinn Féin and the DUP to bash me and my Colleague for daring to table an amendment. I am glad to see that there is some unanimity between the two parties, as Sinn Féin accused the DUP and the Alliance Party of such unanimity. There is a lovely triangle at work in the Chamber today.

Mick Murphy attacked me personally by saying that I had proposed the amendment for personal reasons. That is an insult not only to me but also to my absent Colleague to whom I earlier offered my condolences on the bereavement in his family.

The motion is in respect of nuclear-processing activities. The stoppage of nuclear-processing activities will not give a result. It is necessary to stop nuclear-reprocessing activities, which is a very different scientific concept. The amendment was tabled yesterday after an announcement at 11.00 am from the tribunal of the International Law of the Sea in Hamburg regarding the case that the Irish Government brought against the British Government over the licensing that is pending full implementation. That is not contained in the motion, and it is important that we address the issue.

I like to think that there is no disputation in the Chamber. It might be presumptuous of me, but when the proposer and the seconder are winding up, could they amalgamate the two into a composite motion, so that we will have total unanimity?

The proposer of the motion drew our attention to the enormous potential health risks of cancer clusters. These were also mentioned by Mr Shannon.

It is important that some of the Minister's comments are dealt with in a short winding-up speech. I have already dealt with the accusations of bashing the British Government. I have admitted to that and pleaded guilty, and I will continue the bashing as an unrepentant sinner. However, as a protection for relative inaction, the Minister says that he is happy to depend on the safeguards of the Health and Safety Executive of the United Kingdom.

Perhaps he did not listen to what I said. The Health and Safety Executive in England has not yet given advice to the British Government; neither has it made its conditions appropriate to the issue of the licence.

The British Government went ahead of its Health and Safety Executive.

The Minister also quoted the Radiological Protection Institute of Ireland as an argument for relative inactivity. Perhaps I spoke too softly, but the Radiological Protection Institute of Ireland clearly stated in a recent report that Sellafield is

“the dominant source of this contamination”

in the Irish Sea. A further report from the Radiological Protection Institute of Ireland stated that along the Irish coastline, the highest activity concentrations of radioactive material are observed in the north-east — the area for which the Minister is responsible.

He should not be able to hide behind these two important protection bodies if those bodies have concerns or have not made a commitment to approving the licensing. Licensing is one of the most important and immediate issues, as it will multiply enormously the reprocessing capacity and, therefore, the generation of high, medium and low-level radioactive material.

The Minister said that there is great public concern. I am glad that that is recognised. The House recognises it, and the Minister must show by his actions that he recognises it too. What more will be done about it?

The Minister also referred to the assurances that he is getting from the British Government — rather he is awaiting a reply from them — that the security risk is containable. Before 11 September, the World Information Service on Energy described the grave security risks attendant on Sellafield, information that has since been published. I am far from convinced that the British Government took the scale of security risks into account when they made their decision. I repeat, the OSPAN committee — as distinct from OSPAR — which was appointed to advise the Government, has yet to report. The British Government even went ahead of it. This was a hasty decision made for particular reasons.

It is especially important today because of the decision taken at Hamburg yesterday morning. This is an important week. It is important that we realise what happened in this one of the two or three pending cases. We now have interim findings from the International Tribunal for the Law of the Sea with regard to the Irish Government's bid to prevent the commissioning of the mixed oxide plant. The international tribunal refused the Irish Government's request to force the British Government to withdraw the licence.

However, it did other things. The president of the tribunal ordered the British and Irish Governments to co-operate and consult on measures in the coming weeks. The tribunal insisted that both Governments report to it before 17 December. The tribunal further prescribed that both Governments shall exchange the necessary information to enable a reasoned judgement

to be made. It also insisted that both Governments establish a mechanism to monitor the operation and the effect that this plant will have on the Irish Sea. It gives latitude to the president of the International Tribunal for the Law of the Sea to ask for further reports. This is not a clean sheet; this is not a blanket refusal from the tribunal. It is saying, "We shall not halt the licensing now; but we want to be assured by your urgent reporting that you are satisfied that the international law is required".

We will be looking for that report before Christmas and for a further report in January 2002. It is not a lost cause, and it is important that we follow it to its conclusion.

3.00 pm

This debate has been held many times, and I make no excuse for rehearsing it. If the commissioning of the MOX plant goes ahead, that will affect and perpetuate nuclear reprocessing activities at Sellafield and add dramatically to the level of radioactive discharges to the marine environment. It will also increase the volume of worldwide shipments of nuclear fuels, with the obvious risks to traffic in the Irish Sea.

Other European countries, particularly the Nordic countries and Iceland, have increased their pressure on the British Government through the EU. The International Energy Agency and the WISE group of scientists in Paris have emphasised the need to rethink the issue. The Northern Ireland Executive, and particularly the Minister's Department, must take concerted action and reflect the opinion expressed in the Chamber and that of the people of Northern Ireland, to strongly oppose the licensing of the MOX plant.

I support Mr McCarthy. We must continue the process of decommissioning and eventual closure of the entire plant at Sellafield. That is what our constituents want. It is not just a wish; it is substantiated across all agencies. Britain has flouted the OSPAR agreement made at Sintra as regards the discharge levels that it undertook to reduce. It went ahead of its own environment and health and safety executive report, and it went ahead of the WISE security report.

That has all been driven by dubious financial considerations, because it can now be proved — given the views of one of the main contractors, British Energy — that it is too expensive to reprocess nuclear waste. It is not cost-effective. No one uses the end product of reprocessed uranium and plutonium.

It is important that the Department of the Environment, through the North/South Ministerial Council, the British-Irish Council and the Council of the Isles, gets the message across that we cannot, and will not, accept what is happening to the environment. There are potential health and security risks.

I had no intention of diminishing the main motion. My aim was to exploit the licensing situation that was created yesterday morning; to make our objections known and to correct a couple of words in the motion. The winding-up speech should show that we have a commonality of approach and a common motion to propose and accept.

Mr Wells: Mr McGrady's words have fallen on fertile ground. After consulting Mr McCarthy we are mindful, with the will of the House, to accept Mr McGrady's amendment. That proves that we do sometimes listen. I can say that with double certainty because, until this afternoon, I had lost the hearing in my left ear. In the middle of his speech, my hearing came back. — *[Interruption]*.

Not only am I listening but today Mr McGrady has given me the ability to listen fully. We accept that his amendment is clarifying a difficulty that he had with the original motion and adds to it. It is important that, as an Assembly, we go forward united on this crucial issue. There is no unholy alliance between Sinn Féin, the Alliance Party and the DUP. The DUP has consulted the Alliance Party, and we are happy to accept the SDLP amendment.

It is very sad that a Minister can come before the House, read from a prepared text given to him by his officials and refuse to accept the intervention of a Member who wants to ask crucial questions about the welfare and health of the people of this Province. How are we ever going to perform properly as an Assembly if Ministers are not prepared to give way when there is a time limit on an issue as crucial as this? I will ask the three questions that I intended to ask the Minister had he given way. I will give him the opportunity to intervene at any time during my speech, and for as long as he likes, to answer those questions.

Was Mr Foster, as Minister of the Environment, consulted before the decision to go ahead with the MOX plant at Sellafield was announced? The people of Northern Ireland need to know, because we will be directly affected by the implications of the opening of that plant.

If he was consulted, what comments did he make to his counterpart at Westminster on this vital issue? If he was not consulted, did he protest in the strongest possible fashion that the Assembly was being ignored and that its views were not taken into account before the decision was made? The people of Northern Ireland have a right to know the answers to those questions. I want to give the Minister the opportunity to answer them, if he feels that that is appropriate.

Sellafield is closer to Belfast than it is to Sheffield or Birmingham. This is a reserved matter, and the Assembly has no direct control over the licensing of Sellafield. However, the implications of anything going wrong at Sellafield are more important to the people

of Belfast than they are to the people of Birmingham, because we are that much closer. Sellafield was opened in 1956 and is literally across the Irish Sea. It has produced the most radioactive, contaminated sea in the world. All the risks associated with Sellafield fall on the people of Northern Ireland, but none of the benefits. Nobody from Northern Ireland is employed at Sellafield. None of the power produced at Sellafield goes onto the Northern Ireland grid. However, it is the folk on the east coast of the Province, in Portavogie and Portaferry, Ardglass, Kilkeel and Newcastle, who will be directly affected by the continuing radioactivity of the Irish Sea, or if something goes drastically wrong.

A recent issue of 'New Scientist' magazine predicted that a terrorist attack on Sellafield would produce a radioactive cloud of dust 44 times bigger than the cloud that escaped from Chernobyl. Chernobyl is many thousands of miles away from Northern Ireland, but as older Members will remember, there were major implications for agriculture, even in Northern Ireland, as a result of the fallout from that accident. Scientists predict an impact 44 times greater.

I suppose that some would have said, before September 11, that this speculation was fanciful, and that it would be incredible that anyone should think that a plane could be crashed into a tall building, killing many thousands of people. Now, unfortunately, we see all too clearly that that is indeed a real threat. If some lunatic terrorist decided to bomb Sellafield, the implications for Northern Ireland would be horrendous. It was my hope that we would have heard an announcement that Sellafield was to be run down as safely as possible.

The reason that the announcement regarding the MOX plant is so important after five years of consultation is that the £470 million that has been spent on developing it, and the decision to continue using it, means that there is little prospect of running Sellafield down. The MOX plant is an entirely new process in which there has been much investment. The Government will feel that they simply have to continue pumping in large amounts of money to keep that plant going.

The MOX plant cost £470 million. It is predicted that even on the most optimistic basis, it will make a net profit of £200 million over its lifespan. No matter what happens, this new plant is a white elephant that will cost British taxpayers, including ourselves, a significant amount of money. Even that estimated profit is based on the assumption that BNFL will secure all the markets that it has predicted will be secured. However, that is far from the reality. As things stand, BNFL has markets for only 11% of the produce that it intends to manufacture. What will happen if it is unsuccessful in obtaining new markets? There will be huge stockpiling of MOX products at Sellafield, which is only a few miles from the east coast of Northern Ireland.

The Japanese market appears to be rapidly drying up. As a result of the falsification, deliberate or otherwise, of some of the information given to the Japanese, it seems that they are getting cold feet about purchasing any further reprocessed material from Sellafield. Sweden is also getting cold feet, and other markets are far from secure. Will that lead to stockpiling of vast amounts of radioactive material? The chances are that it will.

Mr Foster: I will reply to Mr Wells's questions. I welcome this debate. It is good to tease out the feelings of the Assembly. I know that Members have many concerns, and I am not taking those lightly.

Mr Wells asked whether I was consulted; I was not. I have raised concerns about security issues. I have written to the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, to Margaret Beckett and to Stephen Byers, and I await a reply from them.

Mr Wells: I thank the Minister for his answers, as far as they go. I wonder if he will ever be able to release that correspondence, because I hope that if he wrote to his counterpart Minister in Westminster, it was to protest in the strongest possible fashion about the lack of consultation. He has now admitted that there was no consultation with the Assembly or its Ministers before the decision was made.

Rev Dr Ian Paisley: What the Minister has said is very revealing. This part of the United Kingdom has been affected for years. This debate did not start yesterday. In the European committee on which I served, I learnt that Sellafield had been polluting the Irish Sea for years, and that there was danger in that. Now, with Sellafield's new departure to try to keep doing its work under another guise and a different name, we learn that the Minister with responsibility to the people of Northern Ireland on this issue was not even told about it. He was not consulted. That is ridiculous.

The British Government must be called to account. I will be asking a question in Westminster about this, and I am sure that Mr McGrady will do the same. Even though the Assembly does not have powers on this issue, it should not have been ignored. Our Minister should have at least been consulted and informed of what was happening. That is how the British Government act — they do the job and then the people hear about it.

Mr Wells: I thank the hon Member for his comment.

Mr Foster: I must emphasise that I have nothing to hide. I wrote to my Westminster counterparts because I was concerned that I had not been consulted on the matter, and I knew that the people of Northern Ireland were concerned.

Mr Wells: I appreciate the Minister's comments. I am glad that the deafness that left me did not transfer to him. He heard my questions, and he has answered

them. However, I am not reassured by the news that a Westminster Department decided to go ahead with a decision that has major implications for the health of the people of Northern Ireland and did not even think it worthwhile to write to the counterpart Northern Ireland Department.

While it is true that the Department of the Environment has no direct control over the licensing of Sellafield, it has direct control over the testing and assessment of the water and air in Northern Ireland for radioactivity. Therefore, if for no other reason but to give him his place, Mr Foster should have been consulted. I hope that the message sent by the Assembly and the Minister to Westminster is that we will not tolerate that sort of treatment in regard to a matter that is so directly linked to our people's welfare and health.

Several Members raised the issue of transportation. As well as the dangers of a terrorist attack on Sellafield, large quantities of nuclear material will be transported to and from Sellafield, mostly by boat, sometimes by air. There could be a natural disaster, with a ship running aground on rocks or sinking while carrying a load of nuclear material. If there were a MOX plant, more ships would be sailing to and from Cumbria. The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment should have been consulted about sea traffic.

3.15 pm

I do not want to be alarmist and scare people. However, if a heavily laden plane is hijacked at an airport in the north of England and is directed towards Sellafield, almost nothing can be done to stop it. Events in the United States are evidence of that.

What is happening at Sellafield is deeply alarming. As a community we are united on this issue, and those of us who represent communities on the east coast of Northern Ireland are particularly concerned. We receive none of the benefits of Sellafield, but we have all the worries and penalties. I hope that the Assembly sends out a united message that we must be consulted in the future and that the ultimate aim of the UK Government — our Government — is the gradual and safe rundown of nuclear reprocessing at Sellafield.

Finally, if Sellafield is so safe, why is it not located in the Midlands, and if it is so watertight, how many of its executives live within a 30-mile radius of the plant?

Question, That the amendment be made, put and agreed to.

Main Question, as amended, put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That this Assembly calls for the withdrawal of the licence issued by the British Government to British Nuclear Fuels Ltd in respect of the full commissioning of the mixed oxide plant, and for the proper decommissioning of all nuclear reprocessing activities, leading to the rundown and closure of the plant at Sellafield in Cumbria.

DUAL CURRENCY STATUS FOR THE EURO/STERLING IN NORTHERN IRELAND

Ms Morrice: I beg to move

That this Assembly calls on the UK Government to make the necessary legal and financial arrangements for the euro to be officially recognised as a second currency alongside sterling in Northern Ireland after 1 January 2002.

I draw Members' attention to the fact that despite many attempts on my part, this is the first time that the Assembly has debated the vital issue of the single European currency. The debate is long overdue.

Although Northern Ireland is not part of the euro zone, the impact of its arrival on the local economy will be tremendous, and we must be prepared. Just four weeks from today, the greatest single economic event in the history of the European Union will swing into action. It will affect 300 million people in tens of millions of homes in hundreds of thousands of villages in 12 European countries, and it will affect us. The United Kingdom may have chosen to "wait and see", but in Northern Ireland it must be recognised that we will be touched by the euro phenomenon whether we like it or not.

Northern Ireland is the only area of the United Kingdom that has a land border with a euro zone. Undoubtedly, Northern Ireland will feel the effects more than any other region of the United Kingdom. We are in a unique position, and we need special arrangements to allow us to take advantage of our situation. Our experience with dual currency has been restricted to pound/punt transactions in the border areas. However, we should not forget that there are only three million people using punts in the world. From January 2002, no one will be using punts, Deutschmarks, pesetas, lire or any other of the currencies of the 12 European countries involved. There will be more than 300 million people using euros. Northern Ireland, whether we like it or not, could find itself awash with euros in the months and years to come.

What should our traders, tourist establishments, businesses and bankers do? Should they operate a dual currency system? Can they afford to take on the exchange rate risk? Can they afford not to? Do they simply say "No euros served here"? I believe that those days are gone. Our farmers, businesses, industries and the public need guidance and support. Above all, they need clear political direction. That is why urgent action is needed. By calling on the Government to make the necessary legal and financial arrangements for the euro to be officially recognised as a second currency alongside sterling — I emphasise "alongside" sterling — we are simply asking for arrangements to be made to accommodate, facilitate and, where is it in the interests of

business and industry, encourage the use of the euro in financial transactions in Northern Ireland.

We are not calling for laws to be imposed to force people to accept euros against their will. It should be done on a voluntary basis, and it should be demand-led and market-driven. The difference between that situation and what is being called “cross-border currency creep” — which will inevitably take place — is that we would be giving the euro an official welcome and preparing ourselves for what will happen.

Mr Beggs: The motion, as it currently stands, is calling for the euro to be recognised as a second currency alongside sterling. That would mean that the euro would be legal tender and that any shop in Northern Ireland would have to transact business based upon it. The motion is, therefore, not introducing the euro on a voluntary basis, but rather putting it on a compulsory footing. That would add additional costs to every retail and tourist outlet in Northern Ireland. Does the Member accept that her motion, as it currently stands, is not a means of introducing the euro on a voluntary basis?

Ms Morrice: The Member’s comments give me the opportunity to explain matters. It is important that Members understand the situation.

I asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment, Sir Reg Empey, about the euro and the matter of legal tender, and he explained that the euro is legal tender in Northern Ireland already. Foreign currencies are legal tender, so legal recognition does not mean that a currency is imposed upon traders, and I am not calling for it to be made compulsory tender. From the point of view of a party that is pro-European, there is no point in trying to force the euro upon shopkeepers. That would hardly endear them to the currency. The euro is legal tender, and it is treated in the same way as the dollar and the yen. Sterling is the only legal currency of the United Kingdom. I am asking for the euro to be given special status, for its “foreign currency” label to be removed and for it to be treated differently from the dollar and the yen. I say again that it would not be compulsory — it would be on a voluntary basis, demand-led and market-driven.

Rev Dr Ian Paisley: Is the Member drawing a distinction between legal tender and a double currency? The Member seems to be defining what is legal tender, then saying that she does not want it to be legal tender, although she claims that it is so — she wants it to be a second currency.

Can the Member explain that? It will take a good deal of explaining. Does she think, in the name of all good fortune, that the British Government will listen to a debate attended in this manner in the Assembly, and make a drastic change to the entire financial arrangements of the United Kingdom before the referendum

takes place? If she thinks so, she must be living in a country whose name I do not even know.

Ms Morrice: I will go to great pains to explain matters to Members who do not understand them. Sir Reg Empey informed the House that the euro is already legal tender in Northern Ireland — Members can refer to Hansard on that. I went to great pains to phone the Treasury and ask for an explanation. The explanation was given to me, and I was grateful for it. All foreign currencies are legal tender because they can be traded in this country. The UK has a very liberal regime in that regard. The euro should not be treated as foreign currency. My next remarks are for the benefit of Rev Dr Ian Paisley in particular. I do not know whether the Bank of England has been listening to the previous discussions in Northern Ireland, but it has decided to remove the foreign currency label from the euro. That important step has been taken in the City of London.

There are practical benefits. Members will understand the plight of the farmers. They are crying out for help. Their exports have been crippled by the strength of sterling, as we know well. They are sympathetic towards the United Kingdom’s entry into the single European currency. It would be a positive move for the farmers. Why should we make them wait for the outcome of a referendum?

I do not know whether Members are aware of it, but earlier this year the European Council of Ministers agreed that subsidies to farmers could be paid in euros. However, the UK Government have so far applied that form of payment to export refunds only. In other words, only the large, exporting farmers can benefit. What happens to the small farmers? Why can they not receive all their subsidies — which can make up as much as 100% of their wage packets — in euros? If that is allowed by Europe, why are the UK Government preventing it? I understand that the Ulster Farmers’ Union would be very pleased to see subsidies paid in euros.

Big businesses — and not just those in the border areas — will move to a dual-currency regime themselves. They recognise that it is in their interests to do so. That, however, could leave the small businesses, which cannot afford to operate in two currencies, high and dry. Euro customers will flock to the large retail outlets, which will be offering goods and change in euros. The small businesses will be bypassed. We need a level playing field.

The United Kingdom Government have got us into this situation. It is the duty of the Treasury to provide appropriate financial support to allow our small businesses to operate in euros and sterling if they so desire. I want to underline that — if small businesses want to use euros, they should be allowed to do so, and they

should be given appropriate financial support directly from London.

Tourism is vital to our economy, and we want it to grow. The Minister in charge of tourism, Sir Reg Empey, has said that he expects two thirds of our tourists to come from the euro zone this year. That is as a result of the slowdown in transatlantic traffic in the aftermath of the events of 11 September. We are also attempting to market Ireland — North and South — as a tourist destination. Sir Reg Empey has said that it will be difficult to do that because we are dealing in two currencies.

By encouraging our large and small hotels, our restaurants and our tourist facilities in Northern Ireland to operate in euros as well as in pounds, we send an important message to our guests: Northern Ireland is open for all business.

3.30 pm

We must also send an important message to foreign investors. Allowing them to operate in euros would encourage them to regard Northern Ireland as a special place to do business, either in euros or in pounds. They can use Northern Ireland as a stepping stone to a European market of 300 million people, and do so in the currency of their choice. They will avoid the huge cost of foreign exchange. That is something that the new super-agency should look into.

I could talk forever about the benefits of moving towards a dual currency system — in cross-border trade, for example, which we are trying to promote. With regard to cross-border transport, do we want Ulster-bus to become “Ulster bureau de change on wheels”? Bus drivers should be allowed to take their money in euros and to give their change in euros. Should not students who study abroad be entitled to receive their grants in euros if they wish? What about people who regularly travel abroad? The list is endless.

I want to stress, to Mr Beggs in particular, that a dual currency system cannot be imposed upon those who may be reluctant Europeans. It must be operated voluntarily. We must recognise that the euro is a reality. We must stop playing King Canute; we must stop trying to stem the rising tide of the euro onto these shores; we must stop treating it as a foreign body. It is in the best interests of all to facilitate its arrival and to get the best of both worlds.

The Women’s Coalition’s motion is not an attempt to pre-empt the decision of a referendum. As a party we are pro-European; however, we are also pragmatists. We respect the will of the people. By supporting the motion, Members will be supporting a pragmatic solution to accommodate the euro in Northern Ireland, and they will be sending an important message to our European partners. The motion is not intended to introduce the euro by the back door. Rather, it places Northern

Ireland at the front door of the euro in the United Kingdom and at the forefront of investment in Europe.

Dr Birnie: The subject of the euro is a very important one. When the history of Europe since the second world war is written, the introduction of the euro will stand alongside the collapse of the Berlin Wall as one of the most significant events of the past five or six decades. To that extent I congratulate Ms Morrice, and I am grateful to her for moving the motion.

Beyond that, I am struggling with the sense (or otherwise) of the motion. As about 20% of Northern Ireland’s manufacturing output is sold to the prospective “Euroland” — the countries that will make it up from 1 January 2002 — it clearly does make commercial sense for exporting firms to prepare themselves for the euro. No doubt they will do so. However, I doubt, and this is my quarrel with the motion, that we need such a motion to encourage firms to do that.

We must bear in mind that introducing a new currency entails a large administrative cost. The same costs will apply if the euro is introduced as a dual currency in the Province.

The estimated potential cost of that varies between £200 million and £750 million. Those figures derive from the Small Firms Association in the Republic of Ireland, adapted to the size of the Northern Ireland economy, and the House of Commons Select Committee on Trade and Industry report on the single currency.

Are the proposers of the motion entirely happy that the Northern Ireland economy should have such a cost imposed on it, which will inevitably follow the introduction of a second, officially recognised currency?

Ms Morrice: It is important that I immediately clear up any misunderstanding. The Member will recall that I said that there will be administrative costs, but I am calling on the UK Treasury to pay those costs. The UK Government got us into this situation. They will pay those costs if we get into the euro, and they should be paying them in advance now. I am not calling on the Northern Ireland economy to pay those costs — I am calling on the Treasury to do so.

Dr Birnie: I thank the Member for her contribution. However, with all respect, it is entirely incredible that HM Treasury would stump up between £200 million and £750 million on the self-indulgent introduction of a dual currency in a single region of the United Kingdom. Week after week in the House, there are repeated calls to reform Barnett and to get extra money from HM Treasury for policing, railways, gas pipelines and hospitals. If we add the euro to that, I imagine that Gordon Brown will start to chew the carpet and say, “Get these mad Northern Irish people away from me”.

It is quite clear that the proposers of the motion favour the entire euro project. That is their right, but

the majority of public opinion in the United Kingdom is against the introduction of the euro. Indeed, even in Germany — the powerhouse of the Continental European economy — it seems that the majority of opinion, if given a free choice, would vote to retain the Deutschmark. Perhaps the proposers imagine a creeping euro status whereby the Province is half in and half out of the single currency, and that that will forward eventual adoption of the euro.

The economic case against full UK membership of the euro is overwhelming. Therefore, the same arguments surely apply to any formalised dual currency status. A publication entitled 'The Economic Case Against the Euro' was issued last month by a group called New Europe. That document proves demonstrably that, under the five economic tests that were set by Chancellor of the Exchequer, Gordon Brown, there is little or no case for either the UK as a whole, or Northern Ireland in particular, joining the euro in the foreseeable future. If that is true for total adoption of the euro, it surely applies to the implication of the strict wording of the motion.

The trade cycles of the UK and the Continental European Union remain out of line, and a common European monetary policy of "one size fits all" will not work. Contrary to Ms Morrice's argument, neither the euro nor, by implication, dual currency status are needed to promote foreign direct investment into either Northern Ireland or Great Britain. Of IDB-backed external investment into the Province in recent years, 97% came from non-euro countries — only 3% came from the euro zone.

In short, the euro would not be good for jobs for the United Kingdom financial sector or for the overall health of the economy. Before we back the motion, we should remember that the recent experience of the Southern Irish economy's preparation for the adoption of the euro has not been a happy one. During the 1990s, the Republic experienced rapid economic growth. Much of that can be explained by the free exchange rate that existed at that time. In 1993, the punt was devalued by a substantial amount, which increased competitiveness. Many economists believe that that led to much of the growth of the "Celtic tiger" economy.

Rev Dr Ian Paisley: The Member will recall that the Republic received a heavy subsidy from Europe — something like £6 million a day was poured into the Southern Irish economy.

Dr Birnie: I agree with the Member that that was a contributory factor, but many Southern Irish economists feel that the devaluation of the punt was of even more significance.

Notwithstanding a favourable macroeconomic performance, the Southern Irish Government have this year been repeatedly subjected to what can only be described as

bullying from the European Commission. That is part and parcel of the loss of autonomy — the ability to set policy to fit regional or national conditions. An eminent Southern Irish economist, Prof Peter Neary of University College Dublin, said in 1997 that, as far as he knew, every university economist in the Republic of Ireland was concerned at the harm which would be done to the Southern economy through joining the euro in a position where sterling was not doing so. As the Nobel prize-winning economist Milton Friedman has argued recently about the Southern Irish economy, the euro experiment has represented a case of locking itself to the rest of the EU economies while throwing away the key.

While the aspirations behind this motion are in part worthy, the motion is unnecessary. Where businesses find it beneficial to adapt to a multicurrency set-up, they will do so. They have been doing that for years, especially in the border regions. I can see no advantage in officially recognising a second currency alongside sterling, to use Ms Morrice's words. She has failed to explain how her motion will differ from what will happen in any case. I oppose the motion.

Mrs Courtney: I welcome the motion, which calls on the United Kingdom Government to make the necessary legal and financial arrangements for the euro to be officially recognised from 1 January 2002 as a second currency in Northern Ireland alongside sterling.

I come from Derry, the second city, which is geographically next to Donegal. Since partition, Donegal has suffered economically by being cut off from its natural hinterland. However, being practical, the people of Donegal and ourselves on the other side of the border have got used to living with it and, occasionally, have used the border to our advantage. I could, for example, quote the difference in punt and pound. We know we will get a better rate for sterling if we change it and spend it across the border, and considerable savings can be made. We all notice the queues at filling stations across the border, and that proves my point. We can also save on holidays; everyone wants a bargain and to get the best possible rate.

However, the downside is that for the last year all bills in the Republic of Ireland have been in dual currency — punts and euros. The Republic has got used to it, but we across the border still endeavour to work out rates.

Why should that concern us? After all, the UK Government have still to decide when to join the EU currency and adopt the euro. It concerns us because traders and business people in every border area are gearing up for the euro. It is happening in my city, and it will be more obvious in the run-up to Christmas. To encourage business and to attract customers from the Republic of Ireland, traders traditionally give a very good rate for the punt. In many instances that means

punt for pound, and that continues into sale time, after 1 January.

From 1 January 2002 three currencies will be in operation — the punt, the pound and the euro. That will add further confusion. We have the added problem that the punt will no longer be legal tender, North or South, after 9 February. From 1 January 2002 to 9 February 2002, there will be a period of dual circulation when both punt and euro will be accepted. After that, banks in the North will accept punts until 15 February. That will help traders in border areas, as shoppers attempt to get rid of their punts.

In my area, we are aware that individuals are offered large loans in punts, interest free — provided they are paid back in euros. The black market is already in operation.

Banks have also advised business that cheques made out in punts after 31 December will not be accepted.

3.45 pm

At a recent seminar in Derry, traders were informed that automated teller machines in Derry will dispense both euros and sterling from the beginning of the new year. Less than 40% of small businesses in the North are prepared for the euro, and 27% are adopting a wait-and-see approach. Therefore, issues such as the exchange rate must be addressed now. The exchange rate is currently set weekly; when the euro is adopted, it must be set daily. Dual pricing must also be addressed, so that customers know how much an item costs. The currency in Northern Ireland needs to be regularised. For us to achieve proper economic stability, the euro must be officially recognised as a second currency.

What is the euro? It is the single currency of the European monetary union, which was adopted by 11 member states on 1 January 1999. Those 11 member states are Belgium, Germany, Spain, France, Ireland, Italy, Luxembourg, the Netherlands, Austria, Portugal and Finland. On 1 January 2001, Greece became the twelfth member state to adopt the euro. The name “euro” was chosen by the European heads of state at a conference in Madrid in December 1995.

What will it be like to use the euro? We shall have to get used to it irrespective of whether we are pro-European. It is similar to the existing national currency except that the bank notes and coins will be different. After January 2002, people who cross the border to spend money in the Republic will receive their change in euros.

We shall experience the real difference when we travel to countries that have adopted the euro, because it will no longer be necessary to exchange currency and, therefore, we shall not have to pay commission. We shall not have to spend time calculating price comparisons, and we shall not have to waste time shopping around for the best exchange rate.

Other countries are adopting the euro. We must prepare for that now. It will, as Ms Morrice said, be a challenge for small businesses. The onus is on the UK Government to provide small businesses with the necessary finance to cope. They will have to make complicated changes to their information technology systems, their pricing and marketing policies and their financial management and accounting systems.

To prepare for that, I ask the Executive to note today's debate and mandate all Departments to, if requested, pay bills in euros from 1 January 2002. It is imperative that the Assembly show the way forward. I represent a pro-European party, and it is clear, from listening to the debate, that there are few pro-Europeans in the Chamber. I congratulate the mover of the motion, and I support it.

Rev Dr Ian Paisley: I oppose the motion. A gun has been put to our heads. We were told that we can have a referendum, but the euro will be in place before we are allowed to make our decision. The previous speaker told the House that the euro would be adopted anyway. However, the British people stand before the introduction of the euro, and they, through the ballot box, have the right to say whether they want the euro. No one can tell us that we must have it. The referendum will give the British public the opportunity to say either yes or no.

If the British public vote no, what becomes of the hon Lady's speech? It is utter nonsense for Ms Morrice to tell us that in the cloud cuckoo land in which she lives, the British Government will pay millions of pounds to bring her stupid little motion into effect. We cannot get enough money from the British Government to deal with bed shortages in hospitals. Does Ms Morrice really mean to tell the House that a couple of hundred million pounds will be set aside to fund a part-time euro to dance in tandem with the pound simply to please her?

Ms Morrice: Will the Member give way?

Rev Dr Ian Paisley: I shall not give way, because I have been told that I have little time. If the Member wishes to use the motion to create a back door for the adoption of the euro, she is welcome to do so. However, she should acknowledge that it is a back door. She should not tell us about a house with the euro standing at the door.

The Member wants to push the euro in through the back door. I am told that I should write to the Speaker to request that I be paid in euros in future.

We must get down to brass tacks — this motion deals with something that will not happen. There are good reasons why it will not happen: Northern Ireland is part of the United Kingdom. The decision to enter or not to enter the single currency will be made as a result of a UK-wide referendum. The decision will be

a political, economic and constitutional one of fundamental importance. This debate divides all the parties in Westminster. To listen to some people, one would think that everyone was convinced that we must go down the euro road. Everyone is not convinced, and to say that the farming community wants to follow this route is nonsense.

The farming community is worried about why it does not get the same money as the middlemen. The farmers do not care whether the money is paid in euros or in pounds — they simply want the money, and they deserve it. Farmers do not get the money that they deserve for the job that they do. It is nonsense to say that they want the money to be paid in euros. Not one farming organisation has mentioned that issue to me. The Member must be a miracle woman if she thinks she knows what farmers want.

The Prime Minister and the Chancellor are at odds on this issue. Only last week, the chairman of the Labour Party, Mr Charles Clarke, said that the Government should recommend entry into the euro even if the Treasury cannot prove that the single currency would be good for the economy. Members of the Cabinet are in public debate about what will happen.

Co-operation between nation states in Europe is to the benefit of those states, but I oppose the creation of a European superstate. Before a country gives up its currency, it should remember that he who pays the piper has the right to call the tune. A country can have independence in nothing if it is not allowed to use its money as it wants.

Members must examine the facts about British trade. The rest of the world is far more important to British trade than the euro zone, and we must remember that. I welcome Sir Reg Empey's visit to China. If the salvation of our economy lies in Europe, why does he visit China? He does so because he realises that investment in Northern Ireland will not come from the euro zone. We shall not receive vast investment from Europe now. Those days are over, and we must look to other places. We trade as much with America as we do with Germany and France. How can the American Government do well when it pays in dollars and not in euros? Why does the Member not advocate that they change their dollars into euros and start trading in Europe?

The population of the euro zone is slowly decreasing, while the population of the rest of the world is rapidly increasing. The pound and the dollar are overwhelmingly more important for British trade than the euro. The Treasury itself reveals that only 19% of our exported goods are invoiced in euros, while 27% are exported in dollars and 52% in sterling. The pound/dollar rate is the most stable in the world, so joining the euro would not increase stability for foreign trade — it would probably destabilise it. Although the euro

zone will remain an enormously significant trading block, future changes in population and income levels per head mean that its relative significance in the world is at its high-water mark.

New markets will become increasingly important. It is ironic that, as the UK considers abandoning its independent currency for the euro, the importance of trade with the euro zone may be about to fade.

The Member for North Down claims that the motion is about giving guidance to people when the euro arrives. I do not understand what she means. The euro is replacing the Irish punt, but there has never been any need for a dual currency system while the punt was legal tender. The idea that the euro will flood across the border and that people will not know how to deal with it is nonsense.

She argues that farmers want the euro. What does she base that argument on? Farmers want a fair deal for their products from those who buy them in the production chain. It is regrettable that the Member believes that the introduction of the euro will cure the ills of the farming community. It will do nothing of the kind.

The people of the UK will decide if, and when, they will enter the euro zone — no one will decide for them. Judging by what the hon Member from the Official Unionists said, it seems there has been a turning of the tide for the euro. As a result, there is no need for a King Canute. The winds of business and trade are telling us not to stay in the euro zone, but rather to get business from every nook and cranny of the planet into Northern Ireland.

Dr O'Hagan: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. The motion is useful in opening up the debate on the euro — an issue that has not been debated enough — and I welcome the opportunity to speak about it. However, my party will not be supporting the motion because it is not practical, and because neither Gordon Brown nor Tony Blair will defer to the implications of the motion if it is passed.

An informal dual currency has been operating on this island, and it will continue to operate after 1 January 2002. Sinn Féin would like to see a united Irish currency that operates outside the European monetary union and that will retain the economic power and control that comes with having an independent currency. That will include the power to set interest rates, control the growth of money supply and determine an ideal exchange rate position. These are vital tools of any state's economic strategy and play a crucial role in ensuring a dynamic sustainable economy.

Mr Deputy Speaker: I detect an undercurrent of conversation — it is difficult to hear what Dr O'Hagan is saying.

Dr O'Hagan: The experience with the euro has shown that the European Central Bank takes no account of the needs of the small economies on the periphery of Europe when formulating monetary policy.

The present dual currency system works against the creation of a united Irish economy, as will the introduction of the euro. The scenario of Britain being outside the single currency while the Twenty-six Counties adopt it creates an economic fault line between North and South on this island. Although Sinn Féin is opposed to the European monetary union in its current form, it does not want to see more obstacles to economic development and trade on the island. We must, therefore, ensure that the introduction of the euro does not cause yet another blockage to positive economic development on the island of Ireland.

The failure of the EU itself, as well as the Irish and British Governments, to consider the negative effects of the euro on trade in Ireland shows the lack of thought that has been put into the actual effects of introducing a single currency.

4.00 pm

The economic effects of partition in border areas are greater than ever. Changing currency values leave communities on both sides of the border continually seeking the best means of increasing their spending power. Short-term gains for consumers on either side of the border are no recompense for the long-term damage inflicted on the border economy by this dual currency predicament. Therefore, the motion, as it stands, does not address the greater problem of economic sovereignty and the underlying economic problems.

The euro project is the centrepiece of a process of economic and political integration, in which more and more power is to be ceded, not only to centralised decision-making processes but to a range of unelected bodies. Participation in the euro has removed substantial economic decision-making powers from the Dublin Government. The ability to run deficits, borrow money and set exchange and interest rates is gone. The Twenty-six Counties are now victim to a "one-size-fits-all" policy formulated and managed not by any elected body but by the autonomous European Central Bank (ECB). Not one Irish official is among the senior management of that bank. Added to that is an ongoing campaign to end the right of the Dublin Government to set their own tax rates. That litany of failure should be nothing new to the people of the Six Counties or to our business community. For years, we have all been victim to the same "one-size-fits-all" policies of Westminster, which were formulated with little thought to the economic impact that decisions will have outside England.

A single EU currency, in its current format, is not of benefit to the island of Ireland economy. Until 1979, we had a single currency on the island of Ireland, and

a connection with sterling. The Twenty-six Counties have merely substituted one unsatisfactory form of monetary union for another. We want to bring real power back to the people of the island of Ireland, not to be ceded to a new union. Go raibh maith agat.

Mr Ford: I am grateful for the previous two Members' contributions. If I had any doubt about the motion's virtue, the terms on which it has been rejected by the DUP and Sinn Féin enable me to be sure that it has considerable merit.

My party fully supports the swift and early entry of the UK into the European monetary union. There is no doubt that the current self-exclusion policy of the UK Government brings uncertainty to businessmen and potential investors — whether domestic or external — and creates dislocations on this island and in the UK as a whole. It is time that action was taken to address that.

Dr Birnie: Will the Member give way?

Mr Ford: After only 49 seconds — certainly.

Dr Birnie: I thank the Member. His point is that self-exclusion dislocates business. How does he explain the fact that the UK gross domestic produce growth is higher than that of "Euroland", and is projected to be higher again next year?

Mr Ford: Those of us who witnessed what happened to the British economy during the Thatcher years of the 1980s have little difficulty in seeing the lower base from which the British economy is now recovering. It is certainly not an economy that is booming and forging ahead of Europe. Rather, it is one starting from a low base and that is still catching up with Europe. No doubt the better economic minds on the Ulster Unionist Benches, and in the Speaker's Chair at present, will continue to deal with that debate for some months.

I interpret the resolution from Ms Morrice and Prof McWilliams as one looking towards some voluntary arrangements to deal with the inevitable currency difficulties. There is no doubt that the changeover to the euro, the expectations of developments in that direction and what Dr O'Hagan has described as the informal dual currency system pose problems for small business. There is no doubt that unless we do something to assist small businesses to deal with that, there will be economic difficulties for this region that will not apply elsewhere in the UK. It is therefore right that we should seek ways to deal with that problem and to assist small businesses to cope with the situation.

Mrs Courtney spoke about cross-border trade, as it affects commerce in the city of Derry. There are, of course, many small firms in border areas — and, increasingly, in other parts of Northern Ireland — that are having to adapt their work to deal with cross-border activity and the two-currency problems entailed in that. Dr Paisley correctly suggests that farmers are more concerned

about getting a fair share for their production than the precise currency in which it is paid. However, surely even he would agree that it is a little bizarre to hear journalists discuss on the radio the ewe premium being set at 21 euros, when nobody knows whether, when it is actually paid, it will be 61p, 62p, 63p or 64p — or whatever — per euro. That is a fundamental issue, and I have heard farmers complain about their inability to predict the value of European grants. However, that, of course, is an argument to support all of the UK adopting the euro, rather than one specific region.

Changes are starting to occur, and the UK Government are clearly preparing for the referendum that will lead to the UK's entry into the European monetary union. It is, therefore, right that the particular problems that we experience — in the only UK region that has a land frontier with the euro zone — should be addressed. Small businesses should be given the assistance that they require, whether it be from the Treasury or from the Department of Finance and Personnel.

Ms Jane Morrice said that the UK Government had got us into this mess — they certainly have some obligation to assist the economic development of this region and to help us to get out of the mess. Looking back some years, we were in a situation where the punt and sterling were part of a common currency union but not of a customs union. Now we are part of a common customs union without being in a currency union. Perhaps we will achieve the full benefits that are necessary for our economic development, and that of the other part of the island, only when we are both in the same customs and currency union.

I may have some reservations about the precise way in which the motion is phrased, but the terms in which it has been outlined by the proposer make it worthy of support. There is no doubt in my mind that the euro represents the best way forward for this society, and the motion is a step towards recognising the transitional nature of the arrangements that will exist from 1 January 2002. I support the motion, and I ask the House to support the concept of practical measures to deal with the informal currency system that we are about to enter.

Mr Beggs: I oppose the motion, and I will speak about the wording of it rather than comment on what the proposer of the motion has said. We vote on the wording of the motion, and that is what we should be talking about. Government can legislate and make financial arrangements, but who will pay for their implementation? Who will pay for new cash registers and new accountancy software in our businesses? Will it be the taxpayer, or will it fall to our hard-pressed businesses just as we are entering difficult financial trading times?

The motion refers to the official recognition of the euro as a second currency. Euros will, of course, be traded in Northern Ireland in the same way as punts,

francs and pesetas have been traded. That is already happening, so why is it being called for in the motion? Why have we stated the emotive date of 1 January 2002, when the euro will replace all those currencies in Europe? It is obvious that Ms Morrice is looking for much more than is currently happening, and I am taking a reasonable interpretation of the wording of the motion — as opposed to what the proposer has said.

The motion refers to there being a second currency alongside sterling. It refers to a second currency and not to all the other currencies in the world, such as the dollars, that can be traded. Surely it is therefore referring to a second currency that is to be used in our tills. That is a reasonable assumption. What the Member has said in the debate does not add up to what is written in her motion. My understanding is that if her motion were to be agreed, the measures would not be introduced on a voluntary basis.

Nowhere in the motion is it stated that that should happen on a voluntary basis. As I said earlier, this is happening automatically on a voluntary basis. Businesses that rely on trade in other parts of Europe or across the border — hoteliers, and so forth — are already making preparations. It is important that they provide convenient payment methods for their potential customers.

The motion concerns compulsory dual currency, which would be the worst possible outcome for Northern Ireland. It would mean additional costs for Northern Ireland, the only place in Europe that would have dual currency. If the motion were to be adopted, additional costs would be imposed on our businesses that would not exist anywhere else in “Euroland” or in the United Kingdom. That would disadvantage businesses.

The Member also calls on central Government to provide additional funds to pay for preparations for dual currency. As my Colleague has stated, that would cost hundreds of millions of pounds. How high on the list of priorities for public expenditure in Northern Ireland is preparation for the euro? If additional funding were given from the Barnett formula because of euro preparation, would the choice be to spend millions of pounds converting tills and accountancy software? Surely it would be spent on health, education, public transport and the protection of children rather than on financing the Member's single euro indulgence.

Banks, businesses, retailers and hoteliers are already making these preparations. It is right and proper that they should do so. The official recognition of a second currency would mean having two currencies in the tills. That is my interpretation, and I must reinforce that point. It would be an extremely expensive exercise for rural shopkeepers and for proprietors of corner shops in urban areas. How many tourists are expected in order to justify the additional financial burden in

having dual currency and dual accounts? Firms could go out of business.

The euro is being presented as a solution to all our ills. However, the single European currency would hand over some economic control to Europe and would ultimately lead to the further development of a European superstate. To date, close co-operation has been beneficial to all the people of Europe. Now that Northern Ireland has devolution, the real danger is that, if a European superstate were to be promoted, more and more decision-making would be handed over to that superstate. We may also receive a flood of European Directives, as is already being experienced by Assembly Committees. There is no choice involved with European Directives; they must be approved. So much for devolution.

Who contributed to the decision-making on the preparation of these European Directives? The people of Northern Ireland have little involvement in that process. Decisions are made at a high level by representatives of the Governments of all the nation states in Europe. There is little consultation with the Northern Ireland Assembly on any of these Directives.

The Committee of the Centre is currently conducting an investigation into interaction with the European Community. That may be an important area that is not being dealt with. A European superstate goes completely against the grain of devolution. More decision-making is being handed over to European central Governments above the heads of the people. There will be limited means of influencing decisions.

The motion, as it stands, does not correspond with the mover's words. I oppose additional costs on local businesses and increased central control by a European superstate, and I oppose the motion.

4.15 pm

Mr Deputy Speaker: I remind Members to switch off mobile phones and pagers before coming into the Chamber.

Dr McDonnell: I welcome this all-too-brief opportunity to have a debate on the euro, although it is an oblique discussion. We are not talking about introducing the euro directly, although many of my colleagues have been talking about that. The euro will be legal tender from 1 January 2002. I reassure Esmond Birnie that he is not the only person who is confused. We are all struggling to discover what it will mean for us. It is timely that we should face the issue.

Much of the discussion in the Chamber has been about the pros and cons of the euro. However, from the wording of the motion I do not think that that is the issue. We all accept that the euro will not be the official currency in Northern Ireland or Britain after 1 January. This is not about replacing sterling; it is about facing the reality that in 27 days time the cash in

people's pockets and the currency in their bank accounts and chequebooks will change in most of Europe.

Punts will remain for approximately a month until the banks gather them in. After 9 February there will be no more French or Belgian francs, lire, guilders, pesetas, Deutschmarks, drachmas, or markka. There will still be Danish and Swedish kronor, as well as sterling. For most people the currencies that are disappearing represent 1% or 2% of their expenditure. When added together, about 10% of our financial expenditure could be handled in euros.

Most of us do not admit that we go across the border to buy fuel for our cars. Many local transport companies have re-registered vehicles in the South and buy their fuel there. Many of us spend the odd weekend in Dublin or elsewhere in Southern Ireland, in places such as Donegal, and many of us holiday abroad. The combined impact of this will be much greater than that of people from the South spending punts in the North. I estimate that it could be two or three times greater.

The greatest interest will be in tourism. Almost all of our tourist expenditure will be in euros. We will still have British visitors, and I hope that we will still have Canadian and American visitors, although the transatlantic trade is down. We may have some Swedish visitors, but they do not form a big section of our tourist market. I hope that we will have Southern Irish visitors, and a few French, Spanish, German, Italian, Dutch and Belgian visitors. I am not just talking about past visitors, I am talking about those whom we hope to bring here, and those for whom the Tourist Board and Tourism Ireland Limited are marketing. All of those people will have euros in their pockets.

I have no doubt that many of our tourist businesses and entrepreneurs in other fields will accept euros. They will be accepted in the same way as the Irish pound has been exchangeable along the border and in many large stores in Belfast and in provincial towns. They will be accepted in the same way as sterling can be exchanged in Dublin, and the punt works in Newry, Derry and Belfast — on an unofficial and informal basis.

There will be many more euros to handle than there ever were punts. Any unwillingness, disinterest or lack of enthusiasm on the part of shops, bars or hotels to freely accept or tolerate the euro, will be seen by tourists as awkward, unfriendly and unwelcoming. It will give a less than subtle message that their business is not wanted, and they may decide not to come back.

I am not making a case for or against the euro. On 1 January, we will still have sterling, but our dealings with external currency will change. How will we grapple with that? I have a small business interest, and the bank has already advised me to set up a euro account to deal with what are trivial bits and pieces of exchange. As I understand it, most small businesses are being

advised along those lines. Up to 20% of our financial transactions, whether they are for business, tourism or personal reasons, will be in euros. We will not need to spend vast amounts of money that are badly needed elsewhere, but we need to create and manage a euro tolerance. Otherwise, the clumsiness that might emerge will inflict damage on our credibility.

Despite the fact that we will remain a sterling zone, we need to encourage people to be familiar with the euro. When they get on a plane and go to any European country on holiday, the euro will be the currency. When I go abroad, it takes me about three days to become familiar with the currency. The challenge, and the motivation behind Ms Morrice's motion, is to create a sensible connection between the two financial systems that makes sense of the exchange between them, so that our import and export business can move freely.

I do not wish to deal today with the strong case in favour of the euro. I know that those who are opposed have an equally strong case against it. I want to make a simple, rational, common-sense case for coexistence or cohabitation.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Please draw your remarks to a close, Dr McDonnell.

Dr McDonnell: I like to believe that sterling will still be acceptable along the border, and perhaps in Dublin and at the interface with France, Belgium and Holland. We must get to grips with that situation and make exchange easy for business.

Mr S Wilson: I am not surprised that the motion has been put down by the Women's Coalition and supported vociferously by the Alliance Party. The motion calls for two currencies in Northern Ireland. As we have all witnessed in the last couple of weeks, when it comes to schizophrenia, both parties are very adept at behaving in that way. A couple of weeks ago, they wanted to belong to two communities. They wanted to be Unionist, and they wanted to be Nationalist. Now they want to have pounds, and they want to have euros.

Ms Morrice: It is the best of both worlds.

Mr S Wilson: It is the worst of all worlds; that is the problem. If it were the best of both worlds, the DUP would support the motion. Let us consider the arguments. Members have been told that Northern Ireland cannot help but be affected by this issue because it shares a land boundary with a country of the euro zone. I am not very touched by that argument. It is not a new phenomenon that two countries that share a land boundary should have to deal with different currencies. That happened in Europe until this year.

Ms Morrice: There were not 300 million of them.

Mr S Wilson: Three hundred million people use dollars, and more of those people come here on holiday than those from Europe. We are not awash with dollars. Nevertheless, there is an argument that there must be a special arrangement in Northern Ireland because many people will be using euros and because we share a land boundary with the euro zone. If those special arrangements are not required between Canada and the United States or between France and Germany until this year, why should there be a special case for Northern Ireland after 1 January 2002?

It has also been said that treating the euro as the second currency in Northern Ireland will be voluntary. However, Ms Morrice does not regard this as voluntary. In fact, its being voluntary would invalidate all her arguments. On one hand she says that it will be a disaster if businesses do not recognise the euro as a second currency; on the other hand she says that they can pick and choose whether they want it. She must make up her mind, although I know that that is difficult.

Members were also told that it would help farmers. I have taught some economics students in my life; some of them were good, and others were poor. However, if I were marking an essay by Ms Morrice, I would not give it a pass grade. She says that if farmers were paid in euros, all their concerns about the effects of the exchange rate would cease. What does she think the farmers will do with the euros when they get them? They are not going to pay wages, electricity bills or feed bills with them. They will have to change them into sterling. Therefore, the argument that euros will do away with the exchange problems that farmers have been complaining about is false.

That takes me to the logical extension of her argument, which is, as my hon Friend Dr Paisley said, that the euro be introduced into Northern Ireland as the first step towards imposing a common currency on the United Kingdom.

Ms Morrice said that the introduction of the euro would help tourism. An article from 'Ulster Business' quotes a man who should know about tourism because he owns several hotels in Northern Ireland. Howard Hastings has said that we should say "yes" to Europe — as Dr Paisley said earlier — but "no" to the euro. That is the view of someone who works in tourism every day, who knows the effects and who has said that these arguments are not valid.

It was also argued that the euro would make Northern Ireland's trade with Europe easier. Dr Birnie pointed out that 80% of Northern Ireland's international trade is outside the euro zone. Therefore, most businesses will still have to deal with exchange fluctuations. Some businesses have traded almost exclusively in dollars for many years, but they do not argue that Northern Ireland must join the Federal Reserve or introduce the

dollar into Northern Ireland. Trading, as the currency exists, can be done; it is done every day. Nevertheless, Members are told that if they do not agree the motion, Northern Ireland will face economic disaster.

Of course, we should not worry about the cost; we can get it from the Treasury. That is the final argument — let us go to the Treasury, hold out our hands, and it will pay.

4.30 pm

If the Treasury were to give Northern Ireland another 200 million quid, I would want it to be spent on something more than slot machines and cash registers. Yet, it appears that this is the priority that the Women's Coalition, the Alliance Party and, it seems, the SDLP share in the event of the extra money becoming available. Let me give an example. A newspaper recently published an article about a company which runs a few buses between Donegal and Northern Ireland. It reckoned that the changeover to the euro will cost it £40,000. That is for one small business. That will be multiplied across Northern Ireland, and the figures estimated are £200 million or £700 million — nobody is sure.

I can think of far better things to spend our money on, especially when all of the arguments that have been made are fallacious. The reason behind this is not that it will help the farmers and tourism, that it is realistic or that it will help our trade with the rest of Europe. The real reason is that those euro fanatics who are looking at the political landscape in the United Kingdom know that 80% of the population in the United Kingdom will not voluntarily vote to go into the euro zone. So what do you do? Esmond Birnie has described it; you introduce the currency by stealth, "euro creep", as it is called — or "euro creeps".

Ms Morrice: What would the Member do if the referendum in Northern Ireland were counted separately and Northern Ireland voted for entry into the single currency?

Mr S Wilson: Northern Ireland is part of the United Kingdom, and I hope that it will be treated as such when it comes to a referendum count. I have no doubt that good sense will prevail in Northern Ireland as much as it will prevail in the rest of the United Kingdom and that the people here will oppose it.

The fact of the matter is — and Esmond Birnie has mentioned it — that it is less and less likely that the five economic tests that Gordon Brown has set will be met. It is less and less likely that people in the United Kingdom will be persuaded to voluntarily accept the euro. We have seen the kind of interference that comes from Europe — it is now telling the Irish Republic how much tax it can levy. We are not members of the euro zone, yet it is telling Gordon Brown how much he can spend. Next week we will discuss the Budget.

Under the proposals for a common currency, Brussels can determine our level of spending and taxation.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Time is up.

Mr S Wilson: I will finish now. That is why people will reject the introduction of the euro. That is why we have to have it sneaked in by the back door. That is the real motive behind the motion.

Mr M Robinson: On 1 January 1999, the euro was launched to great acclaim and much media frenzy. We were informed of the many benefits associated with the euro; how it would be a strong currency and would one day rival the mighty dollar. Unfortunately, this has not been the case.

For the first three years, the new currency has struggled in the markets, and its value has plummeted month after month. Advocates of a single currency feel that it makes sound business and economic sense, in that it will create lower interest rates and faster growth. However, interest rates are unique to each country. No one interest rate fits all; no one interest rate is right for both Belfast and Brussels.

It is, therefore, obvious that countries that have signed up to the single currency will end up with interest rates that are either too high or too low. How could any country be sure that it is getting a fair deal in line with the needs of that particular country? One currency, one bank, one interest rate will inevitably lead to common taxation, one budget and one economic policy. As I have already mentioned, each country is very different economically, so how can a single budget, which will meet the needs of every country, be created?

There will obviously be winners and losers. If we look at the common agricultural policy and the common fisheries policy, it is blatantly obvious who the winners and losers were. As part of the common fisheries policy, the EU tightened the quota system against the United Kingdom. As a result, thousands of trawlermen have lost their jobs, and hundreds of vessels have been taken out of commission. Under the latest proposals, Britain is expected to cut her fishing fleet under the quota system by another 40%. The decimation of the fishing industry has caused problems of unemployment and recession in the fishing towns and villages across our Province. This is one all-too-obvious example of how community policy can damage not only jobs and employment, but the social and community fabric in affected areas.

Mr Shannon: Does the Member agree that while the fishing industry in the United Kingdom has suffered because of job and boat losses, other European fleets have done better at the expense of the fish in UK waters?

Mr M Robinson: In agreeing with my Colleague, I would like to thank him for illuminating the point that I was making.

The assertion of governmental or imperial power has always rested upon the assertion of the rights to levy taxes, to spend money and to impose a portrait of the head of the king or queen upon the coin. The European Union is following a well-trodden path in wishing to issue and design its own coinage. The power to tax is fundamental in establishing governmental rights. It is difficult to see why we would even contemplate a common economic policy run by the very people who brought us the common fisheries policy and the common agricultural policy.

In discussing the single currency, we cannot help but mention the fact that we would be moving towards the centralisation of federal power and, therefore, the creation of a single Government. How would it be possible to govern a single country called Europe, given the different languages, histories, cultures, identities, et cetera? Each and every country should be proud of its heritage and culture. Unfortunately, the introduction of a single currency is only going to further weaken our culture and our identity.

Yes, Northern Ireland is unique in that it shares a land border with the Republic of Ireland, which as we all know has opted to introduce the euro. However, this should not pose any great difficulty, as we have managed for over 20 years with two different currencies, since the Republic of Ireland introduced its own currency by replacing the pound with the punt.

It is an absurd notion to have the two currencies working alongside one another. The cost of implementing this would be phenomenal. The costs of conversion are huge. Every computer, vending machine, slot machine, accounting system and bank telling machine would need to be changed. There are over 20,000 automated teller machines handling the existing type of paper currency note in the UK. All of these would have to be replaced to handle entirely different styles and shapes of notes. Also, 500,000 point-of-sale terminals in shops around the country would require either fundamental overhaul or replacement to handle any new currency. All accounting and cash settlement systems would need to be adjusted in order to deal in the redenominated currency, and in the period of transition these would need to shift from sterling to the euro and back again using the fixed conversion factor.

Around the European Union as a whole, there are 12 billion bank notes in circulation and another eight billion in store. All or most of these would need to be replaced with new ones. The complete coinage would require reminting into the new shapes and specifications of the euro. In the case of a small shopkeeper, the costs would be considerable. They would have to make facilities available for transactions in both sterling and euros. In practice, this would mean doubling up the number of tills in the shop to handle two separate sets of banknotes

and coins. The total cost to business is estimated at more than £30 billion in total.

What return could they possibly earn on this? In effect, it would be all cost and no benefit. Who would end up footing this bill? Would the customer end up paying the price in more ways than one? We should be proud of the pound and all that it stands for. John Redwood MP said that if we join the euro, there is no point to general elections, as so many of the important decisions about our prosperity will be taken behind closed doors by unelected officials in some far away bank.

Ms Morrice: I would like to address several issues. The issue of cost was raised by Dr Birnie and by several Members from the DUP Benches. I would like to tease out that issue in order to understand it better. For example, let us suppose that we will have a referendum. Dr Paisley put this point well. What will happen if the people of the UK say, "Yes"? We will have to convert our currency into euros and have a transitional period. Who will pay for that? Surely the Treasury will not expect the people of Northern Ireland to foot the bill for that currency change? The Treasury will have to pay for the conversion.

Mr Beggs: Will the Member give way?

Ms Morrice: I do not know how much time I have.

Mr Deputy Speaker: The Member's time is limited, but she can decide to give way.

Ms Morrice: How much time do I have?

Mr Deputy Speaker: The Member has approximately eight minutes.

Ms Morrice: I will not give way, because I must respond to the arguments. If the people of the UK say, "No", we are still going to have euros in Northern Ireland. I make that point in answer to Mr Sammy Wilson's comments. Has his head been buried in the sand? Does he not visit Newry or any other border town? Does he not see that currency is crossing the border, and that the euro will cross the border? I would point out to him that there are several thousand miles of water between the United States of America and us. Perhaps he has not noticed that. Canada and America have the same problem with cross-border currency and trade.

Some Members got out their single, transferable speeches as soon as they saw the motion on the Order Paper. They began to say "No" to the euro; "No" to entering a single currency; "No" to the central bank, and "No" to a common — *[Interruption]*.

Some Members: Hear, hear.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order.

Ms Morrice: I am not calling for our entry into the single currency, common control or the central bank.

Some Members: Oh yes you are.

Ms Morrice: Oh no I'm not.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order. The Member knows that her comments must be directed to the Chair and not to the other side of the Chamber.

Ms Morrice: I will direct my comments through the Chair.

I am not calling for those things. The difference is stated in the motion. The euro should be sitting "alongside sterling". Did Members read that in the motion?

Mr Beggs made an important point. I would like to take time out, because Mr Beggs is probably on the conversion list as far as political persuasion is concerned. He said that he misunderstood the motion because it does not mention the word "voluntary". However, it does not mention the word "compulsory" either. I hope that I have explained that it is about accommodating, facilitating and, when it is in the interests of business and industry, encouraging the use of the euro. I am not talking about its being enshrined in law, or compulsory. I want it to be voluntary, demand-led and market-driven.

I hope that Mr Beggs will understand, and perhaps be persuaded to change his position on the motion, as a result of my explanation.

4.45 pm

I thank Dr McDonnell and Mrs Courtney for their support. It was useful to hear Mrs Courtney's reference to experiences in the border areas. Businesses there are having problems and are having to accommodate for euros without any guidance. However, problems do not occur only in the border areas. I have heard about a small business in north Belfast — *[Interruption]*

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order.

Ms Morrice: — that could not obtain a conversion rate for the euro from the bank. Yes, there are forward-thinking businesses in Northern Ireland, although it seems some banks have yet to get there. I appreciate Dr McDonnell's point about "euro tolerance". If we do not have that, we shall damage our credibility. Why not have co-existence?

I was disappointed, although not surprised, with Sinn Féin's position on the motion. That demonstrates how far we still must go to achieve modern political and economic thinking. I thank Mr Ford who pointed out the problems for small business. It is vital that we understand those problems. I also thank him for explaining to those Members who are supposed to be so close to the farming community that he has come across farmers who would appreciate their subsidies being paid in euros. Those Members who think that that is not the case should go to the farmers and ask them. Perhaps they would then respond differently to the motion.

Mr Shannon: How many farmers are there in north Down?

Ms Morrice: There is a problem here, Mr Deputy Speaker. I wish to make that clear.

I am afraid that those who vote against the motion do not realise that it is a pragmatic solution. They simply "do not want a euro about the place". We are correct to wait for a referendum.

I have already referred to Mark Robinson and Sammy Wilson. I mentioned the head-in-the sand approach and the single transferable speech.

There is no question that the referendum on the UK's membership of the single European currency will be the deciding factor on whether the UK enters it. The Women's Coalition believes that the single European currency is important and valuable. However, the criteria and the timing must be right. We in the party are pragmatists. The motion offers a solution in the interim. I remind Members that support for the motion is not necessarily support for the euro, nor is it support for UK membership of the single currency. The motion seeks only to make provision for the unique situation in Northern Ireland.

The euro is a reality. It will make its way north of the border whether we like it or not. Our farmers, our businesses and our industry need to know how to deal with it. By supporting the motion, the Assembly would send out a clear message to the people that it represents — Northern Ireland is open for business in euros and in pounds. Let the people decide.

Question put and negatived.

Adjourned at 4.55 pm.

NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

Monday 10 December 2001

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

Members observed two minutes' silence.

ASSEMBLY BUSINESS

Mr Speaker: I have received notification from the First Minister, the Rt Hon David Trimble MP, that he will be absent from the Assembly today.

The First Minister and the Deputy First Minister advised me, in a letter dated 3 December 2001, that they have jointly agreed that the Deputy First Minister will deal with a number of items of Assembly business that fall to the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister. When making statements on plenary meetings of the North/South Ministerial Council and the British-Irish Council, the Deputy First Minister is, of course, speaking on behalf of all Ministers who attended those meetings. When answering questions to the Office of the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister, he is undertaking the responsibilities of them both.

ASSEMBLY:

Suspension of Standing Orders

Mr Speaker: I remind Members that a suspension of Standing Orders requires cross-community support.

Resolved (with cross-community support):

That this Assembly suspends Standing Order 10(2) and Standing Order 10(6) for Monday 10 December 2001 — *[The Deputy First Minister.]*

BRITISH-IRISH COUNCIL

Plenary Meeting

Mr Speaker: I have received notice from the Office of the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister that they wish to make a statement on the British-Irish Council plenary meeting that was held on 30 November 2001 in Dublin.

The Deputy First Minister (Mr Durkan): I wish to make a statement on the second summit meeting of the British-Irish Council. All the Northern Irish Ministers who attended the meeting have approved this report, and it is made on their behalf.

The First Minister and I, together with the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety, the Minister of the Environment and the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development, represented the Northern Ireland Executive. Representatives of the British and Irish Governments, the Scottish Executive, the National Assembly for Wales, the Isle of Man Government and the states of Jersey and Guernsey also attended.

The main focus of the meeting was the issue of drug misuse and the development of further co-operation in that area. The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety explained the steps being taken by the Northern Ireland Executive. In particular, the British-Irish Council agreed elements of a framework for future co-operation which will focus on the two key areas of demand reduction, incorporating prevention and treatment, and supply reduction, incorporating law enforcement. This future co-operation will include the further development of information exchanges and joint actions.

Among the areas covered by enhanced information exchange will be co-operation on models of best practice, research, data pilot programmes and rehabilitation and reintegration strategies. The Council also noted the importance of information technology in enhancing information exchange and agreed to further examination of possibilities in that area.

It was agreed that specific joint actions could include joint awareness campaigns — for example, highlighting the risk of heroin use and targeting young people who use so-called recreational drugs. An agreement to develop joint training initiatives could also include exchange programmes for those members of the British-Irish Council who are engaged in drug-related work.

The importance of targeting the assets of criminals engaged in drug trafficking was widely acknowledged. In this context, the background to the establishment of the Criminal Assets Bureau (CAB) in Ireland and its success in targeting the assets of drug barons was regarded as significant. To advance work in the agreed areas the Council established a group of senior officials

with a mandate to prepare recommendations for future co-operation. Those will be reviewed by a ministerial meeting on drugs, and progress will be reported to a future British-Irish Council summit.

An update was provided on work being undertaken in sectoral areas by the relevant lead Administrations.

At the British-Irish Council environment sector meeting in London in October 2000, Ministers agreed that many environmental issues of mutual interest could be taken forward, with added value for all participants through closer co-operation.

From the range of topics discussed, it was agreed that several priority work areas would be taken forward with individual member Administrations in the lead. Consequently, the Irish Government and the Isle of Man are taking the lead in preparing a paper on radioactive waste from Sellafield. That will be discussed at a future meeting of the environment sector. I drew the Council's attention to concerns raised by Members of this Assembly and stressed the importance of a full exchange of information on the issue.

The UK Government have taken the lead in examining issues of climate change. The climate change group has met twice and has agreed to extend the climate change scenarios of the forthcoming UK Climate Impacts Programme 2002 to cover all the British-Irish Council Administrations.

The Scottish Executive look forward to hosting the next British-Irish Council environment sector meeting in Edinburgh next spring. That will include a discussion, initiated and led by the Scottish Executive, on the difficulties and challenges of finding more sustainable ways of dealing with generated waste.

The Scottish Executive and the National Assembly for Wales provided an update on the Council's work on social inclusion. Recognising that there are strong commonalities across the British-Irish Council areas, proposals included a community conference to promote sharing of good practice on particular aspects of social inclusion. The British-Irish Council web site will shortly launch a section on social inclusion. That will promote community networking and will engage with communities on the British-Irish Council's programme of work on social inclusion.

A report has already been made to the Assembly on the inaugural transport sector meeting, held in Belfast on 19 December 2000 under the joint chairmanship of the First Minister and the then Deputy First Minister.

At that meeting there was a wide-ranging debate on the discussion paper prepared by the Northern Ireland Executive, and agreement was reached on the need for an integrated and sustainable approach to transport issues that would take account of the relevant economic, social and environmental issues.

In addition, a range of key issues were identified that will inform future work. They included the problems of peripherality, road safety, regional air links, transport in rural areas, exchanges of information, experiences in areas such as public-private partnerships and links between transport and land-use planning. Existing and future strategies for dealing with integrated transport issues and policies were also noted.

The Council decided that the Northern Ireland Executive would convene an early meeting of senior officials to examine an agreed menu of options and prepare detailed recommendations for work in several initial priority areas. Recommendations will then be submitted to a further meeting for approval.

In November 2000, Jersey chaired a wide-ranging discussion on the knowledge economy, and several further useful discussions have been held since. A key issue that has been identified is the problem of a lack of information technology skills among significant groups of people, especially in remoter areas. The digital divide is seen as a central problem which acts as a barrier to a range of strategies to increase social inclusion. Jersey is establishing a project to map and analyse member Administrations' initiatives to improve access to the Internet and to ensure that the bulk of the population can readily acquire computing skills. To take that work forward, Jersey will host a major conference for decision makers, Bridging the Digital Divide, in April 2002.

In consultation with other member Administrations, Jersey, along with the British-Irish Council's secretariat, has taken the lead in designing the Council's web site. In the first instance, the aim is to create a public showcase for the work of the British-Irish Council that will be launched in spring 2002.

The Council agreed that Guernsey will do work on tourism while the Isle of Man will take the lead in health, with a focus on the application of telemedicine. The Council also heard proposals to improve the workings of the British-Irish Council and agreed that each member Administration and the Council will consider them further.

The Council agreed that Jersey will host the next summit in April 2002 and that the meeting will focus on the knowledge economy. Scotland and Wales will host a summit in September 2002, and Northern Ireland will host one early in 2003. A copy of the communiqué issued following the meeting has been placed in the Assembly Library.

Mr McClarty: Does the Deputy First Minister agree that there should be more activity in the British-Irish Council than has been the case to date?

The Deputy First Minister: The Executive and I agree that there needs to be much more activity in the

British-Irish Council. That was only the second summit meeting. Owing to political difficulties, we were unable to hold summit meetings earlier, and we have been unable to follow through on the sectoral meetings in the way that was planned. The meeting on 30 November was businesslike, and people discussed drugs issues. Many of the member Administrations found the meeting worthwhile and a useful model for ongoing work in the British-Irish Council. That proves that the Council can work in an organic and effective way that helps and reflects the interests of the member Administrations.

Mr McMenamin: What consideration was given to the operation and success of the Criminal Assets Bureau in the South in freezing and seizing the assets of drug barons? Has consideration been given to introducing similar legal powers in the United Kingdom?

10.45 am

The Deputy First Minister: As I said, the importance of targeting the assets of criminals engaged in drug trafficking was widely acknowledged. The Irish Government took the opportunity to explain the background to the establishment and operation of the Criminal Assets Bureau in Ireland. The bureau has had significant success in targeting the assets of drug barons. Many of the Administrations had questions on this, and useful ideas were exchanged.

The successful operation of the bureau was taken into account when the Proceeds of Crime Bill was being drawn up at Westminster. However, the exchanges at the meeting helped to air other issues that may be considered by UK Administrations in the future.

Mr McLaughlin: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. The Deputy First Minister has pointed to the benefits to everyone of exchanging information. I welcome the reference to Sellafield, although I note the absence of any information on the response of the British Government. I am certain that the other Assemblies and Parliaments that were represented at the meeting expressed widespread concerns.

References to information technology and the knowledge economy are recurring themes, and that is to be welcomed. Will the Deputy First Minister comment on the importance to the economy of extending broadband technology throughout the region and say whether this was recognised in the discussions? This area of the economy is led by the private sector, and that approach is inadequate because the area west of the River Bann will lag behind areas around the Greater Belfast conurbation.

The Deputy First Minister: I was happy to reflect the fact that all parties in the Assembly had expressed concerns about Sellafield. Concerns were also expressed by people on both sides of the border of this island. The British Government seemed to acknowledge those concerns, but it is not the first time that they have done

so. The concerns were substantiated further by the court case. I hope that we will receive better information and that we will be more directly in the loop on these issues in the future. The British-Irish Council will address the issue again in the environment sectoral meeting, so we will be involved as a participating Administration.

The importance of the knowledge economy is emphasised in the Programme for Government. It is of huge importance to the region, because it is where the path to competitiveness lies. It is important that the matter be addressed by the British-Irish Council, and the Administration in Jersey are doing useful work on drawing together proposals from the other Administrations.

Mr McCarthy: I welcome the fact that the Deputy First Minister has drawn attention to the Sellafield problem. However, both authorities on this island have expressed enormous concern, and the Prime Minister, Tony Blair, has provided a scant response, determined to press on with further development there. If Mr Blair is not prepared to deal with this potential time bomb and sitting target, is it worth having a British-Irish Council?

The Deputy First Minister: Yes. The fact that we were able to address an issue such as drugs in the useful and practical way that we did demonstrates the value of the British-Irish Council. Its value will be underscored by the useful work that will flow from it.

The same also applies in other sectors. The issue of Sellafield is a vexed one. However, the British-Irish Council gives the various Administrations who share these islands an avenue through which to deal with such issues. Without the British-Irish Council, what forum would the Administrations have to raise those issues? What sectoral format would exist to allow them to take the lead in examining the issue of radioactive waste from Sellafield? The value of the British-Irish Council is that it provides a forum in which concerns can be raised, and in which the British Government can offer reassurance if they so wish.

Rev Robert Coulter: Does the Minister agree that benefits can accrue to Northern Ireland from work in the sectors being pursued by the British-Irish Council, particularly in the area of tourism?

The Deputy First Minister: All member Administrations of the British-Irish Council recognise the value of the different sectors on which we seek to focus in this early programme of work. Guernsey will take the lead on the tourism issue. We know how important tourism is for us and that we can make up ground in that area. We have usefully addressed that issue on a North/South basis, mainly through the setting up of Tourism Ireland Ltd. It has worked directly with other tourism authorities in these islands and has

examined the implications for tourism of the events of 11 September, not least the issue of air links. That is a matter that the Administrations who share these islands should address together.

Mr A Doherty: Mr Mitchel McLaughlin's question on Sellafield covered many of the issues that I wished to raise. From what he heard at the meeting, is the Deputy First Minister satisfied that the UK Government will give that matter the serious attention that it deserves, and that they will base future actions on the well-being of their people and others, rather than on purely commercial interests?

The Deputy First Minister: I would like to give the Member the assurance that he seeks. However, it would be rash and premature for me to do so. The British-Irish Council will deal with that matter again. The Irish Government and the Isle of Man Administration are taking the lead in addressing the issue, but other Administrations will also be involved. The British Government will play a key part, and we must wait and see what develops, just as Members will watch with interest the developments arising from the recent court cases.

Dr Birnie: I thank the Deputy First Minister for his report on a welcome second plenary meeting of the British-Irish Council. The Minister referred to the Jersey Administration working alongside the British-Irish Council secretariat to construct a web site — again, that is welcome. Does he believe that the size of the secretariat is adequate, given that, when I was last apprised of its size, it comprised one employee in Whitehall and a part-time employee in Dublin? Do the Minister and the Executive feel that the secretariat is large enough to carry out the work outlined this morning?

The Deputy First Minister: The arrangements for the secretariat are as provided for in the Good Friday Agreement, and responsibility for it falls to the British and Irish Governments. Given that due to circumstances, not many meetings have taken place, the size of the secretariat and the question of how active its role has been have not mattered very much.

The British-Irish Council meeting did hear some proposals to further consider the operation of the secretariat, and it has been agreed that officials will look at the issue, and that papers will issue in due course. The matter will then be subject to full consideration by the relevant member Administrations, as well as by the Council itself.

Mr O'Neill: The Minister referred to the knowledge economy, and I want to explore that topic further with him. Can he say what work is being prepared in Northern Ireland, and by which Departments, on the key issue of bridging the digital divide?

The Deputy First Minister: Much work aimed at bridging the digital divide is already under way in Departments here. The Department of Agriculture and

Rural Development has established 19 access points across the region for farmers. The Department for Employment and Learning has created 32 learndirect centres throughout the region, aimed at providing citizens with the skills needed to access the digital world. That Department has also implemented the Electronic Libraries for Northern Ireland project, through which libraries will become information hubs for their communities.

A number of other initiatives will be included in a policy statement on bridging the digital divide. The Central Information and Technology Unit in our own Department will bring that forward for public consultation in 2002. It will aim first to scope the problem and, secondly, to draw together the many current and planned initiatives, as well as proposing a way forward.

Mr Hussey: On the issue of transport, the Deputy First Minister mentioned the transfer of information and experiences in public-private partnerships. Of course, in the South, as he will be well aware, such partnerships were an option of choice, whereas here in Northern Ireland they may be an option of necessity. He also said that existing and future strategies for dealing with integrated transport issues and policy were noted. Are we talking here about the inclusion of public-private partnerships within such strategies?

The Deputy First Minister: The Member has raised several points. Obviously, in looking at transport issues overall, the Council will want to look, not just at transport arrangements in the islands and between the different areas, but also at experience in each administrative area on more localised or regional transport issues. Clearly, the use of public-private partnerships in relation to key transport infrastructure is going to be a relevant area for exchange of information and best practice, and that will follow through. Obviously there are different approaches in the different Administrations, but that adds to the benefit and value of the British-Irish Council as a forum where we can look at the different practices and establish what is best practice for different types of projects, according to their scale or significance.

Regarding other transport issues and integrated strategies, it is again going to be a case of looking at different approaches in different areas. Further work is needed on that. The Northern Ireland Administration have agreed to take the lead on transport. However, it could well be that, as we get into discrete areas of transport, other Administrations will take the lead in looking at particular issues or aspects, such as we have seen in relation to the environment. We have seen other Administrations take the lead on specific issues that have emerged in that sector. We are looking forward to further development in the transport sector.

Mr A Maginness: The importance of targeting the assets of criminals involved in the drug trade and drug trafficking was widely acknowledged at the meeting.

What proposals are there for future co-operation? In particular, what protocols are to be developed to cover co-operation between the Criminal Assets Recovery Agency (CARA) and the Criminal Assets Bureau in Dublin?

The Minister mentioned a ministerial meeting on drugs. When will that meeting take place?

11.00 am

The Deputy First Minister: Further developments will be the subject of consideration by officials and, subsequently, by Ministers. I hope that the work will be developed during the spring.

Many member Administrations expressed particular interest in the operation of the Criminal Assets Bureau and referred to issues that might arise if they were to follow a similar course. Given the movement of the assets of drug barons between different administrative territories, we must co-ordinate and exchange information that could help to target those assets. However, that will be the subject of further work, and it would be wrong for me to anticipate what might emerge and when.

Mr Gibson: The statement included reference to social inclusion and the launch of a new web site in 2002. A meeting held in the Maiden City at the weekend addressed the problem of the alienation of the Unionist community, particularly in west Tyrone. What benefits will those Unionist people, who have suffered so much, gain from such a web site?

The Deputy First Minister: The web site will be a British-Irish Council web site. Any web site that exchanges information between community groups working throughout these islands should be of interest. Obviously, it will be for each group to identify what is of most interest to it. The web site will also serve as a platform on which community groups can set out issues of concern as well as giving details of actions that have been of benefit to them and others.

The web site is being developed in the context of the British-Irish Council's work on social inclusion, and that work is led by the Scottish Executive and the National Assembly for Wales. They propose to hold a community conference, drawing together people from all the administrative areas, which shows that the approach taken will be as responsive and inclusive as possible.

NORTH/SOUTH MINISTERIAL COUNCIL

Plenary Meeting

Mr Speaker: I have received notice from the Office of the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister of their wish to make a statement on the North/South Ministerial Council plenary meeting on 30 November 2001 in Dublin.

The Deputy First Minister (Mr Durkan): With permission, Mr Speaker, on behalf of the Ministers who attended, I will make a statement on the third plenary meeting of the North/South Ministerial Council, held on 30 November 2001 in Dublin Castle. The nine Ministers whose names have been notified to the Assembly participated in the meeting.

The Council agreed that the first annual report on its activities from December 1999 to 31 December 2000 should be published. It also received a report on the work of the various sectoral councils since January and noted the progress made in implementing the work programme set out in December 1999 at the first plenary meeting. Several Ministers described the work being taken forward in the sectors for which they had responsibility. It was clear that good progress was being made.

The report includes a range of practical initiatives, such as the launch of the equity network programme by InterTradeIreland. That was designed to promote the availability of venture capital to businesses in the North and South and to develop awareness of the potential of private equity investment to foster growth in private enterprises, particularly in the small and medium-sized enterprise (SME) sector. Another initiative is work in the health sector to consider the report of the acute hospitals review group in view of its suggestion of the potential to develop existing cross-border arrangements for the benefit of patients.

A third initiative involves work done in the agriculture sector to limit the spread of foot-and-mouth disease on the island of Ireland. That is now to be reinforced by an official steering group that will develop a strategy for the control of animal movements on the island, drawing on work done in both jurisdictions. That group will consider the means of prevention, containment and eradication of future epizootic disease outbreaks on the island. There is also work to develop a joint market development programme for recycled materials and goods to encourage and support the expansion of waste recycling on an all-island basis.

These are only four examples drawn from a much wider range of measures designed to secure mutual benefit for all. The Council looks forward to continuing progress being made in all areas of its remit.

Approval was given to a schedule of council meetings to take place over the coming months. That includes plans to hold a first meeting in the next few weeks in institutional format, involving the First Minister, myself, and Brian Cowen, the Irish Minister for Foreign Affairs.

The Council noted a progress report on the work undertaken by a working group established to take forward a study on the establishment of an independent North/South consultative forum. The Council agreed that this issue should be addressed at the forthcoming meeting in institutional format. A further progress report will be made at the next plenary.

The Council agreed to publish the report on a study on the obstacles to cross-border mobility on the island of Ireland. The two Administrations agreed that views would not be offered on the conclusions at this stage, pending publication and a process of consultation to give interested organisations, including Government Departments and individuals, the opportunity to present their views on the recommendations and their implementation.

The steering group will remain in place to manage the consultation exercise. It will then present to the next plenary meeting a paper summarising, evaluating and costing the recommendations, and reaching conclusions relating to implementation proposals where appropriate. The Council also agreed that the steering group should ensure that in considering proposals, care should be taken to avoid both creating barriers to east-west mobility and creating unjustified advantage for cross-border workers beyond that available in the respective jurisdictions.

The Council agreed an opinion on the budgets for the North/South bodies for the period 2002 to 04. It is envisaged that £54.37 million/92.07 million euro will be spent by the six bodies in 2002. The respective contributions from each Administration will be £40.01 million/67.74 million euro from the Irish Government and £14.37 million/24.33 million euro from the devolved Administration.

On competitiveness, the Council received a report commissioned by the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment and the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Employment, working in conjunction with Inter-TradeIreland.

The report covered a broad spectrum of work in a range of administrative functions, and the Council requested that the relevant Government Departments and agencies pursue the competitiveness agenda to achieve mutual economic benefit in the areas for which they are responsible.

There was a useful exchange of information on key priorities in the Irish Government's Programme for Prosperity and Fairness, the National Development

Plan and specific sections of the Administration's draft Programme for Government. The Council noted the position taken on each and welcomed the opportunity to discuss each document.

There was a useful exchange of views between Ministers from the North and the South on the impact of the 11 September attacks in the United States. They discussed the economic impact of those horrific events, particularly their effect on tourism in both parts of the island. The Council noted that the tourism agencies on the island of Ireland are developing proposals to reduce the impact on the tourism industry. Emergency and contingency planning were discussed, and the need for continued cross-border co-operation on health issues, and for structures in each jurisdiction to plan for major incidents, was highlighted.

The Council agreed that its next plenary meeting would be held in Northern Ireland in May 2002. A copy of the communiqué issued after the meeting has been placed in the Assembly Library.

Mr B Bell: Can the Minister assure the Assembly that when addressing issues of North/South mobility, no action will be taken that would disadvantage people in Northern Ireland who wish to move between here and Great Britain?

The Deputy First Minister: The Council agreed that given that the steering group is carrying out a study of obstacles to mobility and that a consultation exercise is still to take place, care should be taken to ensure that the work does not result in any new barriers to east-west mobility. That is understood. There is also a need to ensure that nothing arises that would allow anyone to believe that they have been placed at an undue disadvantage in relation to others in their jurisdiction.

Many North/South mobility issues apply equally to those moving from east to west. Some who move between east and west, between Great Britain and Northern Ireland, also seek to move between North and South. Useful work can be done that is not detrimental to anyone, and which contributes to the wider benefits for those moving between east and west.

Ms Hanna: How can the proposals on cross-border arrangements that are contained in the acute hospitals review group report be implemented, following their consideration by the North/South Ministerial Council?

The Deputy First Minister: Cross-border work has already been carried out. The Hayes Report, and many of the responses to it, have identified such co-operation as a relevant issue. Cross-border work has included that between health boards in the border area under the Co-operation and Working Together (CAWT) programme.

Given that the review of acute hospital services is under consultation and that proposals are still to emerge, it would be wrong to specify what might happen on a

cross-border level. At present, no more can be settled in regard to that issue than in relation to any other aspect of the acute hospitals review that arises in one jurisdiction. We are using the facilities of the North/South Ministerial Council to enhance co-operation and co-ordination to address those issues in a meaningful way. Therefore the cross-border issues will not be disregarded in the development of the review of acute hospital services.

11.15 am

Mr Gibson: The Deputy First Minister mentioned the impact of 11 September attacks and their effect on the tourist industry. The South of Ireland has lost IR£2 million. However, Bord Fáilte Éireann has initiated an effort to help the domestic market. Does the Deputy First Minister intend to encourage his Departments to initiate an effort in Northern Ireland so that the tourism industry can be stimulated between now and 31 March 2002?

The Deputy First Minister: Tourism Ireland Ltd, which is a limited company operating on a North/South basis, is taking the lead in the marketing campaign for tourism on the whole island. It has been active, and not only since 11 September, in dealing with issues that have arisen from the global economic downturn.

The North/South Ministerial Council heard exchanges of views on tourism issues from relevant Ministers, not only on global marketing but on the need to stimulate more tourist activity in markets closer to home. We anticipate positive developments, based on undertakings made at the meeting.

Mrs Nelis: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. The Deputy First Minister will have noted that the Department for Employment and Learning's November 2001 'Labour Market Bulletin' identifies more than 9,000 workers who commute cross-border from the North to the South. Will the consultation process take account of the unfair situation in which those workers who live in the North and work in the South pay tax in both jurisdictions, which sometimes amounts to IR£2,000 per year?

The Deputy First Minister: There will be a full consultation process, and the document will be made available to the public. Anyone with an interest can follow the process and make submissions accordingly. The steering group that carried out the study will stay in place so that no loss of focus or interest in the consultation stage will occur. The consultation exercise should be amenable to anyone with direct experience of the issues. It should be remembered that the exercise was set up as a Northern Administration initiative, and the Southern Administration then agreed to participate through the North/South Ministerial Council. We want

to follow it through so that those obstacles to mobility are dealt with in a sensible and sensitive way.

Mr McCarthy: Would the Deputy First Minister consider it useful for mechanisms to be put in place to give the Assembly Committees an opportunity to have an input into, and to review in greater detail, decisions reached at North/South Ministerial Council meetings?

The Deputy First Minister: All decisions made by the North/South Ministerial Council are by agreement. First, both Administrations must agree that proposals will be agreed by the North/South Ministerial Council. Any issues that arise in North/South Ministerial Council meetings or at the British-Irish Council are within the work programme of the respective Northern Ireland Departments, and the relevant departmental Committees are free to put forward their views.

Many of the issues addressed at the North/South Ministerial Council and the British-Irish Council were views expressed by departmental Committees. The views represented by Ministers and Departments are views that have been aired in the Assembly and in Committees. As I have already said, in the British-Irish Council I made reference to views expressed in the Assembly. On other issues people can refer to views expressed at Committees. I do not see any underlying problem to the Member's question.

Mr Hussey: I thank the Deputy First Minister for his statement. With your permission, Mr Speaker, I will make a brief comment and then ask a question. The Minister's statement mentioned the health sector's consideration of the report of the acute hospitals review group. At least four Members from the two communities would issue a health warning on that. The Minister's statement described the health sector's initiative to consider the report of the acute hospitals review group in view of its suggestion about the potential for developing existing cross-border arrangements. It is a pity that Hayes did not totally examine that matter when he came to his conclusions about hospital provision in the south-west.

The statement also deals with work done in the agriculture sector to limit the spread of foot-and-mouth disease. Will the Deputy First Minister advise the House what actions have been taken in the North/South Ministerial Council's agriculture sector to control the spread of animal disease?

The Deputy First Minister: I am sure that relevant others will note the observations and comments in the first part of Mr Hussey's question. It is not for me to answer on the implications of the review of acute hospital services. However, regardless of how Members feel that the cross-border dimension was treated in the Hayes Report, the North/South Ministerial Council offers a

relevant channel through which we can look at that, now that the review is the subject of further consultation.

My statement covers some of the developments that are taking place in agriculture. It says that we are moving to ensure that there are strong and effective controls in place to deal with any episodic outbreaks that may occur, that agreed and reliable controls can be applied, particularly in relation to animal health, and that people island-wide will have confidence in the system. Much of that work will follow from the lessons that were successfully learnt when dealing with the foot-and-mouth disease outbreak.

Mr Byrne: I welcome the Deputy First Minister's statement. Will he say whether the areas of North/South co-operation that are not working satisfactorily, such as Irish Lights and transport, were discussed at the Council? What measures are being taken to address their shortcomings?

The Deputy First Minister: The main focus of the meeting — as well as looking at the report that we agreed to publish — was to look at the operation of the Council and reflect strongly on the successful areas. Some other areas have been underdeveloped, and we will need to consider how to improve their operation and development.

Some of the issues with Irish Lights are not conducive to being dealt with on a North/South basis, and east-west issues are also involved. The Council must look at them again and come up with satisfactory arrangements for dealing with Irish Lights.

With respect to transport, we want to ensure that we act on the opportunities for useful co-operation. At some levels we are seeing effective co-operation in transport through some work that is not unrelated to the common chapter — for instance, the road from Larne right through to the border below Newry. However, we want to make sure that we have a more strategic approach than that. Therefore further proposals will be considered.

Mr McElduff: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. Cuirim fáilte roimh an ráiteas agus roimh an chruinniú. When will the annual report mentioned in the Deputy First Minister's statement be published?

With regard to the North/South work in the matter of the acute hospitals review group, will Micheál Martin's 10-year strategy document also be viewed in this context for its North/South potential?

Finally, I ask the Minister to comment on whether these meetings take place too infrequently. Would quarterly meetings not be more practical and effective than six- monthly meetings?

The Deputy First Minister: I shall answer the Member's last question first. We know of the obvious political difficulties there have been with the greater frequency and reliability of plenary and sectoral

meetings. The most important issue is not the frequency of the meetings, rather that there is substantive and practical business to conduct, both for the plenary itself and in reflecting the work that is going on at sectoral level. The next plenary meeting is planned for May.

More importantly, there are key meetings planned in the various sectoral formats. There is a work programme, which I referred to in my statement, agreed between now and then and, indeed, beyond. Rather than saying that there is one type of meeting that we have to have more of, the issue is that we have to have more of the meetings, in more of the formats, producing more benefits and producing more outcomes that are in everyone's interest.

The report should be published. If Members have not yet received it, it will not be long in winging its way to their pigeonholes.

Mr A Maginness: I note with interest the reference to the national development plan by the Dublin Government. During a recent visit to the north-west, which included Derry, but not only Derry, local people and Derry City Council emphasised the importance of the national development plan and of taking the north-west region into account in the plan.

Was there much discussion about the national development plan? Was there any discussion about including the north-west in particular in the development of transportation links — not just road but also rail links — as this is an important and vital element to the development of that area?

The Deputy First Minister: The exchange that touched on the national development plan also reflected issues in the Programme for Government. It highlighted the fact that there is a common chapter between the national development plan in the South and the community support framework for Northern Ireland. That offers a facility for us to ensure some more concentrated co-operation in border areas, particularly in developments that would be common to and compatible with both the national development plan and the community support framework. The exchange that took place did not get down to the level of precise detail about transport sectors in particular regions or localities.

Discussions were held to compare issues arising from both strategic plans, and it was agreed that additional targeted work, which could be followed up at the appropriate interdepartmental or sectoral level, would be worthwhile.

11.30 am

Mr McHugh: Go raibh maith agat, a Chin Comhairle. The Deputy First Minister's statement is welcome, as is the fact that some agriculture issues have been raised. In the context of the cross-border, North/South workings of the Council, are all Departments, North

and South, willing to work positively together on the eradication of animal disease? There was evidence of co-operation during the recent outbreak of foot-and-mouth disease. Will Departments have programmes and strategies in place in order to avoid situations such as we have had in the past? Brucellosis is a serious problem along the Cavan border, and it is essential that the two Governments work together to deliver a solution.

The Deputy First Minister: Animal health is an important issue that was well registered at the North/South Ministerial Council meeting, as it has been throughout the agriculture sector. The Council's discussions focused strongly on the lessons learnt on how to control foot-and-mouth disease. There were also discussions on the need to develop a strategy for the control of animal movements on the island, something which underpins good animal health.

The meeting considered other issues, such as the need to improve the competitive position of the pig sector throughout the island. The progress made by the steering group on cross-border rural development was also noted. More detailed work on those and other agriculture issues will continue to be progressed.

Ms Ramsey: Go raibh maith agate, a Chin Comhairle. I would like to address the issue of cross-border mobility. Did the Council discuss qualifications obtained by health professionals on the island as a whole, in the light of the Assembly debate on health and social services staff on 20 November 2001? When will the report be published? Go raibh maith agate.

The Deputy First Minister: No significant delay is expected in the publication of the report. It is a matter of housekeeping arrangements to ensure that it does not clash with other publications. There are arrangements to have a meaningful consultation, which is why the steering group is being kept in place.

Several mobility issues were identified, including benefits and qualifications. The focus was not on a single sector or group of workers. Issues relating to health workers will be followed through and competently addressed in the health sector. I understand that that work is continuing.

NORTH/SOUTH MINISTERIAL COUNCIL

Education

Mr Speaker: I have received notice from the Minister of Education that he wishes to make a statement on the North/South Ministerial Council sectoral meeting on education held on 28 November 2001 in Dublin.

The Minister of Education (Mr M McGuinness): Following nomination by the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister, Dermot Nesbitt and I attended the third meeting on education of the North/South Ministerial Council, which was held in sectoral format in the Berkley Court Hotel, Dublin, on 28 November 2001. The Irish Government were represented by Dr Michael Woods TD, Minister for Education and Science. This statement has been approved by Dermot Nesbitt and is also made on his behalf.

The objectives of the meeting were to consider the outcome of research on cross-border school, youth and teacher exchanges; to review the progress made by the joint working groups, which were established at the first sectoral meeting on 3 February 2000, on under-achievement in education, special education needs and teachers' qualifications; to consider several progress reports from the working groups and agree the priorities for their future work; and to make decisions on some specific actions, on which I shall elaborate later.

First, the Council took note of the scoping study carried out by the Centre for Cross Border Studies in Armagh on the extent and effectiveness of existing school, youth and teacher exchange programmes. The study was commissioned at our meeting in July last year, and the report was completed in the autumn. Its findings and recommendations were considered by interested organisations at a consultative conference, which took place on 18 October in Armagh.

With regard to the report and the outcomes of the conference, the Council agreed that there was a need for suitable processes to improve the ways in which school, youth and teacher exchanges are managed and facilitated and to improve the quality of such exchanges for participants. Therefore, we have agreed in principle to establish an advisory standing committee on school, youth and teacher exchanges with representation from across the various stakeholder groups. At its next meeting, the Council will consider proposals for delivery mechanisms and the composition of the standing committee.

Special education, where the initial focus has been on autism and dyslexia, is an important area of the Council's work. It took note of the progress report from the joint working group and agreed several specific actions. The Council is keen to promote dialogue and

joint working between the professionals involved in that field, particularly at a strategic level. We wish to see the development of specialist programmes for teacher exchanges. In addition, the Council decided to fund the development of videos for the parents of children with autism and dyslexia and CD-ROMs for their teachers. The videos and CD-ROMs will provide advice and guidance for parents and teachers.

The Council also considered a report from the teachers' superannuation working group, which was set up to examine the feasibility and implications of establishing an agreement for the transfer on a North/South basis of the superannuation benefits of teachers who move between the jurisdictions to live and work. There is potential for agreement on this, and we agreed further work to be undertaken by the working group to progress the matter.

The report from the teachers' qualifications working group, which was established by the Council to examine a range of issues related to teacher mobility, was also considered. We welcomed the intention of teachers and education professionals, North and South, to collaborate on a range of issues of common interest.

The Council welcomed the greater flexibility in the requirements for proficiency in Irish for teaching posts in the South. It also noted that some steps have been taken that underpin the conclusions of the working group. Those include the Teacher's Registration Council's granting general recognition of several qualifications that are awarded by the University of Ulster. The Council also agreed further work to be undertaken by the working group.

In another key area, the Council again noted the report from the literacy and numeracy working group. Literacy and numeracy skills are vital to enable access to the rest of the curriculum. It is important to learn from one another as we develop our respective policies and strategies. We have shared our experiences of the reading recovery programme and the new materials that we have produced to help children improve their mathematics skills. The Council noted that the working group would be considering a recent evaluation of the reading recovery programme published by the University of Strathclyde. The working group will later present to the Council proposals for the development of the programme, together with proposals for the production of interactive training materials for literacy teachers. The Council agreed a further programme for the working group.

Unless children attend school and are encouraged to remain there after the age of 16, they cannot achieve their full potential. The Council considered areas for co-operation to promote attendance and retention, and endorsed the joint working group's proposals for the dissemination of good practice in that regard. The Council also agreed to run a home/school/community pilot project in the North, aimed at improving parental

involvement in their children's education. The project will draw on the considerable experience of similar programmes that operate in the South, such as those in north Dublin and Dundalk.

Children have a fundamental right to be safe and protected while in school and elsewhere, and to be free from the risk of abuse while in the care of teachers, youth leaders and others. The Council believes that the issue of child protection in these islands must be addressed. It noted the joint working group's report on the matter. It has agreed that there is a need for confidential mechanisms, North and South, to register those teachers and other education workers who are regarded as being unsuitable to work with children and young people. The Council recognised that the issue is a complex one; it agreed that all jurisdictions must collaborate to reach an effective solution and that appropriate legislation will be required. My Colleague Bairbre de Brún has published a consultation document on legislative proposals to place existing pre-employment checks on a statutory footing. We will also create mechanisms to provide adequate safeguards for our children. Any proposal on our part would require separate but complementary legislation, North and South.

The Council welcomed the availability of over five million euros under measure 5.5 of Peace II to promote school and youth co-operation. Officials in both Departments have been working closely to establish the necessary administrative procedures to enable joint bids under that measure to be made by the two Departments of Education for cross-border projects.

The Council agreed the text of a communiqué that was issued after the meeting, and a copy has been placed in the Assembly Library. The next meeting of the Council is planned for April 2002. I look forward to returning to the Assembly with a further progress report at that time.

Mr Hussey: I welcome the section of the Minister's statement on the fundamental right of children to be protected from child abuse. The Minister will be aware of the concerns about young children who were sent to Australia and other countries in the middle of the last century.

I support the Minister's statement. However, I am concerned about the right of children to be safe and protected from the excesses of their peers. Teachers, youth workers, and others have a right to work in a reasonable environment free from disruptive behaviour. Will future education sector meetings consider the issue of discipline in schools?

Mr M McGuinness: At present, discipline does not come under the remit of the education sector of the North/South Ministerial Council. However, the potential for developing that was evident in the Programme for Government.

The education sector will consider school discipline, and steps have already been taken in the North to deal with the issue. The Council understands the pressures and stresses that the difficult issue of discipline creates for teachers. I am willing to explore the issue more fully with our colleagues in the South.

Mr A Doherty: I am particularly interested in the Minister's comments on the targeted home/school/community pilot project, which is aimed at improving parental involvement in their children's education. I appreciate the importance of that. How far advanced are arrangements for the pilot project? What is the scale of the project, where will it operate and what range of schools and community elements is involved?

11.45 am

Mr M McGuinness: This is a comparatively new innovation, and it has been led by the South. We have been keenly interested in the work that has been done, both in Dublin and in Dundalk. We are proceeding with haste because the project will bring considerable value to us all. There is an increasing recognition on the island that the connections between home and school, and between community and school, are vital. We have learnt that lesson in the North. It is too early to say what areas will be piloted, but we are seriously considering the matter. The House will be informed of our plans when final decisions have been made.

Mr McElduff: Go raibh maith agate, a Chin Comhairle. Cuirim fáilte roimh an ráiteas seo. I welcome the Minister's statement, which was one of the more comprehensive North/South Ministerial Council sectoral meeting statements that have been made in the House. I look forward to progress reports from the advisory standing committee on school, youth and teacher exchanges as work continues in those areas. Can the Minister detail his plans to encourage the promotion of literacy and numeracy in schools both North and South? Are the sectoral meetings held frequently enough to be effective and practical?

Mr M McGuinness: Several Members mentioned the frequency of the meetings. It is important to meet regularly to ensure that the work that occurs between meetings — and, in our case, with the working groups that have been established between the two Departments — is progressing to our satisfaction. I am pleased with the work carried out by the working groups.

Everybody knows that literacy and numeracy are the keys to the rest of the curriculum and other areas of learning. It is important to consider how North and South can best co-operate to ensure that we learn from each other as we take forward our respective policies and strategies. The literacy and numeracy group recognises the benefits of exchanging documents and other materials relating to the promotion of literacy and numeracy in schools.

The group also recognises the benefits of key personnel, North and South, attending relevant conferences and seminars on existing or new developments in the other jurisdiction. That has already led to the attendance of teachers at key training events, including summer schools. A strategic approach will be considered for future events. Arrangements have been established, North and South, to secure the exchange of materials and the notification of events.

Two initiatives are already operating on a cross-border basis. One is the Pushkin Prizes, which encourage creative writing among young people. It is not only young people who are being encouraged. On Friday, I attended the launch in Derry of an anthology of work by teachers from all over the island. It was most encouraging to see people at the chalk face of education being keenly involved in releasing children's imagination, and unlocking their own creativity and that of the children.

The other initiative is the Children's Books Ireland research project, which will provide valuable information on children's reading habits and will inform future policy decisions. Those two schemes are exciting innovations that can be built on in the future.

Mrs E Bell: I thank the Minister for his interesting statement, which contained several important points. However, I want to raise a number of concerns. Why have I, as a member of a party outside the Executive and as a member of the Education Committee, received the information on the statement only today? That is despite the fact that such subjects as underachievement and special educational needs have been included in our work programme. I have mentioned such overlapping previously. Has any consideration been given to creating a system that would facilitate more frequent communication between the Council and Assembly Committees?

Mr Speaker: Before I call on the Minister to respond, I must point out that there is a procedural issue involved. It would be improper for the Minister to make statements to Committees on the outcome of North/South Ministerial plenary meetings or other meetings before bringing them to the House. Of course, the Minister may choose subsequently —

Mrs E Bell: Yes.

Mr Speaker: Order. The Minister may choose subsequently to engage in discussion with the relevant Committee — any Minister may do so. Nonetheless, I must say that it is important that Ministers do the House the courtesy of making statements in the House. The Minister is doing that, as his Colleagues have done. It would not be proper to make the statements elsewhere — in Committee or outside the House. The House must appreciate what Ministers are doing.

I will, of course, ask the Minister whether he wishes to respond.

Mrs E Bell: I am sorry if I put the question in the wrong way.

Mr M McGuinness: The Speaker has explained the dilemma faced by all Ministers. The mechanism was agreed and has been established for some time. We have a duty to ensure that we go through the proper mechanisms by informing the Executive and the House. Any problems should be explored in the round by all of us.

Mrs Carson: Regarding special education, the Minister said that the Council “decided to fund the development of videos for the parents”. Who will develop those videos, and how will they be distributed?

Subsequently, he said that “We have shared our experiences of the reading recovery programme”. Are those the experiences of Ministers, teachers or civil servants?

The Minister referred to new materials that have been produced. Are copies of those materials readily available to teachers in Northern Ireland, and are they compatible with the Northern Ireland curriculum?

Mr McGuinness: I thank the Member for those three questions.

It is vital that we provide as much information as possible to parents and teachers, and the videos and CD-ROMs will be important aids in doing that. The special educational needs working parties have a duty to provide us with progress reports on their work. In many ways, we depend on receiving that information before decisions can be taken.

We must all share details of good practice, and North and South must learn from each other. The establishment of the working parties has been an important development. They have done much good work, building on the good work done by officials from both Departments of Education long before the Good Friday Agreement. We are learning all the time, and we are keen to see that the working parties produce materials that are consistent with the education that we provide, in the South as well as in the North.

Mr Byrne: I congratulate the Minister on the comprehensive nature of the report on North/South education co-operation, particularly in those areas that have caused teachers great frustration for many years. I welcome the five million euros from the EU Peace II programme for the promotion of school and youth co-operation. I encourage the Minister to increase co-operation on youth exchanges on a North/South basis. Does he agree that that co-operation could help to improve community relations, particularly among young people on the island of Ireland?

Mr M McGuinness: A formal call for projects that might avail of the money announced will be made in the new year. Allowing time for completion of the application and selection process, it is anticipated that the funding should be available to the successful projects before the end of March 2002. The sum of 5.3 million euros is a considerable amount of money. The Department wants people to come forward with innovative schemes and approaches to build on the good work that has been done recently.

Members know that since the Good Friday Agreement, in particular, more people have been travelling between the North and the South. That is vital and valuable. It makes a worthwhile contribution to increasing pupils’ and teachers’ understanding of important issues.

Members know that many of these different contacts were conducted on a one-to-one basis, and the good work of bodies such as Co-operation Ireland made an immense contribution to increasing understanding. However, as the Council has established an advisory standing committee on school, youth and teacher exchanges, we can look forward to a much more cohesive and co-ordinated approach to the work. It is exciting, and the atmosphere is conducive to our work. This work will benefit community relations, both in the North and throughout the island of Ireland, and that is essential. There are clear and encouraging signals that educationalists of all descriptions — North and South — appreciate the importance of movement between the northern and southern jurisdictions and the formulation of schemes that can bring people together.

Mr McHugh: Go raibh maith agate, a Chin Comhairle. As my Colleague said, the statement is comprehensive and detailed. In its future programme, the Council will undertake important work that relates to education in both parts of Ireland. Child protection and special education are of particular interest to all Members, especially the Committee for Education. The cross-border group’s study is a powerful piece of research that will benefit everyone. What was the main issue to emerge from it?

Mr M McGuinness: Child protection is vitally important. Minister Woods and I accept the need for additional measures to enhance the already stringent mechanisms which keep track of individuals who may be unsuitable for involvement in any aspect of education.

We are moving steadily to ensure that we deal with this. At the same time, we must bear in mind the fact that this is a complex and sensitive matter concerning people’s rights. We have a responsibility to ensure that we deal with it in a sensible way.

12.00

Employing authorities are required to carry out a criminal records check before making an offer of employment. That is vital, and it must be applied to all

who are involved in children's education or who have substantial access to children, whether they are volunteers or prospective school staff. The Department also carries out a check of List 99 when a teacher is to be included on a payroll for the first time. We are trying to put a mechanism in place that will allow us to track people all over the island. The system should also recognise the importance of contact with England, Scotland and Wales. I also suggest that we establish contact with education authorities further afield, given some of the recent cases on the European mainland.

It is vital that we move in a sensible way and implement the optimum child protection measures. When the work is complete, I am satisfied that we will have achieved the optimum arrangements to secure the protection of our children.

Mr A Maginness: I welcome the Minister's comprehensive statement. I noted with particular interest the report of the teachers' qualifications working group, which was established by the North/South Ministerial Council to examine a range of issues relating to teacher mobility. Progress is being made, which is very helpful. However, it does not go far enough on this small island, where there is a need for teacher mobility. The Republic of Ireland also needs additional teachers, so is it not absurd that we have not achieved full and mutual recognition of teachers' qualifications on both sides of the border? Will the Minister set a target for achieving that objective? It stretches the credulity of many that teacher qualifications are not fully recognised on both sides of the border.

Mr M McGuinness: Under European Union Directives, we have already gone a long way towards mutual recognition of qualifications. The South accepts graduates from certain teacher training courses here. It will be useful to see if it is practicable to extend this further. The key issues are the quality of the training provided and the competence of teachers.

We must remember that this work is all new. The working groups were established only recently and because of the Good Friday Agreement. The agreement challenges us all about ending division on the island of Ireland. In education, that includes the difficulties that teachers face, both North and South. We have a duty and a responsibility to make life easier for teachers and to ensure maximum mobility across the island. We and the working groups are challenged to do that. I am very confident that the Member's concerns about teachers' qualifications and the mobility of teachers can be resolved through the good work of these groups.

Mr B Bell: I thank the Minister for his report. Can he say how much more flexibility now exists as regards Irish language proficiency requirements for teaching posts in the Irish Republic? Is there flexibility on a range of teaching subjects, or for specific posts only?

In response to a question for oral answer on 25 September 2000, the Minister gave a commitment to provide the Committee for Education with a summary of the issues discussed at each education sectoral meeting of the North/South Ministerial Council. Will he fulfil that commitment, and when will the Committee for Education receive that information?

Mr M McGuinness: The Member's second question relates to a point made by Mrs E Bell. I wish to advise the House that, like all Ministers who attend North/South Ministerial Council meetings, I am bound by the rules that have been established by the Executive and the Assembly. In following those procedures, I am more than willing to ensure that, after we have reported to the House, the Committee for Education receives as full a report as possible on the business that was conducted at a sectoral meeting.

The requirement for proficiency in the Irish language is now limited to teachers in primary schools and secondary level teachers in Gaeltacht schools, or teachers who are required to teach through the medium of Irish. In addition, individuals are now afforded a five-year period in which to satisfy the requirement for proficiency in Irish and, of course, the differential rates of pay will end, pending the acquisition of a certificate. The authorities in the South are addressing this matter, and we are keen to ensure that every encouragement is given to ensure a proper mobility of teachers between North and South.

Ms Ramsey: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. I also welcome the Minister's statement. I am heartened that he has mentioned children's right to be free from the risk of abuse while in schools or in teachers' care. What impact will the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety's proposed Protection of Children and Vulnerable Adults Bill have on the education sector?

Mr M McGuinness: My officials have worked closely with Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety officials on the proposals for the Protection of Children and Vulnerable Adults Bill, and consultation is ongoing. The comprehensive proposals are intended to cover those who work with children, including teachers and others employed in education. The main proposal is to establish a statutory list of people who are unsuitable to work with children. As far as employees in education are concerned, that will not dispense with the need to carry out a criminal records check on each teacher or employee. As indicated in the consultation paper, the Bill will create a broad equivalent to the Protection of Children Act 1999 and part 7 of the Care Standards Act 2000 in England and Wales. Through the Bill, and mirroring the approach adopted in the Protection of Children Act 1999, the Department of Education proposes amending the regulatory powers

contained in the Department's primary legislation to allow the Department to draw up regulations to strengthen specific safeguards in the education sector where appropriate. The drafting of any such regulations will involve separate consultation in due course.

Mrs Nelis: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. I thank the Minister for his positive report, which we welcome. We are pleased to note the progress on the various joint working groups, particularly those dealing with autism, literacy and numeracy, and the teachers' superannuation working group, which I trust will focus on the important issue not only of cross-border qualifications, but of benefits harmonisation. Can the Minister elaborate on the purpose of the superannuation working group and the options that it is considering?

Mr M McGuinness: At present a teacher moving to take up a job in either the North or the South cannot add his previous service to his new employment for the purpose of calculating pension benefits. This is an obstacle to mobility, and its removal would benefit all teachers, North and South.

The options being considered revolve around the central difficulties that many teachers face. In examining the possible alternatives the working group has indicated that it aims to ensure that teachers moving between the jurisdictions, with the consequent transfer of accrued pension rights, will be awarded benefits in the receiving scheme broadly equivalent in value to the benefits that would have been received in the surrendering scheme. This approach will prove equitable and will address the need to ensure that the arrangements finally agreed are not more favourable in one or other of the jurisdictions otherwise teachers would be encouraged simply to take advantage of the more favourable terms.

Mr M Murphy: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. I welcome the Minister's statement and the continuing co-operation between the two Departments. I especially welcome the fact that the Department of Education and Science in Dublin has dedicated measures in the Peace II programme to provide funding for approved projects in support of cross-border schools and youth co-operation. When will this funding be available to the schools and youth projects? Go raibh maith agat.

Mr McGuinness: As I said earlier in answer to another question, a formal call for projects will be made in the new year, allowing for projects to complete the application and selection processes. It is anticipated that funding should be available for successful projects before the end of March 2002.

Mr Speaker: That brings to an end questions to the Minister on his North/South Ministerial Council statement.

Mr Kennedy: On a point of order, Mr Speaker. I want to raise a matter about the indicative timings

shown on the monitors. You will be aware, and will appreciate, that many Members use the monitors to find out when statements will be made or when Assembly business will take place. Having had to undertake duties outside the House this morning, I read the monitor, which indicated that the Minister's statement would be made shortly after 1.00 pm. Clearly that is not going to happen. I missed the statement and have been unable to ask relevant questions. I ask you to consider the indicative timings that appear on the monitors.

Mr Speaker: There are a number of issues. The question of indicative timings has raised itself again and again. Indicative timings are nothing more than that. They were actually meant to give the Whips — not the Members — some kind of guidance. The difficulty is that people treat them as if they are Holy Writ and imagine that business will operate according to them. If the indicative timings are on paper, business will almost certainly not operate to them — it never does, and that has been increasingly so in recent weeks.

The Member raises the question of matters on the monitors, and I will look into that. If they are being displayed on the monitor in a way that is misleading to Members, that is exceedingly unhelpful and is something that must be looked at.

There are two ways in which ministerial statements can be treated as far as our business is concerned. One is the way in which we have treated them until now, which is that, insofar as possible, they are taken as the first items of business on the day, and there can be up to an hour for questions on them. If there is less, we move onto the next item of business. That can sometimes be difficult for Ministers, because they may find that previous Ministers do not provoke as many questions as were thought, and that they, therefore, have to rush back to the House. Since the outset, the Assembly has operated in that way — the House moves immediately to the next item of business, and ministerial statements are taken first.

12.15 pm

There is another way that we could operate; we could give a time in the way that is described by the Member. We could say that a ministerial statement will take place at a convenient time after a particular point on the clock — for example, a convenient time after 1.00 pm. The Member must, however, realise that if a matter is in process at that stage, that matter must then proceed to its conclusion. For example, if the Programme for Government debate today were to start at 12.45 pm, it would then continue for some hours. The first possible convenient time after 1.00 pm would be after Question Time at 4.00 pm. I am not sure whether that would actually convenience the Member more. However, whatever arrangement we have, we

must operate to that arrangement, otherwise no one will know where they are.

If it is the case that the monitors are misleading in the way that they have described something, then something must be done about that. I undertake, to the Member and to the House, to look into that matter.

Mr Dallat: On a point of order, Mr Speaker. You will be aware that there is crucial business running parallel to the functioning of the Assembly, in which Members are expected to participate. I am talking about Committees. You will also be aware that ministerial statements were available this morning and that Members had an opportunity to read them and digest the contents, yet critical, important business relating to constituents could not be asked of the Ministers. That was because the relevant Members — in this case me — were not present during the reading of the statement. Do you accept that that is unfair towards my constituents? They could not have their questions answered.

Mr Speaker: Order. I do not think anything of the sort. There are matters of common courtesy here. If we expect Ministers to come and do the House the courtesy of making their statements, then we should expect Members to be here if they want to ask a question — at least in some part of the statement. Otherwise, we could have a situation, as happened in another place, where Ministers started to make their statements outside of the House. On those occasions, the Speaker said to the relevant Minister “Fine. If it is made outside of the House you do not need to make it again here. We will take it as read into Hansard and move straight to the questions.” However, there is a question of proper courtesy to the House.

The Member raises the question of Committees choosing to meet during the time of the plenary. The time of the plenary is absolutely clear. The Standing Orders make it clear that the appropriate time for the plenary is on Monday and Tuesday, and the appropriate time for Committees is Wednesday, Thursday and Friday. If Committees choose to meet during the proper time of the plenary, they are perfectly at liberty to do so — but they cannot then make demands as to how matters will be conducted in the plenary. If the Member is not in a position to ask questions for his constituents because he was elsewhere, that is a matter for himself.

That is not something that I have simply dreamt up. It was fully consulted on through the usual channels. There was a general feeling that too many Members were touring into the Chamber and asking questions which had nothing to do with the statement, and that they had not done the House and the Minister the courtesy of being available for the statement. If the Member on this occasion has been caught in that, then that is unfortunate. I do not say that he is the major offender in respect of those other misdemeanours, but

there is no point in my saying that it can be fish for one and flesh for another. All Members must fall under the same rubric.

The Member has done the House the service of bringing the matter not just to the attention of the Business Committee but to the attention of the House as a whole. It is now placed in Hansard for everyone’s edification and education.

GAME PRESERVATION (AMENDMENT) BILL

Further Consideration Stage

Clause 1 (Close seasons)

Mr Ford: I beg to move amendment No 1: In page 1, line 20, at end insert

“(3A) In section 7D(4), after ‘purposes only’ there shall be inserted ‘and that the taking of such hares would not endanger the hare population in Northern Ireland or any part thereof.’”

I believe that copies of the Marshalled List of amendments were not available earlier today in the Rotunda. However, I thank the Business Office for acting speedily to make copies available when that was pointed out.

I would also like to thank Mr Jim Wells, who assisted me in drafting this amendment, and those other Members who have supported it.

When we discussed the Bill a fortnight ago, I referred at some length to the research work done by Dr Karina Dingerkus, whose PhD was on the Irish hare and the threats to it. I thought that in some senses the matter was then closed, since a number of amendments were tabled and fell on that occasion. I was somewhat surprised shortly afterwards to receive a letter that was sent to the Committee for the Environment and copied to me, from Prof Montgomery, the professor of animal ecology in Queen’s University and the head of the School of Biology and Biochemistry there. It was Prof — then Dr — Montgomery who supervised Dr Dingerkus’s project in 1997.

I will not read the whole letter, though lest the Minister think that I am quoting it unfairly, I will emphasise the fact that a number of points made in it refer to habitat protection, which are outwith the purposes of this Bill. However, Prof Montgomery does say that

“numbers [of hares] have declined with no indication that the population is cyclic”,

and that,

“the most recent night-time transects were driven in February and September this year with no indication of recovery in numbers”.

This is clearly a matter that not only gave the student that he supervised in 1997 cause for concern, but with which the professor himself remains concerned.

The final paragraph of his letter reads as follows:

“I have no personal axe to grind regarding Irish hare as a quarry species. It is neither widely shot nor coursed. However the population is vulnerable and it is difficult to reconcile the need for conservation measures with permission to take hares for sport.”

That is the view of the most appropriately qualified representative of his profession in Northern Ireland — the professor of animal ecology.

This should be taken in conjunction with the ‘Northern Ireland Species Action Plans’, that I referred to last time, which the Minister’s Department has not yet taken action on. It lists one particular responsibility to

“review and, if necessary, increase the level of protection given to the Irish hare in the Wildlife (Northern Ireland) Order 1985.”

Action is due on this by the Environment and Heritage Service (EHS) and Department of the Environment.

I do not propose to speak on this amendment in as much detail as I did last time, but the position is clear. We have a species action plan for the hare, but the Department is not implementing it. We have heard the professor of animal ecology express concern about any threat to hare numbers. We also have a Minister who has told the Committee on a number of occasions over the last year that as the law currently stands, he cannot refuse to issue a license to take hares for coursing. If that is the situation — if the Minister is genuinely concerned and if his Department proposes to take action as set out in its own species action plan — then the position is clear. The Minister should welcome this amendment with open arms, because it gives him the power to refuse licenses to take hares for coursing until it is established that the species is not under threat. It is as simple as that.

The Minister has said that he has not got the power, and that he therefore cannot respond to concerns expressed by the Committee on numerous occasions in the last year. This amendment gives him that power. It simply makes it clear that no license should be issued to take hares for coursing unless it is established that it would not endanger hare populations in Northern Ireland or any part thereof. I trust, therefore, that since this amendment is assisting the Minister in the concerns that he has expressed to the Committee over a great period of time, he will accept it in the spirit in which it is made. We will then ensure that the Bill is amended in this appropriate way.

The Deputy Chairperson of the Committee for the Environment (Ms Hanna): As the Deputy Chairperson of the Committee for the Environment, I want to remind the House that the Committee has, for over 12 months, been questioning and opposing the Department of the Environment’s practice of issuing licenses for the capture of live hares for hare coursing. The Committee continues to have serious concerns about the acknowledged decreasing hare population throughout Northern Ireland. Prof Montgomery’s recent letter to the Committee confirms that the hare population is vulnerable and questions the permission to take hares for sport.

However, the amendment to the Bill before the House today was not considered by the Committee during its consideration of the Bill, so as Deputy Chairperson, I cannot speak on the Committee’s views on it. However, as a Member, I fully support the amendment, because

it would make it unlawful to net hares for coursing if the taking of hares would endanger the hare population in Northern Ireland or any part thereof.

The Minister of the Environment (Mr Foster): I thank Mr Ford and Ms Hanna for their statements on the protection of hares. This subject had a respectable airing at the last meeting. It was discussed fully. I am concerned about the endangered species, but the figures given last time suggested that there is no great danger to hares from the coursing we have at present. The habitat of hares is the biggest problem, not just the coursing. The amendment tabled by Mr Ford, Mr McCarthy and Mr McLaughlin proposes to amend section 7D of The Game Preservation Act (Northern Ireland) 1928 to ensure that in granting permits to take hares from the wild, the Department is satisfied that this will not endanger the hare population in Northern Ireland or any specific area of it. Even if we were to take this literally, we would not be able to find out how many hares there are in any particular area. We do not believe that there is any scarcity of hares in Northern Ireland as a whole.

This amendment will not make any significant contribution to protecting Irish hares, particularly when the ecological evidence shows that the main factor limiting the hare population is the availability of quality habitat, and that is the issue. This matter received a full airing during the debate at the Consideration Stage of the Bill, and I reiterate the views I expressed then. I am aware of the need to keep the hare population under review and have already detailed to the Assembly the measures I propose to take. These include the development of a species action plan for Irish hares as part of the wider biodiversity process and will include a repeat survey of the numbers of hares here. My Department already knows the approximate number, but we do not have detailed information on hares in any particular part.

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

Were this amendment to succeed, my Department would have to be satisfied beyond reasonable doubt that any local population would not be endangered, however that might be defined. That information could only be obtained at disproportionate cost. It would also place an unreasonable statutory duty on my Department, with no proven gain to the conservation status of the hare.

Finally, if the amendment is aimed at hare coursing, it will not prevent the practice, since the majority of hares used for coursing here are brought from outside Northern Ireland, and we should note that. These issues were discussed thoroughly by the Assembly after Mr Ford's and Mrs Bell's amendments were tabled at Consideration Stage. The Assembly did not accept the need for Mr Ford's various amendments at that time, and circumstances have not changed since.

Mr Ford mentioned Prof Montgomery. The professor is only stating an opinion. There is no further data on which this opinion depends, and we have nothing definite to confirm what Mr Ford has said. Consequently, I am not prepared to accept the amendment proposed by Mr Ford, Mr McCarthy and Mr McLaughlin to Clause 1 of the Bill.

Mr Ford: If I was not confused before, I am most certainly confused now. The Minister said this morning that the Department does not believe that there is any great danger to hares. He also said that he does not have detailed information. Does that not prove the point of this amendment? The Department does not know what the situation is, but thinks that everything is OK. We are expected to believe the Minister rather than Prof Montgomery. I am sorry, but if it comes to the detailed ecology of Irish hares, I would sooner believe Prof Montgomery than the Minister and his civil servants.

Indeed, the Minister has just said that Prof Montgomery was only expressing an opinion. I shall repeat a point from Prof Montgomery's letter that I made earlier:

"the most recent night-time transects were driven in February and September this year with no indication of recovery in numbers".

That is not an opinion. That is a statement of fact, from a person who appears to know significantly more about the issue than the civil servants who so badly advised the Minister. The Minister's response is proof that the amendment is clearly needed. The House should make the amendment.

12.30 pm

Question put, That the amendment be made.

The Assembly proceeded to a Division.

Mr Ford: On a point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker. The Minister does not appear to have Tellers for his side. I understand that the amendment should therefore be made.

Mr Deputy Speaker: We do have Tellers.

The Assembly divided: Ayes 46; Noes 16

AYES

Eileen Bell, Paul Berry, P J Bradley, Joe Byrne, Gregory Campbell, Mervyn Carrick, Wilson Clyde, John Dallat, Arthur Doherty, Boyd Douglas, David Ervine, John Fee, David Ford, Oliver Gibson, Michelle Gildernew, Carmel Hanna, William Hay, David Hilditch, Billy Hutchinson, Roger Hutchinson, Gardiner Kane, John Kelly, Patricia Lewsley, Alban Maginness, Alex Maskey, Kieran McCarthy, Robert McCartney, William McCrea, Alasdair McDonnell, Barry McElduff, Eddie McGrady, Gerry McHugh, Mitchel McLaughlin, Eugene McMenamin, Jane Morrice, Maurice Morrow, Conor Murphy, Mary Nelis, Dara O'Hagan, Eamonn O'Neill, Ian R K Paisley, Edwin Poots, Sue Ramsey, Mark Robinson, John Tierney, Cedric Wilson.

NOES

Ian Adamson, Billy Bell, Joan Carson, Fred Cobain, Ivan Davis, Sam Foster, Derek Hussey, Danny Kennedy, David McClarty, Alan McFarland, Michael McGimpsey, Dermot Nesbitt, George Savage, Jim Shannon, Peter Weir, Jim Wilson.

Question accordingly agreed to.

Mr Shannon: I welcome the Minister's declaration on the Game Preservation (Amendment) Bill — specifically on partridge shooting — and the changes that he has introduced. I also thank the Committee for its work. The benefits as a result of those changes, which include the extension to the partridge shooting season, will be significant — *[Interruption]*.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order. It is difficult to hear Mr Shannon.

Mr Shannon: The Minister's extension of the partridge shooting season will bring direct benefits to the countryside. We all know the possible economic benefits — the matter was well debated last week. We welcome the fact that the changes have taken place, and we welcome —

Mr Tierney: Is this in order?

Mr Deputy Speaker: The motion is that clause 1, as amended, stand part of the Bill, and the Speaker indicated that Mr Shannon would be allowed to speak.

Mr Shannon: I asked the Speaker beforehand, and he told me that it was in order. If the Member had asked him, he would have known that before he asked the question.

The amendments that the Minister has made to the Game Preservation (Northern Ireland) Act 1928 will bring tourism and economic benefits to the entire countryside. Jobs will be retained and opportunities will be created. We recognise the contribution that the shooting organisations — which have spoken to each of the Members here — have made to the countryside. We are also aware of the contribution that landowners, farmers and countryside enthusiasts make to the betterment of the countryside. The proposals in the Game Preservation (Amendment) Bill do just that. The legislation will bring opportunity and benefits to the countryside.

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

Clauses 2 to 4 ordered to stand part of the Bill.

Schedule agreed to.

Long title agreed to.

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

12.45 pm

PROGRAMME FOR GOVERNMENT

The Deputy First Minister (Mr Durkan): I beg to move

That this Assembly endorses the Programme for Government agreed by the Executive.

I am pleased to present, on behalf of the First Minister and the Executive as a whole, this Programme for Government to the Assembly for approval.

Sir Reg Empey and Mr Mallon first presented the Programme for Government to the Assembly in draft form for consideration on 24 September. At the same time, a wider consultation process was launched on our proposed priorities and actions as set out in the draft programme and in our resource allocation plans contained in the draft Budget. We have now reached the end of that period of scrutiny within the Assembly, and of wider consultation, and have revisited the Programme for Government in the light of the points made in the Chamber, in Committees and elsewhere. Last week we presented the Assembly with a revised Programme for Government for its approval. Today provides an opportunity for the Assembly to debate and endorse this programme.

I want to focus on the importance of the consultation to the development of the Programme for Government, on the work that the programme sets for us and on the role of the programme. Before I do that, however, it would be helpful to Members for me to explain how the Programme for Government has evolved and developed since we presented the first draft programme to the Assembly in October 2000.

In this, the second year of the Programme for Government, we have been working to develop our approach to planning. We have defined clearly the policy issues that face us and focused our public services agreements on outputs and outcomes. We are in the process of identifying the actions required to deliver these outcomes in new service delivery agreements. Each Department should by now have provided a draft service delivery agreement to its Committee for consideration. We are keen to have the views of the Committees on the progress made to date and on areas for improvement.

Within the programme, we have also refined our priorities. Following last year's consultation we have, for example, given a much better focus to social matters, including that of the treatment of older people. The issue of housing and its important contribution receives a more significant description in this text. Of even greater significance, we have started work to tackle the issue

of community division, seeking to integrate this more clearly into our process, preparing for the outcome of our review on community relations.

The Programme for Government cannot be, and is not, developed in a vacuum. Its development is influenced by a wide range of factors, including many that lie beyond the control of the devolved Administration. The Programme for Government sets out how we will work to make a difference to society. However, the priorities and policies it contains are shaped by the society and the world in which we live. They reflect, for example, the current economic conditions we face.

Over recent years our economic performance as a region has been strong, with several key indicators consistently performing well. Our employment growth, for example, has been at a much faster rate than Scotland and Wales, and we were outperformed only by London and the south-east. We have seen a 35.7% increase in manufacturing output over the last six years, compared with a UK average of 4.1%, and a dramatic improvement of 36% in labour productivity.

A key challenge for the Executive will be to build on those successes, and the Programme for Government restates our commitment to securing a competitive and sustainable economy.

The events of 11 September and their aftermath present a real challenge. The severity and duration of their impact on the global economy is still uncertain. However, although some impact has already been felt in the aviation and tourism industries, there is evidence that Northern Ireland should be able to weather an economic downturn. The relative importance of the public sector and, in particular, the buoyancy of the local labour market should stand us in good stead. In delivering the Programme for Government, the Executive will work in partnership with business and the trade unions to ensure that the prospects for growth are realised.

Economic factors influence, and are influenced by, social conditions. Too many people depend on benefits. For example, almost 18% of children under 16 years of age live in homes that are in receipt of income support. Our health record is not good either. Our life expectancy compares unfavourably with the European average, and there are huge differences in health status between the best off and worst off. It is vital that our priorities and policies respond to those social conditions.

The development of the Programme for Government will also be influenced by another important factor — the work that is under way in the Treasury in preparation for the spending review in 2002. That is the next major spending review, which will set out our expenditure limits for the three years from April 2003.

Turning to the consultation process, a key piece of feedback that we received from the experience of

developing the first Programme for Government last year was that more needed to be done to encourage and facilitate engagement in the process. That includes engagement with the Assembly, with our social partners and with the public. Engagement happens only if people believe that it is a two-way process, and that their views and suggestions will be listened to and considered. These days much is heard about “consultation fatigue”, and many consultation exercises are under way. However, it is important that we in Government hear not only the views of those involved in the delivery of public services but also the views of the public who receive and depend on those services. It is important that the views of people help the Executive and the Assembly to make a difference, and that all responses are considered carefully.

I reassure Members and others that the Executive take their views and suggestions seriously, and that in turn they influence our thinking. The Programme for Government is a single document on which the Executive consult. It is significant because it is the context within which all other public policies are developed and implemented. It is well worth engaging with the Executive on its development, and we are ready to listen and respond.

With that in mind, we made several changes to our consultation arrangements this year to facilitate a wider debate on our plans and priorities, and on the resource allocations that are required to support them. We began the process as long ago as June, when we presented the Executive’s position report on the Programme for Government and the Budget to the Assembly. That drew out many of the main features of the programme and its resource implications and equality aspects. It provided a structured starting point for discussions in the Assembly and beyond. We built on that during the consultation period. As well as circulating the draft Programme for Government widely, we organised a series of seminars that allowed for debate on the draft programme and the draft Budget. That included events in Armagh, Antrim and Derry that involved local councils and their social partners. We were also represented at an event arranged by organisations representing older people to consider the draft programme. Those seminars provided us with an opportunity to discuss and listen to views on the equality aspects of the Programme for Government and on our approach to assessing the equality impact of the policies that are set out in it.

We also received detailed and constructive responses from Assembly Committees and from many organisations and individuals. We had the opportunity to listen to the views of Members in the debate that took place on 13 November. Together, those contributions helped to shape the programme that we have presented to the Assembly for approval.

Of course, it has not been possible to include every suggestion that we received. Many proposals that were put forward during the consultation will require further, more detailed thought. Some have significant resource implications. However, I reassure all those who contributed to the process that the shelf life of their responses goes beyond the closing date for the consultation. The ideas and suggestions in those responses must be considered by Ministers and their Departments to ensure that the future development of the programme and the policies that it contains are well informed.

Consultation means hearing what people agree with, as much as hearing what they disagree with or would like to see more of. The Executive were pleased with the level of support — in the Assembly and in the wider public — for their priorities and sub-priorities. We also welcome the support for our work in developing public service agreements and setting targets, and for our commitment to reporting publicly each year on progress towards implementing our Programme for Government commitments.

The Executive have also considered areas in which it was felt that we could do better. We have set out more clearly the steps that we will take to support older people. A key concern that emerged through the consultation was that we should do more to support older people, including the provision of free nursing care. We have now been able to respond positively, and, as I explained in the Budget statement, the programme has now been changed to include a commitment to introducing free nursing care for the residents of nursing homes from October 2002.

The programme also commits us to providing many more community care packages than we had planned in September. The Executive will now deliver an additional 1,000 fully funded community care packages, targeted mainly at older people. Those packages will not only provide support for some of those most in need, but also, in many cases, help to obviate the need for hospital treatment. In other cases, they will allow people to return home from hospital much earlier.

The programme also restates our intention to modernise and improve hospital and primary care services. It commits us to new measures that will deliver better health and social care. Since September, we have considered, in the light of the consultation, what more we might do to improve services for those suffering from cancer, heart disease and renal failure. The Programme for Government now commits us to improving access to cardiac surgery, strengthening treatment processes for cancer sufferers and providing additional dialysis sessions for those with renal failure.

The Executive have also set out more clearly how the new agency, Invest Northern Ireland, which will be established in April 2002, will help deliver our goal of

promoting entrepreneurship, innovation and creativity. We have highlighted new actions to improve our energy infrastructure.

I have outlined the main changes made since September. We must also remember that the Programme for Government contains many other important commitments that demonstrate our determination to work together to identify and develop approaches that respond to local needs. The programme, once approved, will commit us to delivering in many areas that fundamentally affect the lives of people in Northern Ireland. It commits us, for example, to appointing a commissioner for children by next June and developing a comprehensive 10-year strategy for children and young people.

It confirms new action that we shall take to renew disadvantaged neighbourhoods and build community participation. That action includes a new regeneration initiative under URBAN II, which will be targeted at inner north Belfast. An additional 1,500 volunteers will be recruited through the active community initiative.

1.00 pm

The Programme for Government also sets out our commitment to put in place a cross-departmental strategy during 2002 that can effectively promote improved community relations. We have recently taken the initiative in north Belfast and we shall continue our efforts to improve community relations and tackle our society's divisions. We must also recognise that community relations policy must encompass good relations between all communities, including the growing ethnic minority community.

The programme underlines our commitment to targeting social need and promoting equality of opportunity. The new targeting social need (New TSN) policy aims to tackle social need and social exclusion. It applies to a range of policies and programmes across all Departments and throughout the Programme for Government. We have published New TSN action plans that show how Departments are redirecting efforts and available resources to those in greatest need. Those plans are currently being updated. The programme contains a specific commitment to ensure that the plans are fully implemented and that annual progress reports are published.

The programme also highlights the core principles and values of equality of opportunity and human rights, which are fundamental to our work. We remain committed to promoting equality and human rights through strong legislation, as well as through effective public policies and strategies. We are determined that no section of our community should feel excluded.

The programme commits us to implementing new actions that will provide good health and improved services for those who need treatment and care. In light of the

Hayes report, that work will include development of our plans for a modern acute hospital service that meets local people's needs.

The programme commits us to introducing proposals by next September on the future structure of post-primary education. Those proposals will be shaped by the current consultation on the Burns report. The programme also sets out important commitments on underachieving schools, literacy and numeracy, and the introduction of a citizenship programme. It confirms our plans to extend third-level education, to provide new student support measures, to implement a new basic skills strategy and to provide additional help for the unemployed.

We have also included important commitments that will preserve cultural and information resources, and make them available to the widest possible audience. Those include the commitment to complete the electronic libraries project, which will link every public library to the Internet and open them up as electronic and information centres. The measure will ensure that people who do not have that technology at home are not disadvantaged.

We are committed to completing all parts of the trans-European network from Larne to the border south of Newry in the coming years and to extending the gas network to make natural gas available to at least half the population of Northern Ireland. We shall also publish a Belfast metropolitan transport plan by December 2002 that will set out a 25-year vision for transport in the Belfast area. We are committed to increasing the number of new businesses and to securing more inward investment by knowledge-based industries.

The 'Vision for the Future of the Agri-food Industry' report has been published. The Programme for Government commits us to begin implementing an action plan arising from that report. Recognising the importance of developing all policies in line with our commitment to sustainability, we shall introduce a new sustainable development strategy by next October.

The Programme for Government also sets out important commitments that reflect our desire to become a more outward-looking region. Real progress can now be seen in the work of the North/South institutions and on an east-west basis, as indicated in my earlier statements on the recent North/South Ministerial Council and British-Irish Council plenary meetings. We will continue to build relationships on this island and between the two islands, and we will maintain and develop our relationships in Europe and North America. Our new office in Brussels will open shortly, and the Northern Ireland Bureau's move to new offices in downtown Washington, DC earlier this year has helped to create a defined and more clearly articulated regional voice for the Executive. Both offices will play important roles in delivering our commitment to developing effective links in Europe and effective representation in North

America and to presenting a positive international image of Northern Ireland.

Those are just a few of the commitments made by the Executive. It is a challenging work programme, and we are committed to realising it. It will result in real progress in each of the five priority areas identified. However, we also recognise that other factors will influence our progress. It is essential to gain a better understanding of the needs of people here and of the effectiveness of our current policies in addressing those needs. For that reason our work programme for next year includes the completion of initial needs and effectiveness evaluations on our main spending programmes in health, education, training, housing and support for industry. Those major pieces of work will give us a clearer sense of the rationale for Government intervention and of the effectiveness of our policies and programmes. They should help us to develop a sound evidence base for future policy interventions. The work will also assist in pressing our case for a fair allocation of resources to Northern Ireland based on need.

The work programme for the year ahead is important, but so too is the process of refinement and development of the Programme for Government, which will continue year on year. In the coming year we must use the Programme for Government as a programming tool for the entire Executive. In one document we have a clear road map of the challenges we face, together with all the key policy areas. Such policies as need to work together to achieve sub-priorities and real change have been brigaded carefully. We need to improve only the means whereby Departments and agencies can work together across their boundaries to deliver those priorities and sub-priorities more effectively.

Departments working in isolation cannot pursue the work programme I have outlined. Members have frequently referred to the problem of a silo mentality, in which we can all too easily become trapped. Unless we have a clear description of the related policies and can see how we link together to achieve wider objectives, it is difficult not to be caught in a silo. The challenge is not only for Ministers but for everyone in the Assembly, and it can only be met head-on if we have a wider vision of why we are in Government and what we want to achieve. The Programme for Government can give that wider vision.

Systems must be set up to allow policy issues to be examined from the perspective of the Programme for Government as well as on a departmental basis. The exact mechanisms are under consideration. At official level, several interdepartmental groups work across those boundaries and seek to take a broader view. For example, the task force on the long-term unemployed, under Dr Seán Farren, seeks to draw together a wide range of policy issues from childcare to transport to

social security, so that a real impact can be made on those who are caught in long-term unemployment.

We will also establish a new interdepartmental steering group, to be chaired by Peter Robinson as Minister for Regional Development, to oversee progress on the regional development strategy and to ensure that the implementation of the key cross-cutting strategy is managed and monitored in a co-ordinated way.

The evidence shows that we will be most effective only if we take the broader view. A Department can do excellent work, but unless we have support for all aspects, we cannot make the real change that we want.

We will drive the change from the top by developing at ministerial level Executive sub-committees that can provide leadership and strategic direction to ensure a cross-cutting approach to policy development. That approach has been effective in the ministerial group on drug and alcohol misuse, but we need to extend and formalise the range of policy issues on which there is joint work at Executive level.

In the next few months, therefore, we will work to ensure that we have a programming process that facilitates the development of a more effective approach. We want to see whether, for example, we can start to focus on clearer sets of policy priorities and outcomes that can help us to give expression to the vision that is set out in the document. The task is a complex one, and we realise that the process will take some time to develop. The need to learn to walk before we run was very much in our thoughts as we built the Programme for Government. We have developed the document further, and we will, with the assistance of the Assembly and its Committees, continue the development process.

I note that there is an amendment to the motion that invites the Assembly to not approve the Programme for Government. I am disappointed that such an amendment was considered necessary at the end of such a lengthy consultation process.

The Executive are clear that tackling division and inequality is central to their work, and I referred to those issues in my statement, in respect of several aspects of the programme. They devoted a section of the programme entitled 'Growing as a Community' to address that range of issues. We are clear that division and inequality will not be eliminated in one year or in one Programme for Government. However, we are putting in place the necessary framework to tackle those issues on a long-term and sustainable basis through actions that include the development and harmonisation of anti-discrimination legislation, cross-departmental strategies to tackle gender and racial inequalities and the current review of community relations policies.

Divisions continue in our society as evidenced by the Holy Cross situation and other recent incidents.

The Executive have tackled manifestations of these problems, for example, through an initiative that was specifically targeted at north Belfast, but they are also tackling the cause of the problems. The programme stresses

"the need to support the capacity of local communities to deal with matters of dispute and division including the proliferation of sectarian graffiti, unauthorised flag flying, the erection of memorials and other issues that can lead to community tensions."

However, to successfully address these issues we must work together across Departments and across boundaries.

In the debate on the Programme for Government of 13 November, Mr Ford, who has tabled the amendment, welcomed the fact that the Executive had addressed some of the concerns about community relations and tackling divisions that were raised in earlier debates. He also welcomed the fact that progress had been made. He even tried to take credit for the establishment of a cross-departmental group. Unfortunately, in the subsequent debate, no real practical suggestions came from that source to match his party's rhetoric, but we look forward to such constructive input to the review of community relations policy as is covered in the Programme for Government.

The management guru, Peter Drucker, once said that

"Plans are only good intentions unless they immediately degenerate into hard work."

The Executive are committed to ensuring that their plans, as set out in the Programme for Government, are not merely good intentions. As an Administration, we all have much hard work to do to ensure that our policies and programmes address people's needs. The Assembly has a key contribution to make towards ensuring that that hard work is done. We are ready for the hard work that is needed, and we look forward to working with the Assembly and our social partners in that task.

I commend the motion to the Assembly.

1.15 pm

Mr Deputy Speaker: I intend to continue with the debate until 2.30 pm, break for Question Time, and resume at 4.00 pm.

Mrs E Bell: I beg to move amendment No 1: Delete all after "Assembly" and insert:

"declines to approve the Northern Ireland Executive Programme for Government because it fails to adequately address the Executive's stated priorities, does not tackle the deep divisions and inequalities in this society and therefore does not deliver the new beginning envisioned by the Good Friday Agreement."

I move the amendment, more in sorrow than in anger because the Alliance Party feels that it must clearly state its concerns about the Programme for Government that has been agreed by the Executive. Steps have been taken but, unfortunately, the sad fact

is that Northern Ireland society continues to be defined by its deep divisions and inequalities. This programme, like its predecessor, compares favourably with those that have come forward from the Scottish Executive and the Welsh Assembly Cabinet. However, thankfully, those societies do not have the problems that permeate Northern Ireland. Therefore, despite the Executive's constructive proposals on social, economic and environmental issues, it is progress in healing our divisions and reducing inequalities that will be the ultimate test of the success or failure of the Executive.

To be credible, the Executive need to place the tackling of divisions and inequalities, as the Minister stated, at the heart of the programme. However, they fail in that. Instead, promoting equality of opportunity and human rights, and improving community relations and tackling the divisions in society are stated only as sub-priorities, under the heading 'Growing as a Community'. This is not good enough and it is the reason for the Alliance Party's amendment.

The Executive have made the task of addressing community disputes in north Belfast a priority. However, this is fire fighting rather than fire prevention. It costs much more, in time and resources, to address the violent manifestations of our problems than to address them before they flare up. It is not only in the area of health that prevention is better than cure. One of the paradoxes of the peace process is that society is more segregated today than at any other time in history. Segregation can be most clearly seen in the area of housing, both public and private.

Resolute action to create and maintain mixed workforces through fair employment legislation has had significant success. It is now time to address how we live. No one is suggesting that people should be forced to live in certain areas. Mixed housing should be proactively encouraged, yet it is not even mentioned in the programme.

Attention must turn to the barriers to mixed housing which begin with the control that paramilitaries still have over certain areas. The painting of kerbstones; murals that glorify the deeds of paramilitary organisations, and the illegal erection of flags, turn too many areas into ghettos. The message being sent is that such areas are the exclusive preserve of one or other side rather than being common civic spaces. People get the message, directly or indirectly, that they are not welcome in them. That occurs throughout the year, not just at sensitive times, and is felt not just by the perceived minority, but also by the perceived majority in these areas. This can be clearly seen in my area of North Down, yet everyone feels powerless to respond because the system does not work. It is therefore incumbent on the Executive to be proactive in that rather than merely pay lip service to the problem. My Colleague Kieran McCarthy has proposed having an Executive

inter-agency working group, if that has not yet begun. The Department for Social Development should be mandated to work with the Housing Executive to pilot the creation and maintenance of mixed housing estates.

For historical reasons, it has become the norm for children to be educated in segregated schools. Despite the fact that integrated education is the norm in almost every other western European democracy, it is still regarded only as a peripheral alternative here. Only 4% of children here attend integrated schools, and it is a constant battle to get new schools built and existing schools to transform. A recent report by the Mixed Marriage Association stated that 68% of couples in mixed marriages would prefer integrated education. Where do their children go?

Children have a human right to be educated in mixed schools, but the Executive are only tinkering around the edges rather than actively encouraging such schools. Indeed, as education resources are already overstretched, surely it makes sense to encourage a sharing of built resources and the freeing up resources for investment in teachers and pupils.

There was talk of the need to recognise that a community relations policy must encompass good relations between all communities including our growing ethnic minority community. Those are great words, but past and present practice has been to assume that we are a society of two communities, rather than one community with great multicultural diversity and pluralism. That was never so clear as with the Assembly designations, but we await progress on that.

Action on improving community relations has been deferred pending a review, and no specific measures have been proposed. Many of the myths about community relations still prevail today. It is now common for policies to be proofed against all sorts of criteria. Equality-proofing, rural-proofing and TSN-proofing are necessary and welcome. However, the Alliance Party would like to see all Executive and Northern Ireland Office policies proofed for their impact on promoting sharing rather than communal separation, a criterion that could be described as part of the past.

It is also incumbent on the Executive to realise the potential for advancing Northern Ireland as a distinct region in many aspects of work. The more we do that, the more we help to create the notion that all the people of Northern Ireland are working towards a common, rather than a separate, set of objectives.

Unless we begin to address seriously and directly the deep divisions in society, the very survival of the agreement will be under threat. We seem to reinforce the notion of a society of two separate but equal communities in an uneasy co-existence requiring constant skilful conflict management. In the absence of a meaningful strategy to improve community relations

and promote sharing, it will be all too easy for communities to go their separate ways after a crisis — no doubt with substantial violence. We accept that it will be a long process, but a band-aid approach is not sufficient. We must address problems head-on, make substantial progress a priority and not sweep them under the carpet or treat them as side issues. I agree that we must meet the challenges, but we must meet them first on those substantive issues. We hope that the Executive listen and respond to our well-meaning comments. I support the amendment.

The Chairperson of the Committee for Education (Mr Kennedy): I am pleased to contribute to this important debate. I covered most of the key points, including the need for education to be a central priority, in a debate a few weeks ago. I welcome broadly the Programme for Government, but will outline several of my Committee's outstanding concerns.

Our first concern is that numeracy and literacy targets for 14-year-olds have now been revised downwards in the Department of Education's public service agreement. The target to be achieved by 2004, for mathematics and English, has been reduced from 75% to 72%. I am sorry that the Minister of Education is not in his place. My Committee has argued that those targets should not be revised downwards, and we are disappointed that the Executive have done so. Too many children leave school with inadequate levels of numeracy and literacy. The targets have now been reduced twice, and that is simply not good enough.

Recently, I wrote to the Minister of Education about the issue. He replied:

"The decision to reduce the targets had been taken on the basis of information from the Year 2000 Key Stage 3 assessments which indicated that, if the trend demonstrated were to continue, we would be unlikely to reach the previously stated target of 75%."

He added:

"We will examine the Key Stage results on an annual basis and if our current assessment proves overly conservative I will be happy to revise the targets again in the light of new evidence."

The purpose of public service agreements is not to set targets for a three-year period and then revise them downwards each year if we are not doing well enough. I believed that the whole purpose of the Programme for Government and public service agreements was to identify the key priorities of the Executive, and to set targets accordingly.

The Budget allocations reflect the priorities in the Programme for Government, and the Department of Education, strongly backed by my Committee, has received substantial funding aimed at meeting this priority — most recently from the Executive programme funds. We are allocating more money to fulfil that key priority, yet targets are being reduced again. If, next year, the 2001 key stage results do not indicate that

there has been satisfactory progress, will the targets be reduced for a third time? I will seek an assurance from the relevant Minister that that will not be the case.

My Committee also believes that rather than reduce targets for 2004 as soon as it appears that they will not be achieved, the Department of Education should identify the reasons for the lack of progress and take appropriate action to address the problems.

I want to highlight the commitment in the Programme for Government to continue to invest in the quality of our teachers and principals. My Committee recommended the inclusion in 'Investing in Education and Skills' a target to carry out a review into the pay levels, the salary structures, the workload, and the conditions of service for principals, vice-principals and teachers. Unfortunately, it was not included, the stated reason being that it would have been premature to do so, given that discussions on the matter were ongoing. However, my Committee believes that such a target ought to have been included in the Programme for Government because it would have indicated properly our commitment to principals and teachers.

One sentence, with no target or timescale, is not an adequate reflection. Principals and teachers, who are the cornerstone of our education system, feel over-worked and undervalued. For a long time, morale and motivation have been extremely low. One teachers' union has initiated industrial action, and others have indicated their intention to do likewise; therefore it is not premature to include a target to address that long-standing problem. Indeed, a commitment in an important document such as the Programme for Government might well have eased the problem.

1.30 pm

The Minister of Education said that he intends to include proposals for the implementation of the Burns Report in next year's Programme for Government. I welcome that, but it is important to stress that they are proposals and not legislation — I will seek the Minister's confirmation.

I welcome the launch of a comprehensive review of public administration by spring 2002. That is particularly relevant for education, which received £60 million of public money for administration costs. The Education Committee would like to know the completion date of the review as soon as possible, in order to include it in next year's Programme for Government.

Mr Byrne: I congratulate the First Minister, the Deputy First Minister and, indeed, their predecessors, for conducting such a transparent and wide-ranging consultation process on the formulation of the Programme for Government for 2002-03. As the document shows, the Assembly and its Committees have had the experience of a full year of debates on policies, and it has been an

invaluable learning experience. Despite some criticism in the media, the policies outlined in the Programme for Government are evidence that the devolved institutions and locally elected Ministers can deliver stable government and implement measures that shape the social and economic directions of our society.

The current Programme for Government is a development plan for progress, to point us in the right direction. I welcome the objectives outlined in the public service agreement (PSA) of the Department for Regional Development. They will shape the region's long-term strategic development.

During the years of direct rule, the North's infrastructure developed on a very uneven basis and was concentrated on the north-east, which led to social exclusion for some parts of the region. Now that we have devolved power, the improvement of Northern Ireland's infrastructure must take place in a balanced fashion throughout the region, so that urban and rural citizens have equal access to roads, transport and water and sewage services, and the competitiveness of the economy will be enhanced.

I am pleased that the upgrading of several key strategic routes is regarded as a priority. For example, I welcome the Programme for Government's commitment to allocate £40 million from the Executive programme fund for infrastructure to complete all the parts of the trans-European transport status (TENS) route from Larne to the border, south of Newry. However, I remind the Executive and the Minister for Regional Development that other important TENS routes, such as Dublin to Monaghan and Omagh to Derry, should also be upgraded. The upgrading of these routes is vital in helping to attract inward investment, enabling local firms to expand and enhancing safety for motorists.

It is therefore essential that when the 10-year regional transportation strategy is adopted, it marks a radical departure from what we have experienced to date. All too often, those of us who live west of the Bann have had to make do with totally inadequate roads and a limited public transport system. This has had a detrimental effect on the local economy and the quality of life of rural residents. Therefore, we must invest in a safe, efficient and integrated transportation infrastructure.

The regional transportation strategy must be placed in the context of European Union and North/South transport planning, with particular reference to the Irish Republic's national development plan and the national spatial strategy. In the Executive, the principles of joined-up government must guide the implementation of the new transportation strategy. The Executive must work collectively to ensure that transportation policy is formulated with reference to economic development and the development of Northern Ireland's energy and technology infrastructure.

Recently, the Committee for Regional Development held a formal meeting in the Guildhall in Derry and heard strong representations on the transport difficulties of the north-west area. In particular, there was a fully agreed and presented position from Derry City Council, the North-West Region Cross-Border Group — involving Limavady Borough Council, Strabane District Council, Derry City Council and Donegal County Council — and the business community. The position was that capital investment in the TENS roads and the railway system was vital for economic development in the counties of Derry, Tyrone and Donegal. It is extremely important that the regional transportation strategy, being finalised, must be sufficiently determined and developed so that it dovetails smoothly and effectively with the recently agreed regional development strategy.

In relation to the Department for Employment and Learning, I particularly welcome the additional expenditure designed to increase the number of further and higher education places and the target of achieving a total enrolment of 35,000 full-time students in higher education. I also welcome the objective of increasing enrolment in further education colleges by 5% in the key areas of tourism, catering, computing, engineering and construction.

Given that Northern Ireland's unemployment is above the UK average, and given our high dependence on the public sector, the enhancement of the skills level of the workforce is important in creating a vibrant economy. However, it is also important to ensure that resources are properly targeted and that people such as the long-term unemployed are not exploited. Therefore, I welcome the Minister's recent decision to close the individual learning account (ILA) scheme, which was open to exploitation, ahead of the planned suspension date. As many adults in the North lack basic literacy and numeracy skills, it is important that we implement a skills programme which encourages lifelong learning, which is properly resourced and which targets those most in need. The ILA system must be primarily promoted and managed because of the net benefit it can bring to client trainees who require up-skilling and personal development.

With reference to the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment, I welcome the targets of achieving growth in export sales and net employment, and also the commitment to attract 75% of all first-time investment projects to new targeting social need (New TSN) areas. The new single economic development agency, Invest Northern Ireland, provides the opportunity for a new approach to attracting inward investment and delivering a more effective range of services to entrepreneurs. To meet this requirement, it is essential that the new agency maintains offices that are geographically spread throughout Northern Ireland, not just primarily located in Belfast.

If the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment is to be able to live up to these commitments, it is important that the Department be properly resourced. I am concerned that, given the current economic slowdown, planned expenditure for 2002-03 will decrease by 1.3%. Nevertheless, I am pleased to read that the Executive have given a clear commitment to significantly increase investment should the need, or some particular opportunity, arise.

I also want to take the opportunity to welcome the commitments given in the Programme for Government to complete reviews of promotion and recruitment to senior positions in the Civil Service and Government office accommodation. That will include an examination of the possibility of decentralising Civil Service jobs. Over the past two years, my party has consistently lobbied for the decentralisation of Civil Service jobs. We believe that the Executive should lead by example and relocate entire sections of Departments from Belfast to the main towns. Such a policy would help to achieve more balanced growth beyond the Greater Belfast area and bring government closer to the people.

This is an ambitious and imaginative Programme for Government, geared towards addressing the social and economic damage done by almost three decades of direct rule. It is an example of what can be achieved if we work constructively in the Executive, the Assembly Committees and beyond, and it has given many people the opportunity to make an input. It demonstrates that the Administration listen to the concerns of ordinary people and that they are determined to make a difference.

We have a difficult task, but the 2002-03 Programme for Government — guided by new TSN, the statutory equality legislation and the public service agreements — will build on the progress that has been made in implementing the first Programme for Government. It provides the opportunity to deliver real change through stable, effective and transparent government and create in Northern Ireland a cohesive, inclusive and economically vibrant society.

It is important that our Programme for Government should develop our economy and, over time, tackle the social problems of unemployment and poverty, so that everyone feels that devolution can bring net benefits to individuals and the collective community. I endorse the finalised Programme for Government: we should support it and help to build a better Northern Ireland and a harmonious community.

The Chairperson of the Committee for Agriculture and Rural Development (Rev Dr Ian Paisley): Sub-priority 8, headed “We will work together to regenerate the rural economy”, is the main area of interest for the Committee in the chapter on the economy. One of the main commitments made in that sub-priority is the publication of a plan of action for the strategic develop-

ment of the agrifood industry. That plan will emanate from the vision group’s report on the industry’s future. That commitment is welcome, especially as several of the vision group’s recommendations are consistent with those that have already been made in the Agriculture Committee’s reports. However, members of the Committee remain deeply concerned that none of the additional funding identified in the Budget has been allocated to the matter. It will be extremely difficult for the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development to translate a plan into tangible action, especially if the Department recommends a new direction. The Committee has raised that issue in its Budget deliberations and will continue to do so.

Another commitment by which the vision group and others have set great store is the introduction of what is called “rural proofing” as part of general policy implementation. Over a year ago, the Committee welcomed the proposal for rural proofing, but had concerns that it was little more than a concept, rather than a matter for action. According to the current Programme for Government, a ministerial-led group to carry out rural proofing of Government policies should have been established by April 2001.

1.45 pm

Sadly, when our Committee met on Friday 8 December, eight months after the target date for setting up that important group, the Minister remained unable to update the Committee on its establishment. Rural proofing has been heralded as being vital to ensure a fair deal for all rural areas. The commitment to rural proofing is reiterated in the document that we are debating today. It must, like the action plan, be progressed urgently from concept to reality if the commitments are to mean anything. Members will be disappointed that that has not been taken on board, but will watch with interest to see how the Executive ensure that all relevant agencies work together, as set out in the third paragraph of section 5.10.

The third paragraph of section 5.11 sets out plans to introduce regulations covering the storage of silage, slurry and agricultural fuel oils, which are the waste products of farming. It is unfortunate that, although the Department of the Environment has already put forward its proposals for regulations, the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development’s bid for Executive programme funds to help to establish a farm waste management scheme was not included in last week’s announcement. Extra money could have provided well-targeted funds to enable farmers to meet their obligations under the new regulations. With farm incomes at such low levels, it is unreasonable to expect farmers to fund major improvements themselves. The Committee reissues its call for close co-operation between the two Departments involved to ensure that there is action proportionate to risk and to take affordability into account.

In the Committee's written response to the draft Programme for Government, it pointed out that the sub-priority on the rural economy did not mention the sea fisheries fleet or the communities that rely on the fisheries industry. Members who have been taking note of what is happening in Europe must be flabbergasted by the drawing of a dagger that will strike at the very heart of the fishing industry.

My Committee decided that we had better go to Europe, with the co-operation of the three MEPs from Northern Ireland, to talk to Commissioner Fischler. If the figures that we have seen are correct, and if Commissioner Fischler acts according to the proposals, that will mark the end of the fishing industry in Northern Ireland. The fishing industry cannot afford to have £1.7 million deducted from its total income.

Those are matters of deep concern. The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development has the full backing of the Committee on the fisheries issue. She has expressed her happiness that the Committee will be standing with her in her fight to salvage something from the disastrous proposals that are to be put forward in Europe next week.

Mr Maskey: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. I support the motion. I reject the amendment on the basis that, as the Deputy First Minister said, the matter has been debated considerably. This is the second year of the Programme for Government. The document is moderate in its ambitions, and many measures could be described as being vague or, in some cases, ill-defined.

The Programme for Government has been developed against a fairly difficult background. This is the institutions' first term, and there have been serious political difficulties in the past couple of years. Therefore, the Programme for Government maps out the way forward, albeit in a moderate way. As other Members have said, it is the result of a great deal of work by the Executive and many of the Committees. There has been a fair amount of consultation on and input into the Programme for Government. The programme has established new priorities in health, education and other areas that are of concern to constituents. Members have raised those concerns on numerous occasions, both inside and outside the Chamber. The programme has already been described as developmental and work in hand.

The year 2002 will be one to watch. The Programme for Government is worthy of the Assembly's endorsement insofar as it is work in hand. It will be interesting to see how many of the reviews and developing strategies will make an impact. Sub-priority 1 of the section titled "Growing as a Community" describes the strategies that will be introduced in 2002 to bring together the anti-discrimination measures. It also mentions how the Executive propose to deal with gender and racial inequalities, the reviews into the workings and needs

of the travelling community and the critical area of the overall complexion and working practices of the Civil Service. I look forward to seeing how those completed studies and strategies will impact in 2002.

Sub-priority 4 of the section titled "Working Together" deals with how the Executive will find new ways to finance public services. I am grateful that the Department of Finance and Personnel and the Executive will announce the results of the review into public-private partnerships (PPPs) and private finance initiatives (PFIs). I remind the House — and critics outside the Assembly — that the Committee for Finance and Personnel took the lead when it held an inquiry into PPP. The work that we put into that inquiry, in co-operation with the Department of Finance and Personnel, is testimony to the fact that Assembly Members from all parties recognise that PPP is a big issue.

There have been critics outside the Assembly. Even in the past week or two, some people from the trade union movement who did not even bother to participate in the inquiry, despite the fact that it was publicly convened, have been critical. Some parties in the Executive have concerns about PPPs. However, the Committee for Finance and Personnel treated the issue seriously enough to have an inquiry. That inquiry took up much of the Committee's time and effort. It held sessions here, in Dublin, in London and in Leeds. I look forward to the findings of the review undertaken by the Executive's working group.

I am concerned about the rates review, which Members are now advised will not conclude until the end of 2001. That means that any action taken will not be implemented until 2003 or 2004. I have never suggested that there are any easy fixes, but it would have been helpful if the rates review had been conducted and completed earlier so that some of the inequalities could have been addressed. However, I welcome the fact that the rates review has been conducted, and I look forward to its recommendations.

I am encouraged by the intention of the Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure, and its Minister, to promote greater respect for cultural diversity, et cetera. However, I have heard criticisms levelled at the Minister on what appears to be an emerging partisan approach by his Department to certain political commemorations. I hope that the Minister has taken on board some of the criticisms that were levelled recently — I do not intend to repeat them today. Again, I welcome the intentions in the sections of the document that relate to the Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure. I hope that it works out in an equal way in the future.

I echo some of the concerns raised earlier by Danny Kennedy about the public service agreements. It is my understanding that they will, in effect, be binding contracts between the Departments and the wider

public. Some of them are ill-defined and rather vague and have again involved slippage. That is a matter for concern.

By and large, I support the Programme for Government, despite the fact that it is a moderate document — I would not say that it is ambitious. However, it is useful and important, and we will have to watch how the strategies and reviews affect the issues that many of us continue to address. I support the Programme for Government, and I reject the amendment. However, I certainly do not reject some of the concerns expressed in the amendment. Others will undoubtedly support the Programme for Government.

I welcome the fact that we have this document — it is work in hand. We will have to use this first term of the Assembly to try to get our systems right, and we are moving in that direction. By the end of term I hope that we will be able to demonstrate to the wider public that these institutions are worth having and that they will have a clear impact, particularly on socially disadvantaged and excluded areas and peoples.

The Minister of the Environment (Mr Foster): I find it gratifying that the Chamber is able to debate the second Programme for Government reflecting the benefit of locally elected politicians working together to enhance the standard of living of all of the people in Northern Ireland.

In the previous debate on this Programme for Government, I focused on my Department's contribution to the first one. Today I wish to highlight some major actions in the 2002-05 Programme for Government that my Department will undertake. Yet again, these actions reflect the importance that the Executive, the Chamber and the public place on environmental issues. Clear evidence of this is the fact that my Department's funding for 2002-03 has increased by 10% to almost £111 million. Clearly we must continue to take actions that safeguard the environment and contribute to improving the health and well-being of our people.

It is with these objectives in mind that my Department is considering consultation responses on a road safety strategy for the next 10 years. The document sets out in some detail how the various Departments and agencies involved in road safety are seeking to improve our road safety record. It also proposes challenging road casualty reduction targets and a strategy for achieving them. In March next year my Department will publish a strategic plan that will take account of the comments received from the consultation exercise.

Waste management is another major issue that we need to continue to address. Recycling and market development for recovered materials are key elements of the waste management strategy, and my Department will be working closely with the Waste Management

Advisory Board on a public awareness campaign to promote both waste minimisation and recycling.

We will also extend the waste and resource action programme in Great Britain to Northern Ireland to assist in creating a stable and efficient market for recycled products. I particularly welcome the Committee for the Environment's call for economic development agencies to be involved in this. There is a clear need for us to work together on this, and my officials will be working with the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment and key business sector representatives on the Waste Management Advisory Board to develop the market programme.

I am keen to see openness and transparency in the planning process. For that reason, on 1 November, my Department introduced a number of measures to achieve this as part of a commitment given in the Programme for Government. Some of the key elements of these changes are: letting people know the reasons for a planning decision; making available representations on planning applications, including objections; making available details of consultations with district councils; and enhanced access to the planning application files.

A leaflet that explains the planning process to the public has been produced. These measures significantly enhance the customer focus of Planning Service and should help the public to understand better the importance that the planning process plays in protecting our environment.

2.00 pm

My Executive Colleagues and I recognise that the integration of sustainable development principles into society in Northern Ireland presents a challenging agenda. We need to obtain the ideas of as many sectors, groups and individuals as we can, and not just those of Government. For that reason my Department has plans to consult widely, early in the new year, on proposals for a Northern Ireland sustainable development strategy.

I am also pleased that the Executive were able to restore the £2 million of provision for my Department's resources grant to district councils. That is most welcome. It will avoid the need for a reduction in the grant, and it will ensure that full assistance can be given to the poorest council areas.

I intend to build on the actions that my Department has taken, and those that it intends to take in the coming year, and I look forward to working closely with the Committee for the Environment to take forward the many challenging objectives that have been set in the Programme for Government.

Mr Gallagher: I support the motion and agree with most of the content of the Programme for Government. I would appreciate clarification on a few points, one of which is in relation to the Health Service. Having said

that, I welcome the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety's commitment to bring about improvements in the Health Service, particularly in primary and acute care, in the coming year. I note that the Department has committed itself to publishing plans by December 2002 for the modernisation of our acute hospital services. We are all well aware of the problems in the Health Service and especially those in relation to acute services. I do not want to rehearse those problems here, but it has to be said that the crisis in acute hospital services is growing. Indeed, many people would pose the question "Why do we have to wait for another year before decisions are taken about that important sector?" While we are waiting, services at many of our local hospitals are being whittled away, and we know that that in turn leads to larger hospitals being unable to cope with the extra pressures that are placed upon them.

Many consultations have been carried out on the future of acute hospital services — the most notable being the recent one carried out by the Hayes review group. That group was both independent and representative, and it made specific recommendations about the way forward. Many people are now fed up with consultations, and the view is that it is time to take decisions about future hospital services.

What does the statement on page 29 of the Programme for Government mean when it says:

"The Executive will shortly be involved in discussions, leading to the issue of a consultation paper which will consider the way forward. We expect to take decisions in the course of 2002 and will take steps in the meantime to maintain safe and effective services at smaller hospitals."?

Are we now being told that the Executive are embarking on a further consultation on acute hospital services? What does that statement mean? Will it result in further delays in implementing a plan or will the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety deliver the long-overdue decisions on the way forward by December 2002, as indicated in the Programme for Government?

I welcome the commitment to the reform of public administration and the development of a plan for the decentralisation of Civil Service jobs. I note that consultation will continue from spring 2002 to November 2002. As a representative of a constituency with high levels of economic deprivation — and most people are aware that the Fermanagh area has lost 1,000 jobs over the last four years — I am in no doubt that the decentralisation of Civil Service jobs can improve the economies of such areas. Constituencies in deprived areas should be given special consideration in the decentralisation programme.

I welcome the work that is to go ahead over the next year, and I look forward to the plans coming to fruition. However, I would like some specific information about relocation. On the foot of the work that they

have outlined for next year, do the Executive expect to be able to take decisions about relocating Government jobs at the end of next year, or do they have a later date in mind?

The Chairperson of the Committee for the Environment (Rev Dr William McCrea): On 13 November, as Chairperson of the Committee for the Environment, I drew the attention of Members to an important paragraph entitled 'Promoting sustainable living' on page 8 of the draft Programme for Government. The Committee for the Environment noted the designation of sustainable development as a key theme, cutting across the five priority areas in the Programme for Government. However, the draft document fell seriously short in reflecting the Executive's commitment to promoting sustainable living in their priorities and sub-priorities.

I detailed several of the Committee's recommendations in an attempt to rectify that. Unfortunately, the document before us reflects only a few of those recommendations. For example, on page 69 there is now a reference to being "conscious of environmental issues" in seeking to improve the efficiency and effectiveness of public service. In the same paragraph it states:

"Working with local government, we will develop and promote good working practices and procedures under Best Value aimed at delivering effective, efficient and quality local services."

If the Minister had been listening to the Committee's debate, he would have found that it is most anxious to have effective, efficient and quality local services. However, even at this late stage, I again implore the Minister and the Department to agree with the representation that was made by the Committee to implement best value on a voluntary basis and not on the legalistic approach that the Department has indicated. I have the full backing of the Committee to make that request.

An implementation plan to improve public procurement is referred to immediately below the statement:

"In seeking to improve efficiency we shall also be conscious of environment issues set out in paragraph 5.11."

I trust that the implementation plan will fully demonstrate that there is, in practice, a significant commitment to sustainable living by developing environmentally sustainable Government procurement policies across all Departments.

Government action on environmentally sound practices could dramatically impact on the development of markets for recycled and recoverable materials, thus boosting the prospects for the successful implementation of the Northern Ireland waste management strategy.

On page 69 there is a commitment to:

"launch a comprehensive review of public administration by spring 2002."

That is a long-awaited and badly needed statement. I ask that a timetable for the urgent implementation of that review be drawn up and brought before the Assembly for debate as soon as possible.

The Committee for the Environment is currently taking a keen interest in the progress of the development of effective waste management plans to underpin the waste management strategy for Northern Ireland. In the opinion of the Committee, progress on that and on other important areas of the strategy has been too slow. The Committee notes, therefore, the new commitment on page 54 of the Programme for Government that the strategy

“creates opportunities for Northern Ireland to become a leading example of sustainable resources and waste management.”

I trust those are not just fine words and phrases, and that action will be taken to deliver on that commitment and to reach an agreement with the waste management advisory board, by June 2002, on a public awareness campaign to increase waste minimisation and recycling.

The Committee notes that on page 48 of the programme the word “sustainable” now describes the business start programmes. I hope that that is met in every sense, through the commitment to achieve 6,000 new sustainable business starts over the period to March 2005.

The Committee is disappointed that the Executive have not improved the reference to the environment in the overview to ‘Securing a Competitive Economy’ on pages 42 and 43. The Committee has suggested a more ambitious approach to the integration of environmental themes into economic policy. In the context of sustainable development, the environment should no longer be viewed as a constraint on economic activity. The environment and sustainable development represent opportunities to support and develop new economic and job creation activities.

On page 43 it is stated that

“We will work to protect and enhance our natural and built environment.”

Members of the Committee would agree with those words but would like a clear outline of the action that will be taken by the Department of the Environment to protect and enhance our natural and built environment. There are concerns that our natural and built environment have been under threat on many occasions, and that no action has been taken.

The reference to renewable energy on page 45 could have been widened to take account of sustainable economic development opportunities for new technology, research, development, production and export.

Finally, the Committee notes that the Department of the Environment’s public service agreement target for river pollution is:

“To maintain or improve Year 2000 levels of river water quality (both chemical and biological).”

Why was a more ambitious target not set, bearing in mind the number of instances of serious river pollution over the past year?

I trust that the relevant Ministers will answer these questions.

The Chairperson of the Committee for Social Development (Mr Cobain): As I said during the debate on the draft Programme for Government last month, the Committee for Social Development is most concerned with two sections — section 2, ‘Growing as a Community’, and section 7, ‘Working Together’. The Committee made representations on those sections.

The foreword to the Programme for Government acknowledges the feedback from Assembly Committees, and suggests that

“This document has been revisited and revised in the light of that feedback.”

It continues:

“although we have not been able to respond immediately to the many suggestions made during consultation, we would also like to reassure those who responded that their views and comments will continue to have an influence as the Executive takes forward work to develop the Programme over the months and years ahead.”

The Committee for Social Development welcomes that assurance and will watch those developments with interest.

The Committee continues to be content to endorse the priorities and sub-priorities in the two sections that I mentioned earlier and remains broadly satisfied with the associated actions and commitments. However, the latest version of the Programme for Government does little to allay the Committee’s concerns about the precise way in which social need is to be tackled and how the needs of those in poverty will be addressed in practice. No doubt, there will be those who say that the service delivery agreements (SDAs) are the place for detail.

2.15 pm

The Committee will meet with officials from the Department for Social Development to discuss those SDAs and will reiterate that the decision to change the format and presentation of the Programme for Government is short-sighted. Those changes deny the Committee and the public at large the opportunity to compare performances year on year.

Last month, the Committee pleaded for a bold, bottom-up approach towards calculating the Budget based on the cost of funding particular priority programmes rather than setting a broad-based agenda and then facing the dilemma of assigning resources for too broad a range of programmes. That plea has gone

unanswered. I am already on record as saying that we are in danger of promising much but delivering little, that the jam has been spread too thinly and that we run the risk of underachieving. I continue to hold these views.

The Department for Social Development deals, in the main, with some of the most marginalised people in society. The Committee has urged the Minister for Social Development to extend the scope of the warm homes scheme to accelerate its progress. The Committee does not deny the cost implications and the competition for funding but, as the Committee has said all along, the costs associated with the warm homes scheme are indisputably one-off capital payments rather than a recurring drain on public resources.

The early eradication of fuel poverty would not only ease the recurring financial pressure on the health budget, but would also positively contribute to the health and well-being of people who are among the most marginalised. However, people who are over 60 with a small occupational pension continue to be excluded, as do families with young children.

That is not to say that the Committee does not appreciate that the sums available for the warm homes scheme will apparently be doubled to £8 million. However, last month the Committee for Social Development welcomed the inclusion of a reference in the Programme for Government to supporting people and the proposed introduction of a new scheme for funding housing support costs by 2003. It will undoubtedly be necessary to plan for and train staff in advance of the introduction of the new scheme. The Committee raised concerns about how the scheme is likely to be financed as there appears to be no reference to it in the draft Budget, but the Committee has had no reply.

Section 2, sub-priority 7, relates to housing and contains promises to improve services and the quality of accommodation generally and to increase the number of properties built to meet special needs. The housing budget will rise by £6.2 million next year, but £4 million of that has already been earmarked for the warm homes scheme, leaving £2.2 million for other housing improvements — a sum that is unlikely even to offset the cost of inflation.

Members from across the House acknowledge the continued importance that social housing plays in society and the fact that it deserves to be properly financed. I will be amazed, as the Committee will be, if we manage to keep pace with this year's Programme for Government objectives, let alone improve on them.

I have also given notice of the Committee's intention to monitor carefully the Social Security Agency and the Child Support Agency. Vast sums of public money are to be invested to enable both agencies to improve the accuracy and speed of their claims handling. Some

members of the Committee for Social Development recently visited a service that is being piloted in Dungannon that delivers a single point of access for some services provided by the Training & Employment Agency and some benefits administered by the Social Security Agency. Members were impressed by what they saw and will be interested to see the findings of the evaluation of the pilot scheme and what it might mean for extending the programme across the region.

In conclusion, the Social Development Committee recognises that much of the policy for tackling disadvantage and community development is under review. Nevertheless, it is a vitally important area of spending priority. The issue must be raised in tomorrow's debate, and I will save my remarks until then.

The Chairperson of the Committee for Culture, Arts and Leisure (Mr O'Neill): I have comments of my own to make, but I begin with those of the Committee. The Committee was especially pleased that the Programme for Government identified a significant contribution in each of the Executive's priorities. In particular, the Committee noted that the revised programme highlights more clearly the role of the Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure in the delivery of almost all of those priorities.

Key priority 6 deals with the development of North/South, east/west and international relations, and I want to focus on that. The Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure has an important contribution to make, and the Committee has noted that six of the seven sub-priorities relate directly to the Department's area of responsibility. In particular, we hope that the support indicated in sub-priority 5 for Imagine Belfast's bid to be European Capital of Culture 2008 will be reflected in financial allocations for next year and beyond. Belfast will compete against cities such as Liverpool, Birmingham, Cardiff, Bradford, Oxford and Brighton, and against joint bids from Newcastle/Gateshead and Bristol/Bath.

The bid must be submitted to the Department for Culture, Media and Sport by March 2002, and a shortlist of three cities will be drawn up. The final decision on which of the three will go forward to Europe as the UK's recommendation will be made in March 2003. At that stage the competition will become even tougher. Even at the UK selection stage the Northern Ireland bid will be up against serious opposition from cities with well-developed physical and cultural infrastructures, cities which have not had to live with the eyes of the world upon them for all the wrong reasons.

No other city has the opportunity for change and growth which Belfast now has. Our people, our culture, our history and our rich creative potential have been obscured in recent times, and the decision to bid for European Capital of Culture 2008 gives us a unique

chance to rediscover those. The major success stories are there to be aspired to and learnt from. The most significant and tangible story is that of Glasgow, whose exceptional success can be explained by its bid's having been strongly focused on people.

The comparison between Belfast and Glasgow is striking. Glasgow in the 1980s was a hard-edged, post-industrial city suffering from declining industries, years of under-resourcing, a poor self-image and with little to offer the visitor. Through the City of Culture process, the emphasis on education, training, community development, social inclusion and changing mindsets has paid off in every way. Importantly, it was not just a one-year wonder. Glasgow's regeneration and rejuvenation as City of Culture 1990 has had a lasting legacy, and the city continues to grow in confidence and prosperity.

This is an opportunity for us, and those goals lie at the heart of the priorities set out in the Programme for Government. I recognise that the necessary resources may be considerable, but I call on the Executive and this House to make a commitment, not only to provide those but also for proper joined-up government to take hold of the opportunity so that Departments work together to provide the support necessary for the bid to succeed.

The comments which follow come from my membership of the Social Development Committee. Some of them support the concern indicated earlier by the Committee Chairperson. As ever, the funding issue is critical, and nowhere can that be seen more than in housing. I am particularly concerned about the spiralling problem of homelessness. In 2000-01, over 12,694 people were homeless in Northern Ireland, constituting the highest rate of homelessness per head of the population in any region, including England, Scotland and Wales. It is a 24% increase on last year, and as I pointed out in the debate on homelessness, the previous year saw a 17% increase. It is a steadily growing problem. A comparison of the figures from 1991-92 and 2000-01 shows that over those ten years homelessness grew by 26%. Is the problem spiralling out of control?

I urge that homelessness be made a priority in the Programme for Government. It says on page 19 of that document that

"we will work to ensure that everyone has the opportunity to access decent, affordable housing."

That is an umbrella statement that does not focus directly on the real problems; it is aspirational. When I asked the former Minister for Social Development if he was willing to support the aspiration, he clearly was — but only as an aspiration. When I asked him for a financial commitment, he would not give it.

Homelessness does not need more aspirational support. It needs practical support. There is a need for both financial and legislative support. Northern Ireland has already fallen behind other regions in legislative

terms. I hope and expect that the new housing Bill will contain the necessary adjustments to bring us up to date. Meanwhile, the focus must be on finance for new build, temporary accommodation and health and social services support for those in that dreadful situation. The requirements were well identified by the contributors to the debate on homelessness, which was carried unanimously.

The Executive and the House rightly support the prioritisation of health and education. Those Departments get some 60% of the Budget, but there are health and educational dimensions to homelessness. The World Health Organisation (WHO) document 'Health for All' identified adequate shelter as a prerequisite for good health, and many official strategy documents regularly identify housing as one of the key factors that affect health.

There is a widely held view amongst educationalists that a stable and secure home is a vital element in building an environment for children to learn and to develop into fulfilled and motivated adults. How can education be successful when people are faced with the trauma and disruption of temporary accommodation and rehousing to other areas?

It is also difficult for young homeless people to access education and training opportunities, and New TSN makes a clear case for the prioritisation of homelessness. Making homelessness a priority will open the opportunity for access to Executive programme funds. The funds' objectives clearly state that they will have particular regard for the Executive's priorities, as set out in the Programme for Government, and also for their commitments to equality and New TSN. Given that, I vote that we make progress to improve this terrible situation.

Mr Deputy Speaker: There are 30 seconds before ministerial Question Time.

2.30 pm

Oral Answers to Questions

FIRST MINISTER AND DEPUTY FIRST MINISTER

Mr Deputy Speaker: Question 2, in the name of Mrs Courtney, has been withdrawn.

European Union Strategic Policy Document

1. **Mr Poots** asked the Office of the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister when the strategic policy document on the European Union will be available.

(AQO 500/01)

The Deputy First Minister (Mr Durkan): I will answer today's questions on behalf of the First Minister and as Deputy First Minister, with Mr Trimble's prior agreement.

A paper setting out a framework for the development for Northern Ireland of a co-ordinated, cohesive and strategic approach to the European Union is being finalised with Departments. It is anticipated that the paper will be considered by the Executive early in the new year, prior to discussion with the Committee of the Centre.

Mr Poots: The Department's own corporate plan suggested that the strategic policy document would be ready in July 2001. In response to the Committee of the Centre, the Department indicated that the document would be ready by autumn 2001. We are now told that it will be ready in January 2002, almost six months behind schedule. Can the Minister assure the House that the document will be ready by that date? Does the delay show that the Office of the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister is not taking European Union interests seriously enough?

The Deputy First Minister: The Office of the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister takes European interests very seriously. The strategy paper is designed to enable the whole Executive, not just my Department, to pursue Northern Ireland interests effectively, by establishing overall priorities for European work. That will assist the development of the policy priorities set out in the Programme for Government.

If we are serious about using this strategy as a means of ensuring a co-ordinated and cohesive effort across all Departments, we must ensure their full involvement. That in itself has been a complex process. Departments must deal with different issues and different levels of activity. It is inevitable that delays will occur in the

drawing up of a strategy to cover every Department. Departments face other pressures and distractions in addition to this paper.

Mr Davis: What preparations are being made to help businesses prepare for the introduction of the euro in the member states?

The Deputy First Minister: Preparations for the euro will depend on the likelihood of its introduction here soon. The Administration have two levels of interest in the matter. First, a ministerial group is meeting in London to deal with administrative issues that the introduction of the euro might present for the Government. We are also examining the impact of the euro on businesses. That will involve studying the impact of our status as a non-euro area that shares a land border with an area where the euro is being used in trade. That involves the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment, in particular, because it deals most directly with businesses.

Sellafield

3. **Mr Savage** asked the Office of the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister if it has had any approaches from the Government of the Irish Republic on the nuclear reprocessing plant at Sellafield.

(AQO 534/01)

The Deputy First Minister: The matter was raised at the summit meeting of the British-Irish Council on 30 November, as I said this morning. The Irish Government and the Isle of Man Administration are taking the lead in examining the issue of radioactive waste from Sellafield. The Administrations are preparing a paper on this, which will be discussed at an environment sectoral meeting. The Irish Government have not made any approaches to the Office of the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister regarding the nuclear reprocessing plant at Sellafield.

Mr Savage: The First Minister and the Deputy First Minister know that last Tuesday, the Minister of the Environment told the House that he had not been consulted by the British Government on the mixed oxide (MOX) fuel plant at Sellafield.

Does he find it acceptable that the United Kingdom Government should take such action over a matter that affects the vital interests of a territory under the authority of a UK regional Government without any prior consultation? After all, Sellafield is closer to Belfast than it is to Sheffield or Birmingham.

The Deputy First Minister: I note fully the concerns raised by the Member. I conveyed the cross-party concern that has been expressed in the Assembly about Sellafield and, in particular, the development of the MOX plant, at the meeting of the British-Irish Council. I emphasised the need for information and real consultation about

such developments. I will be happy to convey the Member's views in any future discussion on the issue.

Mr McCarthy: The Irish Government, and others, must be congratulated on their determination to use every means at their disposal to stop the activities at Sellafield. In view of the Assembly's unanimous decision last Tuesday to ask for the closure of Sellafield and the withdrawal of any licence for the MOX activities, can the Deputy First Minister assure the House that his office and the Department of the Environment will take seriously the potential for disaster as a result of terrorist action or human error? Will the Executive co-operate as far as possible with the Southern Government and others to solve the Sellafield problem?

The Deputy First Minister: As I said, the matter will be discussed further in the environment sector of the British-Irish Council. The Executive will determine the precise attitude that we will take on some of the detailed issues, but the Office of the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister is alert to the concerns that have been expressed in the Chamber, not only last week, but on previous occasions. My Department will work with other Departments that have a particular interest in such environmental and health considerations.

Mr Deputy Speaker: I call Mr Mick Murphy.

Mr M Murphy: My question has already been answered.

British-Irish Council

4. **Mr McGrady** asked the Office of the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister when the next meeting of the British-Irish Council will take place, and what will be the items for discussion. (AQO 509/01)

The Deputy First Minister: The next British-Irish Council summit meeting is scheduled for April 2002 in Jersey, and the main topic of discussion will be the knowledge economy. The full agenda has not yet been finalised.

Mr McGrady: My intended supplementary question on Sellafield has already been answered. I urge the Deputy First Minister to put four issues on the agenda at the next British-Irish Council meeting: reprocessing; the operation of obsolete plants; discharges; and storage. I also urge him to ensure that the relationship between the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs and our Department of the Environment is put on a proper basis. We need proactive, co-ordinated action to represent the views of the Assembly on licensing and the continuation of Sellafield.

The Deputy First Minister: I acknowledge the Member's long-standing and active interest in the issue. Many of the views that he has voiced down the years are now reflected more widely in these islands.

The environment sector of the British-Irish Council will meet again. The Irish Government and the Isle of Man Government will lead the work on radioactive waste and Sellafield. We will ensure that our response to any papers issued by the Irish Government or the Isle of Man Government incorporates the four areas that Mr McGrady has identified.

Homelessness

5. **Mr K Robinson** asked the Office of the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister if Executive programme funds have been earmarked to deal with the issue of homelessness, especially during the Christmas season. (AQO 535/01)

The Deputy First Minister: Homelessness is a year-round problem, and it is important that none of us forgets those who do not have anywhere to call home. Obviously, at Christmas those less fortunate than ourselves, including the homeless, are rightly prominent in our thoughts.

The Executive recognise that housing support is particularly important for those who are homeless, not least at this time of the year. In order to reduce the plight of the homeless, the Housing Executive is spending approximately £11.5 million each year on homelessness services. In addition, the Housing Executive launched a review of its homelessness strategy and services in September 2001, with the purpose of improving services to the homeless in Northern Ireland. Consultation finishes at the end of this month, and the review is due to be completed in March 2002.

Regarding Executive programme funds, no bids for allocations aimed specifically at tackling the problem of homelessness were received in the funding round I announced to the Assembly on Monday 3 December. We should not forget the valuable work done by a range of voluntary organisations for the homeless, and we take this opportunity to commend them for their year-round efforts to help the less fortunate.

Mr K Robinson: I thank the Minister for his comprehensive answer. However, do the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister agree that the magnitude of the problem of homelessness manifests itself particularly at Christmas? Funding was allocated last year to deal specifically with the homeless at Christmas; will that be the case in the current year?

The Deputy First Minister: Last year, following discussion between the Minister of Finance and Personnel and the Minister for Social Development, the Department for Social Development was able to announce a special allocation of funding to help those organisations and shelters providing particular measures at Christmas for the homeless. I can confirm that the Minister of Finance and Personnel and the current Minister for Social Development again discussed the point last week. I can assure the Member that the Office of the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister will encourage any measure this

year similar to that which came forward last year. As was the case last year, any announcements would be for the Minister for Social Development to make.

Mr O'Neill: My question has already been answered to some extent. I realise that the Deputy First Minister is somewhat hard-pressed with so many responsibilities today, which must be difficult. However, I would like him to give some thought to the question that I raised earlier in connection with the Executive programme funds. If homelessness were a priority — and we all know the terrible figures that have been recently released — would it be eligible for funding in the coming year under the Executive programme funds? Under normal policy, and indeed under TSN, is it not possible to categorise homelessness as a priority?

The Deputy First Minister: There would certainly be no grounds for anybody to say that homelessness, or measures to improve support to those who are homeless, would be ineligible for the Executive programme funds. Considering the range of funds available, one could possibly see bids in relation to some developments being considered under the social inclusion fund. Equally, certain measures aimed at directing some new services or measures to the problems of homeless people could be considered under the new directions fund. Nothing in the criteria for the Executive programme funds would rule out any such bid.

2.45 pm

Mr Shannon: Does the Minister agree that homelessness is only part of the problem? According to figures that were published last week, in one year alone more than 2,000 people died as a result of the poverty trap. What steps will be taken to address that problem? Will the voluntary organisations receive financial assistance to ensure that they can serve the homeless and the many others in that category?

Mr Deputy Speaker: I remind Members to ensure that their supplementary questions are relevant to the question on the Order Paper.

The Deputy First Minister: The Member's question is not directly related to housing, but the issue he raised remains in the purview of the Department for Social Development. That Department is responsible for introducing measures to improve support, not least through the community and voluntary sector, for those who are most afflicted by poverty and who depend on benefits. Given the correlation between poverty and homelessness, the Department for Social Development is best placed to deal with those issues.

Fireworks

6. **Mr Ford** asked the Office of the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister, in the light of the debate

on fireworks on Tuesday 8 May 2001, if it will give details of any discussions it has had with the fireworks safety group. (AQO 510/01)

The Deputy First Minister: On 8 May, during the debate on the motion on fireworks, the Assembly called on the Executive to establish an interdepartmental working group in conjunction with the NIO to examine concerns about fireworks. After the debate we wrote to Minister of State Jane Kennedy to alert her to the Assembly's concerns, and a copy of our letter was sent to every interested Department. The Northern Ireland fireworks safety group already includes representatives from the Department of Education, the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety, the Housing Executive and the NIO. It provides an appropriate mechanism for interdepartmental work on the issue. The issues raised by the Assembly will be discussed at today's meeting of the fireworks safety group.

Mr Ford: What an interesting coincidence of timing that the group should meet today. The meeting follows another autumn during which pensioners and others in Northern Ireland were subjected to the terror caused by fireworks, without anything's being done. I am not sure whether Jane Kennedy has experienced the effects of many fireworks during her stays in Hillsborough, but I have no doubt that Members of —

Mr Deputy Speaker: Is there a question?

Mr Ford: There is always a question.

Mr Deputy Speaker: This is not an opportunity to make speeches or statements.

Mr Ford: Now that the group is getting round to discussing, in December, an Assembly debate that took place in May, will the Minister use his officers at the NIO and the Executive Ministers to ensure that next autumn will be free of terror caused by fireworks for pensioners in Northern Ireland?

The Deputy First Minister: The group will continue to work not just to reflect Members' concerns, but to meet the responsibilities of the Departments. It is an appropriate way to deal with an issue that is not straightforward and that does not fall to the devolved Administration alone. There should be no undue inference that the timing of today's meeting of the group is not a true coincidence.

Executive Committee Meetings

7. **Mr Dallat** asked the Office of the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister what action can be taken to safeguard the rights of those affected by the continuing refusal of the Minister for Regional Development and the Minister for Social Development to attend Executive Committee meetings. (AQO 540/01)

The Deputy First Minister: Under the Belfast Agreement and section 18 of the Northern Ireland Act 1998, a Northern Ireland Minister shall not take up office until he has affirmed the terms of the Pledge of Office. The Minister for Regional Development and the Minister for Social Development have taken a pledge to fulfil the duties of their ministerial office. Although they were prepared to take up ministerial office, they have so far refused all invitations to participate in Executive meetings to discuss policy and legislative matters that affect their Departments. They have also refused to contribute to strategic discussions about resources and the preparation of the Executive's Programme for Government, which is to be endorsed by the Assembly.

Although they have not attended Executive meetings in person, both Ministers have complied with the requirements of the ministerial code by seeking the Executive's agreement to their proposals relating to the Programme for Government, the Budget, legislation and major policy areas that impact on other departmental programmes. The fact that they comment in writing about papers to be discussed by the Executive indicates their confidence in the Ministers who attend Executive meetings to make decisions that affect their Departments' programmes.

The Minister for Regional Development and the Minister for Social Development have permitted their senior officials to make presentations on policy areas that concern the Executive. Despite the non-attendance of these Ministers at Executive meetings, the Executive have been able to ensure that important strategic and policy decisions are taken to enable those two Departments to function effectively so that the people of Northern Ireland are not disadvantaged by any political actions.

Mr Dallat: I welcome the Minister's upbeat reply to my question. Would the Minister agree that in any other organisation, members of the management who continually absented themselves from board meetings could expect penalties to be imposed on them? Is it reasonable that these Ministers should continue to enjoy the luxuries of power without the responsibility of Executive decisions?

The Deputy First Minister: I have already said that the Ministers have taken, and are in compliance with, the Pledge of Office. In declining to attend the Executive, they deny themselves a contribution to the Executive's wider thinking. However, there is no basis in current provisions on which we might exercise sanctions. Clearly, it is important for all Ministers to take the fullest opportunity available to them to represent the needs of their Departments and the insights that they have as Ministers, at all levels — including in the Executive.

Mr McClarty: Can the Deputy First Minister tell us whether any key decisions on matters that are the

responsibility of these Ministers have been progressed through the Executive in their absence?

The Deputy First Minister: As I indicated earlier, in the absence of, for example, the Minister for Regional Development, the Executive in their deliberations on the Programme for Government and the Budget have taken strategic decisions on key infrastructure issues that will affect the people of Northern Ireland. An increased allocation for roads next year is an example. We set aside £40 million over a number of years to ensure that the trans-European network from Larne to the border south of Newry is developed coherently. The "dualling" of the proposed Newry to Dundalk road is also part of that, making a significant contribution to cross-border trade and mobility. That investment should also strengthen the competitiveness of ports.

In line with the commitment in the Programme for Government, the Executive also took the decision to fully fund free travel for the elderly. That took effect from 1 October 2001. The Executive took that decision on the basis of proposals made by the Minister of Finance and Personnel with the encouragement of the Office of the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister. The Executive have shown sensitivity in the way in which we deal with budgets, the monitoring rounds and Executive programme funds. We are recognising the needs of programmes in every Department, including those whose Ministers do not attend Executive meetings.

North/South Ministerial Council

8. **Mr Davis** asked the Office of the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister to make a statement on the recent meeting of the North/South Ministerial Council. (AQO 533/01)

The Deputy First Minister: Earlier today I made a report to the Assembly on behalf of all the Ministers who attended the North/South Ministerial Council meeting that was held on 30 November. A copy of the communiqué issued following the meeting has been placed in the Assembly Library.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Mr Davis indicated that he did not wish to ask a supplementary question.

Review of Local Government

9. **Mr C Murphy** asked the Office of the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister to outline how the review of public administration will impact on the review of local government; and to make a statement. (AQO 524/01)

The Deputy First Minister: Good governance requires systems of regional and local government that complement each other. We are conscious of the contribution made by councils to building local partnerships and

embracing new challenges in areas such as economic development and community relations. As the Minister of the Environment told the Assembly on 12 November, the organisation of local government services will be considered in the context of the review of public administration.

The review, which will cover all aspects of the public sector, not just local government, will be launched in the spring. The Executive are working to finalise details of the review, and we are confident that we are on target. We hope to be in a position to provide the Assembly with draft terms of reference early in the new year.

Mr C Murphy: Does the Deputy First Minister agree that these two reviews need to be dovetailed? It is difficult to see how public administration could be reorganised without taking account of the future size, geographical area and makeup of local councils. We have had statements from the Office of the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister on progress on the review of public administration, but we have heard very little on the review of local government. Does the Minister agree that it is necessary that these go hand-in-hand? Is he aware that the review of local government is being tailored to match the review of public administration?

The Deputy First Minister: The First Minister, the Minister of the Environment and I have reflected that the review of local government will proceed in the context of the wider review of public administration. We need to achieve a system of governance that allows regional government to play a part in developing policies and delivering programmes that are effective in meeting the needs of people. Similarly, it should also allow local government not just to deliver local government programmes, but to contribute to good regional government by delivering the local services and policy programmes that they are best placed to deliver. We can apply positive lessons and experiences from partnership working, not just in the European programmes, but in the different sectors as well. In the review of public administration we should not take a single tier of government in isolation, and no tier of government will drive the review.

Mrs Carson: Does the Minister appreciate the concerns about uncertainty in local government that the forthcoming review is causing, and will he tell us how they will be addressed during the review?

The Deputy First Minister: We recognise the difficulties posed by the pending review and the uncertainty that the Member has described. We are anxious to do what we can to ensure that there is no disruption to public services or to those who deliver them during the review. To that end, we are drawing up a comprehensive communications strategy to ensure that, throughout the process, information flows to everyone who may be affected. My Colleague, the

Minister of the Environment, has informed the Executive of district councils' concerns, and those are appreciated. In anticipation of the review, some councils are having difficulties with forward planning and managing resources, including filling new posts and staff vacancies. Completing the review and implementing its outcome will take time. During that period we will not be able to ameliorate all the concerns involved. It is accepted that review is needed, but we must proceed in a thoughtful and effective way, and that coherence will do most to deal with the uncertainty.

Mr Weir: Given that the review of public administration and the review of local government were first announced well over a year ago, and given that we are only to learn their terms of reference next spring, will the Minister say in which decade he expects the review to be completed?

The Deputy First Minister: The review will be launched next spring, and there will be consultation on the terms of reference to be published early in the new year. No doubt Members will have views, not just on the terms of reference, but also on the approach and structure. It is important to get the review under way so that we can deal with the issues that need to be addressed.

I look forward to the launch of the review in spring 2002, and the delivery of useful material for us to consider in order to progress this matter throughout the year.

3.00 pm

North/South Ministerial Council (Premises)

10. **Mr Fee** asked the Office of the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister what progress has been made to obtain permanent offices in Armagh for the North/South Ministerial Council. (AQO 520/01)

The Deputy First Minister: Although the joint secretariat is operating effectively from temporary accommodation in Armagh, work is continuing to identify and procure a new permanent headquarters. A schedule of accommodation requirements for a new permanent headquarters has been drawn up, and it is currently being developed and evaluated by the professional staff of the Department of Finance and Personnel's Construction Service and by the Department of Foreign Affairs in Dublin. That evaluation will include an investment appraisal of options, which include a new build, and also the possibility of refurbishing part of the former Armagh Prison. The evaluation process will take several months, after which the various options will be put before the relevant Departments, North and South, for consideration prior to submission to the North/South Ministerial Council for approval.

Mr Fee: Will the Deputy First Minister accept that there is a certain amount of frustration that that prestigious facility has not yet found a permanent home in the city of Armagh? Can he give the House a commitment that the outstanding issues will be resolved before the next meeting of the North/South Ministerial Council?

Mr Deputy Speaker: Please be brief, Mr Durkan.

The Deputy First Minister: The secretariat is located in Armagh and is committed to that location. The evaluation of permanent accommodation is under way and has to follow normal procedures. I anticipate that that evaluation will be concluded by mid-2002.

REGIONAL DEVELOPMENT

Mr Deputy Speaker: Question 9 in the name of Mr Byrne has been withdrawn.

Dromore Underpass

1. **Mr Poots** asked the Minister for Regional Development what progress has been made on the proposals for an underpass to the A1 dual carriageway at the Hillsborough Road junction, Dromore. (AQO 499/01)

The Minister for Regional Development (Mr P Robinson): My Department's Roads Service published the necessary environmental statement in February 2001, and the direction and stopping-up orders in July 2001, in order to progress the junction improvements proposal on the A1 at Hillsborough Road, Dromore. Following those publications, several objections were received, and despite the best efforts of Roads Service officials those objections have not been resolved. Therefore, public inquiries will have to take place. It is hoped that they will commence as early as possible in the new year. The start date for the scheme will depend on the outcome of those inquiries and the availability of funding at that time.

Mr Poots: The inhabitants of Dromore, and those who regularly use that junction, will be disappointed that a public inquiry must take place. An 84-year-old woman was recently killed crossing the junction; it is a death trap. Will the Minister tell the House how many objections were received, and the nature of those objections? I understand that several of them were environmental objections that would not stand up to scrutiny. Were that the case, a public inquiry would not be necessary.

Mr P Robinson: I understand the frustration of the people of Dromore who want the scheme to proceed. That frustration is shared by my Department's Roads Service, which is equally eager to advance the scheme. However, the House recognises that individuals have rights, and it is important that people put forward a

material objection to any roads proposal so that it can be thoroughly considered. If an objection cannot be dealt with through discussions with Roads Service officials, the matter should rightly be heard at an inquiry. In this case, there will be inquiries into a number of the features, and not simply the environmental statement or the direction and stopping-up orders.

There were four objections. I have to say to my Colleague that, although he and I may not consider some of the objections to be well founded, I am not in the position to set them aside on that basis. If something will have a material impact on someone's property and the matter cannot be resolved, there has to be a public inquiry. That is the case in this instance.

Mr M Murphy: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. When will the carriageway on the A1 as it passes Dromore — which has been closed for the past 18 months — be reopened?

Mr P Robinson: The Department for Regional Development has a number of proposals relating to the A1. The A1 is a key road in the Province's infrastructure, and the Department will ensure that there is no undue delay in the opening of any road or the improvements on it. The Roads Service proposes to construct a grade separation junction between the A1 and the Rathfriland Road at Banbridge. The principal objective of that scheme will be to improve road safety at that junction. The estimated cost of that scheme will be about £2.5 million. That is in the Department's preparation pool, subject to finance. There have been some objections to the scheme, but the Department is doing its best to address the concerns of the objectors. However, the ultimate aim of the Roads Service is to have Northern Ireland's roads open and operating fully.

Northern Ireland Bus Fleet

2. **Mr Hussey** asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail the number of vehicles in Northern Ireland's bus fleet that are (a) under two years old; (b) under five years old; and (c) older than five years. (AQO 502/01)

Mr P Robinson: Translink has advised that it has a total bus fleet comprising 1,459 vehicles: 1,195 of them are in service with Ulsterbus, and 264 are in service with Citybus; 99 Ulsterbus vehicles and 44 Citybus vehicles are under two years old; 132 Ulsterbus vehicles and 78 Citybus vehicles are over two years old but under five years old; and 964 Ulsterbus vehicles and 142 Citybus vehicles are older than 5 years.

Mr Hussey: I thank the Minister for those comprehensive figures. I am sure that he, like myself, is mindful of the sad state of deterioration into which Northern Ireland's railway stock was allowed to fall under direct rule, aggravated of course by terrorist action, community

strife and reprehensible, wanton vandalism. Can the Minister assure the House that he supports, and will continue to support, a rolling programme of replacement for Northern Ireland's public bus fleet, so that a similar deterioration does not take place under his stewardship?

Mr P Robinson: I give an absolute assurance that I support that. Indeed, in the Department for Regional Development's present programme approximately £1.7 million has been allocated for new buses in the current year and in the indicative figures for next financial year. The Member will be aware that about 50% of that funding for buses comes from the Department, and the other 50% comes from Translink. That gives a total of £3.4 million, which would purchase only about 28 new buses a year.

If the Member had asked about the replacement age of vehicles, I would have informed him that the Department believes that about 256 of Translink's vehicles will be due for replacement by next March. The Department expects there to be a replacement age of 18 years for buses and 12 years for coaches. Therefore, while 256 vehicles need to be replaced by next March, we have a budget that will allow the replacement of only 28 buses. The House will therefore see that we are likely to drag further behind as time goes on unless there is a considerable uplift in the amount of money available for an increase in new fleet.

Mr R Hutchinson: The Minister indicated that over 1,000 buses are over five years old. Can he give any further details of the bus age beyond five years?

Mr P Robinson: I rather threw out the figures, so it was probably hard for the House to assimilate them quickly. There were 1,106 buses in total that were five years or older. That represents 76% of the fleet. However, there are 838 vehicles that are ten years or older, and that represents 57% of the fleet. As I indicated in reply to the earlier question, 256 of those are past the replacement age of 12 years for coaches and 18 years for buses. The Member might also be interested to know that the oldest Ulsterbus is 23 years old.

Senior Citizen Concession Passes

3. **Mrs I Robinson** asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail the number of senior citizen free fare passes issued over the past three months; and to make a statement. (AQO 513/01)

Mr P Robinson: In the last three months, 12,621 senior citizen concession passes were issued. This represents an increase of 450% compared with the number of passes issued during the same three months last year. I am pleased to report the positive response that my free travel initiative has received. Free travel is enabling many older people to enjoy the benefits of

enhanced mobility and is making an important contribution to addressing social needs in the community.

Mrs I Robinson: As a member of Castlereagh Borough Council who piloted the free-fares scheme I welcome the increased uptake. It justifies the implementation of our party's policies, and I congratulate the Minister for pursuing this objective to a successful outcome.

Mr Deputy Speaker: I remind Mrs Robinson that it is the opportunity to ask a question.

Mrs I Robinson: I will be accused, whatever I do.

The Minister will know that many Members have been approached by war-disabled pensioners under the age of 65 who are seeking the opportunity to take part in the free-fares scheme. Has the Minister considered the special case for their inclusion in the scheme?

Mr P Robinson: Mr Deputy Speaker, I can assure the House that that was not a planted question. Of course, I find little to disagree with in the comments that were made in the Member's question.

Just as in Castlereagh when the pilot scheme was carried out, the significant increase is not just a case of those who are taking passes out, which was what the original question was about. I am also told that Translink's figures for the first month since the introduction of free travel show increases in the number of older people travelling to be in the region of 28% on Ulsterbus, up to 50% on Citybus and 35% on Northern Ireland Railways. That is a considerable uptake from senior citizens.

With regard to the point about war-disabled pensioners, they have always been considered as a special category as far as concessionary fares are concerned. They along with senior citizens over 65 enjoyed the concession of 50% up until the point when the over 65s were able to get free fares. Therefore war-disabled pensioners currently benefit from half-fare travel on public transport. I believe that they ought to be treated in the same way as retirement pensioners over 65 years of age. Consequently, I am proposing that war-disabled pensioners under 65 be eligible for free travel alongside registered blind people and senior citizens over 65 years of age.

The resources required for this enhancement of the concessionary fare scheme are quite modest and should not prove to be a stumbling block. The legislation requires approval by the Department of Finance and Personnel. Therefore I have written to the Minister of Finance and Personnel seeking his agreement to introduce my proposal forthwith.

Mr McNamee: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Will the Minister indicate whether the free-fare passes held by senior citizens entitle them to free travel on the public ferry services operated by his Department and by private companies?

3.15 pm

Mr P Robinson: My Colleague, Mr Campbell, made a statement about the Strangford ferry, indicating that it would be included in the scheme. A similar statement has been made about another ferry service. If the ferry services are run by my Department, the only outstanding problem — that of the audit trail — is overcome. I am keen that free public transport, including transport on the ferries, should be enjoyed by those who are entitled to it. The problem goes beyond the ferries that are run by my Department, because the Department also funds some free fares for private operators, provided it is satisfied with their *modus operandi*.

Mr Bradley: Free passes have been collected by 12,621 people, which is good news for everyone who campaigned through the years for the scheme. That includes Newry and Mourne District Council, which also piloted the scheme.

Will free travel be introduced for people who accompany disabled or ill senior citizens who require assistance when travelling?

Mr P Robinson: I am happy to mention Newry and Mourne District Council, which partnered Castlereagh Borough Council in the pilot scheme. When I was involved in the Committee that supervised the pilot scheme, I got the impression that free travel means nothing unless there is an adequate bus service. That applies particularly to people living in the country, and work remains to be done to improve our rural bus service.

With regard to companions travelling with disabled people, my Colleague, Mr Campbell, indicated that the Department would examine the extension of the concessionary fare scheme over the next few months. It would be appropriate to extend the scheme to people with disabilities. Under the provisions of the Transport Act 2000, certain categories of disability receive a concessionary half-fare as a minimum in Great Britain. However, these categories are not covered by the scheme in Northern Ireland. That matter will receive urgent attention. Whether the scheme will extend to those who accompany disabled people will be a matter for consideration in the review.

Mr J Wilson: It is interesting that the DUP has attempted to claim credit for free bus passes. Had the DUP had its way, there would have been no Executive to introduce free bus passes.

Further to the Minister's reply to the Member for Strangford (Mrs I Robinson), is he aware that some transport services that are used extensively by senior citizens have been reduced? My home town of Ballyclare is an example: the Saturday service has been removed completely. Why is free travel handed out with one hand and the bus service taken away with the other?

Mr P Robinson: I am not sure what kind of a Province the Member thinks we might have where there would be no Executive. Of course there would be an Executive, but it would not be a home-grown Executive. It was a Northern Ireland Office Minister who, after much pressure, agreed to have a pilot scheme for free fares. The scheme would have progressed whether it had been a Northern Ireland Executive or a UK Executive dealing with the matter. I am content that the DUP's manifesto proposal for free fares has now come to fruition, and the public appreciates that.

Transport services are an operational matter. There are some routes in my own constituency where services have been reduced. I made enquiries about the situation with Translink — I am sure Jim Wilson has done the same thing — and I was told that the reductions were introduced because of service usage. If the Member will give me specific details of the case that he has in mind, I shall take up the matter with Translink.

Translink Buses and Trains

4. **Ms Lewsley** asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail the number of trains and buses owned by Translink that are currently in operational use. (AQO 521/01)

Mr P Robinson: Translink has advised that, in addition to its two Enterprise-class rolling stock, which are used between Belfast and Dublin, it currently has a total operational fleet of 28 train sets. The fleet comprises nine three-car 450 castle class and 19 class 80 sets. Translink also expects to add eight-car train, which formerly operated on the Gatwick Express route, to its fleet shortly. By early 2002, Translink should, therefore, have a total operational fleet of 31 sets.

Translink's bus fleet comprises, as I said earlier, 1,459 buses, 1,195 of which are in service with Ulsterbus and 264 in service with Citybus. Not every train set or vehicle can be operational at the same time given Translink's rolling programme of repairs and servicing.

Ms Lewsley: I was pleased to hear, in response to Mrs Robinson's question, that the Minister is considering extending the scheme to include some type of transport concession for those with disabilities. However, it does not matter what concessions are made if transport is not accessible in the first place. Will the Minister tell us how many buses and trains are accessible to people with disabilities, especially in rural areas?

Mr P Robinson: I agree with the Member's point. I am glad that my Department's bid for funding for buses is gaining me so many friends and supporters. As the Member might expect, only the newest buses will be suitably adapted to accommodate those with disabilities. I stress the point further by saying that the average age of the bus fleet in Northern Ireland is 13 years. The

average age in Great Britain is eight years, and it is 4·7 years in the Republic of Ireland. Therefore, there is considerable catching up to be done. If we are to have buses that are accessible for the disabled, we must improve and renew the bus fleet regularly — every year — at a significantly higher rate than we have been doing thus far.

Mr Shannon: Will the Minister tell us how Northern Ireland's trains and buses compare to those in the United Kingdom and the Republic of Ireland? Will he also confirm the cost Translink has incurred as a result of vandalism? What percentage of its budget goes towards trying to address that spiralling cost and drain on its resources?

Mr P Robinson: A couple of weeks ago, I noticed a report that said that the United Kingdom was falling dramatically behind the rest of the civilised world as far as roads and transport were concerned. As I said in response to an earlier question, we are falling behind the rest of the United Kingdom in that regard.

I am informed that the average age of the Republic of Ireland's Expressway coach fleet is between four and five years. However, the average age of its city service fleet is around 2·5 years. That is a remarkably new fleet. The Transport Minister in the United Kingdom has set clear targets for an average age of eight years. At present, Northern Ireland's average is 13 years. However, we are asking for buses that are 18 years old and coaches that are 12 years old to be replaced. We cannot meet that target even under present Budget arrangements. No doubt, increased bids must be made to the Minister of Finance and Personnel.

I hope that I can draw on the support of the House for a successful outcome to those bids. With regard to the Member's comments about vandalism, the Department faces an uphill struggle with public transport in Northern Ireland. It is a disgrace that valuable resources are being wasted to repair damage caused by vandalism rather than being used to upgrade and update the fleet.

Mr Beggs: I refer to the Minister's earlier answer, in which he confirmed that the refurbished Gatwick Express trains could be entering into service in Northern Ireland early in 2002. Will those trains be utilised on the busiest commuter routes, such as the east Antrim line, in order to benefit the maximum number of commuters and further encourage the use of public transport?

Mr P Robinson: The House will be aware that the Department recently conveyed to Translink its approval for the purchase of 23 new trains at a total cost of £87 million. The tendering process has been completed. The three tenders received are currently being evaluated. Translink hopes to be able to award the contract to a supplier in early 2002. Delivery of the first batch of 12 train sets for testing is envisaged by February 2003,

and delivery of the remaining 11 sets by September 2003.

Where those train sets are used when they become available to Translink is an operational matter. I hope that they would be used widely across the Province and that everybody would see the benefits of the new trains. Consistent with the regional development strategy and, I expect, the regional transportation strategy that will soon be published, in Northern Ireland we are tasked with encouraging people to use public transport. That will not be possible unless public transport is upgraded and people are offered comfortable and regular services.

A32 Dromore/Irvinestown Road

5. **Mr McElduff** asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail what plans he has to upgrade the A32 Dromore/Irvinestown road. (AQO 497/01)

Mr P Robinson: Roads Service has plans to carry out an improvement scheme on the A32 between Dromore and Irvinestown at Lettergash. The scheme, costing some £270,000, involves the widening and resurfacing of the carriageway over approximately 600 metres. The works are programmed to start early next month. Roads Service also has plans to undertake two other improvement schemes at Lisdoon and Corlaghdergan on this section of the road.

The scheme at Lisdoon, which is currently being designed, involves the vertical realignment and resurfacing of the carriageway over approximately 900 metres. That scheme will cost somewhere in the region of £500,000 to £600,000. Subject to the acquisition of land and the availability of funds, Roads Service plans to commence the work towards the end of the 2002-03 financial year.

The scheme at Corlaghdergan involves the widening and resurfacing of the carriageway over approximately 700 metres. The work will cost around £350,000. Subject to the availability of funds, Roads Service plans to start that scheme in 2003-04.

(Madam Deputy Speaker [Ms Morrice] in the Chair)

Mr McElduff: Go raibh maith agat, a Leas Cheann Comhairle. Ba mhaith liom mo bhuíochas a ghabháil leis an Aire as a fhreagra. I thank the Minister for his answer and for the details of the schemes.

I ask the Minister to consider major capital funding for the A32 in the future, as well as for the present schemes that have been outlined. The A32 is used extensively by ambulances and cars ferrying patients, expectant mothers, visitors and others between two hospitals — the Erne Hospital in Enniskillen, and the Tyrone County Hospital in Omagh. I would like that

road to be accorded greater priority for major capital funding in the future.

3.30 pm

Mr P Robinson: People in Tyrone and Fermanagh have expressed concern about travel times and delays on that route, as certain health services are currently provided only at the Erne Hospital in Enniskillen or the Tyrone County Hospital in Omagh. The recent Hayes review of acute hospitals recommended Enniskillen as the location for a new acute hospital for the region. It is not for me to say whether that recommendation will be accepted, but the Department will undoubtedly continue to review the situation as and when that decision is taken.

The Department requires more funding for Roads Service to make further improvements to any road in Northern Ireland. As far as the A32 is concerned, the three schemes that I listed show that we recognise that as a priority. I hope that those schemes can proceed. If more funding becomes available, the Department will consider other schemes in the area. My predecessor, Mr Campbell, wrote to all Members in September asking if there was any scheme that they particularly wanted to be included in the 10-year forward programme; that was followed by a letter from Colin James, the chief executive of Roads Service. Perhaps surprisingly, there was no correspondence from the hon Member on that.

Newry Bypass

6. **Mr C Murphy** asked the Minister for Regional Development to outline any improvement works planned for the Newry bypass. (AQO 511/01)

Mr P Robinson: Roads Service has already carried out several measures to improve road safety on the Newry bypass. In addition, Roads Service proposes to ban traffic from turning right off the bypass into Carnagat Road. Subject to the making of the necessary legislation, it is hoped to introduce this measure in 2003-04.

In April 2001, Roads Service commissioned consultants to carry out a feasibility study to identify options for upgrading to dual carriageway standard the section of the A1 between Beech Hill and Cloghogue roundabout. As part of the study, the consultants will consider several options, including the possible improvement and upgrading of the existing route, which includes the Newry bypass, and a possible new route from Beech Hill to join the Newry bypass near the Cloghogue roundabout.

Madam Deputy Speaker: Time is up. If the Minister has any more information for the Member, he should give it in writing.

ENVIRONMENT

Madam Deputy Speaker: Question 10, in the name of Mr Tommy Gallagher, has been transferred to the Minister for Regional Development and will receive a written answer.

Planning Applications (Wind Farms)

1. **Mrs Carson** asked the Minister of the Environment what special considerations are taken when planning applications are received for the erection of wind farms. (AQO 523/01)

The Minister of the Environment (Mr Foster): All applications for wind farm development are considered under existing planning regulations and policies, taking account of representations received following normal advertising and consultation procedures.

The main policy guidance in this area is contained in 'A planning strategy for rural Northern Ireland', which states that all proposals for wind farms will be assessed in respect of their implications for the visual, ecological and historical landscapes. The implications for agriculture and the safety and amenity of local residents are also considered. It also makes clear that permission will not be granted in any location where there would be a seriously detrimental impact on the amenity of an area of outstanding natural beauty or any area that has been designated for its conservation, scientific, archaeological or historic interest.

Consultations on wind farm proposals normally include the environmental health department of the relevant local council, Environment and Heritage Service, Water Service, Roads Service, the Ministry of Defence and the Civil Aviation Authority.

Under the Planning (Environmental Impact Assessment) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 1999, my Department may require an environmental statement where a proposal for a wind farm involves the installation of more than two turbines or where the hub height of any turbine or the height of any other structure is greater than 15 metres. Such a statement provides my Department with detailed information about the impact that a proposal may have on the environment.

Mrs Carson: Is the Minister satisfied with the situation in Fermanagh and South Tyrone with regard to the proliferation of wind farms? Does he agree that a skyline of wind turbines will detract from and spoil the natural beauty of Fermanagh, especially?

Mr Foster: The Member's question comes very close to my heart, and I thank her for it. Coming from Fermanagh, I am well aware of its natural beauty. It is the jewel in the Province's crown. Several planning applications for wind farms in Fermanagh are being assessed by the Department of the Environment. The

assessment, in appropriate circumstances, requires an environmental statement to evaluate the environmental impact of proposals.

All proposals for such development are assessed in respect of their implications for the visual, ecological and historical landscapes, and the implications for agriculture, the safety of local residents and the amenity of the area. I recognise, however, that wind farms have the potential to affect landscapes adversely. All practical measures should be taken to avoid or minimise that, and such measures will be included in any environmental statement required by my Department for such proposals.

It should, however, be pointed out that wind farms provide an alternative form of energy that does not involve the consumption of fossil fuels and the production of greenhouse gases. They do, therefore, deliver some environmental benefits.

Mr McCarthy: The Minister said that he would not allow wind farms to be set up in areas of outstanding natural beauty. In view of that, can he explain to the House why, on an application that came before Ards Borough Council, his Department allowed a small wind farm to be erected on the Lough Shore Road in Portaferry? That wind farm sits almost alongside Strangford Lough, which is an area of outstanding natural beauty. Despite my objections and concerns at the time, the Department approved the application.

Mr Foster: I admit that the Member's question is very good, but each case is considered on its own merits. As I said earlier, under current regulations the Department of the Environment may require an environmental statement where a proposal for a wind farm involves the installation of more than two turbines. Each case is assessed very thoroughly and is taken on its own merits. In some areas the applications are refused, and in some they are approved. I assure Mr McCarthy that those matters are not taken lightly, and applications are examined very closely and adequately.

Tachographs

2. **Ms Lewsley** asked the Minister of the Environment what plans he has to enforce the use of tachographs in the haulage industry. (AQO 537/01)

Mr Foster: Tachograph enforcement is required in Northern Ireland under the Passenger and Goods Vehicles (Recording Equipment) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 1996, which implement the requirements of the relevant European regulations. Enforcement is undertaken by the Driver and Vehicle Testing Agency (DVTA) and by the police. When vehicles are presented for the annual roadworthiness test, DVTA examiners check for the presence of a tachograph and whether it is working, appropriately calibrated and sealed. Compliance checks on tachograph charts on heavy goods vehicles and

buses are carried out at the roadside and by random visits to premises to ensure that drivers comply with the requirements on driving and rest periods. The European Directive requires each member state to check a minimum of 1% of charts each year for compliance. In Northern Ireland that equates to over 48,000 checks. The DVTA has a target to carry out 20,000 of those. The remainder are carried out by the police as the main enforcement agency for tachograph charts. Last year, the Department of the Environment initiated enforcement proceedings in 397 cases, and 287 of those led to prosecution. As a result, fines totalling over £33,000 were levied on operators and drivers.

Ms Lewsley: Perhaps the Department of the Environment should look a little more closely at the issue, because some drivers are driving for longer than the allotted time — some are driving for 16 hours a day. Indeed, some companies blacklist drivers who will not drive the extended hours. Can the Minister look into that, please?

Mr Foster: I thank the Member for the points that she made. I assure her that my Department takes these matters seriously. The DVTA and the police are the relevant enforcement agencies. They carry out checks to ensure that drivers discharge their responsibilities properly by using tachographs in accordance with the statutory requirements, by not exceeding daily and fortnightly driving periods and by taking daily and weekly rest periods. Checks are carried out at operators' premises, as well as at the roadside.

To comply with EU Directive 88/599/EEC, each member state — and this includes Northern Ireland — must examine a minimum number of charts each year for compliance, calculated each year in accordance with the Directive. When vehicles are presented for the annual vehicle roadworthiness test, DVTA examiners check for the presence of a tachograph and whether it is working, appropriately calibrated and sealed.

Road Safety Campaign

3. **Mr McClarty** asked the Minister of the Environment to give his assessment of the success of his road safety campaign. (AQO 505/01)

Mr Foster: The combined efforts of local road safety departments and agencies, including the police, have contributed to a significant reduction in deaths and serious injuries on our roads. Road fatalities are now at about half the level they were in the 1970s. There were approximately 4,000 fewer deaths and serious injuries in the period from 1989-2000 than if numbers had continued at the 1989 level.

Nevertheless, the number of deaths and serious injuries on our roads remains totally unacceptable. Since devolution, I have successfully obtained additional

resources to double the number of road safety education officers to work with schools, and I have substantially increased the budget for road safety advertising, resulting in new campaigns and additional airtime.

It is gratifying to see that those campaigns, supplemented by police enforcement, are having a positive impact. For example, with increased seat belt wearing and improved road user attitudes, there have been 137 road deaths to date this year, compared to 155 for the same period last year. That reduction is very welcome but, as recent events show, more needs to be done.

I have also initiated a wide debate on road safety through the publication of the 'Road Safety Strategy 2001-2010' consultation document. Officials are considering the responses, and next spring I intend to publish a new 10-year strategic plan. However, the Government can do only so much. The key to achieving significant reductions in road casualties lies in more responsible road user behaviour. It will take the efforts of all to ensure that road users take personal responsibility for their safety and the safety of others.

Mr McClarty: I thank the Minister for his response to that serious question. Can he confirm that, despite the recent spate of tragedies on the roads, the underlying long-term trend is downward? Will he join me in urging everyone to take special care in the run-up to Christmas so that more families are spared the terrible grief that such losses bring?

Mr Foster: I thank Mr McClarty for a special question and a very special statement; it is very important at this time. The Department's anti-drink-driving campaign was launched about 10 days ago. Sadly, that afternoon there were three deaths in one road accident. It is always difficult and sad for those who lose a loved one, but especially so coming up to Christmas.

To 9 December, 137 people have been killed on our roads this year. That compares to 155 in the same period in 2000. Although fatalities in 2000 — 171 in total — were higher than in previous years, the long-term trend has been downward, despite the increase in the volume of traffic. Twenty-five years ago, more than 300 people were killed on the roads annually; for example, 355 were killed in 1977, while the average figure for the past five years is 150.

There will always be peaks and troughs in the numbers killed on the roads, and 1999 saw the lowest number of deaths — 141 — for over 40 years. While it is encouraging that the number of deaths and serious injuries this year remains lower than last year, the recent fatalities are tragic and serve to reinforce the need for all road users to take the utmost care, especially during the festive season.

On Saturday, at Colaghty Parish Church, in my home county of Fermanagh, I attended the funeral of the

young couple killed on the local roads last week. It was a sad occurrence. Three people were buried on Saturday afternoon. My heart bleeds for those who have lost loved ones in such tragic circumstances. At such times I often think of the words of Alfred Tennyson,

"But oh for the touch of a vanished hand, And the sound of a voice that is still!"

3.45 pm

Rev Dr William McCrea: The road safety situation is far from satisfactory. What further action does the Minister intend to take, before the Christmas period, to ensure that enough resources are made available to actively tackle drug-driving as well as drink-driving? A Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions report indicated that 18% of road accidents are attributed to drivers who have consumed drugs. That is a serious matter. What further action will the Department take over the Christmas period?

Mr Foster: The Department takes the matter to heart and deals with the problem diligently. I am worried about it. One death is too many. Alcohol consumption remains a more serious problem than drugs as a cause of road deaths and serious injuries. There is no evidence yet to show that illegal drug use by drivers in Northern Ireland is a principal factor in causing crashes. I am aware of the increasing use of drugs among young drivers. Extensive research into drug-driving is being carried out in Great Britain. There are no current plans to carry out an anti-drug-driving campaign. However, I assure the Member that that will be kept under constant review.

St Joseph's Church (Structural Work)

4. **Mr G Kelly** asked the Minister of the Environment to make a statement on the major structural work that is being undertaken on the interior of St Joseph's Church in Prince's Dock Street, Belfast. (AQO 525/01)

Mr Foster: The work that is being carried out inside St Joseph's Church is limited to the stripping of small areas of plasterwork to investigate the condition of elements of the building and the affixing of ties to monitor the movement of the structure. At the rear of the church, props have been installed to provide structural support for the gallery. Most of the internal fixtures have been placed in secure storage. The pulpit and some pews remain in the building. The firm that carried out the investigation has recommended that a structural engineer be appointed to study structural movement, the state of underground piling and the seating of the trusses.

Mr G Kelly: As the Minister is aware, the building was deconsecrated in February. Given that it is a grade B listed building, will the Environment and Heritage Service continue to inspect the inside of the building? There is concern about it. The Minister mentioned the pews, some of which are missing. Is everything

covered by the protection of the Department of the Environment? Will there be regular inspections? Is there any planning permission for hoardings outside the building?

Mr Foster: As the church has been deconsecrated, it no longer enjoys ecclesiastical exemption from listed building consent. Any works of alteration, extension or demolition will require my Department's approval. However, there was no requirement for listed building consent for the works that have been carried out to date because they were purely investigative and were in the interest of the safety of the structure.

My officials are aware of the works, but were not formally consulted because listed building consent was not required. However, the nature of the work was confirmed when officials from Environment and Heritage Service recently met the parish priest, Fr David White, on site. The interior fixtures were removed for safe keeping when the building was still a consecrated church. It would therefore have been exempt from the requirement for listed building consent.

Sellafield

5. **Mr Savage** asked the Minister of the Environment if there has been any contact from the Government of the Irish Republic over its opposition to the nuclear reprocessing plant at Sellafield. (AQO 506/01)

Mr Foster: My Department has had no contact with the Government of the Irish Republic over its opposition to the nuclear reprocessing plant at Sellafield. The issue was raised at the plenary meeting of the British-Irish Council in Dublin on 30 November.

It has been agreed that the Sellafield issue should be considered by the environment sector of the British-Irish Council on the basis of a joint paper on Sellafield that the Irish and Manx Governments had previously agreed to prepare. I shall participate fully in those discussions and ensure that relevant Northern Ireland considerations are put forward. As the Member knows, neither I nor my Department has any jurisdiction over the operation or regulation of the Sellafield plant. Therefore, it would not be appropriate or productive for the Irish Government and the Northern Ireland Executive to deal with the issue bilaterally. The British-Irish Council provides a forum within which all Administrations with an interest in Sellafield can be represented.

Mr Savage: The Minister will be aware, especially after last week's debate, that the issue is emotive. Can he point out any reliable scientific evidence that shows whether the mixed oxide (MOX) reprocessing plant represents a greater danger to Northern Ireland than existing dangers?

Mr Foster: The MOX plant causes much concern, and we are keeping a close eye on emissions. However, as I said earlier, we have no power over that matter, other than to make representations on behalf of the people of Northern Ireland. I assure the Member that we shall watch the situation closely. The events of 11 September in America have created a fear that there will be an attack on a plant such as Sellafield. We shall make every representation that we can and do all that is within our power, and all that our permanent structure allows, to deal with that problem.

Mr M Murphy: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Has the Minister been in contact with his counterparts in the Irish Government, particularly in the light of the cross-party concerns that were highlighted in the House last week about the welfare and health of the people on this entire island?

Mr Foster: I re-emphasise that we are aware of this Administration's concerns and those of the Administration South of the border. We are willing to work with anybody for the benefit of all people where possible, but, as I have said, Sellafield is a matter for Her Majesty's Government, to which we shall make representations where and when we can. There is great fear about the MOX plant emissions, especially since the events of 11 September and the concerns that there are about nuclear security in America. I stress that I shall make what representations I can. The situation is difficult, and there are concerns abroad.

Mr Weir: I welcome the fact that the Minister will keep the situation under surveillance. Will he tell us what specific measures his Department will put in place to ensure ongoing monitoring of the effects of the MOX plant in the coming months?

Mr Foster: My Department arranges for the Centre for Environment, Fisheries and Aquaculture Science to take samples and analyse sea water, fish, shellfish, seaweed and sediments on the bed of the Irish Sea. That work has been ongoing since the early 1950s. Northern Ireland's results consistently reveal minimal amounts of radioactivity at levels that are consistent with normal background levels. Those results are published in the 'Radioactivity in Food and the Environment' annual report. They also appear in the Northern Ireland digest of statistics. People in Northern Ireland receive an average of 2,500 microsieverts of radiation a year from natural and artificial sources. Exposure to radon in the home accounts for 50% of that total, with 12% coming from medical exposure. Nuclear discharges account for less than 0.1%. A recent study undertaken in collaboration with the Radiological Protection Institute of Ireland and University College Dublin on radioactivity levels in Strangford Lough shows that the radiation dose from artificial radioactivity is of negligible significance.

Sellafield

6. **Mr McGrady** asked the Minister of the Environment what representations he has made to British Nuclear Fuels Ltd concerning the commissioning of the mixed oxide plant at Sellafield; and to make a statement. (AQO 491/01)

Mr Foster: I have made no representations to British Nuclear Fuels Ltd concerning the commissioning of the MOX plant at Sellafield. I acknowledge the concerns expressed about a range of potential safety risks from the operation of the MOX plant, which we have just referred to. As I said in last week's debate, my officials have written to their counterparts in the Department of the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs to seek confirmation that all relevant risks were fully taken into account in the MOX decision. Their reply pointed to those parts of the decision document that dealt with the safety, security, environmental and health issues, and, in particular, to the advice from the Office for Civil Nuclear Security. I have since written to Margaret Beckett, Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, with a copy to Patricia Hewitt at the Department of Trade and Industry, seeking further information and assurance about the regulation of Sellafield and the security arrangements following the events of 11 September. I await their responses.

I shall also ensure that Northern Ireland considerations are fully taken into account when the environment sector of the British-Irish Council discusses the paper on Sellafield which is being jointly prepared by the Irish and Manx Governments. I assure everybody that my objective is to be fully satisfied that Northern Ireland's interests are sufficiently protected. To that end, I will convey to the Assembly as much of the information obtained in these exchanges as the constraints of national security will allow.

Mr McGrady: I thank the Minister for his response. It is the sixth response on Sellafield in the Chamber this afternoon, which is very welcome indeed. Will the Minister take on board the fact that there were two prerequisite elements for the licensing of the MOX plant that were not covered in his reply? First, the Health and Safety Executive had not reported before the licence was granted. Secondly, he completely omitted the economic case, which is also a requirement of the European Atomic Energy Community (EURATOM). That was omitted deliberately, because it is infeasible.

The Minister is the one person who can drive this on behalf of the House. Will he assure the House that he will be proactive in representing last week's debate and today's questions? He must ensure, in co-operation with all relevant parties, that the British Government are made fully aware. The strongest possible expression of discontent, to put it mildly, must be made to them, and we must be proactive.

Mr Foster: I can assure Mr McGrady that, as far as we possibly can, we will make undoubted representations for the protection of Northern Ireland.

Statutory Best Value Regime

7. **Mr Poots** asked the Minister of the Environment what consultation he has had with his ministerial counterpart in the National Assembly for Wales on the benefits of a statutory best value regime. (AQO 498/01)

Mr Foster: My Department has received papers from the Welsh Office on the best value process in Wales, including details of the plans to review that process over the next few months. I have also spoken to my counterpart in the Welsh Assembly, Edwina Hart, the Minister for Finance, Local Government and Housing, to learn at first hand what the review is likely to address. My understanding of the position is that the principles underlying the statutory framework for best value in Wales are not being questioned. Rather, the review will address details of its implementation and arrangements for its scrutiny. The broad objective of the review is to provide a workable model for best value in Wales that will give practical effect to the existing framework within current statutory provisions. Following a consultation process, the review group aims to have revised guidance in place by 1 April 2002.

The Local Government (Best Value) Bill currently before the Assembly includes five clauses that provide for a basic framework in the interest of council residents and ratepayers.

Mr Poots: I hope that, after his consultations with his Welsh counterpart, the Minister will take this issue seriously and reconsider the process of introducing statutory best value to Northern Ireland, which he is currently engaged in. The Bill appears to be inappropriate at this time, and it does not have the support of the local authorities or the unions that represent those working in local authorities. It has already cost local authorities an immense amount of money. Much valuable staff time has been tied up in the operation of voluntary best value, and much more of that time — which could be put to better use — will be tied up in the operation of statutory best value.

4.00 pm

Mr Foster: I thank Mr Poots for his question, but I am not sure whether the sentiments expressed come from Edwin Poots MLA or Cllr Edwin Poots; he may wish to declare an interest.

Best value is designed as a framework within which councils should deliver local services according to the wishes of residents and ratepayers, at a price that they are willing to pay. People are entitled to know how their council is performing, how well their money is

being spent and what future plans the council has for local services.

I am committed to avoiding the imposition of unnecessary bureaucracy on councils, but their views should not be given precedence over the rights and needs of ratepayers, residents and users of council services. Equally, the Assembly, with its preponderance of district councillors, should not allow its judgement to be clouded by the wishes of councillors at the expense of the views of local people, who deserve value for money and who are entitled to transparency and accountability in local service provision. Openness and transparency are vital elements of the Local Government (Best Value) Bill.

Mr B Bell: As Chairperson of the Public Accounts Committee, I am aware of the issues relating to accountability. Does the Minister agree that there should be a robust public accountability framework for local government, as there is for central Government? I declare an interest as a councillor, but I speak as Chairperson of the Public Accounts Committee.

Mr Foster: I acknowledge the fact that the Member has declared an interest. I agree that there is a need for a robust public accountability framework for local government, but the application of best value across the wider public sector goes beyond my remit as Minister of the Environment.

Central Government already operates a type of best value framework. Indeed, in many ways, it is more rigorous than the best value framework that I propose for district councils. It includes the Programme for Government, public service agreements, published departmental and agency corporate and business plans, the work of the Northern Ireland Audit Office, value for money studies and the work of the Public Accounts Committee and other Statutory Committees of the Assembly. That accountability framework was designed for central government, and it would be too burdensome for local government as presently structured. The Local Government (Best Value) Bill, on the other hand, is designed to fit the specific circumstances of the local government sector.

I am aware that proposals for regulating best value in housing and education are being considered and that the Department of Education is drafting legislation covering the application of best value by education and library boards. Similarly, the Department for Social Development is examining proposals to formulate best value in the housing sector. My ministerial colleagues in the relevant Departments are responsible for the detail of those proposals, but I can assure Mr Bell that best value and accountability are seen as an absolute necessity.

Planning Applications

8. **Mrs E Bell** asked the Minister of the Environment if he plans to place contentious planning applications

on hold until such time as the reform of local government is in place. (AQO 504/01)

Mr Foster: The Executive gave a commitment in the draft Programme for Government for 2002-03 to launch the review of public administration by spring 2002. The organisation of local government services will be considered in the context of that review, which will cover all aspects of the public sector and will be led by the Office of the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister. Good progress has been made, and we are on target to launch the review in spring 2002.

It would not be practical or lawful for me to place contentious planning applications on hold pending the outcome of the review. Once all material planning information relating to an application has been received and considered, my Department is under a legal obligation to determine that application. I have no powers to hold applications — contentious or otherwise — in such circumstances.

The Member may also be aware that article 33 of the Planning (Northern Ireland) Order 1991 gives applicants in all but major cases designated under article 31 of that Order the right to appeal to the Planning Appeals Commission on the grounds that his or her application has not been determined by my Department within the timescales laid down.

Mrs E Bell: I thank the Minister for his answer, even though it may not be the one that I wanted. Does the Minister at least agree that his experiences as a local councillor show that the current planning system is chaotic? The review of local government could consider how to ensure that all planning cases could be considered on their merits. Individual planning applications should be dealt with according to the needs of the local area and the residents, which is not happening at present.

Madam Deputy Speaker: Our time is up. I ask the Minister to give his reply in writing.

PROGRAMME FOR GOVERNMENT

Debate resumed on amendment to motion:

That this Assembly endorses the Programme for Government agreed by the Executive. — [*The First Minister*] [*The Deputy First Minister*.]

Which amendment was: Delete all after “Assembly” and insert:

“declines to approve the Northern Ireland Executive Programme for Government because it fails to adequately address the Executive’s stated priorities, does not tackle the deep divisions and inequalities in this society and therefore does not deliver the new beginning envisioned by the Good Friday Agreement.” — [*Mrs E Bell*]

Mr McCarthy: While I have a lot of reservations about many aspects of the Programme for Government, as outlined by my Colleague, Eileen Bell, earlier in the debate, I welcome the decision by the Executive to prioritise, and I am thankful that health is now the number one priority for all. Despite the extra funding for the Health Service, waiting lists continue to lengthen. Bed blocking is also continuing to increase, and facilities for people with learning difficulties are being stretched to the limits. Cancer service problems and problems with other services must be tackled immediately. Our sick people deserve better, and with the funding that is going in, they expect better.

However, I am relieved that free nursing care is to be provided — the sooner, the better. I hope that the necessary legislation will come along shortly; we do not want to see any delays. There is real disappointment because free personal care is not being provided for. I appeal to the Executive to work extremely hard on that as soon as possible. One section of care is as important as the other, and this needs urgent attention.

There is deep disappointment that the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety’s request for funding for free digital aids for people with hearing difficulties has not, to my knowledge, been granted. Again, the disabled are left to suffer. If the Executive are to mean anything, they must listen and act as far as humanly possible to assist everyone to have confidence in the National Health Service.

There are many other concerns to do with health and other areas of daily living, and Eileen Bell spoke about some of them earlier. My party leader, David Ford, will shortly follow with what the Alliance Party feels needs in-depth attention. I support the amendment.

Mr Fee: I support the motion and reject the amendment. This, the second Programme for Government, goes a long way towards addressing the Executive’s stated priorities. It also makes a good stab at tackling divisions and inequalities in society. It goes a long way towards delivering the new beginning envisaged by the Good Friday Agreement. As the second home-grown Programme for Government agreed by the Executive, this is

another extraordinary document and an extraordinary achievement.

I am not going to speak at great length. The debate has ranged across many wide areas, policies and services. One comment that the Deputy First Minister made earlier struck me and illustrates one element of this programme which is deeply frustrating. The phrase he used was “consultation fatigue”. On page 29 of the Programme for Government the Executive have committed themselves to ensuring that

“any new configurations of hospital services are supported by a modern and effective Ambulance Service, delivered through a programme of targeted investment and change based on the implementation proposals now published.”

I can only assume that the implementation proposals are those contained in the report of the strategic review of the Ambulance Service, which was published last month by the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety. I use the words “consultation fatigue” because the implementation paper has “consultation paper” written all over it.

I will put the proposals in context: in 1998, the Department first set up a team to review the Ambulance Service. That review group reported on 25 February 2000 and then began a consultation exercise, which lasted until 30 June. It took until November 2000 to establish an implementation steering group. A year later, in November this year, that steering group published its implementation strategy. Four years since the review began the Minister still refers to it as a consultation exercise. I find that consultation fatigue is setting in, and that must also be the case for those who are failed, not by the ambulance staff and paramedics, but by the service and its organisation.

According to the current targets for response times, the Northern Ireland Ambulance Service should respond to 50% of all emergency calls within eight minutes, and to 95% of all emergency calls in the Eastern Health and Social Services Board area within 18 minutes, or within 21 minutes in the other three board areas. The Executive should take on board that the vast majority of my constituency, and of most rural constituencies, cannot be reached from a hospital or ambulance station within eight minutes.

A substantial portion of Northern Ireland cannot be reached within the 18- or 21-minute response time. Among those areas are the whole south Armagh border, from Cullaville to Crossmaglen, through Keady to Middletown, vast tracks of the Clogher Valley, including Augher, parts of Fermanagh, and, until recently, parts of County Down and County Antrim. In an emergency, large sections of our community cannot be reached within the agreed safe response times for ambulance provision.

Since the implementation proposals are mentioned so specifically in the Programme for Government, and since they have now been published, will the Executive get on with the job of implementing them? I am not asking for a single extra penny for this service. Reorganisation could achieve savings, while creating the response times and the emergency services that we all want.

Every other emergency service — such as the fire, police and coastguard services — is centrally funded. The Ambulance Service has 800 staff in four operational divisions, which work in four health board areas. The boards commission urgent ambulance services, and in the Eastern Health and Social Services Board area the eight local trusts commission the Ambulance Service. Why is the service not funded centrally in the same way as other emergency services? Imagine the layers of bureaucracy that could be bypassed, the money that could be saved and reinvested in the emergency appliances and the training of the specialist staff who man them.

My plea to the Executive is not to allocate money from a certain budget, nor to rewrite the Programme for Government. After almost four and a half years of consultation, I plead that they put an end to the dithering and implement, without further delay, what is clearly stated on page 29 of their programme.

4.15 pm

The Chairperson of the Committee of the Centre (Mr Poots): In answer to my question of 3 December on the state of forward planning in relation to the review of public administration and the children's commissioner, Mr Durkan indicated that he had previously responded to questions about these matters. That is correct, but it does not mean that the responses were adequate. He should not therefore be surprised that I will be returning to those matters. They are matters of concern to the Committee of the Centre, and I hope that the Office of the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister understands that I will continue to raise them until they are dealt with satisfactorily.

In its response to the Office of the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister on the draft Programme for Government, the Committee of the Centre expressed concern about the approach to forward planning there and the lack of specific or measurable targets for a number of areas. The junior Ministers advised that it might not be possible to have quantified time-bounded targets in place in every case. This may help explain why the closest target we have been given for the launch of the review of public administration is spring 2002.

The House may be interested to note that according to the Collins English Dictionary spring is defined as the period from the March equinox to the June solstice in the northern hemisphere, or from the September equinox to the December solstice in the southern hemisphere. Given the lapse that has taken place, let

us hope that the Office of the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister realise that we are in the northern hemisphere and not the southern and that we will have a review of public administration within the next six months.

We have already waited for two years for a review. It was a priority for the leader of the Ulster Unionist Party, Mr Trimble. When the eleven Departments were set up, we were told that a review would help offset the costs of having additional Departments. We should remember that Northern Ireland costs £80 million more to administer now than it did before the signing of the Belfast Agreement. Administration costs are much higher than they were pre-April 1998. That issue must be addressed.

In June the Committee of the Centre was advised of the main issues under consideration with regard to a review. Should the approach be strategic or overarching, or should it take the form of a series of independent departmental reviews of individual sectors? Should it cover all functions at local, sub-regional and central levels? Was the most appropriate mechanism for taking it forward internal, external or a combination of these? What principles should guide the direction of the review? Should it be one all-encompassing review, or a review of the principles of public administration followed by a series of linked reviews of different sectors? How should the timing be phased?

In June of this year consideration was still being given to what the terms of reference should be. I had hoped that by now we would have had those, but I have not been advised that this is so. The Committee was advised that it would receive a further report when progress was made on these issues. Members may be surprised to learn that no such report has yet been sent to the Committee. In view of the approach to forward planning taken by the Office of the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister, I am not surprised.

In paragraph 7.5 of the Programme for Government we are told that

"The Executive remains committed to improving the efficiency and effectiveness of and accountability for, the administration and delivery of public services in Northern Ireland. We recognise the need for different structures under devolution, taking account of new relationships between local and regional government, as well as the full range of other bodies that function within the wider public sector. We are committed to a comprehensive and strategic review of all aspects of the public sector."

In a press statement following a meeting of the Executive on 14 November, the public was advised that at that meeting the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister introduced a discussion paper on the review of public administration. When are the Assembly and, indeed, the relevant Committee going to be advised of the content of the discussion paper?

What progress, if any, has been made since June? This is one of the most important cross-cutting issues that the Assembly will have to tackle, and it is one that could deliver significant efficiency benefits and cost savings. As the Minister of Finance and Personnel proposes a significant rise in the regional rate and one considers the additional burden that has been put upon ratepayers, a review of public administration will show where £4 million of savings, which would keep the rate rise to the level of inflation, might come from.

The way in which the Office of the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister has handled that does not inspire me with confidence. If that is its approach to such a vital task, how can the Assembly be assured that it will deliver on the other important cross-cutting issues set out in the Programme for Government, such as the community relations strategy and the victims strategy, both of which have slipped from the original dates that were set for them.

The Committee of the Centre and many Members attach a great deal of importance to the appointment of a children's commissioner. Sub-priority 4 of section two of the Programme for Government says that the Executive aim to protect children's rights, meet children's needs and include children's voices. The Programme states that

"Children need the support of society to ensure that their right to a safe, happy and fulfilling childhood is respected and promoted."

No Members would disagree, but the Programme for Government sets June 2002 as its target for the appointment of a children's commissioner. The Committee of the Centre carried out an inquiry into the appointment of a commissioner earlier this year. The Committee's report was debated and approved by the Assembly on 26 June. In responding to the debate the junior Minister said that

"The appointment of a children's commissioner is one of the most significant and exciting things to occur since devolution."

He advised that the legislation should be introduced to the Assembly early in the new year. I understand that that may happen in February. Even allowing for a smooth passage through all the stages, it is likely to take three to four months for the Bill to go through the Assembly, and it may be May next year before the legislation is finally in place. Can the Ministers explain how a children's commissioner will be in place for June 2002? Will they also confirm if the appointment will be made in accordance with the procedures for public appointments? Will the Ministers explain why they continue to set unrealistic targets in the Programme for Government that unfairly raise the expectations of the public — particularly the expectations of the most disadvantaged and vulnerable groups and individuals in society?

Some concerns about the equality impact assessment on the Programme for Government were drawn to the

Committee's attention. Paragraph 1.11 of annexe D states that the Executive recognise that much of their work

"has significant implications for equality of opportunity"

and that they are

"committed to ensuring that this is fully taken into account as we progress our work".

However in paragraph 1.9 we are advised that

"it is not practicable to properly assess the equality impact of the various sub-priorities nor of the overall Programme for Government".

Reliance is instead to be placed on the individual equality impact assessments carried out on various policies.

That approach has various weaknesses. It will not pick up the impact of combined policies; it will not identify ways to promote the equality of opportunity through joined-up Government; and it places particular emphasis on the quality of individual assessments — and the Committee of the Centre has drawn the Office of the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister's attention to deficiencies there. The equality impact assessments identify adverse impact rather than focus on positive ways to promote equality of opportunity.

Will the Office of the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister reflect on those comments and consider if there is any way in which the deficiencies in its approach can be addressed?

Mr M Murphy: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. The Health Service is in crisis because it has had no one to care for it. At last, we have a Minister who knows what she is doing and who is slowly but surely evaluating the performance of all the separate parts of the Health Service — hospitals, primary care, ambulances, health promotion and education.

However, there are two fundamental facts that we cannot change in the short term. The Health Service has been starved of hundreds of millions of pounds over the past 30 years. The Thatcherite agenda has created a culture of bureaucracy. The internal market and the trusts have taken money from front-line services; an added complication is the lack of nurses and doctors.

At last, the Executive have begun to respond to the Minister's demands for more cash. They have had to; across every political party and throughout every community the demand was clear — give the Health Service more money. However, we must be careful, now that we are taking faltering steps, that we do not demand the unreasonable.

The motives of the motion are very clear, but much more spend would be invisible and improvements slow. Junior doctors are working more civilised hours — and they are safer. However, productivity has been cut. Registrars no longer operate alone; surgeons supervise them — again a cut in productivity.

One of the problems is that politicians cannot wait; they will not let the changes be explored and bedded down and allowed to work. The scale of the long-term underfunding cannot and should not be underestimated. During the lifetime of the Assembly, Mr Durkan has allocated the Minister only a fraction of the resources that she has bid for. This is the responsibility of the Executive.

The trusts that were created to facilitate the internal markets have also had considerable problems in managing their budgets. It is true that a portion of new money, in some cases, has gone to meet health trust defects. Go raibh míle maith agat.

The Chairperson of the Audit Committee (Mr Dallat): I do not propose any radical changes to the programme. Clearly, any programme necessitates choices, but it also involves good housekeeping to ensure that the public gets value for money.

Since the end of direct rule, the Public Accounts Committee has dealt with several disturbing reports prepared by the Comptroller and Auditor General that clearly show that in the past, and particularly during direct rule, the public did not get good value for money — far from it. The Minister has clearly said that there will be no tolerance of Departments that do not clearly demonstrate that they have managed their finances well, and of course this is most welcome. However, much public expenditure is not controlled directly by the Departments but by a whole variety of quangos, and here the public auditor has produced several highly disturbing reports that show that there has been little regard for proper accountancy practices.

Since the last report on the Programme for Government there have been important improvements to how spending of public finances is recorded and accounted for; I refer of course to the Government Resources and Accounts Act (Northern Ireland) 2000.

I would welcome an assurance from the Minister that he will leave no stone unturned in his determination to clean out all bad practices in how public money is expended. Ultimately, this can only mean that the public will get more services within the constraints of the resources available. I would go further and ask that we do all that we can to measure the quality of the services provided and to ensure that where serious deficiencies exist they are rooted out without delay. However, I should like to see recognition for success.

To date, it has not been shown that there is a quick response to unnecessary waste or a fast track to stem it. I would welcome an undertaking from the Minister that the findings of the public accounts reports will be much more than historical records of past events and are in fact alarm bells for all that there is no tolerance of waste or of substandard service being delivered to the public.

4.30 pm

The public will judge the success or failure of the Assembly by the way in which we conduct our income and expenditure and the level of service we provide. It must be clearly understood that the bad practices that crept in during direct rule are gone forever.

Mrs I Robinson: While every Department has a genuine case for claiming to be underfunded, there is little doubt that the one single area of local government most in need of investment is the Health Service. No other area of local life has seen such decline over the past few years, and the challenge must be met head-on to prevent further disintegration of healthcare across the Province.

The provision of cancer care requires urgent financial assistance — the local service is rated as one of the poorest in Europe. It was encouraging to hear last week's announcement that an extra £41 million is to be ploughed into the Health Service. It has, however, been acknowledged that that may not be sufficient to maintain the level of healthcare currently required. While it is not all that we wanted, it must be of some comfort to patients whose treatment has been postponed or suspended. I am glad that £12.4 million of that provision is to be allocated to the coronary and cancer fields. The Programme for Government states categorically that there will be a focus on modernising and improving hospital and primary care services to ensure more timely and effective care and treatment.

The current state of our cancer services is exacerbated by the state of the equipment and machinery being used to deliver the services. It is old, outdated, inefficient and in need of urgent replacement. It is with horror that I note that there is not one single reference to investment in cancer care services in the programme. There are only two references to the disease — one in section 3.2, where it states that

“While deaths from heart disease are falling among those under 75, cancer deaths have been increasing and are likely to become the main cause of death in the coming years. We will therefore maintain a focus on prevention and treatment of cancer and heart disease.”

A second reference is to the demand for essential drugs in the fight against cancer, in paragraph 3.6. Providing access to cardiac surgery for an additional 150 people by March 2003 is referred to, yet there is no mention of the provision for cancer care. I find that illogical, indefensible and ill thought out. Last year, 31% of eligible women had not had a cervical screening test in the previous five years, and 28% of women aged between 50 and 64 had not had a breast screening test in the previous three years. Primary care services vigorously promote the concept of healthy living but lack both the finance and the resources to enable that goal to be fulfilled.

The Health Service must be able to provide rapid diagnosis followed by speedily planned and implemented treatment and support for patients. As things stand, patients are all too often forced to wait too long to see a specialist, delaying diagnosis and treatment. That delay and the inefficiencies of cancer equipment are causing untold and unnecessary anxiety for patients. It does not maximise the potential of the Health Service to treat conditions properly.

People often have no option but to travel to Belfast for treatment, rather than be treated locally, thus adding to their stress. At present there are no haematologists in the Western Board area, and that forces patients to travel to Belfast. The recent resignation of a radiologist at Antrim Hospital has caused delays in diagnosis. Attracting and keeping qualified staff is an ongoing difficulty. Better financial support across the Health Service would benefit many needy people. That must be addressed.

I am also disappointed to note that there is no reference in the Programme for Government to investment in maternity services. Following the farce that was the review of maternity services in Belfast, it is incredible that there is no mention of the new maternity hospital.

I am glad that the Department has finally realised that failure to provide adequate aftercare services has resulted in the system backing up to the point at which ambulances have had to be used for patients in accident and emergency departments. More than 70 beds in the Ulster Hospital are being used by patients who should not be in hospital. The lack of community care services continues to be the reason for bed blocking, not only in the Ulster Hospital but throughout the Province's acute hospitals. More than 12 patients waiting for operations on life-threatening brain tumours were forced out of the Royal Victoria Hospital for the same reason. Until that problem is properly addressed, services will stumble from one crisis to another.

The long-term care of the elderly is an issue that has gathered great momentum over the past few weeks and months — rightly so. Elderly citizens in Northern Ireland must stand idly by as services in Scotland, England and Wales are enhanced. The Health and Social Care Act 2001 splits care into two parts: nursing care and personal care. In England, residents will not receive funding for personal care, but they will receive up to £35, £70 or £110 per week for nursing care, depending on individual circumstances. In Wales, all residents qualify for £90 per week for nursing care, but, again, they do not receive assistance for personal care. In Scotland, residents receive up to £65 per week for nursing care and up to £90 per week for personal care, while all personal care is free for those living at home.

We should compare all that to what is provided in Northern Ireland — absolutely nothing. Residents of

Northern Ireland receive zilch for nursing care or personal care. Although the Department appears to be committed to free care in principle, it was forced to admit that it could not afford to provide that assistance. In any case, that commitment relates only to nursing care and not to personal care, which constitutes the bulk of care costs.

The elderly in this country have been relegated to the status of second-class citizens. Although the commitment to provide free nursing care by October 2002 is welcome, elderly citizens are not best served by having the cost of care split into nursing and personal sections. The state should be responsible for nursing and personal costs. Until such times, elderly citizens will get a bad deal from the Assembly. I hope that Ministers will take those views on board.

Ms McWilliams: Members who had the opportunity to look at this afternoon's 'Belfast Telegraph' will have seen that a major report has been published in the UK called 'Monitoring Poverty and Social Exclusion'. That report is the result of a large-scale survey carried out by the New Policy Institute and the Joseph Rowntree Foundation. It responds to the UK Government's ambitious programme for eradicating poverty and shows that results relating to 24 out of 50 indicators improved last year. That is the good news. Results for eight of those poverty indicators have become worse, and the rest have remained steady.

The report goes on to say that there are still four million children and a total of 13.3 million people living in poverty, which it defines as less than 60% of the average household income.

The report's conclusion is that the UK Government have made a slow start in their ambitious programme, but at least they have made a start. I would have thought that, on opening the Programme for Government, we could see what kind of start we have made in Northern Ireland. After the publication of the first Programme for Government, I asked whether the Executive had a research base for the indicators for child poverty — if not for family poverty — in Northern Ireland.

I still ask that question. Despite the Programme for Government's targets, we will not know in Northern Ireland whether we are doing better, staying steady, or getting worse, unless we can come to some answers, in the way that the Joseph Rowntree Foundation and the New Policy Institute were able to do by evaluating the ambitious programme set down by the Government at Westminster. Until we have that information, we can continue to set different targets in each new programme, but all we are doing is monitoring different things each time. The questions that I often ask are: what is in it, and what is not in it? I will continue to ask those questions until there is some indication of whether we are going up, staying steady or going down.

Despite the excellent report from the Committee for Finance and Personnel, reliance on private finance initiatives is being put forward as the only way forward. There should have been some criteria in the Programme for Government stating that that may not be the most appropriate way to proceed and that partnerships could be sought elsewhere. I would like to have seen a greater emphasis on private, public and voluntary partnerships, rather than the argument that private finance initiatives are the only way to proceed in Northern Ireland. We have learnt a great deal from the partnerships that have existed with regard to the social economy. However, there is little with regard to that in the Programme for Government.

The programme makes a sweeping statement on external relations, suggesting that Northern Ireland is a model for conflict resolution. I am not convinced that we have even started the process of conflict transformation. The Executive of Northern Ireland are targeted with conflict management. Through the management of that conflict, Northern Ireland may have become a good model for elsewhere. However, if we are ever going to achieve conflict resolution, we should be mindful of what we have not done well. What is happening on the streets and in the communities of north Belfast, for example, shows us how far we still have to go.

The duplication of services and lack of integration in Northern Ireland increases the amount of money that we spend each year — whether it is to provide separate facilities for housing, education, or health, depending on the location of local health surgeries. If we are to address genuinely the problems that we have faced in the past 30 years, that should have been an interdepartmental theme in the programme. The Civic Forum made a good point when it stated that the section titled ‘Growing as a Community’ should have been titled ‘Tackling Inter-Communal Division’. The alternative is the promotion of equality and inclusion.

I agree with Iris Robinson about the problems that we still face with regard to health. Despite the extra finance that the Health Service in Northern Ireland has received, there has been no real increase. Therein lies the problem. The percentage of the block grant has remained at 40% this year; it will go down to less than 39% next year, and it will be just over 38% the following year. That is a major issue that should be addressed. It is good to see that the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety has increased its targets from eight in the draft programme to 22 in the revised programme, because it has the highest departmental budget.

However, if the percentage of the block grant remains at 40%, the Health Service will not do well. Free nursing care for the elderly has already been put forward as an example of a promise that was held out and then pulled back, and then restored, but only with effect from October 2002.

4.45 pm

I am enormously concerned that the Personal Social Services (Amendment) Bill, which should have been considered by the Committee for Health, Social Services and Public Safety, has not been introduced. The Executive should have explained in the Programme for Government why that is so. The public do not know that, unless the legislation is passed, we may be unable to give out that money next October. To date, no member of the Committee has seen the legislation.

The personal social services legislation is now going to relate only to nursing care, and not to personal care. Those in the communities that came here today, particularly the elderly, are extremely concerned that the Executive held out a promise that they are unable to deliver until October of next year. The promise carries a large health warning — the legislation may not be in place by next October.

Once again, mental health services have not been prioritised. Professionals working in that sector have come here to talk about the troubled mind and the impact that 30 years of conflict have had on children in Northern Ireland. That could have been an integrated theme for cross-departmental work, yet it is barely mentioned in the specific programme on health.

The new regional maternity hospital, which will be located in Belfast, is not mentioned in the Programme for Government either. The dire consequences are that the main regional neonatal hospital must turn children away because there are not enough cots or intensive care nurses to cope with children who are seriously ill after birth.

Unfortunately, in the Programme for Government, childcare is simply mentioned and then passed over. The message from programmes in other regions of the UK, and the Republic of Ireland, is that a child out of a nursery is a woman out of a job. Until that ceases to be the case, numeracy and literacy levels will continue to be poor because children fall behind if they do not get a head start — both in education and care. I pay tribute to John Dallat for raising the issue of numeracy and literacy so many times in the House.

It is with some concern that I address the Programme for Government. It is not enough to talk about investing in education and skills, or about working for a healthier people, when, throughout the programme, insufficient attention is paid to cross-departmental projects and programmes. On reading the document, one must ask which particular project has truly been highlighted for implementation on a cross-departmental basis.

My final concern is about where our legal obligations under the European Directives are addressed in the Programme for Government. Have specific targets been set? We have fallen far behind in meeting targets,

particularly in environmental policy. Will we have to pay money because those obligations have not been met? If that were the case, what would the Executive's intentions be to actually meet some of their obligations in the next few years?

The Minister for Employment and Learning (Dr Farren): I am pleased to have the opportunity to contribute to the debate and to address some issues in the Programme for Government that my Department is responsible for.

The proposed amendment asserts that the Programme for Government does not adequately or satisfactorily address the inequalities and divisions within our society. Obviously, the programme does not provide all the answers in relation to those areas under my responsibility, but, nonetheless, many initiatives for which I am responsible are specifically directed towards addressing some of the inequalities, lack of opportunities and divisions within our society.

I take very seriously the whole issue of social justice. A profound sense of social justice must inform our entire approach to the Programme for Government and its implementation. As we prioritise the particular initiatives in the various Departments' responsibilities, high on the list must be the needs of the most disadvantaged in our society — those who have least resources and opportunities. Insofar as resources, initiatives and programmes can meet their needs, disadvantages and lack of opportunities, we must be seen to do so effectively.

On the theme of investing in education and skills, considerable progress in several respects can be recorded on the targets and initiatives that have been set, and some degree of positive achievement in making a difference can be identified. That whole theme is highlighted in the key priorities of the Programme for Government. It makes it clear that the Executive are determined to ensure that people in all sections of our society have the opportunities for education and training that will equip them to participate in the labour market in ways that will enable them to gain worthwhile and fulfilling forms of employment. In developing those initiatives and programmes, the Executive will ensure that people will be able to realise their personal potential with respect to their talents; that they will be supported to the best of our ability; and that no one will be marginalised or ignored.

One of the important initiatives currently under way is the work of the task force on employability and long-term unemployment. I trust that Ms McWilliams will note that it is clear evidence of a cross-departmental approach to key issues. The task force was established in the spring of this year, and it has been engaged since then in a wide range of consultations with many sectors in our society, from employers to trade unions and voluntary and community groups.

Ms McWilliams: Does the Minister accept that the public and some Assembly Members — although welcoming the task force on employability — might be disappointed that a genuine partnership, as was suggested in the Programme for Government, was not really built among those in the various sectors who deal with the issue of unemployment daily? Instead, the Minister chose to use officials from Departments, albeit — and rightly so — from across all of the Executive Departments. However, professionals and the unemployed themselves were absent from that task force.

Dr Farren: I am happy to address that point. It is not a point that has been made to us by the various groups that we have met. This morning, in co-operation with the Northern Ireland Association for the Unemployed, I had a very useful and positive meeting with a group of long-term unemployed people drawn from across Northern Ireland, and they were able to tell me of their own experiences. With them I was able to identify some of the initiatives and action plans on which our recommendations are likely to be based when the task force reports, early in the new year, I hope.

The range of community organisations that my officials and I met was such that we have had a most comprehensive form of consultation and engagement. The Department received a significant input and response from across the sector. Therefore, I can assure Ms McWilliams that the engagement that she suggests is necessary took place as recently as this morning. I trust that when the Department comes to make its final report, it will have an effective set of recommendations and action plans to put to Colleagues in the Executive and the Assembly.

The initiative on student financial support has received much public attention. At a further education college recently, I spoke to students who had benefited from the implementation of the first stage of the new package of financial support. They told me that were it not for the benefits that are now available, they would have found it impossible to avail of further and higher education. The group that I spoke to included women who had left school many years ago, some leaving with no formal qualifications. They can now avail of new opportunities to acquire qualifications and skills because of the new childcare allowances and the remission on fees. The residual threshold has been raised from £17,000 to £20,000, thus enabling many more students to avail of those opportunities because they no longer have to make the contribution to fees.

Together with the provision of additional places in higher education, the first benefits to widen opportunities are being put in place. In particular, that helps those from low-income backgrounds to participate in higher education and provides opportunities for more students to avail of higher education in Northern Ireland rather than having to migrate elsewhere.

From next September, bursaries will be available via maintenance support for low-income students. Those bursaries will further strengthen the support that has been made available since the review reported and the package was put in place earlier this year.

Frequently, there are complaints that some reviews take a considerable time to see the light of day and to be acted on. I am pleased to say that this review was undertaken in a short time frame, and action was taken within 12 months of its commencement.

5.00 pm

Having met those in the initial cohort that have benefited from the new package, I take considerable satisfaction from having helped to put it in place. This is just a beginning; much more must be done, and much more could be done with resources that are not available at present.

The third issue relates to the wider provision of opportunities for lifelong learning. Many Members have been exercised by this. The individual learning accounts programme has been successful but, due to circumstances outside our control, it had to be suspended. The programme will be redeveloped in a more targeted way. However, notwithstanding suspension, almost 40,000 people have been able to draw down individual learning accounts and avail of additional or new forms of training and education which many of them would not previously have had access to.

Members will have noted that learndirect centres are being opened in their constituencies — they are being opened across Northern Ireland. We have established nearly 30 centres, and 32 will be open by March 2002. These will provide access to over 12,000 online courses.

Members who are familiar with the provision of learndirect will know that the centres are located on high streets and have the appearance of shops. They are easily accessible and provide an innovative and imaginative approach to the provision of lifelong learning opportunities. When I visited the centres I was struck by the range of people from different backgrounds who use them. Young, middle-aged and older people are using the programme. I trust that Members are encouraging their constituents to avail of the opportunities that learndirect offers.

We provide adequate lifelong learning opportunities. However, courses for those who need to improve their basic literacy, numeracy, and information technology skills must be provided in addition to this. Tribute has been paid to my Colleague, John Dallat, for frequently raising the problems associated with inadequate literacy and numeracy skills. I am aware of the needs that must be met. Many programmes are already in place, but from early next year, the new strategy for basic skills will be set up. Thereafter, we hope that provision will

be made in a much more comprehensive and coherent way. This will involve the further education colleges working with community and voluntary organisations. We must reach out to all who, regrettably, have the types of numeracy and literacy difficulties that have been highlighted. It is important to note the tremendous contribution of many employers and the trade union movement in assisting us and in developing their own initiatives to tackle problems with their employees and members. I trust that, together with the various agencies, we will be able to make such progress that that problem will become one of the past, rather than one of the present.

The recent publication of the Burns Report has highlighted another important area for cross-departmental co-operation. I assure the House that my Department is in close consultation with my Colleague the Minister of Education's Department, particularly in respect of those aspects of the Burns Report that touch on further education. Members will be familiar with the general proposals on co-operation between further education and second level education for pupils over the age of 16. However, I am aware that many Members have highlighted the need for a much more vocational dimension to the final years of compulsory schooling — in other words, schooling for 14- to 16-year-olds.

We are addressing all of those curricular and structural issues in close consultation with the Department of Education. We want to ensure that, in future, all young people leaving school will meet the minimum standards they need to confidently enter training and further and higher education programmes, and thereby equip themselves for full and worthwhile participation in the labour market. That is the joint aim of both Departments' work on the issues that have arisen from the Burns Report.

I will briefly touch on several other specific issues that are in the Programme for Government and that must be highlighted. If we are to achieve the economic progress that is essential to our society and have a workforce that is adequately prepared, equipped, trained and qualified, then we must ensure that our training and further and higher education institutions are as up to date as possible with respect to information communication technology, both at infrastructural level and in the provision of courses to equip students with those skills and qualifications.

I am pleased that, in line with the Programme for Government, considerable progress has been made on ensuring adequate provision for the further education and university sectors. Outside investors who come to Northern Ireland to assess the support that we have available never cease to be impressed by the provision that is there to produce trained technicians and graduates. As Members will be aware, there are not enough properly qualified people here, and we have worked hard recently with employers in several

leading enterprises to establish fast-track training programmes to ensure that the people with the skills and the qualifications are available.

Although there is still a long way to go, the infrastructure and courses are there. We may need a turnaround in curricular focus in our schools to ensure that interest is developed in careers other than those that have been pursued up to now through further and higher education. Again, that highlights the need for closer co-operation between my own Department and the Department of Education. More importantly, an adequate career guidance and counselling service is needed. In line with the contents of the Programme for Government, we hope to be able to put that in place early in the new year when the Fulton Report has been finalised and decisions taken on it.

I argue to the House that, in attempting to meet my Department's general targets, progress is being made. The progress that can be made, and, indeed, should be made will never end. Some issues on which progress might have been made more rapidly are tied to the availability of resources.

I accept Prof McWilliams' point on Northern Ireland and conflict resolution. I have raised that issue frequently with our further and higher education colleges. More often than not our schools become the focal point for encouraging a greater sense of awareness of conflict resolution. The responsibilities fall to those who will be among the leaders in our social and economic sectors. We tend to say that only schools should address issues related to cross-community understanding, respect, democratic citizenship, and the responsibilities that are associated with those general concepts.

Our further education colleges and universities have an even greater responsibility. Too often we focus on particular disciplines and look for excellence — rightly so — in those disciplines. However, there is also a wider responsibility to challenge our students' understanding of democratic citizenship, and the rights and responsibilities that that concept implies. Issues that relate to conflict resolution, such as promoting respect and understanding of different traditions, can assist co-operation. Some of those challenges are not put to our students as directly as they should be. If they were, our young graduates and those who qualify from our further education colleges might develop a greater sense of responsibility. That point must be taken up by all in the Assembly and specifically by our institutions.

5.15 pm

Mr Ford: The issues that have been addressed fall into two broad areas. The first is the Health Service, which the Executive are supposed to have made a priority, and the second is the divisions in our society. Nobody who has spoken has been satisfied with the provisions for health services in the future. Most

notably, the contributions from Mrs Iris Robinson and Ms Monica McWilliams, who backed Mr Kieran McCarthy's concerns, made it clear that a great deal remains to be done. Almost all the additional money was redirected to acute services, even though the Hayes Report has not been implemented because no conclusion has been reached.

There has been very little on community care and virtually nothing on psychiatric services and childcare. Even in community care, we have had sight of the promise of free nursing care for those who require residential nursing home places, but nothing on free personal care — a matter that is of considerably more consequence to more people. There is great concern that the people of Northern Ireland will be left behind — certainly behind Scotland and to some extent behind Wales — in that process as it goes on during this year. If the Executive were serious about tackling the real needs of the many elderly and disabled people in Northern Ireland, they would look at free personal care and not just at free nursing care.

In his opening remarks the Deputy First Minister said that the divisions in our society were dealt with in the section 'Growing as a Community', which, he said, was about tackling divisions in society. However, I can find only one sub-priority that deals with divisions in that section of the Programme for Government. If the Executive were so concerned about such divisions they should have devoted a chapter to them. Indeed, there are only three action points, and they are not terribly specific.

Sub-priority 2 speaks of

"the need to support the capacity of local communities to deal with matters of dispute and division including the proliferation of sectarian graffiti, unauthorised flag flying, the erection of memorials and other issues that can lead to community tensions".

However, when my Colleagues and I write to Ministers about graffiti, kerbstone painting and the flying of illegal organisations' flags, we are fobbed off with "it cannot be done at this stage" and "community consensus is needed". Why is there no coherent action plan? We have instead

"during 2002, following consultation, put in place a cross-departmental strategy".

This, I suspect, means that it will be 2004 before anything is done. If the Programme for Government intends that something happen this year, I should like to hear from the Minister who will respond. I take it by his presence in the Chamber that Dermott Nesbitt will have that pleasure.

It is unfortunate that the First Minister was not present at any stage during the debate on the Programme for Government, and there was a relatively limited input from the Deputy First Minister. We should at least be grateful that Dr Farren has made a speech and

remained in his place. He has shown some of his Colleagues what good manners are when dealing with the Assembly.

In his opening speech the Deputy First Minister said that I had welcomed some of the Executive's proposals. As usual when I find myself being quoted by Ministers, I checked Hansard, and it is only appropriate that I read for the record what I did say on 13 November. I talked about the concerns that Alliance Members had last year about tackling divisions:

"The Executive took no notice of Members this time last year or during the debate in March 2001. I welcome the fact that, since then, they have addressed some of those concerns." — [*Official Report, Bound Volume 13, p 62*].

I may have welcomed their addressing some of the concerns, but we should remember that it took them over a year to recognise that our concerns were genuine. However, we should always be grateful for late converts to a necessary cause.

We should not allow Mr Durkan to suggest that this is anything other than my recognition of those conversions, following the passage in the House of Mr Kieran McCarthy's motion that more needed to be done to tackle issues such as flags and graffiti. At least they have responded to that. Therefore I claim a share of the credit, because that only appeared in the Programme for Government this year after an Alliance motion was accepted. If that offends the Deputy First Minister, I apologise, but it is factually accurate.

Dr Farren spoke as Minister for Employment and Learning. At the start of his speech, he clearly stated the concerns that he had for social justice in his Department. I welcome that statement. However, the issues that we are highlighting about divisions do not fall to his Department alone.

There is nothing in this Programme for Government, as it currently stands, to suggest that there is serious cross-departmental action by the Department for Regional Development, the Department for Social Development, the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety, the Department of the Environment and his Department. If those signs were apparent — and perhaps Mr Nesbitt can respond to that effect — it might give us some reason for believing that the Programme for Government is meaningful on tackling divisions. Currently, it is not. The public service agreements do not tie through to show serious action at departmental level. However, I am always an optimist. I wait to be reassured that there will be something coming in the winding-up speech.

I want to deal with what two or three other Members said. I was particularly interested to hear the speech of Alex Maskey. He is the Chief Whip of one of the Executive parties, and therefore I presume that he speaks with a degree of authority for at least one of the

Executive parties. In suggesting that the amendment should be rejected, he referred to the document as "moderate". I can only presume that coming from a member of Sinn Féin that is not a compliment. He also said that it was vague and ill-defined, which would not be a compliment coming from anyone. Yet he said that it should be accepted because of the difficult background, and it should be endorsed as a work in progress. Let us hear from Mr Nesbitt that it is a work in progress. Let us hear a few more specifics. If that is the official view in an Executive party, I would love to hear a little more as to how it is work in progress, and a bit more about the details.

Mr Kennedy: Will you vote for it then?

Mr Ford: Let us hear what the Minister has to say. Let us hear the Minister's assurances. I always have an open mind in this Chamber, unlike many Members who sit to my left.

Similarly Mr Cobain, when he spoke on behalf of the Committee for Social Development, made it clear that the Committee doubts the ability of the programme to deliver on many of the concerns that it has expressed. Mr Poots, as Chairperson of the Committee of the Centre, made clear his concerns from his Committee's perspective. In particular, the community relations strategy and the victims strategy have badly slipped on their proposed timetables.

Mr Durkan asked me earlier about the practical steps that Alliance had suggested. I have outlined one or two of those. I find it a rather interesting concept that the Deputy First Minister, with the resources of Government, expects the opposition party to produce the practical steps. Those steps have so signally failed to come — unless Mr Nesbitt is going to pleasantly surprise us — in the course of the presentation of this report, the debate on the draft programme and debate today.

As for practical steps, how about specific commitment to promote steps to make it easier for schools to transform to integrated status? It is clear that there is a demand for that. It is clear from what happened to Glengormley Primary School in my constituency last week that that demand can carry through, but it can create enormous difficulties under the current procedures with a group of parents who have divided loyalties on such an issue. If there is a commitment to promoting integrated education and to overcoming divisions, the transformation process must be made easier. That does not require legislation, but it does require Executive action. It is something that we should look to them for.

Let us see more specific proposals from this inter-departmental group. Let us see the Minister spell out, as he winds up this debate, the justification for the belief that his party and the other major party of Government appear to have that this amendment should not stand.

Let us hear the specifics that will flesh out the paper as it currently stands to persuade us that we should be supporting their motion and not our amendment.

The Junior Minister (Office of the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister) (Mr Nesbitt): I thank Mr Ford. He must have mentioned me at least six times, and I am not sure what I felt. It reminds me of something that he said some months ago. He requested that the proper Minister be in the Chamber to allay his fears. The then Deputy First Minister, Mr Mallon, was answering the question. Mr Mallon told him that he was sorry that neither Denis Haughey nor I were there, but that Mr Ford would have to deal with the mere Deputy First Minister. Today Mr Ford is looking for the Deputy First Minister and the First Minister, and I am sorry that he has to deal merely with me.

However, that addresses a very important point. Mr Ford said that there were two matters that he wanted to be addressed and that the second was the divisions in our society. I speak not only on behalf of Mr Haughey, but also on behalf of Mr Trimble and Mr Durkan. I represent an Administration that is cross-community in composition and in its articulation of policies. That is important when trying to heal those divisions. The Programme for Government tries to ensure that areas of need are appropriately targeted, tries to create employment and tries to make sure that we rural-proof what we are trying to do in Northern Ireland. Through the vehicle of the Assembly, of which the Executive is a part, we are trying in our small way — and I accept that it is a small way — to heal the divisions in society. I am glad that Mr Ford made that point, and I do not wish to belittle it by pointing to specific sub-entities and sub-priorities. The Assembly is trying to heal those very divisions. It is what we are all about here.

I listened with interest to the debate on the amendment and to the winding-up speech. The amendment asks that the Assembly

“declines to approve the Northern Ireland Executive Programme for Government because it fails to adequately address the Executive’s stated priorities, does not tackle the deep divisions and inequalities in this society and therefore does not deliver the new beginning envisioned by the Good Friday Agreement.”

My Colleague, Seán Farren, other Colleagues and I represent the new beginning of the Good Friday Agreement. Therefore I contend that this document goes much further in trying to achieve a cohesive, inclusive and just society than any other single document. The whole document plays a part. We have been debating the Programme for Government, and it contains a clear vision of:

“a peaceful, cohesive, inclusive, prosperous, stable and fair society, firmly founded on the ‘achievement of reconciliation, tolerance, and mutual trust, and the protection and vindication of the human rights of all’.”

That is what the Programme is about. It is important that any Programme for Government be a visionary document. However, it must set out how that vision will be translated into reality. Our Programme for Government endeavours to do that. It includes priorities and sub-priorities, and it also includes specific actions that will be taken with public service agreements and new service delivery agreements. They are specific and measurable.

5.30pm

The programme makes clear our commitment to tackle division and reduce inequalities. It sets out the actions that we will take to promote equality of opportunity and human rights for all. It recognises that some of the deepest divisions and inequalities exist between those in the poorest and most geographically diverse areas.

At the outset I mentioned rural proofing. Every aspect of the Programme for Government is aimed at ensuring that there is equality of opportunity, in rural and urban areas, among males and females and in every section of Northern Ireland society. The divergence and diversity of Northern Ireland is the reason that we restate our commitment to targeting social need. That is part of our attempt to heal the divisions in Northern Ireland. I have latched on to the precise phrase that was used by Mr Ford: “overcoming divisions” in our society.

The Programme has sub-priorities that cover the needs of victims of the troubles, committing us to improving community relations and tackling the divisions in our society. We are also committed to reviewing our current community relations policy, and putting in place in 2002 a cross-departmental strategy and framework for the promotion of community relations. We will also ensure that there is a co-ordinated and effective response to sectarian and racial intimidation.

There are problems in our society. We have recognised those problems, and I hope that together we will combat them, wherever they may be found. However, it is vital that we do not regard community relations as a simple, stand-alone issue. The priorities and actions throughout the programme are designed to tackle the deep and painful divisions that so clearly persist. I will refer later to our work to improve health. The implementation of every aspect of the programme that I mentioned in my introductory remarks — to help our children to do well in school, to help people to find work, to strengthen the economy — would help us to tackle the deep divisions and inequalities in our society.

I am therefore disappointed that although the document was with the public in draft form for so long — between the end of September and the end of November — the Alliance Party did not present the Executive with detailed proposals that could be implemented. I recognise that that was part of your winding-up — in the sense of a speech.

Mr Ford: Will the Member give way?

Mr Nesbitt: No. I thank you all the same.

I cannot, therefore, support the amendment, and I encourage all Members present to support the motion. In respect of the amendment, I re-emphasise the ambience of what we do here. Despite the different backgrounds and opinions of the parties who sit around these tables this afternoon — and we see who sits around these tables — we are here together to try to endorse a Programme for Government. That itself, I trust, will heal the divisions of our society.

The Programme for Government contains special commitments, some of which I will examine in turn. Mrs Bell mentioned integrated education. The Programme for Government indicates our support for greater diversity in education. The Department of Education encourages and facilitates the development of integrated education, but it does not impose integration. Rather, it responds to parental demand for that form of schooling. The emphasis for future development of the integrated sector has increasingly been on transforming existing schools to integrated status. All schools will have received information on the requirements for the process of transformation to integrated status.

Mr Kennedy raised the issue of targets for literacy and numeracy at Key Stage 3. The Executive remain fully committed to improving literacy and numeracy levels. The targets for English and mathematics at Key Stage 3 have been reduced; that was done in the light of new information on the progress being made below that level. We are all disappointed, but we must make a realistic and honest assessment of what the education service can be expected to deliver in the period until 2004. That does not mean, however, that there has been any diminution of our efforts to improve standards of literacy and numeracy.

Mr Kennedy also referred to the Burns Report. I can confirm that the Programme for Government commits us to bringing forward proposals by September 2002 for the future structure of post-primary education. Mr Maskey also asked about that.

Targets are important. They must be meaningful and challenging, but, above all, they must be deliverable. If there is slippage, we will report it and try to understand and explain it. We are trying to have achievable baselines and targets. That is progress on our position some years ago.

Mr Byrne spoke about the infrastructure in the north-west region of Northern Ireland. I want to restate the Programme for Government's commitment to making sure that the road infrastructure in Northern Ireland is maintained to a satisfactory standard. There has been other help for the north-west. The Toome bypass is one example of that, but there is also the recent announce-

ment about the extension of the gas pipeline to the north-west.

Dr Paisley spoke about rural proofing. I mentioned the importance of rural proofing in my response to Mr Ford. I understand that the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development intends to discuss her proposals for the implementation of rural proofing shortly and that the first meeting of the interdepartmental steering group under her chairmanship will soon take place. Dr Paisley also raised the issue of funding for the work flowing from the vision exercise. At this stage the Budget does not include any additional resources. However, the need for resources for the exercise will be considered following the current consultation and the preparation of the draft action plan in spring 2002.

Dr Paisley referred to fishing and to the important meetings that will take place next week. I can empathise with those concerned about the fishing fleets, and I am mindful of the constituencies in which they are harboured; I shall say no more than that, Madam Deputy Speaker.

Mr Gallagher asked about proposals for the future of our acute hospitals, and I understand that the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety has undertaken consultation. I hope that that will help the Minister to reach decisions on the best way forward with the Executive. She also proposes to issue a consultation paper following discussion with her Executive Colleagues and believes that there is a need for a further consultation paper because of the importance of the issue. Since Mr Fee mentioned the word "consultation" three times — and I will check that Mr Fee is in his place; he is — I am conscious that he made reference to "consultation fatigue", and in his concluding remarks he made a plea for some implementation after four and a half years of consultation. I share his concern, not about the specifics in relation to the Health Service, but about an over-abundance of consultation that can lead to a delay in the delivery of services.

Rev Dr William McCrea raised some points about sustainability in the Programme for Government, which makes clear our commitment to promoting sustainable living and achieving effective protection of the environment. Our desire to secure a competitive economy is not inconsistent with that commitment, and the programme recognises the need for our region to develop sustainability.

The Member also raised the issue of water quality and questioned why we do not have a more ambitious target for river water quality. We are doing much on that. The Assembly needs to bear in mind that action is being taken where river quality is below the standard required to enable us to meet our commitments. The Environment and Heritage Service, an agency of the Department of the Environment, has identified a number

of targets on which specific action is being taken to address water quality problems.

I will comment now on targets, actions, public service and service delivery agreements. The service delivery agreements should now be with Committees for consultation and discussion. I ask Members to look at them carefully and to contribute to their improvement — they are more detailed than the public service agreements and are in their formative stage. The Office of the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister looked at the service delivery agreements as part of a developmental process, and the Committees' contributions will play a very important part in formulating them.

Mr Cobain spoke about housing and fuel poverty. The Programme for Government commits us to ensure that everyone can get access to decent, affordable housing. In the Executive's first Programme for Government — and I hope that the second one will be endorsed today — the Assembly committed itself to undertake a range of actions. Those commitments in last year's programme included the building of new dwellings every year in the social housing sector, and arranging for the adaptation of properties to ensure that house design meets the needs of older people and those with disabilities. We aimed to raise the standard of the Housing Executive's stock by making improvements to dwellings. We also had a commitment to carry out heating conversions to gas or oil each year to ensure more economic and efficient heating. These actions from last year's Programme for Government remain valid and are supported in the Department for Social Development's public service agreement, which forms parts of the Programme for Government document, which has comprehensive targets for reducing fuel poverty in 2002-03. One example is the Department for Social Development's objective 2.1:

"By December 2004, reduce by 20,000 the numbers of fuel poor households in the private sector by providing energy efficient low cost heating/insulation systems."

Action will be taken in support of that target — we will support heating and insulation work to vulnerable households under the warm homes scheme. By carrying that targeted action through, work will be completed on 6,250 homes in the year 2002-03. There are clear, identifiable targets and actions to deliver that aspect of housing and address the poverty of the housing sector. It is to be hoped that those clear aims will be sustained.

5.45 pm

Mr O'Neill also dealt with homelessness. The new housing Bill will impact on that issue by refining the definitions of homelessness and intentional homelessness. The Housing Executive launched a review of its homelessness strategy and services on 24 September 2001. Statutory and voluntary agencies that work in the area of housing, as well as probation, health and social services and community groups have been consulted.

With apologies to Mr Fee, consultation will finish on 31 December 2001. The review will be finalised by March 2002, and an implementation plan will be produced to progress work on the various recommendations.

The Housing Executive has identified additional need — totalling £300,000 — in relation to voluntary agencies in the community which assist the Housing Executive in delivering its obligations to the homeless. A bid for that funding will be made in the December monitoring round, and it will be aimed at the most vulnerable people in the community.

Mr Poots made some points about the review of public administration. This is an important issue. One Member described it as, perhaps, the single most important element. The Executive are committed to ensuring that there is greater accountability for all services in Northern Ireland through a more efficient and effective structure of administration at local and regional levels. We are committed to undertaking a comprehensive strategic review of public administration. We realise that there have been difficulties in advancing that, but it is a difficult matter, and it will take time. A range of complex issues must be resolved before we can embark on such an ambitious project. All aspects must be taken into account, such as health provision or the Burns Report on education. A complex project is being considered, but I remain committed to it, and I am confident that it will commence early in the new year, with clear terms of reference to be seen. The Assembly and its Committees will have a full opportunity to give their views on the review.

Mr Poots also raised the issue of the commissioner for children. As Members know, the consultation period closed on 8 November. We are in the process of analysing the responses and making decisions on the way forward. The Executive remain committed to having a commissioner in place by June 2002. We have invested considerable effort in ensuring that the consultation was as comprehensive as possible. We tried to find out not merely what adults think children wish, but what children wish for themselves. That was not easy; it was difficult and sensitive.

Over 11,000 copies of the consultation document and 260,000 information leaflets were distributed. In answer to the specific question, the commissioner will be appointed in line with public appointment procedures.

Mr Poots also asked about the equality impact assessment. The Equality Commission issued practical guidance on how equality impact assessment should be carried out. The guidelines relate to individual policies. It is not practicable to apply them directly to the Programme for Government, which covers a wide range of policies, programmes and actions. The problem of how best to link them together has been, and will continue to be, discussed with the Equality Commission. As

Departments develop proposals for inclusion in the Programme for Government, the commission will consider whether those policies, programmes, actions and matters, which are included in the sub-priorities, will promote equality of opportunity and/or address inequalities for any of the categories under section 75 of the Northern Ireland Act 1998.

Individual policies mentioned in the Programme for Government will be subject to full equality impact assessment by Departments, in accordance with their equality schemes.

I agree with Mr Dallat on the issue of proper and effective management of public resources and the review of public administration. Our services should give value for money. Whether we are in a Committee, in the Chamber or in consultation with those in the community, we must at all times try to secure the best output for the given input of resources.

I hope that new initiatives such as public service agreements and service delivery agreements will have an impact. Committees must make their contribution to the improvement of service delivery agreements so that our services are managed properly and effectively. Six needs and effectiveness evaluations are being conducted throughout the sector, and they will make a contribution. All those measures should give better value for money.

The issue of cancer services was raised by Iris Robinson. Since September we have been examining how we can improve the Health Service, including services for those suffering from cancer, heart disease and renal failure. Paragraph 3.6 of the Programme for Government commits us to improving access to cardiac surgery, strengthening treatment processes for cancer suffers at local units and at the cancer centre in Belfast, and increasing the number of renal dialysis sessions.

When I last spoke on the Programme for Government, I mentioned the money that is being spent on health, and the feeling in the 1940s, when the Health Service was set up, that the service would become less costly. However, it has become more costly simply to stand still. An additional £41 million has been allocated to health and social services. To put that in context, that is an additional £224 million, or a rise of 9.7%. That includes a transfer of £19 million from the social security budget, so that the actual cash increase is £205 million, or a rise of 8.9%, which does not allow for inflation.

The bulk of that extra money is required to meet the rising cost of providing essential services. The £41 million will go some way to improving healthcare. However, I have a caveat: it is not enough simply to provide money. It is the management of services that will make the difference. There will be value for money if the output is maximised for the given level of input.

Therefore, the needs and effectiveness evaluations are important.

Finally — *[Interruption]*.

You know what they say about the opposition and the enemy. Perhaps I am totally confused, and perhaps that will be recorded for posterity and people will not know what I really mean.

Dr Farren: I am not sure what side you are on.

Mr Nesbitt: Mr McCarthy raised the issue of free personal care. Earlier this year the Assembly resolved that the Executive should implement in full the recommendations of the Royal Commission on Long Term Care for the Elderly. We put particular emphasis on that provision.

An interdepartmental group has been established to consider the scope for moving to the provision of free care, resources permitting. That group will advise if or when — I hope that it is when, not if — free personal care for the elderly might be introduced. The costs have been estimated to be at least £25 million per annum. The interdepartmental group will take account of the findings of the Scottish Executive's care development group's recent report, 'Fair Care for Older People'.

Ms McWilliams referred to public-private partnerships (PPPs). The Committee for Finance and Personnel's report and recommendations are being fully considered by the PPP working group, which was established by the Executive in accordance with the commitment in the Programme for Government. The group will review the use of PPPs to achieve value for money and to address the infrastructural deficit in Northern Ireland. The working group is also considering alternative sources of funding for improvements to public services. The group will provide useful information. A report is expected by March 2002, and it will be the subject of public consultation prior to any final decisions. I hope that those decisions will have been taken by September 2002.

The Programme for Government is a comprehensive document. Many parts of the programme try to heal the divisions in our society, which was the central concern of those who tabled the amendment. I commend the programme to the Assembly.

6.00 pm

Question. That the amendment be made, put and negatived.

Main Question put.

The Assembly divided: Ayes 46; Noes 18

AYES

Roy Beggs, Billy Bell, Esmond Birnie, P J Bradley, Joe Byrne, Fred Cobain, Robert Coulter, John Dallat, Ivan

Davis, Arthur Doherty, Mark Durkan, David Ervine, Sean Farren, John Fee, Sam Foster, Tommy Gallagher, Michelle Gildernew, Carmel Hanna, Denis Haughey, Joe Hendron, Derek Hussey, John Kelly, Danny Kennedy, James Leslie, Alban Maginness, Alex Maskey, David McClarty, Alasdair McDonnell, Alan McFarland, Michael McGimpsey, Martin McGuinness, Gerry McHugh, Eugene McMenamin, Pat McNamee, Monica McWilliams, Conor Murphy, Mick Murphy, Dermot Nesbitt, Danny O'Connor, Dara O'Hagan, Eamonn O'Neill, Sue Ramsey, Ken Robinson, George Savage, John Tierney, Jim Wilson.

NOES

Eileen Bell, Gregory Campbell, Wilson Clyde, Nigel Dodds, David Ford, David Hilditch, Roger Hutchinson, Kieran McCarthy, Maurice Morrow, Ian Paisley Jnr, Ian

R K Paisley, Edwin Poots, Iris Robinson, Mark Robinson, Peter Robinson, Denis Watson, Peter Weir, Sammy Wilson.

Question accordingly agreed to.

Resolved:

That this Assembly endorses the Programme for Government agreed by the Executive.

Mr Ford: On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. Is it not the case that the motion requires cross-community support? The figures were not given.

Madam Deputy Speaker: There is no requirement for cross-community support for the Programme for Government.

Adjourned at 6.10 pm.

NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

Tuesday 11 December 2001

*The Assembly met at 10.30am (Madam Deputy Speaker
[Ms Morrice] in the Chair).*

Members observed two minutes' silence.

LOCAL GOVERNMENT (GENERAL GRANT) ORDER (NORTHERN IRELAND) 2001

Madam Deputy Speaker: I wish to remind Members that a Statutory Rule which is subject to affirmative resolution becomes law once it is approved by the Assembly.

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

That the Local Government (General Grant) Order (Northern Ireland) 2001 (SR 395/2001) be approved.

This Statutory Rule is required in order to specify the district councils which are taken into account when determining the formula for distribution of the resources element of the general Exchequer grant. Members will be familiar with the financial support that the Department of the Environment provides for district councils in the form of this grant.

There are two elements to the grant: the derating element, which compensates district councils for loss of rate income due to the statutory derating of certain properties; and the resources element, which provides additional finance to those district councils whose total rateable value per head of population falls below a standard determined by the Department.

The grant available for the current financial year is £25.7 million for the derating element and £19 million for the resources element. That is a total of £44.7 million. These funds are distributed to councils in accordance with the statutory formula which is detailed in the Local Government &c (Northern Ireland) Order 1972. As part of the methodology for the distribution of the resources element of the grant, the primary legislation requires the Department to set a standard rate each year. Any council that falls below that rate is entitled to a share of the grant. Councils above that level are not entitled to the resources element of the grant. To determine the rate, data for selected district

councils relating to gross penny rate products and population are applied. The formula is very complicated.

The legislation also requires that the councils taken into account, and the calculation of the standard rate, are specified in an Order that is subject to affirmative resolution. Article 2 lists the 15 councils for which data was used to determine the standard rate for distribution of this year's provision of £19 million. Article 3 revokes the Local Government (General Grant) Order (Northern Ireland) 1997 and the Local Government (General Grant) Order (Northern Ireland) 1998. All district councils' accounts for both years have now been certified, and the grants have been paid. The approval of this Order is a necessary part of the methodology for distribution of the resources element of the general Exchequer grant for 2001-02. I commend the motion to the Assembly.

Mr A Doherty: It is right that we should express satisfaction, as the Order goes some way towards easing the burden on councils, particularly those smaller councils that would have suffered most from the earlier changes proposed to the general grant. We are grateful to the Minister of the Environment and the Minister of Finance and Personnel for making those resources available.

Mr Foster: I thank Members for accepting the motion. I am grateful that I was not asked too many complicated questions, because it is a complicated subject, as far as the formula is concerned. I commend the motion to the Assembly.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That the Local Government (General Grant) Order (Northern Ireland) 2001 (SR 395/2001) be approved.

FISHING VESSELS (DECOMMISSIONING) SCHEME (NORTHERN IRELAND) 2001

Madam Deputy Speaker: I remind Members that a Statutory Rule which is subject to confirmatory procedure becomes law once it has been laid before the Assembly. However, it ceases to have effect unless it is approved by the Assembly within a specified period. This Statutory Rule was made on 5 October 2001 and will expire on 28 December 2001 unless approved by the Assembly.

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development (Ms Rodgers): I beg to move

That the Fishing Vessels (Decommissioning) Scheme (Northern Ireland) 2001 (SR 349/2001) be approved.

I am introducing the scheme to help in the conservation of fish stocks by seeking to reduce the catching capacity of the local fleet. Under the scheme, and with the co-operation and assistance of my Colleague, Mark Durkan, I am making available £5 million in decommissioning grants to Northern Ireland fishermen.

I shall highlight briefly the key aspects of the scheme, which have been the subject of full consideration by the Assembly's Committee for Agriculture and Rural Development and industry representatives. Launched on 5 October 2001 with a closing date for applications of 15 November 2001, the scheme was open to vessels over 10 metres in length that were registered as UK fishing vessels based in Northern Ireland since 1 January 2001; which had a licence authorising fishing in EC waters for any of the sea fish for which the UK has a share of EC total allowable catch; and which recorded at least 75 days at sea in each of the two calendar years 1999 and 2000.

Vessels also had to be at least 10 years old, with a valid safety certificate, and they had to be in the same ownership at the time of application as on 1 January 2001. The scheme provides for grant aid to be awarded in respect of two classes of vessels — those targeting white fish stocks, which will attract three-quarters of available funds, and those primarily targeting nephrops, which will attract the balance.

Applications will be considered as part of a competitive tender process. A strike price mechanism will be applied to each class of vessel to obtain best value for money from the reduction of the fleet capacity. Successful applicants will be allowed to dispose of, or transfer, their fish quota entitlements to another vessel owner or to a fish producers' organisation, and vessel owners have up to three years to complete the transfer. The principal means of disposing of decommissioned vessels will be scrapping; however, my Department will consider other methods. Interest has been expressed in the

scuttling of vessels to create artificial reefs, and, if necessary, I will amend this Order to accommodate that method. However, I foresee environmental difficulties, which the fishing industry would need to resolve urgently.

Successful applicants will be expected to have decommissioned their vessels and surrendered all licences and entitlements before 31 March 2002. We aim to inform applicants of the result of their application before the end of the year, so that they have the maximum amount of time to arrange for the disposal of their vessel. The scheme is a key part of a £21 million aid package, which I am making available to the Northern Ireland fishing industry in recognition of the difficulties that it faces. Similar schemes have been introduced in England and Scotland. I commend the scheme to the Assembly.

The Chairperson of the Committee for Agriculture and Rural Development (Rev Dr Ian Paisley): Local fishermen welcome the launch of the Fishing Vessels (Decommissioning) Scheme (Northern Ireland) 2001, and they wish it well in its progress through the Assembly. Of course they feel that the scheme suffers from many imperfections, which have been well documented and debated. I would like an assurance from the Minister today that she will work closely with the fishermen so that matters can be ironed out during the scheme's application. I also welcome the fact that she has left open certain methods of doing away with decommissioned vessels.

As Chairperson of the Committee for Agriculture and Rural Development, I will discuss our formal deliberations with the Minister on the matter. The Committee was informed of the Department's proposals for a decommissioning scheme in October 2000, and it discussed the issue with officials in March 2001. In April, the Committee obtained a copy of the draft regulations and sought the views of the two fish producers' organisations. Their members are directly affected, and many hope to leave the troubled and seriously run-down industry. The Committee then met with the Minister to discuss the issues raised by the fishermen.

As the Minister knows, their main concern was that the draft scheme did not allow for track records to be retained for use by the remaining Northern Ireland fleet. The track record displays fishing quota units and is attached to a vessel's fishing licence. Fishermen had asked that the fish quota from a decommissioned vessel be returned to the producer organisation of which that vessel's owner had been a member. In that way, the quota would stay with the remaining Northern Ireland fleet. Officials from the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development had assured them that that would be the case. The Committee agreed that that was essential to help sustain those vessels whose owners still wanted to fish.

Unfortunately, the Minister informed the Committee that despite that being the Department's preferred option, according to legal advice the Department could not go down that road. Owners of decommissioned vessels would therefore be free to dispose of their track record to the highest bidder. There followed a period of further correspondence and meetings between the Committee and the Department. Although Members did not see the legal advice that was given, they were able to consider several policy papers. These were supplied on 5 July. The next day the Committee agreed that the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development should proceed with this rule. The Department consulted the fishing industry further during the summer, and the fishermen's organisations raised more issues with the Committee.

10.45 am

The Committee met officials shortly after the summer recess and agreed to make several recommendations to the Minister, including the length of vessels to be included in the scheme and the use of certain statistics when considering applications from fishermen. The Committee was pleased with the Minister's positive response, and the Statutory Rule was finally laid on 26 October. After formal consideration on 9 November, the Committee agreed to recommend that the Rule be confirmed by the Assembly.

More than 60 owners have applied to decommission their vessels. It is sad that fishermen feel that they have no option but to abandon their life's work in that way, but it is also understandable. The savage quota cuts recently proposed by the European Commission represent yet another hammer blow to the industry.

The Deputy Chairperson of the Agriculture Committee, another Member appointed by the Committee and I will today go to Strasbourg to meet MEPs and Commissioner Fischler on this very important matter. The Minister has expressed her thanks for our attempt to lobby for her proposals. I trust that her advocacy, as well as our own, will meet with some success and that part of the dark shadow that hangs over the industry may be lifted. The scheme introduced by this Statutory Rule — assuming it is confirmed by the Assembly — will at least allow some owners to leave the industry with their dignity intact.

Mr O'Neill: I know that the Minister, along with Members who have witnessed the troubles of our fishermen, shares our deep concern for the welfare of those men and their businesses. As the Chairperson of the Agriculture Committee said, this Rule will offer an opportunity for some people at least to leave with some dignity.

We have observed the plight of the fishing industry over the years, and we have seen how people have attempted to deal with the difficulties. On many occasions

we have lobbied with the Minister and in Europe for a solution.

The quota system and the new quota levels have effectively strangled the fishing industry, particularly in my constituency. Many people see those quotas as being excessively severe, and share a sense of injustice. While we are conscious of the environmental impact of overfishing, and while we are concerned about the future of the industry, it is indeed arguable that the quotas are excessively severe. I wish those who are lobbying for improvement every success in their endeavours.

Can the Minister give us any further information on the implementation of the scheme? Does the Department have any further plans to deal with the problems confronting the industry?

Mr M Murphy: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. This is a serious problem. I welcome the Minister's allocation of £21 million in aid for the decommissioning of boats. However, many people have been made redundant. Quota cuts on sole, plaice, herring and nephrops in the Irish Sea run contrary to scientific and fishing industry advice. Scientists specialising in the fishing industry proposed an increase of 90% in the Irish cod total allowable catches (TAC) of Irish cod, but the European Commission has restricted that to 10%.

Last year nephrops with a value of £8.5 million were landed from the Irish Sea, mainly for Northern Irish-based processors. A 25% cut will see the value reduced by £2.1 million. At the same time the value of whiting landed from the Irish Sea was £389,000. In other words, local fishermen are being asked to sacrifice at least £2.1 million in the name of rebuilding a stock that was worth 4.5% of the value of nephrops.

Despite being given the necessary evidence, and despite strong representation by UK Fisheries Ministers, the European Commission has refused to keep its commitments and restore the cut imposed on the out nephrops quota to 10%. There is no problem with the nephrops stock in the area 7 management area, which includes the Irish Sea.

Scientists have confirmed that there is a problem with their advice, in that it is retrospective. Therefore, their advice cannot take into consideration the additional technical conservation measures proposed and adopted by local fishermen from 1 January 2001. Those measures were designed specially to reduce discards of whiting and other stocks.

Fishing organisations believe that the EC's judgement on quota management issues is being clouded by the personalities and ego trips of the few individuals involved. Evidence will show that stocks are high enough to allow fishing in the preserved areas. The European

Commission has chosen to ignore the scientific evidence and continues to place fishermen's livelihoods at risk.

Mr McCarthy: Our fishing community has experienced years of decline and cutbacks, which have had a severe knock-on effect on our fishing villages and further afield. Coming from a constituency that has a fishing community, I have seen at first hand the devastating effect this has had on many people. Let us hope that we will soon see an end to the uncertainty, and that the industry can get back on track to a prosperous future.

I pay tribute to all those engaged in the industry — which is a tough profession — for their forbearance and endurance. I am happy to support the motion, as long as it adequately meets the needs of the fishing community. I ask the Minister to work closely with, and listen to, the fishermen.

Mr Bradley: I welcome the Minister's statement and the key aspects of the scheme that she outlined. It has been pointed out by other Members that it has been a long-drawn-out process since we first met with fishermen to discuss their plight. The Committee and the Department have had a good working relationship on this issue, as we fully realised the serious situation that the fishing industry was in. It was sad to see elderly men representing the industry coming to the Committee and not knowing where they were going to turn. Would their families survive in the industry that their grandfathers and great-grandfathers had set up? We felt that they were faced with an impossible situation, because the bureaucrats in Europe were dictating their lifestyle.

Yes, there are disadvantages in the scheme. However, I must go along with the opinion of the Anglo-North Irish Fish Producers Organisation that the need to proceed with decommissioning outweighs the scheme's disadvantages. I welcome that line. They are the experts, and they probably appreciate that the fishermen cannot get 100% of what they were looking for. The advantages must be welcomed.

Another point is the possible reclamation of grant money paid in the last five years to fishermen who are decommissioning. I hope that a mechanism can be put in place so that any grant reclaimed from successful applicants is redirected into the industry. Ring-fence it, hold it, put it in savings, but get it back into the industry, rather than into some other Department or some unknown account.

The Chairperson said that it was ironic that on the day when we have firmed up some reasonably good news for the industry on decommissioning, we are now faced with the problem of the new quotas on prawns and haddock. The new demands that have been handed down from Europe must be challenged. This is D-day as far as the fishermen are concerned. I agree with the Committee's decision to go and lobby the Commission and to support the Minister as best we can. We are

united on the issue of cutbacks, and it must be fought tooth and nail.

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development (Ms Rodgers): I thank the Members for their contributions. I assure the Chairperson of the Agriculture and Rural Development Committee, Dr Paisley, that I will continue to work closely with the fishermen and consult them on all issues. The issue of scuttling of vessels is difficult, because of the environmental considerations. It would be difficult for the fishermen to scuttle their vessels in a way that would not damage the environment. However, I will examine it, and if a way can be found, I will deal with it in the legislation.

The Department would have preferred to retain the fixed quota allocation in the North. However, we did not have that option, as the legal advice indicated that it was not possible. I was pleased to respond to the Committee's suggestions and make some minor amendments to the decommissioning scheme. I welcome the fact that members of the Committee will be going to lobby the Commission in Europe. The fishing industry is in a serious situation, and the proposed cuts are draconian. It will be useful for the Commission to understand that there is a united voice coming from all the parties in Northern Ireland in support of my attempts to ensure that the cuts are not as drastic as proposed.

Éamonn ÓNeill requested further information about schemes. I am pleased to announce that four schemes, in addition to the decommissioning scheme, will be open for applications from Monday 7 January 2002: improvement of facilities at Northern Ireland fishing ports, aquaculture processing, marketing of freshwater and marine products, and promotions.

That represents a total funding allocation of £15 million, £11.35 million of which is derived from the European Union. The aim of the schemes to improve port facilities will be to encourage the provision of safe, modern and well-maintained harbours and infrastructure at Northern Ireland Fishery Harbour Authority harbours.

The aim of the aquaculture scheme is to encourage the expansion of aquacultural production in Northern Ireland, to broaden the base of cultivated species, to exploit untapped market potential through the cultivation of high-value species and to increase quality through improved production methods.

The processing and marketing of the freshwater and marine products scheme is aimed at encouraging innovation and investment in the fish processing sector, to enhance market opportunities for primary producers and to increase the competitiveness of the participating businesses. The aim of the promotion scheme is to develop improved marketing structures and strategies by encouraging greater integration and collaboration among producers, processors and others in the fish processing and supply chain.

A total of £9.4 million will be made available to improve facilities at the ports, of which £7 million is European Union aid and £2.4 million is national aid. A sum of £1.2 million will be made available for the aquaculture scheme, £1 million of which is European Union aid and £0.2 million is national aid. Some £1.9 million will be allocated for the processing and marketing of the freshwater and marine products scheme, £1.6 million of which is European Union aid and £0.3 million is national aid. The promotion scheme will receive £1.75 million of European aid and £0.45 million of national aid — a total of £2.2 million.

11.00 am

I must correct Mr Mick Murphy's interpretation of the figures. The total allocation for the various schemes is £21 million, of which £5 million is to be used for the decommissioning scheme. However, I agree that this year's proposed cuts are a cause for concern, given that the industry has already suffered a great deal, especially as a result of the cod recovery plan.

Mr Murphy said that the Commission ought to ignore the scientific evidence. However, the Commission should, just this once, agree with the scientific evidence. The problem is that, in previous years, the Commission said that it had to act in accordance with scientific advice. When scientists advised the Commission to make cuts, it did so. This year, the scientists have advised us to increase the cod quota to 4,000, and I hold firm to that advice. The Commission, however, has proposed a swingeing cut. The same applies to quotas for other species of fish: scientific evidence indicates that there is room for an increase in the tack, yet the Commission takes the opposite view.

I want the Commission to be consistent. In the past few years, the Commission told us that it had to act in accordance with scientific advice to make drastic cuts. However, I cannot understand its position this year, because the evidence indicates that an increase in the quota is possible. It is ignoring the science and opting to impose cuts instead of increases.

I agree with Mr McCarthy that uncertainty abounds in the fishing industry, and there are many difficulties. He comes from a fishing constituency, so he will have first-hand knowledge of those difficulties. He has asked whether I shall ensure that the needs of fishermen will be adequately addressed in the decommissioning scheme. The scheme is a response to a request from the fishermen. I hope, therefore, that they can avail themselves of it. We have already received 66 applications for decommissioning. Provided that the strike price is agreed, we hope to be able to inform the successful applicants by mid-December. I expect that between 20 and 30 of those 66 applications will be successful.

I agree with Mr Bradley's remarks about the difficulties fishermen face. The grant money about which he asked

is EU money, and the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development has investigated the possibility of retaining that money. However, I regret to inform Mr Bradley that the Department was unsuccessful in doing so. It would have been nice to retain the money, but we have been informed by the EU that that will not be possible.

I thank Members for their contributions, and I thank the Committee for its co-operation in bringing the scheme forward. It was a complicated scheme and one with which the Department encountered several legal difficulties.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That the Fishing Vessels (Decommissioning) Scheme (Northern Ireland) 2001 (SR 349/2001) be approved.

BUDGET 2002-03

The Minister of Finance and Personnel (Mr Durkan): I beg to move

That this Assembly approves the programme of expenditure proposals for 2002-03 as set out in the Budget laid before the Assembly on 3 December 2001.

Today the Assembly will vote, for the second time, on a Budget as envisaged in the Good Friday Agreement. The Budget sets out the spending plans that will deliver the commitments set out in the Programme for Government, which was agreed by the House after constructive debate yesterday. As I explained in my statement last week and in opening the Programme for Government debate yesterday, the Executive have had more time this year to ensure that their spending plans are based on informed and objective judgements.

The Assembly and its Committees have played a full and constructive role throughout the process, which began in June with the publication of the Executive's position report. That position report provided Committees and the wider community with a long period in which to reflect and comment on the issues facing the Executive across all their major programmes and priorities.

The Executive took careful account of the responses received, and the draft Programme for Government and Budget presented to the Assembly in late September sought to address those. Since then, the Executive have had a more formal eight week consultation. We welcome the positive way in which Statutory Committees and others have used that opportunity to question and analyse the many spending issues that we face. In that context, I pay tribute to the lead given by the Committee for Finance and Personnel, which has drawn together the views of all the Committees. That has been helpful to the Executive, and I am sure that Members will agree that it has been especially helpful to the Assembly.

I made a comprehensive statement on the revised Budget to the House last week. As only a limited amount of time is available for debate, I do not wish to take up an undue amount of time going over all those issues or going through the departmental allocations again.

However, I wish to emphasise a few key points. I hope that it is now clear that the Executive listen and respond to what they hear. Their consultation has not been shallow or perfunctory. We have heard what so many in the House, and in society, have had to say about the need to do more for the Health Service, and we have acted.

Including the Executive programme fund allocations that I announced last week and the new money announced by the Chancellor in his pre-Budget report, we are providing an extra £41 million over and above the amounts that were announced in the draft Budget.

We are also acting quickly by adding £8 million to the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety's budget this year instead of holding that amount back until 2002-03, as was indicated in the draft Budget. As a result, the allocation for health in 2002-03 will be £72 million higher than was envisaged in June's position report and, in total, will involve an increase of £205 million, or 8.9%, in the current year's figure. Although most of that money will be needed to cover rises in the costs of providing services, it will allow some £41 million of service development to take place in health and personal social services next year. That is out of a Budget that will total £2.5 billion.

Such resolute action shows the Executive's determination to make a difference to the way in which society is governed and, more importantly, to the lives of its people. We will be forward looking but realistic as we plan for the future. We shall not be able to deliver the real improvements to achieve the quality of life that we desire, especially to those whose need is greatest, without facing up to some hard choices in future.

As I said last week, the devolved Administration had the good fortune to come into office when spending was growing rapidly. We cannot expect that to continue, and we need to be able to adapt our ways of acting to deal with a different situation. The Executive are determined to use next year's spending review to make a clear and significant difference to spending on Northern Ireland's public services. That will be a fundamental spending review, a root-and-branch analysis of where need is greatest and an opportunity to make our mark on the public services.

Last week's statement gave rise to a range of important questions from Chairpersons of Committees and other Members. At the time, I sought to address those as fully as possible within the time constraints. However, two matters have since arisen that require further clarification. First, the Chairperson of the Committee for Social Development wrote to me as a follow-up to a question he raised after my statement. Specifically, he asked for an explanation of the adjustments that have changed the Department for Social Development's expenditure limit. It was £450.5 million in the draft Budget and is £449.7 million in the revised Budget.

Three adjustments were made to the total for the Department for Social Development between the draft and revised Budgets. The first was the addition of £2.9 million of welfare-to-work funding that is a technical change in the presentation of the figures to reflect the fact that that expenditure now forms part of Northern Ireland's assigned departmental expenditure limit, so it is within the resources that are allocated at the discretion of the Executive and the Assembly. Corresponding presentational changes have been made to other Departments' totals.

Secondly, there is an increase of £1.6 million, which is the Department for Social Development's share of the Executive programme fund allocations that I announced last Monday. Against those additions to its departmental expenditure limit, the Department for Social Development has identified a reduction of £5.4 million in the provision required for the Lagside Corporation. That change to Lagside Corporation reflects a technical change to the treatment and classification of aspects of its finances without altering its actual activities.

11.15 am

The Department for Social Development notified the Department of Finance and Personnel that £5.4 million less than had been allowed in the draft Budget was needed from the departmental expenditure limit to finance the planned level of activity. That reduction, reflected in the revised Budget, is due to a clarification by the Department for Social Development of the amounts required from the departmental expenditure limit to provide for Lagside Corporation's planned activities.

To show such a reduction as a reduced requirement is in line with resource budgeting practice. It released spending power within the departmental expenditure limit for reallocation to other services, and did not reduce the spending power of either the Department for Social Development or Lagside Corporation.

The same technical correction applied in 2001-02 also, with £5 million being returned in monitoring rounds. However, in Budget presentations, it is normal practice not to include in-year changes such as the routine monitoring round reallocations in the comparative figures used in the Budget document.

Therefore, with the £5.4 million reduction applied in 2002-03, but not the £5 million reduction that is shown in the comparative figures for 2001-02, there is an apparent 9.9% reduction in that spending area. That is not the whole story, or the actual spending facts, as it is not possible to show every change in the Budget document. We consistently use comparisons that exclude monitoring changes, because that minimises distortions and provides the best like-for-like comparison between one year and the next, even if it gives rise to possible misinterpretations.

The Minister for Regional Development has written to me asking about the impact of the Chancellor's decision to phase in the introduction of the aggregates levy. According to the Department for Regional Development's own provisional assessment, that will lead to a reduction in the amount of levy that the Department will be required to pay, which will be approximately £2 million. As I indicated in the Chamber on 3 December, and as I advised the Committee for Finance and Personnel on 4 December, the Executive are content that the Department should retain that sum for use in the roads programme. The

draft Budget included a specific addition of £7 million to help mitigate the impact of the aggregates levy on the roads programme.

It would be valid for the Executive to use the £2 million easement elsewhere, perhaps in the area detailed in the amendment. Unlike those who support the amendment to the agreed revised Budget, the Executive honourably concluded that we should sustain the agreed allocation for the Department for Regional Development as an important service. The amendment is a cynical gesture against the agreement. It has nothing to do with addressing the problem of fuel poverty and everything to do with undermining the agreement and necessary public services.

The North/South bodies are an essential part of the agreement. The Assembly and its institutions are interdependent. The creation of bodies to implement some public services on a cross-border and all-Ireland basis is a central and positive development that recognises the nature of the political and institutional settlement. It also recognises and pursues the mutual benefits of co-operation.

The Assembly is obliged, under international law and the North/South Co-operation (Implementation Bodies) (Amendment) (Northern Ireland) Order 1999, to provide for those bodies as necessary public functions.

Far from cutting the budget for the Office of the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister, the Committee of the Centre has argued consistently for additional resources to enable that Office to fulfil essential services, including action on matters such as a children's commissioner and the review of public administration. No doubt Mr Poots and other Members will contribute to the debate. When I presented the draft and revised Budgets, he complained that the Office of the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister was not getting the allocations that it needed to carry out its services. The same Mr Poots will no doubt speak vociferously in support of the amendment, which seeks to further reduce that office's allocation.

The Executive agreed an appropriate allocation for the Department for Social Development as part of the revised Budget proposals. From that allocation, the Minister must propose the Department's priorities. It is striking that the warm homes scheme was not a proposal in the June position report by the then Minister for Social Development, Mr Morrow. It is clearly hypocritical for anyone now to pretend that it is the Department's biggest priority. In last year's December monitoring round, the Executive provided £2 million for fuel poverty in 2000-01, and that allowed the scheme to proceed in July.

It was the Minister for Social Development who chose to reduce the Housing Executive's rent increase last year. That was his choice. However, it meant that

less money was available for his Department's budget, and not least for housing. In effect, we handed £2.8 million back to the Chancellor of the Exchequer, because housing benefit covers 80% of Housing Executive rent. The Minister's decision ensured that the Department would forgo money that could have been used for housing and programmes to alleviate fuel poverty, such as the warm homes measures.

The cuts to the North/South bodies' budget that are proposed in the amendment would also ensure a real cut in necessary public functions. For example, if we deny funding to the Special EU Programmes Body (SEUPB), the new Peace II programme cannot be implemented on time. Furthermore, SEUPB will be unable to carry out its necessary work on other programmes. It would be unable to respond to the needs, interests and concerns of the many groups that want to take advantage of such programmes and who await their urgent delivery. The development of North/South trade is of economic benefit to all parts of the island, and to this region in particular. It is right and proper that it should be pursued.

The amendments are interesting in that they show a possible change in the DUP's position. The party previously sought to strike out the North/South bodies completely, whereas today's amendment seeks to cap and squeeze their budgets. I shall listen with interest to the Members who support the amendment. It may be that they are adjusting their position somewhat on North/South bodies. I note also that there is no move against the food safety body in the amendments. I await with interest the full explanation as to why the DUP now deems that board to be immune from its previous objections to North/South budgetary provision.

The allocation to the Foyle, Carlingford and Irish Lights Commission is for a new interpretative centre at its headquarters in the Waterside area of Derry. DUP representatives have complained that that area has been denied the necessary investment of public resources. However, the DUP tables an amendment that will strike against investment in that very location.

The Waterways Ireland allocation is for new premises in Enniskillen, which will bring up to 70 new and secure jobs to the area. Enniskillen is in the constituency of the Member in whose name the amendment is tabled. Therefore, several contradictions and some confusion has crept into the DUP position. Members await explanations with interest.

The revised Budget is a responsible Budget from a responsible Executive, which is in the business of delivering good government, rather than playing partisan politics. The Budget has to signal a further shift in historical patterns of public spending in Northern Ireland towards local priorities set by local representatives in response to local needs, concerns, and initiatives. The

revised Budget, agreed by the Executive, represents another significant milestone on the road towards stability and normality. It will make a difference where the need is greatest. I commend it to the Assembly.

Madam Deputy Speaker: One amendment has been selected, and it is published on the Marshalled List of amendments.

Mr Morrow: I beg to move the following amendment: At the end add:

'subject to a reduction in the expenditure in the following spending areas:

£0.3 million	North South Body	Carlingford and Irish Lights
£0.2 million	North South Body	Languages
£0.4 million	North South Body	Waterways Ireland
£0.1 million	North South Body	Trade and Business Development
£0.2 million	North South Body	Special EU Programmes
£0.1 million	OFM/DFM	
£0.05 million	Civic Forum	

and requests the Minister of Finance and Personnel to consider the allocation of the resultant of savings to the Department for Social Development for the warm home scheme.'

I listened to what the Minister had to say, and I was somewhat disappointed that he did not try to deal with the real issues that are before the House today.

The Minister must accept, whether he likes it or not, that fuel poverty is a real issue. He may try to play it down and make light of it, as he did in his speech. However, I suspect that that will not make the issue disappear. In considering what people, right across the House, have been saying about fuel poverty, the Minister will find that there is a unanimous stance on tackling the issue.

Should the Minister take our advice and reduce funding on the items that we have selected, nobody will be hurt. If the amendment is carried, people in Northern Ireland, especially those who suffer from fuel poverty, will be much better off. I bring the definition of fuel poverty to the attention of the House. The commonly applied definition of a fuel-poor household is one that needs to spend in excess of 10% of its income on fuel to maintain a satisfactory heating regime. Some 170,000 households in Northern Ireland suffer from fuel poverty. Around 600 deaths are caused every year in Northern Ireland by cold-related illness. I do not think that any Member of the House would try to make light of that or say that we should not make an honest and determined effort to tackle the problem.

We recognise — not because we agree with it — that the bodies that we refer to are statutory. That was something that the Minister picked up on.

However, we simply said that the benefit would be much greater if the increases that were to be applied this year were withheld and directed to tackle fuel poverty.

11.30 am

The Minister was at some pains to outline the achievements of the cross-border bodies. The world outside has not noticed any of those achievements. Approximately £20 million will be given to cross-border organisations. We wait with bated breath to see what real benefit that will bring to the people of Northern Ireland.

I draw the House's attention to the effects of fuel poverty. The principle effects are health-related. Children, the elderly, the sick and the disabled are most at risk. Cold homes are believed to exacerbate existing illnesses, such as asthma, and to reduce resistance to respiratory infections. In addition, households also suffer from opportunity loss, as they use a larger portion of income to keep warm, compared to other households. That has adverse effects on social well-being and on the overall quality of life for individuals and their communities. It is generally recognised that fuel poverty is a contributory factor to social exclusion.

No Member needs to be convinced about the need to tackle fuel poverty; some 600 deaths per year occur because of cold-related illnesses. Those figures stand out vividly and tell their own graphic story.

The Minister said that the Office of the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister needed funding for cross-border bodies. I am not quite sure what it is needed for, as we have not yet seen results from those bodies. The office always wants to be at the forefront when there is a good story to tell.

I suspect that the Office of the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister would not mind in the slightest giving up a small portion of its budget to facilitate the worthy cause of fuel poverty. When another Minister had a good story to tell, the Office of the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister rushed in to take the credit for it. I do not mind if it takes the credit in this case — I just want it to sacrifice part of its budget in doing so.

I draw the House's attention to the comments of some Members who are genuinely concerned about fuel poverty. Mr Fred Cobain, Chairperson of the Committee for Social Development, said:

"The Assembly will not be surprised to learn that the Committee has again felt the need to register concerns about the proposed allocation of funding to tackle fuel poverty and housing needs. The Warm Homes Scheme is a one-off capital cost. It has no recurring implications. If it were to be properly and urgently funded, it would have positive effects not only on the standard of housing, but on people's health and well-being. There would be consequential savings for the Department of Health. I urge the Minister of Finance and Personnel and his colleagues on the Executive to think long and hard about that."

Mr Danny O'Connor, speaking on 25 September, said:

"The Assembly must look at how it can eradicate the problem of fuel poverty."

The whole of Northern Ireland will applaud if the Assembly does nothing else but demonstrate clearly and unambiguously that it is determined to remove this problem.

The Minister also referred to the fact that rent increases were not as swingeing as in previous years. He is right, and I hope that the same attitude will be adopted this year. For too long those who live in social housing have had to pay. Why should they, more than anyone else, pay over the rate of inflation?

However, the Minister should have told the whole story of what is happening in housing. He did not say that £18 million was handed back as a result of house sales, and that is important.

I have listened carefully, and I ask the Minister to listen even more carefully. He could identify savings that would not hurt any of the Departments or anyone in Northern Ireland.

Dr Birnie: The Member has eloquently expounded the need for extra funds for the Department for Social Development. Will he confirm that the running costs of that Department are due to increase by £20 million next year? That offers plenty of scope for savings to deal with fuel poverty.

Mr Morrow: Whatever the increase, it is not enough to tackle existing fuel poverty. The Housing Executive plans to replace 677 Economy 7 room heaters in each of the next three years. To use the £1.35 million identified would mean accelerating that programme, ensuring that it was kept on course and tackling a further 670 homes next year. Areas have been identified which will ensure that no one suffers. No one can say that that would not be worthwhile or that it should be dealt with in any other way.

The Civic Forum has also been identified as a possible source of savings. Can anyone here point to one constructive thing — just one — that it has done since its inception? I suspect that that would be very difficult.

I look forward to the Minister's changing his mind on this. I cannot tell him to do so, but I urge him to reconsider and to redirect funding for the replacement of Economy 7 heaters, thus ensuring that fewer people die this year.

The Chairperson, Committee of Finance and Personnel (Mr Molloy): Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I welcome this opportunity to speak. This is the Assembly's last opportunity to influence the Executive's spending plans for 2002-03. The Committee for Finance and Personnel led a take-note debate on the Budget on 5 November, and concerns were raised

about allocations in the draft Budget proposals. The views of all departmental Committees on their proposed allocations had been sought before the debate, and I thank all Committee members for their useful contributions and their co-operation with the Committee for Finance and Personnel.

Following that debate, the Committee produced a report on the draft Budget with summaries of the views of other Committees as well as its own. Several improvements to the process were recommended, and that report was passed to the Minister and Members on 16 November.

On behalf of the Committee, I welcome the Minister's positive response to the report in his statement of 3 December and his response to the Committee on the Executive programme funds on 4 December. I thank the Minister for addressing the recommendations that we made in the previous Budget report. He helped the Committees to begin to examine departmental spending plans, and that created a welcome opportunity for discussion about the Budget. It is helpful if Members have the opportunity to discuss the Budget in detail and begin to examine the departmental spending plans at an earlier stage.

I welcome the agreement that the Executive programme funds should be reviewed. That was recommended in the report. It is important that the funds are seen as cross-cutting measures that are designed for future development. If the funds are to be successful, they must be innovative and cross-cutting, and they need to set out a new plan. They must not simply regurgitate the different plans and bids that were previously put forward. I welcome the review, and I urge the Minister to ensure that it happens quickly.

The Committee recommended that the needs and effectiveness evaluations should inform the 2002 spending review negotiations. If an activity or target is identified in the Programme for Government, it should be funded through the Budget in a transparent way. Mainstream departmental priorities should be funded by the Budget; they should not be dependent on Executive programme funds or on the re-allocation of funding from another year. More fundamental and ongoing scrutiny of departmental activities and spending is needed, and that should be done through a cross-departmental approach. There should be early consultation between Committees and Departments on the development of position reports. That would facilitate more effective understanding of, and debate on, departmental spending plans.

It is unfortunate that so few Ministers are here this morning. It is important that we have greater correspondence between Departments and Committees, to provide the Committees with the information that they require. I urge the Committees to demand that information, so that future debates can be more informed. The

information must be detailed if it is to form part of discussions. The Committees must be involved with their Department at an early stage to make the bids. From the point of view of a Minister or a Department, it can only be an advantage if the Committee supports a bid, rather than simply rubber-stamping it. A Committee should not wait for its Department to present its programme; it should be involved in scrutinising service delivery agreements (SDAs) and other financial and planning information in preparation for the Budget.

Executive subcommittees should be established as quickly as possible to manage the individual Executive programme funds. The subcommittee system is a way of dealing with the Executive programme funds, as it creates an opportunity to develop new ideas that may not otherwise be put forward.

The Minister has applied the tactic of forecasting end-year flexibility and allocating funds in advance, rather than in the coming year's monitoring rounds. That is to be welcomed, if we are to see how Departments will perform and if we do not want simply to wait and see whether there is an overspend and then re-allocate it. The Committee thinks that that approach could be beneficial.

The Committee welcomes the approach that the Minister has proposed with regard to effectiveness evaluations. Making allocations in advance of the evaluation results creates uncertainty when Departments are planning their services. We urge the Minister and the Executive to involve Committees at an early stage of the preparation of the 2002 spending review.

I thank the Minister, working on his last Budget, for the effective way in which he has dealt with the Committee for Finance and Personnel and the jovial way in which he was able to cope with — at times — a great deal of criticism. He has always been good-humoured. I thank him for the discussions that he held with the Committee and the open and transparent way in which he dealt with us. It was a learning experience for all of us, but the Minister's approach meant that we gained a better understanding. I look forward to working with his successor. I wish Mr Durkan all the best for the future and thank him for his co-operation. Go raibh maith agat.

11.45 am

Mr Leslie: I would like to reflect on Mr Molloy's remarks and on Mr Durkan's opening words about the Budget process. We have developed a system of reading a draft Budget at the beginning of a session, having a full, detailed debate in the middle of the session, and presenting the final Budget at the end of the session. This is proving to be a good method of handling the Budget. It enables Members and Committees to have a proper input into the formulation of the final package, and gives them the scope to influence the

outcomes. That is better than the “here is what you are getting” approach that tends to be used in other jurisdictions, where Members can merely complain on the day of the Budget, with no prospect of changing the outcome. The system that we have evolved is superior, and makes it easier for the Minister of Finance and Personnel to achieve the consensus that is necessary under our form of government.

One or two ideas were left hanging in the Budget presentation. The Minister said that there would be more focus on asset management as part of a move towards resource-based accounting. We still have some way to go, because we must achieve valuations of all assets that command confidence. The depreciation charges may take up a lot of our time over the next year or so; first, as we get to grips with seeing them in black and white, and, secondly, as arguments are raised about what rates of depreciation it would be appropriate for us to use. The matter exercised me considerably when we were dealing with the Government Resources and Accounts Act (Northern Ireland) 2001. It may exercise us again when we prepare the proposed audit Bill at the beginning of 2002. The House must have confidence in the conventions used.

I note that every opportunity will be taken to identify and dispose of surplus assets, and that the money thus raised will be available for additional spending. That move is welcome. During the debate on private finance initiatives (PFI) and public-private partnerships (PPP), it emerged that the Government have built up a huge portfolio of assets, particularly over the 50 years since the major expansion in the welfare state. It is not axiomatic that it is wise for the Government to manage such a large portfolio. A fresh eye must be turned on the matter.

The matter of the Government’s assets is one of the issues energising the PFI and PPP debate. The issue of services is part of that debate, but it is separate from this matter. Our early focus must be on how best the Government can manage their assets. Should they own as many as they do, or should they hire them as required? The advantage of that would be that such assets could be “un-hired”; if assets are owned, they must be disposed of or redeployed, which is not as efficient.

I remind the Minister that there are still problems in the Land Registry, which is in his own Department, and that this continues to be a source of concern for all those involved in the conveyance, mortgaging and financing of property.

Although we have been assured that those problems are being addressed, they have not been addressed in the Budget. It is supposed to be a self-financing process, but the Committee will have to keep a beady eye on that issue in the new year. I trust that the Minister or his successor will focus closely on the matter, and if

further resources are needed, that that will be brought to the attention of the House sooner rather than later.

Although the Minister’s statement mentions that the issue of PFI and PPP is being examined, we continue to tiptoe around the matter. The Department for Regional Development has probably the greatest scope to make progress in that area, and it is best placed to apply the concept of “user pays”. I have not noticed a single reference to those matters in any literature from that Department. Fresh thinking and political courage are needed if we are to go down any of those avenues. It remains to be seen whether the Minister for Regional Development will be willing to display the necessary political courage and ability to think “outside the box”. Such thinking, and a preparedness to explore those avenues, is needed if we are to make a significant improvement, particularly in our transport infrastructure. When setting the Budget, it is important that the Executive are satisfied that such avenues have been exhaustively examined before they simply dole out more money for transport.

I will comment briefly on the amendment. My Colleague Dr Birnie rightly pointed out the substantial increase in the amount of money being allocated to the Department for Social Development this year. Furthermore, the Minister of Finance and Personnel also pointed out that money was reallocated within the Department. It is almost inconceivable that the Department would not be able to find a further £1.35 million from within its own resources for the warm homes scheme, should it seek to do so. If anybody needs to refocus priorities on that matter, it is the Minister for Social Development, who undoubtedly has the means to do that if he so chooses. Mr Morrow is not justified in trying to throw that burden back onto the Executive through this essentially mischievous amendment, which is designed to make a political point in another direction.

As regards the Foyle, Carlingford and Irish Lights Commission, I must point out that the body responsible for the Irish Lights does not only pre-date partition; it pre-dates the Act of Union. It is probably the longest standing British Isles body in existence — certainly on this island. As a practising yachtsman who has not totally mastered the use of global positioning systems and other such gadgets — I generally use a compass, a lighthouse and a bearing from the land — I am twitchy when any assault is made on the allocation of funds to the Irish Lights.

The Budget is a worthy and workmanlike allocation of the existing resources to the existing, mostly inherited, programmes. However, it is vital that we move towards some wider and fresher thinking next year. When we have done so, and given the context of the spending review that will take place over the coming year, next year’s Budget may well contain some surprises, which we should begin to prepare ourselves for. We

need to begin to think differently about how money is allocated and what our priorities are. I trust that that will result in a lively debate on next year's Budget — certainly at the take-note stage — as those changes which will be identified over the coming year are brought before the House. I support the Budget.

Mr O'Neill: I want to make some comments on behalf of my Committee, but before I do so, I thank the Minister for his clarity and information on the budgetary situation for social development. It is important to have that clarified at the outset. Indeed, I congratulate him on providing the extra resources in what was actually a tight expenditure round. It is important to put that on the record because the additional resource will be used effectively in areas that concern us all.

I also want to record the thanks of the Committee for Culture, Arts and Leisure to the Minister, the Executive, and the Committee for Finance and Personnel. Their combined efforts ensured that the budgetary process this time allowed Committees to carry out their scrutiny role more effectively than before.

Although my Committee welcomed the additional allocations for the Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure, totalling £7 million, we remain concerned about some serious aspects of underfunding that continue to inhibit the Department's activities. One of these is in the area of sports, where funding — with the exception of a welcome allocation of £1 million earmarked to be spent on the continuation of the safety at sports grounds scheme — was disappointing.

The Programme for Government's priority of working for a healthier people is not simply about the treatment of disease or the care of sick people. It is about persuading people to change their behaviour, which involves wide-ranging collaborative action across different sectors. This, in itself, puts paid to those simplistic budgetary arguments we have heard in the House this year about taking £10 million from each Department to support an increase in health spending.

Sport and physical activity have important roles to play in increasing health-related activity across all sections of the population. While this is especially true of lifelong participation in sport and exercise, it is equally important in helping to build self-esteem and increase social inclusion through leisure activities. A large body of evidence shows that lifelong involvement in sport and physical activity can bring significant health gains for everyone, and also helps with mental health. Recent research in Northern Ireland has stressed the importance of physical activity to the mental health of our young people, and the strong associations between participation in sport and positive mental health.

We all feel deeply about the tragic loss for families and society when a young person takes his own life.

Sadly, in Northern Ireland this is a trend that has caused great concern and seems to be on the increase.

These are just a few indications of the convincing evidence supporting the need for continued and enhanced investment in sport. The Committee hopes that the connection between sport and policy objectives across a range of Executive functions will be properly recognised in future resource allocations.

We similarly have concerns about the success of the Department's arts bids, which total something in the region of £4 million. This means that there is no additional money next year for a sector that already needs capital investment in a crumbling infrastructure.

I appreciate that the arts fared relatively well in 2001-02 and that additional moneys allocated then have been carried forward in the Budget. However, we are lagging far behind arts budgets elsewhere, particularly the Republic of Ireland.

12.00

We are also trailing behind the Republic when it comes to events. Next year's budget for the Northern Ireland Events Company is just £1 million. Two years ago the Government in the Republic allocated an additional £2.5 million for three years just to attract extra events. That money was additional to the support already given for four major golf events and many other cultural, arts and sports events. For example, they have put between £7 million and £8 million into staging the 2006 Ryder Cup. That investment, they claim, will bring at least £50 million — and probably closer to £100 million — in return. With an annual investment of only £1 million, we are not really in the game at all.

The Committee is also concerned about the continuing neglect of the fabric of our museums and the Armagh Observatory and Planetarium. In 1994, the budget for museums was cut by approximately 8%, and that situation has not been rectified. Additionally, it is simply indefensible that funding for Museums and Galleries of Northern Ireland (MAGNI) continues to be addressed by our annual battle for adequate baseline allocations. Given that MAGNI has already accumulated a deficit of approximately £2 million in the current year, the Committee argues that the position must be addressed in the following spending review.

More positively, we warmly welcome recognition of the difficulties that the Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure faces on the staffing front. The allocation next year of £2 million for administration will enable the Department to create a corporate structure and thereby improve its services to customers, including the Assembly.

I am conscious that I have said this on other occasions, but it is a point worth making again. Very small amounts of money, which could well be lost in the rounding of

amounts by other big-spend Departments, would go a long way towards addressing many of the issues that I have mentioned and would bring significant benefits to our community.

I wish to make a couple of points on my own behalf about the amendment. Its thinly disguised attempt to attack the agreement is clear. At least the DUP has been consistent from the outset in its frantic attempt to undermine the will of the people. However, it is exploitative to use emotional subjects such as fuel poverty to try to win public acclaim and support. Many Members realise that moves on fuel poverty are necessary, and they want to support them.

It is amusing to hear the proposer of the amendment talking in such terms. When he came to the Committee for Social Development as Minister, I put it to him that he might consider an alternative method of ensuring that the resources, inadequate as they are, could be applied more directly to those who need them most. By that I mean that scattergun efforts are made to address fuel poverty. At Christmas everybody over 60 years of age gets a cheque for £200, including one chap I know who is a millionaire. He does not need the money; but I know others who could do with double that amount and more. Why can we not tackle the issue by directing resources where they are needed?

Mr S Wilson: The decision to give £200 at Christmas was not made by the Assembly or the Minister for Social Development. That initiative came from Westminster.

(Mr Speaker in the Chair)

Mr O'Neill: As the Member knows, I am well aware of the point behind his interjection. I serve this as an example of the scattergun effort that is used to deal with the matter. There are other means of tackling the issue, and when I put that to the former Minister he said that he would examine it, but unfortunately that was the last that I heard about it. At that time he was in a position to do something directly about it. He did not do so.

He said that nobody would be hurt by the reduction of funding for cross-border bodies, one of which is a language body. Has the former Minister not been aware of the recent growth of confidence and status of the Ulster-Scots community and language? He should talk to that community, because many of his Colleagues would argue in support of them. Does he suggest that Ulster-Scots should be set back? That is what he will do if he cuts the Budget to such an extent.

Rev Dr Ian Paisley: Does the hon Gentleman suggest that the Ulster-Scots language should be on a par with the Irish language and that it should get the same amount of Government money to forward its interests?

Mr O'Neill: I am not certain of the Member's point, but the confidence and status of Ulster-Scots is being increased tremendously as a result of the languages

body's work. Any reduction in its budget would affect that. Perhaps Dr Paisley wants us to introduce that old DUP exclusive policy whereby we cut the budget for the Irish language only, although I am not certain. Another particular example from my area is the Ulster Canal. *[Interruption]*.

Mr Speaker: Order. I draw to the Member's attention that this is a time-limited debate. A substantial number of Members wish to address the matter, and at this stage, apart from the proposer, Mr O'Neill has been on his feet for more time than any other Member. I ask him to bear that in mind. Members who use interjections, but who also hope to be called to speak, tend to use up the time available. I ask the Member to bring his remarks to a close.

Mr O'Neill: Perhaps I am long by nature also. I will draw my remarks to a close. I use the example of the budgetary cut to Waterways Ireland, which runs the Ulster Canal project. That is a long-term project that was fully supported by every party in the Chamber. The scheme would have a tremendous impact on urban and rural regeneration for areas that otherwise would not benefit in that way. When he talks about the need for cuts in that area, he should tell us how he proposes that that be done. We all know that this is a thinly disguised attempt to attack the agreement once again.

The Chairperson of the Agriculture and Rural Development Committee (Rev Dr Ian Paisley): As Chairperson of the Committee for Agriculture and Rural Development, I sound a warning about the Budget before us today. The final budgetary allocation to the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development is unchanged from the draft Budget that we debated in November. I spoke then of the Committee's concerns about the lack of new progress for the implementation of an action plan, as the agreed Programme for Government promises the strategic development of the agrifood industry. Those concerns remain with us today. They were not allayed by the report by the Minister of Finance and Personnel about provision for the findings of the vision report.

He said that when the current consultation process is complete, the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development would publish an action plan. He went on to say that at that stage firm bids for the implementation of recommendations could be considered, with access to the Executive programme funds as appropriate.

The Committee's difficulties lie in the fact that bidding within that financial year will be very competitive and will be for very limited resources. The chairpersons of the vision sub-groups who met with my Committee emphasised that they were alarmed that after all that they had done, and the recommendations to be considered, no money was being made available at this time.

When I raised this matter in the Chamber on 3 December during the Minister of Finance and Personnel's statement on the revised Budget, he repeated his assertion that the Executive would consider the need for resources following the outcome of the consultation. He said that

"People may have accused us of pre-empting the outcome if we had fixed a particular allocation." — [*Official Report, Bound Volume 13, p195*].

The Committee would not agree. Members feel that such a major commitment in the Programme for Government is worthy of an initial financial allocation at least.

Worse still, when the Minister of Finance and Personnel made a statement on the Executive programme funds on 3 December he said that the Executive were able to agree an allocation — which I understand is to be £1.6 million over three years — for the emerging soccer strategy. That strategy is also the subject of public consultation.

If the Minister can give assistance of £1.6 million to soccer during the consultation period, why can an allocation not be made for a very important programme that is needed to save the largest industry in Northern Ireland? I make no comparisons between the circumstances of one decision or the other, but there is an inconsistency between the wait-and-see principle for agriculture and the absence of such a principle for soccer.

The Assembly would agree that soccer, however enjoyable, is not as important to the Northern Ireland economy as the agrifood industry.

The Committee also recommended that the Executive should set aside additional funding this year for a compensation, or tie-up, scheme for fishermen when they are not allowed to use their vessels. This also falls under the wait-and-see banner, given that the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development has undertaken to review the economic effects of the closure of fishing grounds over the last two years. The Minister tells us that following the review she will consider when compensation is appropriate. Although there has been no provision made in the Budget, I ask the Assembly to remember its unanimous support in March for the Minister to provide short-term assistance to the fishing industry.

There is more hardship ahead for fishermen. Decisions will be made next Monday that could cut the income of the fishing industry by over £1 million. A delegation from my Committee, and our three MEPs, have secured a meeting tomorrow afternoon with the European Commissioner, in an effort to alleviate some of the savage cuts proposed to the fish quota by the European Commission. The Committee remains convinced that the sustainable and competitive fisheries industry mentioned in the Programme for Government must have short-term assistance to ensure that it is maintained. The Assembly needs to play its part in that.

12.15 pm

The Committee is disappointed at the outcome of both the Budget and the Executive programme funds. Time will tell if those concerns are justified, but farmers, fishermen and other rural dwellers will understandably feel let down if good intentions fail for lack of financial planning.

I will now lay aside my hat as Chairperson of the Committee for Agriculture and Rural Development and make a comment on the amendment that is before the House. I regret that the Minister of Finance and Personnel has tried to mislead the House on the motivation and the reason for the amendment. We tabled a series of amendments along the lines that we have advocated in the past. I do not know how much power the Minister of Finance and Personnel has, but it is very difficult to get any amendment tabled in this House.

We were told last night by the Business Committee that our amendments would not be taken. The Minister of Finance and Personnel suggests to the House that the DUP's stand is weakening. Everybody knows our stand against the Belfast Agreement perfectly well. As a party leader, I am deeply resentful that a last-minute decision was conveyed to us that none of our amendments would be taken. Eventually we were told that one of them would be taken, if it were revised. For the Minister to suggest —

Mr Speaker: Order. I advise the Member to be careful about some of the remarks he is making in respect of the amendments. To my certain knowledge, they are incorrect — to my certain knowledge, they are incorrect. It may be that there is misunderstanding in the House, or it may be that there is misleading going on. The Member should also know that according to Standing Orders, no decisions on amendments can be made before 9.30 am.

Rev Dr Ian Paisley: That is a matter for those who sit on the Business Committee —

Mr Speaker: Order. I am astonished, because the Member is well known throughout these islands for his knowledge of matters such as Standing Orders. The matter is very clear, and he knows well that it is for the Speaker to decide on amendments. The account that he gives of some of these matters is not correct. It may be wise for him to check with some of his Colleagues.

Rev Dr Ian Paisley: I stand over what I have said. That was the information given to me by my Chief Whip —

Mr Speaker: Order. The Member must be careful about what he is saying. He is coming in contempt of the Chair, and I will simply bring his speech to a close if he goes any further. What he has said is not the case. If he has been misled by one of his party Colleagues, that is a matter for him and his party Colleagues. I

know how those decisions are made and what the situation is. They are decisions made by me.

Mr Morrow: On a point of order, Mr Speaker. Can you confirm that three amendments were put down?

Mr Speaker: I can confirm that three amendments were put down, and I can also confirm from the start that I made it clear that amendments that were not competent would not be accepted. It is also the case that my Office, on my advice, gave assistance in making an amendment competent, which it had not been. It appears, however, that no good turn goes unpunished as far as my staff is concerned.

Dr Paisley may continue if he wishes, but the matter will be raised elsewhere.

Rev Dr Ian Paisley: You were not present for the Minister's speech, Mr Speaker. He made the point that the amendment we put down made it look as if we were watering down our stand. I was simply commenting on how, to my knowledge — to my knowledge — that came about. That is a legitimate point that I need to make.

Mr Speaker: I accept that, and I accept that as far as the Minister is concerned there may have been some misunderstanding about the question of how amendments may be put down. That is not the issue; it is not the matter on which I took issue with the Member.

Mr McCarthy: On a point of order, Mr Speaker. The Member referred to a meeting of the Business Committee being held last night. I am a member of that Committee, and I can assure the House that there was no meeting of the Business Committee last night.

Mr Speaker: Order. There seems to be some sort of infectious misunderstanding developing. For all that I do not agree with some of the things that Dr Paisley said, I have to say that he did not suggest that there was a meeting of the Business Committee last night.

A Member: Read Hansard tomorrow.

Mr McCarthy: I beg your pardon?

Mr Speaker: We will all read Hansard with interest tomorrow.

Rev Dr Ian Paisley: I suggest that the hon Member for Strangford should wake up and listen to what I have to say.

Mr McCarthy: Mr Speaker, I think the Member did say that there was a meeting of the Business Committee last night. He should look over his notes.

Mr Speaker: Order.

Rev Dr Ian Paisley: I do not have any notes. Members know that I speak extemporaneously. I have only a note of the business of the House here.

Having made that point — and made it effectively because of the interruptions — I move to another point. It was said that the DUP should vote for rent increases, and that its not doing so contributed to the non-progression of the warm homes scheme. I will never come to the House and vote in favour of rent increases in order to finance another programme. Many people can ill afford to pay the rent that is set. The warm homes scheme should be financed completely independently of rent-setting.

The Minister should not bring in those sidelines because he is not happy about the amendment. I thought that he would be happy with the amendment. I did not think that he would castigate the DUP and tell us that we had not changed. However, I discover now that he thinks we have changed. Maybe I have successfully disillusioned him.

Nevertheless, the amendment is clear. Someone said that it was trying to mask what it was really attempting to do. The DUP is not masking its intentions. It is clear what we want.

Mr Close: This is the third Budget to be presented to the Assembly. The Minister says in his foreword that

"The Agreement has provided an opportunity for the people of Northern Ireland to forge their own destiny and seek a new beginning ... we now have locally elected and accountable politicians taking decisions that affect the every-day lives of our people."

Now we know where the buck stops for non-delivery of particular services.

Today the Assembly is being asked to approve the programme of expenditure proposals for 2002-03. It is reasonable to ask whether those proposals will help the people of Northern Ireland to forge their own destiny, and whether they have noticed their lives or destinies being changed since the Assembly became a reality.

Is this the best that the Executive can do, and does it thus warrant the Assembly's support? The consultative process has undoubtedly improved — not only in respect of statutory Committees but also so far as civil society, with its many interests and lobby groups who are availing of the opportunity to have their concerns input to the process, is concerned.

While consultation has improved and scrutiny is beginning to have some meaning, further improvement can and must be made. However, in the final analysis the outcome of consultation is measured by results. Have the Executive listened to the consultation? In this regard it would be particularly churlish of me not to recognise and acknowledge the changes that have been introduced since the draft Budget: for example, the reinstatement from October 2002 of free nursing care for the elderly and the restoration of the resources grant to local authorities.

However, other areas have been ignored, and we could not let this opportunity pass without referring to the ubiquitous regional rate. The spending proposals for approval this afternoon require the domestic regional rate to be increased by 7% and the non-domestic regional rate by 3.3%. Do any ratepayers, domestic or business, support these measures? I do not think so. I have not seen any evidence of support; on the contrary, I can point to loud and widespread expressions of total opposition to such increases. The people who are opposed to these increases do not believe that they are being allowed to forge their own destiny; rather they see their future being impaired by these inflation-plus increases.

Who are the Executive representing by continuing with their iniquitous increases, particularly given the impact on small businesses and those on fixed incomes, such as senior citizens? We have been promised a review of the rating system, but, like many other aspects of the Programme for Government that we discussed yesterday, the timetable is slipping. Three years have passed, and nothing has happened.

While I welcome the 7.5% increase in total departmental expenditure over 2001-02, it is crucially important that the Assembly examine running costs and question whether efficiencies could or should be made in order to redirect those finite resources to that which ought to be our number one priority, namely health. I have spent some time looking at departmental running costs in 2000-01 and comparing them with the proposals for 2002-03. The picture is not encouraging; it points to potential savings that should have been made.

Running costs for the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development have increased over this period by £8.9 million, or 9.7%. The Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure's costs have increased by a whopping 37.9%, or £4.4 million. The Department of Education's costs are up by 16.1%. The cost of running the Department for Employment and Learning has risen by 46.5%, or £12.6 million; the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment by 8.8%; the Department of Finance and Personnel by 8.4%; the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety by 9.2%; the Department of the Environment by 22.6%; the Department for Regional Development by 8.7%; the Department for Social Development by 28.6%, or £41.2 million. The running costs of the Office of the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister have increased by 30.6%.

Over that period, total departmental running costs have increased by £105.9 million to £733 million, which is an increase of 16.9%. Better control of these running costs could have produced savings in the region of £40 million to £50 million. This must be considered along with the overall review of public expenditure in Northern Ireland. It is yet another area where the Executive have promised much, but delivered little.

We are overgoverned and heavily burdened with administrative and bureaucratic costs. There must be more layers of bureaucracy in Northern Ireland than there are skins on an onion. There are 26 local authorities and a plethora of health trusts, boards and quangos, all eating into our financial resources and reducing our ability to deliver the coalface services that the people demand and need.

If people were asked what difference the Assembly has made to their lives, I am sure that many would point to the welcome degree of stability that has followed in its wake. They would point to economic growth and aspire to a better future with the fulfilment of many outstanding promises.

However, they could also point to gross inequalities and the widening gap between rich and poor. Nowhere is this better demonstrated than in healthcare. The recent publication by the General Consumer Council for Northern Ireland, 'The Price of Being Poor', should be compulsory reading for every Minister in the Executive. I have said it before, and I will say it again —

Mr Speaker: Order. I must intervene, because the arrangement, made through the usual channels, is that we will suspend, by leave, and resume at 1.30 pm. I am not bringing the Member's speech to an end, merely introducing an interlude. He may, if he wishes, and with the permission of the Chair, continue when we resume.

The sitting was suspended at 12.30 pm.

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

1.30 pm

Mr Close: Before lunch, I pointed out that the Health Service was in crisis. Even with the additional £41 million allocated in the Budget, the professionals say that that is only a drop in the ocean because of years of underfunding under direct rule. Throughout the 1980s and 1990s, the people to whom I refer as the "pinstripe suit brigade" and the "know-alls" savaged the hospitals and healthcare by cutting down on the provision of nurses, auxiliaries, beds and doctors. They enforced so-called efficiency savings year on year to such an extent that the fabric of health was damaged severely.

Idiots effectively decimated the home help service, which did a first-class job and cost relatively little. If we are to make a difference and create a new beginning that the people of Northern Ireland can look forward to, the Health Service must be targeted as a number one priority, even at the expense of other Departments interests; worthy though they may think themselves to be. We must break out of the departmental mentality and deal effectively with real life and death issues. It is fundamentally wrong for the Executive to treat our senior citizens less favourably than those in other parts

of the United Kingdom are treated. I have acknowledged the reinstatement of free nursing care for the elderly in the Budget, effective from October 2002. However, the fact that its removal was considered is an indictment on the Executive and a demonstration that their priorities are wide of the mark. The Executive should not fall into the fashionable trap of drawing a false distinction between nursing care and personal care.

In February 2001, the Assembly called on the Executive to implement fully the Royal Commission on Long Term Care for the Elderly and to provide senior citizens with free nursing and personal care. Why has that call also been ignored in the current funding proposals? How can we support proposals that ignore the voice of the Assembly? How can we claim to be targeting social need when we allow that anomaly to exist between nursing care and personal care? The provision of money is not the problem; it is the will to prioritise that money that is lacking. A sum of £25 million to £30 million should and could have been found.

Ageism is wrong, and the Assembly should not tolerate it or act in a discriminatory fashion by using semantics as a form of justification. In following such a course, the Executive prevent our senior citizens from forging their own destiny. Therefore, they are failing a large and growing percentage of the population — a group that we all aspire to reach some day.

It is not just our elderly who are suffering from a pigeonhole mentality, whereby each Department believes that it is entitled to its own percentage increase year on year. Day and daily, new nightmarish tales emerge that demonstrate that the Executive are failing to address the health crisis. The Budget perpetuates that crisis. Patients with brain tumours are being sent home, and at the same time beds are closed temporarily. Almost 57,000 patients are on waiting lists, which is 6,500 more than last year. That figure includes 8,000 people who have waited for more than 12 months. Some of those people suffer from heart conditions. Who would dare to say that that is not a life and death issue? Waiting lists in Northern Ireland are now approximately 50% higher than in England in proportion to our population, yet we pay the same taxes and the same National Insurance contributions. Our priorities are wrong. Visit any —

Mr Deputy Speaker: The Speaker indicated that Members had 10 minutes to speak. Mr Close, I have given you some flexibility because of the lunch break, but I ask you to bring your remarks to a close.

Mr Close: To the best of my knowledge, the Speaker — and I stand to be corrected — did not indicate any time allocation before the debate commenced. Mr Deputy Speaker, I ask you to demonstrate a little flexibility, concern and fair play —

Mr Deputy Speaker: I shall try to be as flexible as possible, Mr Close. Please continue.

Mr Close: The parties that have already spoken have Members on the Executive, and some party Members have spoken twice. This is the first opportunity for an opposition party to express its views, so I ask for balance.

Mr Deputy Speaker: I am endeavouring to exercise balance.

Mr Close: The Budget contains expenditure proposals to contain waiting lists at March 2002 levels. Am I supposed to applaud and support that? Is it not more important to reduce hospital waiting lists than to reduce planning applications? The Executive plan to eliminate the backlog of planning applications by the end of 2002. At the same time, they intend to maintain hospital waiting lists at the March 2002 level. There is something wrong with that.

Although the Health Service is not getting what it needs to deal with the crisis, it must also shoulder its responsibility for spending properly what it receives. We must ask why certain things are happening. Why is it that, given that an extra £8 million was allocated to reduce waiting lists, those lists are up by 6,500 on last year? Why have there been improper payments of millions of pounds in exemptions from prescription charges through the family practitioner service? Why has a car park allegedly been subsidised to the tune of nearly £500,000 per year due to some half-baked PFI scheme?

There are other problem areas. Today, the accounts of the local government auditor were published. Time and again, they demonstrate that there are no proper controls on how our money is spent. That needs to be sorted out, and we should learn from it.

Do we need the many glossy magazines and brochures that are produced by each Department? We consult ourselves to death and spend too much of the taxpayers' money in the process. Would it not be better if such reports were placed in a public library or some other public building, where they could be made available, on request, to those who are interested in them?

This Budget fails. I have tried to gauge it according to how it deals with the weakest and most vulnerable in society. I concede that it operates within constraints. However, even within those constraints, it fails the weakest and the most vulnerable people.

I thank the outgoing Minister of Finance and Personnel, who is now the Deputy First Minister. We operate under a strange political system, which has a multiparty Executive. Undoubtedly some members of the Executive are playing to different galleries. However, it is the Minister of Finance and Personnel who takes the flak. He has been able to deal with that flak due to his larger-than-life personality. At times, he has even managed to cut the sting from a thorn such as myself, for which I give him credit. I wish him well in his new position, but I feel sorry for his successor.

It would be wrong not to mention the amendment tabled by the Democratic Unionist Party. Fuel poverty concerns and taxes us all. However, I envy the Democratic Unionist Party. It has two seats on the Executive, from where its Ministers could have argued that justifiable case. I do not have a seat; I wish to goodness that I did. One must question whether there is a political motive behind the amendment. Will I support it? No. My vote in this important debate treats me as some sort of "lesser-spotted democrat". I do not even have a vote that counts. Therefore, I shall not support the amendment, and I certainly shall not support the Budget.

Mr Deputy Speaker: It is difficult to manage the debate. The Business Committee has allocated it three hours, and many Members have indicated that they wish to speak. If I am to include everyone, I must limit subsequent Members' contributions to six minutes.

Mr McCartney: On a point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker. The Members of the House and the public are becoming increasingly aware that the most important and serious matters, such as this debate, are being limited in a draconian manner. For a House that sits on only two days a week, one must question why only three hours were allocated for the debate.

Ms McWilliams: Further to that point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker. It has been the custom of the House that each party has the right to speak for at least 10 minutes in a Budget debate. As Mr Close said, we consider our parties to be the Opposition. Our Members will be restricted to six minutes, although other parties made at least two or three speeches before the ruling was made.

Mr Deputy Speaker: I remind both Ms McWilliams and Mr McCartney that that was not my decision. It was taken by the Business Committee, on which you sit, Ms McWilliams, and on which you have the right to sit, Mr McCartney. There is a time limit of three hours for the debate. I am willing to allow Members from smaller parties to speak for much longer, but that will limit the number of Members who are able to speak.

Mr McCartney: Essentially, the larger parties control the Business Committee. It speaks volumes that not a single Member of the largest party in the Assembly, the Ulster Unionist Party, is in the House. The SDLP has only the Minister and one other Member present.

Mr Deputy Speaker: That is not a point of order. Valuable time is being wasted.

Ms McWilliams: As a member of the Business Committee, I assure you that the Committee did not decide to limit the time allocated to each Member to six minutes. Indeed, my clock tells me —

Mr Deputy Speaker: I did not say that the Business Committee allocated only six minutes to each Member;

I said that the Business Committee limited the debate to three hours. You may check that in Hansard. If all those Members who put their names forward are to be allowed to speak, there must be a limit on the time allowed to each Member. I shall not waste any more time.

Mr Douglas: I wish to comment on some of the Executive's priorities, and to reflect on those issues that were deemed to be unimportant. I welcome the generosity of the Chancellor of the Exchequer, whose intervention to the tune of £9 million has secured free nursing care for the elderly. That measure should bring neither praise nor thanks to the Executive, from whose Members it received no support. They did not consider it worthy of inclusion in the original draft Budget. Instead they chose to support other elements that, in my opinion and that of many others, pale into insignificance when compared to healthcare and the well-being of our senior citizens.

One example that has already been mentioned is found in the Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure's budget. The North/South Language Body has been allocated £3.8 million. Would the electorate of Northern Ireland consider that body to be more valuable than elderly people? I suggest not.

I thank Mr Brown for giving the Assembly an injection of cash, common sense, and common values. However, despite our gratitude, free nursing care is not the end of the story. We must not ignore personal care. Members will be aware that all senior citizens in Scotland will have their care needs met, regardless of whether they live in their own homes or in nursing homes. That care is vital. It can often be the difference between life and death. The Executive must address that issue.

There can be no justice when people work all their lives and save for their retirement, only to be punished in their senior years for being careful with their money. Nobody should be forced to sell his or her home and property in order to pay for care. The only expense that the elderly should incur should be the cost of living. Resources must be found. The elderly in Northern Ireland should not be disadvantaged. They must not become the poor relations of the British Isles because of variations in devolved power.

I am glad to hear the various ideas that the Executive are investigating to address the infrastructure deficits in the Province. Although I am not an avid supporter of private finance initiatives and public-private partnerships in their barest form, there is a need to find ways to enhance and improve our infrastructure. It would not be possible to do so out of public receipts without increasing the taxation burden on people in Northern Ireland.

It is good news that the review will be completed by March 2002 and actioned during the course of the year

in those areas that are deemed suitable. I welcome the completion of the rating policy review by October 2002. However, I wish that a structure movement was indicated in the review of local government. That would be a way to save money, which could be re-allocated for more useful purposes. Northern Ireland must have the most top-heavy public administration in the British Isles, with 26 local councils and 108 Assembly Members for a population of 1.6 million.

A swift rationalisation of local government, as well as health boards and trusts, education and library boards and numerous other quangos, would surely reduce duplication of workloads, bureaucracy and red tape. That would release more resources for front-line services — where they belong — instead of using them to pay for increasing volumes of paper that are pushed from pillar to post and never properly dealt with.

1.45 pm

There are many admirable and achievable aspirations in the Budget. However, I caution against window dressing, which can obscure the real needs that should be met. As a society, we must look after those who are most vulnerable and identify areas that hold that aspiration to ransom. Finances can be cut and savings can be made. That money can be allocated where it is most needed from the outset and not fed in later by the Chancellor, whose aims are often different from our own.

Ms McWilliams: I take this opportunity to pay tribute to the Minister of Finance and Personnel, Mr Durkan, on what is probably his last Budget. That said, I am concerned about the number of times that funding allocations are presented to the House. I am glad that the Minister said that there must be another way to consider allocations.

The Business Committee decided at a meeting earlier this afternoon that the December monitoring round will be debated at the first sitting after Christmas. The Budget is being debated today, and the Assembly recently considered the September monitoring round. If one adds end-year flexibility and the Executive programme funds, it leads to a great deal of confusion. It would be useful, alongside the forthcoming needs and effectiveness evaluation of the Departments, if Committees could have an alternative opportunity to consider the demands of the Departments in their entirety. The present method is bitty.

I am also concerned that the Minister felt the need to withhold £125 million for allocation by the Executive next September. A much clearer justification for that is needed, rather than the one-line explanation that was given. That is a substantial sum of money to withhold when we are in such a crisis.

I thank the Minister for noting the sum that will be allocated the following year, but Members must be

made aware of exactly how much is being withheld. When the Assembly looks at next year's allocations, it will know the minimum allocations that will be given to Departments. Nonetheless, until we have a clear understanding of all the sums of money that are being held back, we shall be unable to effectively scrutinise departmental allocations.

Despite the extra money that the Minister has given to health and education, the concern from the community is such that I cannot, as an Assembly Member, justify the fact that £125 million is being withheld.

The details for funding allocated to the Office of the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister are still only single-line explanations. I have raised that issue in every Budget debate. There is still an insufficient breakdown for the units in that Office. Indeed, we are told that an extra £0.8 million will be set aside for the creation of a victims' fund. It would be useful to see the breakdown of the various functions of the Office of the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister. If there is to be an allocation for victims, a line explaining that would also be useful.

I am concerned — although it may be an administrative error — that £1.5 million has been set aside in the Executive programme funds for a victims' strategy. That is detailed on page 83 of the Budget. Again, in the next round, £1.5 million is being set aside for a victims' strategy between 2002 and 2004. Does that mean that a total of £3 million from Executive programme funds is to go to a victims' strategy, or is that simply an administrative error? I am concerned that a strategy to deal with victims may receive £3 million, when only £0.8 million is allocated from the victims' fund. That means more bureaucracy and less money for those on the ground.

We deserve a breakdown of the suggested increase of 7.2% for equality, human rights and community relations work. How much will go to the Equality Commission? How much will go to human rights groups and how much to community relations groups?

Health is one of the major concerns. It is clear that health administration eats up a great deal of the funding; that problem must be addressed. Salaries take up more funding than service development. Some 40% of the block grant goes to health, but we have no assurance that that level of funding will continue, despite the increases. Estimates have indicated that the real figure represented by 40% of the block grant will go down rather than up.

It was good to hear that the Programme for Government included reference to 1,000 care packages. However, is it guaranteed that that money has been set aside, or will it have to be found elsewhere? There is still concern that free nursing care will be introduced only in October 2002; it could have been introduced in

April. That it will not be is not entirely the fault of the Minister; I lay responsibility for that at the door of the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety, which has failed to pass the legislation to allow that funding to be freed up. That legislation has not yet reached Committee Stage. Had the Minister decided to introduce free nursing care next April, he might have been unable to do so because the legislation would not have been in place. The Department and the Executive must get their act together and ensure that Bills that affect financial resources are put before the Assembly in time.

Later today, we shall debate waiting lists and cutbacks in the Health Service. Many of us visited hospitals in the past year. I never thought that I would see such sights in a hospital run by the National Health Service. One patient, in a bed, was paying for his own drugs. Another patient, also in a bed, was waiting for his arthritis drug. A third, in the next bed, was already being given the drug. Imagine how the second patient must have felt.

Mr Deputy Speaker, I hope that you do not intend to restrict me to six minutes —

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

Ms McWilliams: I shall take the matter up with the Speaker. It has never before been the case in the House that leaders or members of parties whose representatives have not spoken are suddenly restricted to six minutes when other Members have been given in excess of 10 minutes. I shall do as you say and bring my remarks to a close.

I am concerned that we have before us only the first round allocations of Executive programme funds, not the second round. I am aware that £69.8 million is still outstanding in the infrastructure fund. I had hoped that the Minister would tell us today that an allocation was being made from that fund for the cancer hospital on the Belfast City Hospital site. Again, I cannot explain to people why such large sums remain in the programme funds, when urgent decisions about cancer hospitals are outstanding.

Mr McCartney: I congratulate Ms McWilliams and Mr Close on their clear analysis of what has been going on. This is the Christmas season. It is the season of great expectations, of lists to Santa Claus. It is also a season of great reality, when many children realise that Santa Claus cannot deliver their wish list. The Programme for Government is a wish list; in cold, cruel reality there is little prospect of its grand aspirations being delivered.

The reason for that is the absence of adequate resources. The fault in the inadequacy of the resources is the terms on which the major parties, distinguished only by the paucity of their appearance here today,

created the Assembly. One was so anxious to have a devolved Administration that it could claim was protecting the Union, and the other was so anxious to have a Nationalist agenda of institutions that were a transitional mode to a united Ireland that both failed to negotiate properly with central Government for sufficient resources to do the job. Now, of course, they find themselves in the position of having insufficient money to fulfil the bargain into which they entered.

It is a matter of common knowledge among economists that at the date of devolution there was a deficit of approximately £6 billion in infrastructure investment due to underinvestment during direct rule. There is absolutely no prospect, under the Barnett formula, that the devolved Government will find enough money to make good the deficiencies in our infrastructure, let alone have sufficient funds to run the day-to-day administration of the Province.

Mr Close mentioned the cost of administration. More than 10% of the block grant — £730 million — is allocated to the administration of government, and that share is increasing. Why is that? It is for political reasons, not for reasons of efficiency or economy. We have 10 Departments when six would have sufficed. There are about 160 quangos that spend more money and cost more money to run than the 26 local government authorities.

What do we have? We have a Health Service that is a disgrace in a modern Western democracy. We have waiting lists that are 50% greater than in the rest of the United Kingdom, where waiting lists are already a matter of acute criticism. What has the Minister of Finance and Personnel done? Essentially, he has abandoned the fundamental principle that Northern Ireland should have parity of treatment, which even under the old Stormont Government and Prime Minister Andrews was considered a cornerstone of Northern Ireland's being part of the United Kingdom.

Why did the Minister do that? He did it because, under the new deal of devolved Government that was supposed to deliver more efficient, accountable and sensitive government, we have a burgeoning bureaucracy. It is the most overgoverned, overpaid bureaucracy in Western Europe. There are 108 Assembly Members, 47 of whom receive additional payment, and the Senior Salaries Review Body (SSRB) is considering whether they should be paid even more. That money should be devoted to the people who really need it.

It has been rightly said that a society is judged by how it treats its most vulnerable members — the very old and the very young. Certainly it is reflected in the care of the very old. The vast majority of those people paid National Insurance contributions to ensure that they would be protected and looked after in their old age. That is not the case. However, the grasshoppers

who never worked and who never wanted to work, but who indulged themselves at the expense of those who did, and who saved nothing, got nothing and preserved nothing, get free care. Those people who worked like ants all their lives, who paid their income tax and National Insurance contributions, and who took out mortgages so that they could live in their own homes and not be a burden on the state, are screwed by what amounts to robbery by the state.

Those people are robbed of their savings. This Budget does absolutely nothing for them. It does not take a page out of the book of its Scottish counterpart.

2.00 pm

The aged are often also the sick, the people who need elective surgery. Elective surgery is not available as a priority in Northern Ireland. The Musgrave Park Hospital, the Royal Hospitals and the Ulster Hospital have all suspended elective surgery for lengthy periods. Strokes and heart conditions are also the products of old age, and people who suffer from them are not looked after properly. I recently heard of the case of a man who was told by his cardiologist that he should have a bypass operation within seven days, or 10 days at most. The man was a member of the British United Provident Association (BUPA). The earliest that the operation could be done in Northern Ireland was in three months' time. If the man had been an NHS patient, he would have had to wait two years. That is an indictment of what the Executive provide.

There is competition between the various portfolios because the Ministers are not a cabinet — they cannot prioritise anything. Each Minister is a warlord over his own portfolio, and all the Ministers compete against one another. May I say that —

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

Mr McCartney: Mr Deputy Speaker, the leader of the Alliance Party was rightly given 13·5 minutes; that was the level of flexibility that you showed towards him. I endorse what Ms McWilliams said. As one of the few Members of the Opposition in the House, I cannot see why I should be hampered from having a proper opportunity to speak. It is a disgrace to democracy, and it is a disgrace on the part of the Business Committee.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Mr McCartney, your time is up.

The Chairperson of the Committee for Social Development (Mr Cobain): I sympathise with Members who have points to make about what is probably the most important debate of the year.

At last month's debate on the draft Budget, I spoke on behalf of the Committee for Social Development. I said that the Committee's programmes and spending priorities were the most marginalised. Yesterday, I spoke

again on behalf of the Committee for Social Development in the debate on the Programme for Government. I repeated the message that the Department for Social Development has a weighty responsibility to serve those who are most vulnerable. It is a responsibility that must not be ignored or sidelined, and it must certainly not be regarded as secondary. It is no less important than the responsibility that we rightly accept to offer a decent standard of healthcare. Several Members have already spoken about that issue.

When the Minister of Finance and Personnel published his revised spending plans on Monday 3 December, I asked him if he would confirm whether he recognised that the Department for Social Development dealt with the most marginalised people in society. I also asked him to explain why the Department for Social Development's budget was the only one that had been reduced since the draft proposals were first published in September. I sought confirmation that the urban regeneration and community development element of the budget had been reduced. I was disappointed with the Minister's answer, and I wrote to tell him so. I also copied the letter to the Minister for Social Development and asked for his observations.

I apologise for my absence earlier today when the Minister of Finance and Personnel elaborated on the technical adjustments to the Department for Social Development's budget. There was an irony in my being absent this morning. I was in my constituency to hear an announcement about an investment in housing in North Belfast. I marvel at the way in which Ministers are able to recycle that news story regularly. The public receives the impression that an unlimited amount of money is available, and that Ministers are doing wonderful things.

I am grateful to the Minister of Finance and Personnel for acknowledging the points that I made last week. I will read Hansard with interest, but I am sure that he will understand that I insist on written replies from him and his ministerial Colleagues. I want to pay tribute to the Minister for his efforts to respond directly to questions that were raised in the Budget debate. If he finds that he is unable to do so, perhaps he or his successor could review the Official Report of the debate and give a commitment to providing prompt and full written answers to the points that are raised. Most of the figures that I will quote are taken from page 53 of the December 2001 version of the Northern Ireland Executive Budget 2002-03.

Much has been made of the fact that the Department for Social Development's budget will increase by 7·5%, compared to this year. If we scratch the surface, we will find that the Department has three stated objectives in the Programme for Government. Our task is to agree the levels of public spending that are needed to meet those objectives.

The first objective relates to the services provided by the Social Security Agency and the Child Support Agency. The effective and efficient administration of benefits is extremely important to many of my constituents and those of other Members. Sadly, benefits continue to be the main source of income for far too many people in Northern Ireland. The cost of administering those benefits is expected to amount to £204 million next year. Of that amount, £195 million is destined for the Social Security Agency. That is a 20% increase on this year's allocation. Interestingly, the Child Support Agency's budget will be £1.5 million less than this year's; that is a reduction of 22%. The Committee has been led to understand that the agencies were implementing efficiency measures that would also lead to improved levels of service.

The Committee is concerned that the administration of the benefits system should run smoothly and that those entitled to benefits should receive the correct level of financial support — at the right time. The Committee accepts that some short-term investments were required to deliver those efficiency savings. However, the bottom line is that the cost of benefit administration next year will increase by 17.5% compared to this year's spending. The Committee has urged the Minister and the Department for Social Development to ensure that that increase will lead to efficiency savings. The Committee intends to monitor the situation carefully and will insist on more regular and detailed reports about progress on efficiency savings, improvements in the level of service and reduction in fraudulent claims.

The increase for running costs is highly disproportionate in comparison with the Department's other spending plans.

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

Mr Cobain: I have several other issues that — *[Interruption]*.

Mr Byrne: On a point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker. Is it possible to extend the time for the debate to 4 pm, given that the original schedule indicated that the debate on the crisis in the Health Service would start at 4 pm?

Mr Paisley Jnr: On a point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker. Would it not be best to suspend Standing Orders until the debate has taken place properly?

Mr Deputy Speaker: I have taken advice on the matter, and I understand that Standing Orders cannot be suspended at this stage. Like Stephen Hawking, I have difficulty bending time. The Business Committee has allocated three hours for the debate. That is the Business Committee's decision, not the Speaker's. All that I can do is try to ensure that every Member who wishes to speak gets the opportunity to do so, and that

sufficient time is given to the proposer of the amendment and to the Minister for his response. The debate must be carried out within the time allocated by the Business Committee. Perhaps this is a matter to which the Business Committee may wish to apply itself. I will take another point of order, but I am concerned that we are eating into valuable time.

Mr Hussey: I am not attempting to overrule you, Mr Deputy Speaker, but surely the Assembly is the ruling body. I understood that it would be possible to extend the time, with the permission of the Assembly.

Mr Deputy Speaker: I have taken advice on the matter, and I believe that that is not possible.

Mr Byrne: I congratulate the Minister of Finance and Personnel on his third Budget, and on the extensive consultation process conducted by the Executive, both in the House and with organisations and individuals.

First, I welcome the revised Budget proposals, which take account of the Chancellor's pre-Budget statement and the decision by the Executive to provide an extra £41 million for health and social services. The General Consumer Council's recent report on poor health outlines the extent of the relationship between poverty and poor health in the North, and the effect that that is having on the life expectancy of those who are less well off. The report underlines the fact that health, economic development and education are closely linked issues that require a co-ordinated approach from an Executive working on a collective basis.

Many patients, and people who work in the Health Service, greatly appreciate the recently increased allocations. However, it is important that patients, rather than administrative needs, benefit most from those budget increases.

Overall, I welcome the 14.8% increase in the budget of the Department for Regional Development, and the planned expenditure of £538.3 million on roads, transport, water and sewerage infrastructure. I am pleased that the maintenance and upgrading of the region's roads is a departmental priority, and I particularly welcome the allocation of £48 million for the purchase of new rolling stock.

As I stated in yesterday's debate on the Programme for Government, the new regional transportation strategy must mark a radical departure from what we have experienced in Northern Ireland to date. The Committee for Regional Development has highlighted the importance of investment in our physical infrastructure in order to promote and sustain economic development across Northern Ireland. The Executive's plans to increase spending on our transport facilities are therefore very welcome. I believe that it is necessary to pursue private finance, by one method or another, to get the necessary funds to invest in capital spending projects. All possible

options should be objectively pursued. Value for money criteria should be a key priority in evaluating such proposals.

The Chancellor's announcement in the pre-Budget statement, signalling the delay of the introduction of the aggregates levy on processed products subject to EU state aid approval, is a welcome one. As the Budget states, it will create additional spending power for the Department for Regional Development. Despite the fact that taxation is a reserved matter, it demonstrates the influence that we can have as Members of the House. It is an acknowledgement of the Assembly's concerns, expressed last December when it passed a motion from Mr Hussey and myself to reject the introduction of the aggregates levy in Northern Ireland. However, the proposed exemption is only a short-term measure, and it falls short of what the quarry industry in Northern Ireland wanted. I am sure that the quarry industry and Members of the House look forward to the publication later today of the report by the Select Committee on Northern Ireland Affairs on the aggregates levy.

On Employment and Learning, I particularly welcome the additional £37.3 million allocated to expand the number of further and higher education places, and to improve access to student support. It is vital to the economic health of this region that we place such emphasis on further and higher education. Although November's labour market bulletin states that the number of graduates of working age has more than doubled — from 60,000 in 1990 to 123,000 in 2000 — that figure, which represents 12.1% of the working population, is still below the UK average of 14.5%. Therefore, the measures in the Budget to expand access to higher and further education demonstrate the importance which the Executive attach to the issue.

The improvement of the skills level of the workforce is critical in sustaining economic development. Although expenditure on the employment programme will be reduced by £10.3 million, the Department must remain focused on promoting lifelong learning and helping the long-term unemployed back into work through appropriate and adequate training schemes. The findings of the international adult literacy survey are in November's 'Labour Market Bulletin'. It is stated that poor levels of basic skills pose a significant problem for the Northern Ireland economy. It is therefore vital that the Department place greater emphasis on addressing that weakness in the immediate future, and ensure that the New Deal is delivered effectively and directly to those most in need.

It is also vital that areas such as research and development, which in the past have been underfunded, are properly resourced in the future. It is important that our two universities be given every encouragement and assistance to increase their research capability. Research students also deserve greater consideration to enable them to pursue relevant and value-added projects.

I particularly welcome the allocation supplement of £2 million to the Department of the Environment for local council spending, which was announced last week. This is particularly good news for the smaller and poorer councils who face above-average increases in district rates in order to maintain scheduled spending plans.

2.15 pm

I welcome the commitment in the Budget to ensure that New TSN, together with the statutory equality legislation, will inform spending decisions in all 11 Departments. I also welcome the intention to subject all spending programmes to ongoing scrutiny.

The Budget provides a route map for our regional economy to become more productive through increased investment in infrastructure, vocational education and training, which will improve the skills base of our workforce. It also demonstrates social conscience and quality-of-life initiatives, as shown by the increased spending on healthcare services and community care. I support the motion.

Mr S Wilson: I support the amendment. The warm homes scheme has been mentioned in the Assembly on 12 occasions during the past year. Members felt that one of the priorities in the Programme for Government and the Budget should be that people should have adequate heating in their homes, which would help alleviate the health and social problems that many people, particularly in old homes, face as a result of the cold.

There have been many arguments against the amendment. The Minister of Finance and Personnel said that it was only an attempt by the DUP to exploit those who suffer from fuel poverty. However, as I have just pointed out, Members across the House have repeatedly raised the issue. In fact it is a pity that Mr Cobain has left, because at the last Social Development Committee meeting he said that he was in favour of an amendment to allocate more money in order to alleviate fuel poverty.

Only last week, a member of Mr Durkan's own party raised the issue with the Minister for Social Development, indicating that 600 people could die this winter. Not only did he want money to be spent on improved heating systems, he actually asked the Minister to consider ways in which to provide help with fuel bills.

Mr McClarty of the Ulster Unionist Party said that fuel poverty is one of Northern Ireland's hidden disgraces. Mr Ford even wanted to impose a levy on electricity consumers. Mr O'Connor of the SDLP described that as a stealth tax, but he said that it was important to do it in order to deal with the problem. We are not exploiting an issue; we are simply responding to Members.

Mr Seamus Close is so predictable. He showed his arrogance when he told us that this is the DUP at it again, and that they should have gone to the Executive and fought their case. He was talking as though money

for Departments was a kind of attendance allowance handed out for Ministers going to Executive meetings. If that is the case, then Bairbre de Brún must have been living with the Minister of Finance and Personnel; she has had an increase of 33% over the last two years. However, if one takes that argument to its logical conclusion, then why has the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment received a cut?

Mr Close: Will the Member give way?

Mr S Wilson: No, I do not have time to give way because I will be cut down in a moment or two.

If attendance at Executive meetings were the criterion for getting funding, then why have the frequent attenders not received the money that they asked for?

Another argument is that we would be cutting money from essential services — the cross-border bodies. Let us look at the spending of some of these cross-border bodies. InterTradeIreland plans to gather statistics on cross-border trade. They will use money to do work through existing Departments and to duplicate the work currently being undertaken by the Industrial Development Board and LEDU.

The Food Safety Promotion Board is going to use its money to increase the bureaucracy that Mr McCartney talked about. There are to be 20 more staff. I have a lovely quotation on the essential services that Mr Durkan was talking about. The last time it was discussed, Dr McDonnell said

“I just wonder if at some stage we could get down to practical matters that would make a difference to ordinary people’s lives.”
— [Official Report, Bound Volume 13, p.205]

As far as he was concerned, the Food Safety Promotion Board was not then making a difference to people’s lives.

Mr Durkan mentioned Waterways Ireland. What is it using its money for? The last time we had a discussion on it in the Assembly, there were three consultation exercises. There were to be consultants to look at a corporate image. I am sure that that takes great priority over putting heat into someone’s house to stop them from dying. The body was going to look at new premises. It had underspent, yet Mr Durkan says that money is needed for this body to deliver essential services.

The Foyle, Carlingford and Irish Lights Commission is also fond of consultation. Consultants have been employed on recruiting members to the forum, on their staffing structure and on their equality scheme. The commission is tagging salmon carcasses. The Minister has told us that she does not know if it has been effective or not. It is so busy —

Mr Deputy Speaker: Mr Wilson, please draw your remarks to a conclusion.

Mr S Wilson: I will.

It is so busy that it has not even been able to turn in its annual report yet. These are the essential bodies that Mr Durkan has been telling us about. There are many quotations on the ineffectiveness of these bodies, yet we are told that we must give this money to them. It is more important that these bodies be sustained than that people have warmth provided in their homes. I think that —

Mr Deputy Speaker: Sorry, but your time is up.

Mr S Wilson: Anyone listening to this objectively will support the DUP amendment and will support warm homes for people who are living in fuel poverty.

Mr Hussey: I want to comment on section 7 of the Budget.

I apologise for this delay — you have caught me on the hop.

Mr Kennedy: It is not often that the Member is caught on the hop — [Interruption].

Mr Hussey: Somebody else has been caught on the hop.

Mr Kennedy: Time is going on.

Mr Hussey: My remarks will be brief. I am concerned about the reduction of the indicative allocations, set in December 2000, for each Department for 2003-04 by around £125 million, to be known as the Executive SR 2002 allocation. The Minister talked about this last week, saying that the Executive would reduce indicative baselines for that year by £125 million through the allocation of indicative minima to Departments.

I have a few questions for the Minister. When will Departments be informed of the indicative figures? How will this affect their departmental plans to work toward efficiency targets? Will this reduction encourage Departments simply to bid again for activities previously dropped to achieve efficiency savings, rather than to target limited resources on new activities? Is there a danger that the transparency of the Budget process will be lost if resources are creamed off to meet unspecified needs?

Will the Minister give us some indication of these needs? Will he also tell us how the rationale for withholding £125 million differs from the approach in the Executive programme funds, and what criteria will be set to determine how resources are allocated to Departments? The Minister is aware of concerns that Executive programme funds are sometimes regarded as something that should have originally been allocated to Departments. I have already put this point to the Minister. I am concerned that the reduction of £125 million in indicative baselines is creating a similar scenario to that of the Executive programme funds.

Mr O'Connor: I support the Budget. It is a fair and professional attempt to meet the comprehensive needs of our society. This is a difficult task, given the complexity of trying to meet the needs of every Department, which cannot be achieved by offering so-called simple solutions.

Sammy Wilson said that doing away with North/South bodies would save about £1.3 million. I agree with his passion for creating warm homes. However, this cannot be an either/or situation. The Department for Social Development will have £6.8 million extra for housing associations, but there will be £0.5 million less for the Housing Executive, and there will also be a £5 million reduction in money for urban regeneration and community development. However, the Minister seems to need an extra 20% — £35 million — for social security administration. Mr Wilson has not mentioned cutting down the social security administration budget and using that money to provide warm homes for people. These figures are set out on page 53 of the 2002-03 Budget.

The needs of our Health Service are paramount. I had the misfortune to be in hospital recently. Staff are being run off their feet, and cubicles are being shared in casualty departments. Money must be invested. Bob McCartney was right when he said that there was a historical underinvestment of £6 billion. We must redress that situation.

Since devolution, an extra £687 million has been put into the Health Service — an increase of 37%. The Assembly should be proud of the financial astuteness and prudence of the Minister of Finance and Personnel in being able to deliver the introduction of free nursing care. We all care about people, and the delivery of free nursing care to the people of Northern Ireland has been a big plus for the Assembly. I congratulate the Minister on achieving that.

Mr McCartney was right when he said that the Barnett formula is unfair. However, he did not address one single issue in the Budget. I want to see the historical underfunding being addressed. We were promised a peace dividend. However, the money that does not now have to be spent on security and security installations, and the mechanics of a war machine, has been taken away from the people of Northern Ireland. We should be having our peace dividend now that that money is not being spent on security apparatus.

2.30 pm

It is about time that we pressed the Government for an increase in the block grant.

I wish to talk about health and care in the community. There are 19 trusts and four health boards, which poses a problem. A sum of £1 million was paid out last year to non-executive directors in the Health Service here alone. That is almost equivalent to the amounts included

in Mr Morrow's amendment. I am all for reducing the quangos. We and the councils must be accountable, so let us do away with boards that seem to gobble up endless amounts of money.

Mr S Wilson: Do away with the cross-border bodies.

Mr O'Connor: It is all right for Mr Wilson to chirp from the sidelines about cross-border quangos, as he calls them, but they were voted for by 71.12% of the people as an essential part of the Good Friday Agreement. Whether Mr Wilson likes it or not, they are here to stay.

With regard to reducing expenditure on bureaucracy in the Health Service, I wish to address parallel imports, which allow pharmacists to claim a maximum amount of money for prescription drugs, only to bring them in from abroad. That takes away vital resources from patient care.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Please draw your comments to a close, Mr O'Connor.

Mr O'Connor: I support the Budget and reject the amendment.

Mr Carrick: I welcome the opportunity to contribute to the debate. I reiterate the comments made by my Colleague Mr Morrow, who identified the vulnerable section of the community that suffers from fuel poverty. I want to focus on another vulnerable group — people who need basic adult education.

In today's meeting of the Committee for Employment and Learning, Prof Loreto Todd quoted from an article in the 19 November 2001 edition of the 'Irish Independent', which stated that

"More than half a million adults cannot access healthcare services properly because of inadequate literacy skills".

That is a terrible indictment of a system that seems to have failed a sizeable section of the population surveyed. Indeed, the findings of the international adult literacy survey (IALS), in which Northern Ireland was benchmarked against almost all the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) countries, indicate that 24% of the adult population of Northern Ireland performs at the lowest levels of literacy. That is equal to some 260,000 people and compares poorly with our economic competitors such as Belgium at 18%, Germany at 14%, the Netherlands at 11% and Sweden at 8%.

Members from all parties have highlighted the subject of basic skills on numerous occasions in the House. Rarely does a meeting of the Committee for Employment and Learning, of which I am the Deputy Chairperson, go by without reference to the problem of literacy and numeracy. It is good to hear Mr Byrne and Mr Dallat on the SDLP Benches continually raising the subject. If the amendment originally tabled in my

name had been deemed competent, I would have expected Mr Byrne and Mr Dallat to support it. They will not have the opportunity to do that now. Perhaps they will consider supporting the warmer homes amendment.

There is a flaw in the Budget in that there seems to be a lack of co-ordination on basic adult education between it and the Programme for Government. The Programme for Government states that the Executive are

“committed to taking action to tackle these problems.”

If the problem has forced its way into the Programme for Government, one would expect to be able to identify the accompanying and appropriate funding to tackle it. However, so far as I can ascertain, the Department for Employment and Learning’s public service agreement does not give any prominence to the problem. Furthermore, the service delivery agreement appears to be silent on the issue. With unemployment falling in recent years, the cohort of 260,000 adults who lack basic literacy and numeracy skills have become an important entity in the socio-economic agenda in Northern Ireland.

The Department for Employment and Learning presented a business case for a financial resource requirement of some £13 million for the three years commencing 2001-02. In the current year, there was a shortfall of £2 million because the Department was unsuccessful in its bid for Executive programme funds. In 2002-03, there will be a shortfall of £2.2 million because there was a shortfall in the Executive programme funds requirement. Having applied for £3.4 million, the Department succeeded in getting only £1.2 million. An application for £3.5 million from the Executive programme funds was made for 2003-04, but only £1.2 million was allocated — a shortfall of £2.3 million.

It is time for the lip service to cease; it is time for action. More than 250,000 adults are vulnerable due to their lack of literacy and numeracy skills. There must be funding to accompany the fine words in the Programme for Government. Otherwise, it is simply a lot of talk and window dressing. As I said before, there must be action now.

The Minister of Finance and Personnel reminded the House this morning that the Executive listen and respond. How many times do Members have to remind the Executive and the Minister that funding is needed for that critical section of our population? It is vital that the money come now — not in 2003 or further down the line.

Mr Morrow: I know that you are pushing hard on time, Mr Deputy Speaker, and I shall try to accommodate you. I have listened carefully to Members’ remarks, and it is ironic that none of them has said that the idea of providing more resources for a warm homes scheme is not a good idea. Even those Members who have said that they will not support the amendment

acknowledge the need to tackle fuel poverty in Northern Ireland.

I have listened to one or two Members who are somewhat sceptical, but perhaps that is to be expected from those who have no real reason to vote against the amendment. I was particularly concerned to hear Mr O'Neill question why both rich and poor receive the £200 fuel payment. That is how it is. I suspect that he has not thought the whole matter through. I thought that he would know that the fuel payment of £200 is a parity issue. Some Members who spoke today seemed to be confused about that.

Social security was also mentioned. Members know that, while it is administered in Northern Ireland, social security is a parity issue. Mr O'Connor was also critical of the administration of social security. However, the Department for Employment and Learning will roll out one service across the Province. Members of the Committee for Social Development were invited to visit the pilot scheme in Dungannon. Mr O'Connor may have attended that. I have heard no criticism from people who have visited the scheme and have seen it up and running. Therefore, all those who say that they are concerned about fuel poverty now have an option and an opportunity to put their vote where their mouth is. It is one thing to talk about the issue, but another to deliver on it.

Perhaps Mr Close will change his mind before the day is out, but I am disappointed that he cannot find it in his heart to support the amendment. He has also said that he will not support the Budget, so at least he is neutral. Perhaps that is the position he always wants — neutral, whatever the issue. However, Mr Close should get off the fence and join the rest of us.

Mr Close: Does the Member not accept that under this perverse voting system, on what should be the most important date in the Assembly’s calendar, people such as me, who are described as “Other”, do not have a vote that counts? My electorate is disenfranchised — I cannot vote on its behalf.

Mr Morrow: That point is worth arguing. However, did Mr Close not sign up to this? Did he not help to bring all this about? Was his party not party to the whole thing? Surely he cannot sit here now and grouse. He should be re-designate and support us, because re-designation will be nothing new for the Alliance Party. It has jumped through that hoop before, and it will jump through it again.

A relatively small sum of money is being requested. There should be no problem obtaining that funding from the different resources that have been highlighted. It would not impact significantly on the workings of those quangos, and it would better many people in Northern Ireland’s lot. I urge everyone who sits in the valley of indecision to step out with us and vote to

improve the lot of the elderly and the fuel poor in Northern Ireland.

Mr Durkan: This has been a helpful debate that has raised and explored several issues. However, I share with many Members the regret about the time constraints that have been imposed. Members have not been allowed to discuss fully the range of issues in the Budget, and many Members have been unable to participate in the debate. Some Members have insinuated that the time limit was sought either on my behalf or on the Executive's behalf. I remind Members that I have sat in the House faithfully through long Budget debates and — believe it or not — have been happy to do so.

I am available when statements are being made on financial allocations. Ms McWilliams said that there may be too many statements on allocations, but for each statement I have also been available for an hour of questions. I have not attempted to evade or curb debate on the Budget.

Maturity and realism have been evident across the Chamber as Members addressed different issues. That is good to see and it shows that we are maturing as an Assembly. We have a firmer grip on understanding our responsibilities and understanding the limitations of resources. We are beginning to understand that we must develop better ways to meet the needs of the services about which we all care.

2.45 pm

I have heard nothing from Members who spoke in favour of the amendment that would change my view that it is a cynical attempt to injure the agreement by manipulating an important and emotive issue. I understand that that is classic opposition politics, and the agreement allows for that. It is just a pity that the DUP will not do more of what the agreement allows for and play its full part in decision-making by attending Executive meetings. There, their Ministers could contribute their views, not only on their departmental responsibilities but on all matters relating to government. In that regard, I appreciate Mr Carrick's thoughtful contribution; he did not raise the warm homes scheme issue but returned to an issue that he has addressed before — basic adult literacy and numeracy.

None of the ways suggested by the DUP to slice up the Budget alters the fact that the Department for Social Development did not present fuel poverty as a priority for either the Budget or the Executive programme funds. I referred Members to the position report issued in June, when the then Minister for Social Development tabled an amendment. Neither he nor his Department presented the matter as a priority. I hope that Members will appreciate that fact. In the bilateral meetings that we conducted on the Budget, the Department for Social Development did not give the issue priority. Given the extravagance and the exaggeration of some of the

claims made in the Chamber, people should bear that in mind.

In December 2000, the Executive provided £2 million to allow the new warm homes scheme to proceed. The Department for Social Development then introduced the enhanced scheme without seeking additional resources from the centre. Warm homes are important, but we must remember that the current Minister for Social Development announced on 21 November that the £4.3 million that the Department was spending would rise to £8 million next year. That should be set in context. That provision is also part of a wider fuel poverty package that totals £12.5 million. It is not the case that the Executive have done nothing or that the Budget does not make provision to tackle fuel poverty.

The Budget recommendations reflect the level of priority that the Department for Social Development places on fuel poverty. If expenditure on the warm homes scheme is to double next year, it is for the Executive to consider any further proposals that the Department might make to reassess the level of priority given to fuel poverty in its own budget, in the Executive Budget or in Executive programme funds. Those issues can be considered on their merits as they arise. That is the proper way to show the importance of issues — not through gimmicky stunts and ambushes. What Mr Close said about the DUP's amendment was right.

The Chairperson of the Finance and Personnel Committee, Mr Molloy, highlighted the Committee's interest in the management of Executive programme funds. Mr Hussey suggested that money should go straight to Departments, rather than into Executive programme funds. Mr Close complained that there was some sort of syndrome by which Departments assume that the money is destined for them. They regard it as their money, and they do not think about the Budget's wider priorities. Executive programme funds were created as an antidote to that syndrome. They were to ensure that we did not decide that we were dealing with fixed envelopes that could not be reprioritised between budgets. Executive programme funds have been a means to try to bring greater Executive strategic priority to the Budget.

Significant developments have come from Executive programme funds. However, the Finance and Personnel Committee was right to identify the need to improve the way in which the funds are planned, managed and accounted for through positive evaluation and reportage. The Executive will proceed on that basis, and they will follow some of the Committee's sensible and helpful recommendations. Those recommendations do not move against the Executive programme funds, but they try to ensure that we make best use of them.

Mr Molloy also mentioned the needs and effectiveness evaluations. They are substantial pieces of work. The findings will be used to support our case on the Barnett

formula, and they will influence our work on next year's spending review. That work concerns our Departments as well as the Treasury.

Mr Deputy Speaker: There is a great deal of noise in the Chamber. Having asked the Minister so many questions, it would be unfortunate if we were not afforded the opportunity to listen to his response.

Mr Durkan: Part of the work that will flow from the needs and effectiveness evaluations will address the points raised by Mr Close, Ms McWilliams and Mr Leslie. We must see whether we are spending money where it is most needed and where it will have the most impact on our regional needs, whether they be social, economic, environmental or cultural.

Members have queried many aspects of the Budget, and they have asked whether our tests for departmental budget bids have been searching enough and whether we have been thorough in our appraisals for Executive programme funds. I hope that those Members will join with us to ensure that we have honest and thorough reflection on the issues that arise from the results of the evaluations. There is no point in rehearsing the line that programmes must have the sort of spending that they have always had. There is no point in insisting that new needs must be the subject of new bids that may or may not succeed because limited money is available.

The total discretion that we have must apply to the entire Budget. Several Members said that we concentrate too much on the question of additional bids, and I agree. Ms McWilliams complained that too many allocations were announced and that that causes confusion. That is the price of transparency. If I tried to get away with fewer allocation announcements, said less, or said that we would save up the announcements until we have a nice aggregate, many people would say that matters were being obscured — rather than confused — and that they did not know what was happening. If people can follow it, there are clear and consistent patterns. I would prefer some of the major spending decisions that are taken by the Departments to be subjected to the same sort of scrutiny and exposures to which mere fractions of the total budgetary allocation are subjected. Considering the proportion of the Budget accounted for by Executive programme funds, and the level of scrutiny that attaches to them — compared with some of the big decisions that are taken elsewhere — there are issues that need to be addressed by the Executive and the Assembly Committees.

Mr Leslie's point about asset management is correct. It is not only an issue now; it will become a bigger issue because of the impact of resource accounting and budgeting. We, as an Assembly and not only as an Executive, must start to get our heads around some of the issues involved. Among the proposals to help the targeting of next year's health budget was the suggestion

that there would be £5 million worth of asset sales. On a previous occasion, some Members objected to that proposal and raised scare stories about the family silver being sold off. In trying to achieve asset sales of £5 million from a total asset holding of £3 billion we are not looking at the family silver being sold off, we are trying to identify ways to put more money into health, for which many Members have rightly pressed.

Points were made about the Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure's budget. I understand that Department's circumstances and that, historically, some of its programmes have been underfunded. The Executive have seen to it that major increases have been made in that Department's funding programmes in the past few years.

Mr Deputy Speaker: I remind Members to my right that if they wish to conduct private conversations there is adequate space in the Great Hall.

Mr Durkan: On behalf of the Committee for Agriculture and Rural Development, Dr Paisley mentioned the vision group's report. There was an allocation towards the work of the vision group in a previous Budget, which was intended to be a pre-allocation of the Executive programme funds. The vision group's review is now subject to consultation, after which proposals will be made. Any firm bids for implementing the report's recommendations will be developed and considered in that context, with access given to Executive programme funds as is appropriate. The vision group previously received an advance allocation from Executive programme funds, which proves its eligibility for funding. The Executive must ensure that we take into account any necessary prioritisation in the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development. Its Committee often raises points on that matter.

The Executive also want to ensure that we do not just implement structures and policies in a new way, without knowing that they will deliver results. There is no difference between the approach to the vision group's report and the approach to the soccer strategy. In both cases, funding will depend on satisfactory business cases being advanced.

Dr Paisley also raised points about compensation for the fishing industry and the impact of the fish quota cuts. He is aware that it has not been policy to compensate for reductions in quotas or for closures. The Commission's proposals are unwelcome as far as the Northern Ireland fleet is concerned, and that has been reflected in the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development's fight for an approach that takes account of the industry's difficulties while respecting the scientific evidence. She will attend next week's Fisheries Council meeting.

Mr Close raised several issues. Some of them are familiar to Members because of his contributions in the Chamber. For example, he mentioned the regional

rate. Others may be less familiar to Members because they have come via his contributions to the Committee for Finance and Personnel.

As regards the regional rate, I make the point again: where we recognise that we do not have enough money available as a block of expenditure to use at our discretion, we must supplement it from our own resources. If we are committed to public services and to public expenditure — and this Minister of Finance and Personnel is — we must be prepared to ask the public to make further contributions.

That is particularly relevant in the light of next year's spending review. We are supposed to be raising issues about the Barnett formula, but we will be approaching the Treasury from a weak position, because less revenue is raised here by comparison with the contributions paid by households across the water. Many Members rail against the regional rate, while as councillors they vote for higher increases in the district rate. Accusations that some Ministers are inconsistent might apply equally to other Members.

3.00 pm

Seamus Close is right that we need to attack bureaucracy and take action to improve efficiency and effectiveness. We must do more to ensure that resources are used in the best possible way. That relates to my earlier point on the application of scrutiny and the intervention of Committees to scrutinise.

I mentioned that we need more joined-up scrutiny so that such issues as are examined by the Public Accounts Committee, arising from the work of the Comptroller and Auditor General, are properly monitored. A more joined-up approach would ensure that the implications of those issues and the application of Departments' commitments are properly monitored to ensure their full effectiveness. There are ways to ensure that that relays into the Budget process.

Several Members mentioned departmental running costs. I recommended to the Executive that they make a 1% cut in departmental running costs across all Departments — the Executive did, therefore, consider the issue. Committees' responses to the position report and the draft Budget show that Departments and Committees identified that the term "departmental running costs" is sometimes a mislabelling of what those costs cover. For some Departments, departmental running costs do not simply relate to the bureaucratic costs of civil servants at the centre of the Department. In many cases, those costs cover direct, frontline service providers. That distinction should be recognised. For some Departments, the term is something of a misnomer. The Executive have recognised that they need to address that inaccuracy. The Committee for Finance and Personnel might want to address that also.

Some Members highlighted the increase in departmental running costs of the Department for Social Development. Those Members might have thought that they were helping me by making that point, but the significant increase in departmental running costs for the Social Security Agency is part of the welfare reform and modernisation programme. Investments are aimed at introducing new measures that will, in turn, yield savings over time. It would be unfair of me to omit that fact.

Members have welcomed the fact that the Executive have been able to do more for the Health Service, but I appreciate that Members are frustrated that the extra money will not be adequate to tackle all its problems. Members commented on the serious problems that they have seen when visiting hospitals and other services in either a personal or official capacity. We are investing more into the Health Service than is allocated under the Barnett formula.

I resent Boyd Douglas's insinuation that, had it not been for the Chancellor, no more money would have been allocated to the Health Service or for care of the elderly. Prior to the Chancellor's announcement of an extra £28 million in the pre-Budget report, the Executive decided to increase the Health budget beyond that provided in the draft Budget. In last year's Budget I announced that the Executive would provide money for free nursing care for the elderly. Unfortunately, the legislation was not then in place. Other pressures also bore on the situation. No money was taken from the Department, but other pressures were able to absorb the money. However, with available extra money, we have been able to make good that commitment, and I hope that the Executive and the Assembly will facilitate that by passing the necessary legislation.

Unfortunately, because of time constraints, I have been unable to answer all of the points made by Members. I am usually criticised for trying to answer too many questions. I will certainly try to follow them up, as I have done in the past. I also hope that Members will follow up those points themselves in their respective Committees. I am fascinated by some of the points that Members have made to me as Minister of Finance about some discrete issues within their Committees. I would be even more fascinated to see some of those points pursued at Committee level and to see what results from that.

Mr Deputy Speaker: I must ask the Minister to conclude his remarks.

Mr Durkan: I want to thank Members for their contributions to the debate. Some Members paid me compliments for my work as Minister of Finance and Personnel, and I appreciate those. The Committee for Finance and Personnel has helped the Executive and the Assembly to develop very effective and transparent arrangements for examining public expenditure planning

and allocations, and I place on record my appreciation of its work. Our budgetary process is more transparent than that found in any other jurisdiction in this hemisphere. I am glad to have played some part in creating that, but I particularly pay tribute to the work of the Committee for Finance and Personnel. I hope that the Assembly will endorse the Budget.

Question put, That the amendment be made.

The Assembly divided: Ayes 20; Noes 55

AYES

Fraser Agnew, Paul Berry, Gregory Campbell, Mervyn Carrick, Wilson Clyde, Nigel Dodds, Oliver Gibson, William Hay, David Hilditch, Roger Hutchinson, Robert McCartney, William McCrea, Maurice Morrow, Ian Paisley Jnr, Mark Robinson, Peter Robinson, Jim Shannon, Denis Watson, Peter Weir, Sammy Wilson.

NOES

Gerry Adams, Ian Adamson, Roy Beggs, Billy Bell, Eileen Bell, Esmond Birnie, Joe Byrne, Joan Carson, Seamus Close, Fred Cobain, Robert Coulter, John Dallat, Duncan Shipley Dalton, Ivan Davis, Bairbre de Brún, Arthur Doherty, Mark Durkan, David Ervine, Sean Farren, John Fee, David Ford, Sam Foster, Tommy Gallagher, Michelle Gildernew, Tom Hamilton, Carmel Hanna, Denis Haughey, Joe Hendron, Billy Hutchinson, John Kelly, Danny Kennedy, James Leslie, Patricia Lewsley, Alban Maginness, Alex Maskey, Kieran McCarthy, Alasdair McDonnell, Alan McFarland, Michael McGimpsey, Eddie McGrady, Martin McGuinness, Gerry McHugh, Eugene McMenamin, Pat McNamee, Monica McWilliams, Conor Murphy, Mick Murphy, Mary Nelis, Dermot Nesbitt, Danny O'Connor, Dara O'Hagan, Sue Ramsey, Ken Robinson, Brid Rodgers, Jim Wilson.

Question accordingly negatived.

3.15 pm

Mr Deputy Speaker: I remind Members that this motion requires cross-community support.

Main Question put.

The Assembly divided: Ayes 49, Noes 27.

AYES

Nationalist:

Gerry Adams, Joe Byrne, John Dallat, Bairbre de Brún, Arthur Doherty, Mark Durkan, Sean Farren, John Fee, Tommy Gallagher, Michelle Gildernew, Carmel Hanna, Denis Haughey, Joe Hendron, John Kelly, Patricia Lewsley, Alban Maginness, Alex Maskey, Alasdair McDonnell, Eddie McGrady, Martin McGuinness, Gerry McHugh, Eugene McMenamin, Pat McNamee, Conor Murphy,

Mick Murphy, Mary Nelis, Danny O'Connor, Dara O'Hagan, Sue Ramsey, Brid Rodgers.

Unionist:

Ian Adamson, Roy Beggs, Billy Bell, Esmond Birnie, Joan Carson, Fred Cobain, Robert Coulter, Duncan Shipley Dalton, Ivan Davis, Sam Foster, Tom Hamilton, Derek Hussey, Danny Kennedy, James Leslie, Alan McFarland, Michael McGimpsey, Dermot Nesbitt, Ken Robinson, Jim Wilson.

NOES

Nationalist:

Monica McWilliams.

Unionist:

Fraser Agnew, Paul Berry, Gregory Campbell, Mervyn Carrick, Wilson Clyde, Nigel Dodds, David Ervine, Oliver Gibson, William Hay, David Hilditch, Billy Hutchinson, Roger Hutchinson, Robert McCartney, William McCrea, Maurice Morrow, Ian Paisley Jnr, Mark Robinson, Peter Robinson, Jim Shannon, Denis Watson, Peter Weir, Sammy Wilson.

Other:

Eileen Bell, Seamus Close, David Ford, Kieran McCarthy.

<i>Total Votes</i>	<i>76</i>	<i>Total Ayes</i>	<i>49 (64.5%)</i>
<i>Nationalist Votes</i>	<i>31</i>	<i>Nationalist Ayes</i>	<i>30 (96.8%)</i>
<i>Unionist Votes</i>	<i>41</i>	<i>Unionist Ayes</i>	<i>19 (46.3%)</i>

Question accordingly agreed to.

Resolved (with cross-community support):

That this Assembly approves the programme of expenditure proposals for 2002-03 as set out in the Budget laid before the Assembly on 3 December 2001.

3.30 pm

HEALTH SERVICE

Ms Hanna: I beg to move

That this Assembly urges the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to take urgent action to tackle the current crisis in the Health Service, particularly in view of impending additional winter pressures.

I look forward to a constructive debate on the future of our Health Service. Members share many concerns about the Health Service, and we also share a desire to help provide the best treatment and service. Today, we have an opportunity to explore ways of tackling the all-too-evident problems.

(Madam Deputy Speaker [Ms Morrice] in the Chair)

Every day seems to bring more bad news about our health and social services, and we appear to lurch from crisis to crisis. Sometimes, the Minister, her Department and the Committee for Health, Social Services and Public Safety appear to be overwhelmed by the multitude and complexity of the problems. However, we must know where we want to go and how to get there. That is the essence of a strategic vision. We want to achieve a real Health Service, not one for the inadequate treatment of bad health, but one that promotes a positive and coherent vision of healthy living and tries to anticipate our problems.

I support the amendment, but I must say that resources are only half the picture. A blank cheque is not the solution, and spending must be planned. The amendment may be a distraction from the constructive thrust of my motion.

Last week, the Department issued statistics on hospital waiting lists for the quarter ending 30 September 2001. Those statistics give added relevance to the motion, especially as waiting lists appear to be spiralling out of control even before the full impact of additional winter pressures is felt.

I hope that the debate will focus on the necessity for a shared strategic vision for the future of the National Health Service. There are 56,700 people on waiting lists. That is a disturbing statistic, and, more importantly, the annualised rate of increase is now approaching 14% — an increase of more than half on the annualised rate of increase only three months ago.

Waiting lists are one way to measure the pressures on the National Health Service, but I am worried that health professionals acknowledge that waiting lists alone are inappropriate to measure the effectiveness of acute hospital performance. The only foolproof qualitative criterion to determine a patient's treatment is an assessment

of clinical need. The pressures on acute hospitals to meet targets has placed undue emphasis on the performance of routine operations for more easily treatable conditions at the expense of patients who need longer, more complex and, ultimately, more necessary procedures. What concerns me most is that the waiting lists include many of the most difficult cases, and there is less of a mix than in the past. The resources required to reduce that bald statistic — 56,700 — may be enormous.

I have asked for an audit of waiting lists. I ask for it again. For example, the framework for action on waiting lists was supposed to reduce our waiting list to 48,000. The Department received £8 million accordingly. What were the findings of that framework? Where exactly did that £8 million go? Why did the problem get worse rather than better? Those are hard questions, and the answers may sometimes be embarrassing or awkward. However, we need to hear them.

At times, we appear to be rudderless and out of control. In such a situation, to simply call for more resources without knowing what they are to be applied to and what value that expenditure will add is missing the point. Since devolution, we have spent more than 40% of the block grant on health and social services — almost half of our Budget. In the first year, the finance allocated was £2.178 billion. For the current year, 2001-02, the allocation was £2.366 billion. Next year's allocation from the Minister of Finance and Personnel will be £2.5 billion.

In the three years since devolution, the amount of money going to the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety has increased considerably and has been in excess of the rate of inflation. Despite those extra resources the position of the National Health Service in the North has declined. That is a substantial sum of money. Even though the vast bulk of it is committed beforehand, the Minister of Finance and Personnel has rightly noted that the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety was successful with more than half her bids for discretionary initiatives that she wanted to undertake. In other words, resources are a problem, but they form only part of the bigger picture.

Waiting lists are an indicator of pressures in the acute sector. However, the unpalatable fact is that we in the North already spend a higher amount per capita, and a higher percentage of our total health budget, on acute healthcare than the Irish Republic or anywhere in England. However, our waiting lists are by far the worst of any UK region and are worsening all the time.

Those issues are being debated in the legislatures of every Western democracy. They are all faced with ageing populations and a seemingly limitless demand for health and social services. The questions that people in Northern Ireland must address regarding our Health

Service are not unique. Some of them may be, but most are not.

I ask the Minister how we can match the finite resources available with an apparently ever-expanding need? How do we optimise the use of available financial and manpower resources? How do we plan strategically for the future use of trained and competent doctors, nurses, and other professions allied to medicine, as well as Health Service managers and appropriate medical facilities?

How do we lift ourselves off the bottom of the UK regional league table of performance indicators for long waiting lists, cancelled clinics, chronic heart disease, cancer rates and inappropriate lifestyles, as represented by excessive alcohol and tobacco consumption? How soon can we slim down and rationalise the Health Service structures between health boards and trusts? It must be done sooner rather than later. How do we restore public confidence in the bright shining vision of a National Health Service — as first articulated by Aneurin Bevan — as a universal, excellent healthcare system available to all and free at the point of delivery?

As someone who has worked in the National Health Service for decades, I want to make a difference, and I want to play my part. I am sure that every Member of the Assembly who is interested in health matters wants to do the same. Devolution means local people sorting out local problems with the maximum amount of democratic input. I am sure that the people who elected me to the Assembly would expect me to take my opportunity to be involved in that vision. One thing that Tony Benn said that always struck a chord with me was that the most socialist and popular act that any British Government ever carried out was to establish the National Health Service.

The types of healthcare procedures needed most urgently in this demand-led service, and the types of drugs and procedures now available, were largely unknown at the inception of the National Health Service in 1948. The service is a product of a different era and a different set of expectations. We can still preserve the integrity of the founding vision of the National Health Service, but we need to make hard choices to do so.

We have had the reviews and the consultations, now we must have an audit of performance. We must cost the decisions to be made in terms of people, manpower and resources, prioritise them and then make hard choices. As a member of the Health Committee, I have to express my frustration at the inertia and lack of decisions that emanate from the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety. The Minister has inherited an admittedly difficult, challenging and complex brief. She has had to cope with decades of under-funding, the postponement of hard decisions and the lack of political leadership. However, she is now in

her third year of office and we seem to be going backwards rather than forwards.

At the same time, there appears to be a lack of imagination, leadership and vision in the Department. The Department's role should be as a balancing act in the formulation of policy, advising the Minister and introducing legislation. Alongside that, in the hospitals and community care sector, we need the best possible Health Service managers with the appropriate knowledge and skills. That means that the Department must ensure that central priorities are met, while allowing the maximum possible scope for local initiative. It is easy to get bogged down in firefighting from day to day. However, if the Department is purely reactive we shall never break the vicious cycles and replace them with virtuous cycles. We shall never get anywhere.

The National Health Service is supposed to be a seamless, integrated and interdependent service that combines acute hospital and community care. However, we hear mostly about pressures on acute hospitals. We must never lose sight of the fact that more than 80% of healthcare takes place in the community. Healthcare is very much the Cinderella of the National Health Service.

The statistics on the uptake of flu jabs show that targets have not been met. Only around 50% of the elderly population have had the jab, yet I hope that that figure reaches 70%. If there is a flu epidemic, a winter crisis or a cold snap with an increase in fractures among older people, and staff in hospitals going down with flu, how will we cope? Will the perennial problem of the delayed discharge of patients be made worse because the community care facilities are not available? Will other patients who need acute procedures be unable to receive them because the beds for their planned treatments are occupied? And so the cycle continues.

We need to debate whether the current models of health and social services are appropriate and whether they have the capacity to address the complex issues of chronic sickness in an ageing population. There is clear evidence that the most chronic disabling conditions increase rapidly in incidence and prevalence with advancing age. In the next quarter of a century, the number of people aged 80 and over is expected to increase by almost 50%, and the number of those aged over 90 is expected to double. Those age groups have the greatest take-up of health and social services.

Now that the statutory sector no longer provides nursing and residential care for older people, we rely more on the private sector. Last week, we learned of a major private nursing home provider in Northern Ireland in financial difficulties, and we must ask why. Delayed discharges are symptoms of the gap in the total healthcare system in the interface between the acute sector and the primary and community care sector. Neither sector is equipped with the resources to

deal with the needs of those with chronic health problems who require intermittent periods of treatment, rehabilitation, health monitoring and long-term care.

3.45 pm

As a member of the Health Committee, I have learnt a lot by listening and talking to people about the National Health Service, whether they be patients, orderlies, ancillaries, nurses or doctors. The vast majority of health professionals want to deliver a patient-centred healthcare system, but they become frustrated by silly things like incompatible information and communication technology (ICT) systems. A properly functioning person-centred information system can reduce duplication, speed up the process and be very cost effective.

I wish to refer to the excellence of some of our local practitioners. At the top of their profession and esteemed internationally, they are harassed by having to cope with day-to-day pressures. Specialists with established international reputations return to the North, but they are disheartened by the chaos, the disorganisation and the lack of decision-making that confronts them.

The Department must audit practice. Where it is bad, it must be discontinued and where it is excellent, it must be replicated. We need a centre for clinical excellence here that will combine efficacy and efficiency, and recognise that current services vary unacceptably between different hospitals and trusts. With such a small population, 1.67 million, models and standards of practice need to be set so that unacceptable variations between hospitals are eliminated as quickly as possible. The best people in the Health Service, whether they be doctors, nurses, professionals allied to medicine, or managers, all need to have time to think strategically and to contribute to the vision of which I spoke earlier.

How can we expect to get the best from our staff if we do not facilitate professional development and allow them the time to think creatively to solve problems? Is it any wonder that the National Health Service is losing nurses to the private sector, which is costing us more than twice what it should, when working practices are so inflexible and family unfriendly?

The SDLP is the party of public services, but it is also the party of the competent management of public resources. The Committee for Health, Social Services and Public Safety and the Executive have demonstrated their commitment to the Health Service and their desire to work in partnership with the Minister to achieve a well resourced and properly managed service. We are here to help. We share the objective of prioritising health for all, but we need the Minister to meet us half way. She must acknowledge that finance is not the only issue and that receipt of more than 40% of the budget carries significant managerial responsibility.

Madam Deputy Speaker: I have received one amendment to the motion, which is on the Marshalled List of amendments.

Mr J Kelly: I beg to move the following amendment:
At the end add

“and calls on the Executive to make the necessary resources available to alleviate pressures throughout the Health Service.”

Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. The amendment is not a distraction, as Ms Carmel Hanna suggests. It is an attempt to expand on her motion in order to make it more inclusive.

We agree with the sentiments of the motion, but it does not go far enough. The motion tends to curse the darkness, rather than light a candle of hope. I hope that all of us want to point to a beacon of light in the despair that engulfs the Health Service.

I hope that we shall have a constructive debate. However, health is an emotive issue. It is an issue that makes people angry and play games. We hope that no political games are being played with the health of the people of this part of the island.

“The scale of the problem should be acknowledged, as well as the resources and the time that will be required to address it”.

That is a quote from an SDLP document, not a Sinn Féin document. Financial resources, whatever Ms Carmel Hanna says, are at the heart of the health crisis that we face, and if we harp on about mismanagement in the service we shall discourage investment in it. Members are here in an attempt to encourage investment in the Health Service.

The practitioners — the people at the coalface — know the reasons for the crisis. They know exactly where funding is required, and we who have spoken to them in the past year also know. Those people told the Health Committee how the Health Service should be managed, where it should be managed and what finances are required to manage it. There is no mystery about where the money is going in many cases. There may be a degree of rationalisation required in the trusts and boards. However, that is separate from the critical issue about which we talk today — the crisis at the centre of the Health Service.

The Committee for Health, Social Services and Public Safety, as Ms Hanna will be aware, invited the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister to discuss the financial crisis in the Health Service. The Committee has yet to receive a reply even though the Health Minister has stated that she welcomes its support in that matter.

The ability to provide the financial structures to meet the urgent needs of the crisis in the Health Service is a challenge to the collective responsibility of the Executive. The failure to provide those financial structures is a collective failure of the Executive, not of the Minister,

in managing the Department. Events in the other part of Ireland prove that. Charlie McCreevy has provided the resources to finance a 10-year programme of health in the Twenty-six Counties. Gordon Brown is embarking on a similar strategic financial plan to assist in implementing health services in England, Scotland and Wales.

The Health Committee believes that health is the number one priority and, as such, supports the Minister's assessment of an additional £122 million as the minimum needs for 2002-03. The Committee believes that those additional resources are required to deliver an acceptable level of healthcare, otherwise further pressures will be heaped on a sector operating at times under intolerable conditions. The Health Committee is saying that funding is required to the tune of £122 million, and in the current year that is £50 million short. Given all the moneys that have come from the Department of Finance and Personnel, that is still £50 million short.

Junior doctors recently passed a resolution that expressed grave concern at the progressive deterioration in services for patients due to delay in clarifying policy and adequately resourcing the Health Service. They believe that the Assembly needs to take up the issue of funding and ensure that health and social care is given higher priority. That is what the junior doctors say, not the Health Committee. Those at the coalface are saying that at the centre of the crisis is a lack of funding. That is where we are coming from and where we should be coming from — we should express our concern about the lack of funding that afflicts and affects the Health Service. That is what the Health Committee, junior doctors and the SDLP document has stated.

A consultant to whom I spoke recently compared the provision of financial services to the Health Service to putting money into a bottomless pit. He said that the answer did not lie in throwing resources into that pit but in finding a floor to that pit. Members realise that good money could be thrown after bad, and no one is asking that more good money be thrown after bad. However, Members must realise that there is a bottomless pit and the trick is finding the floor to it. Only then will it be possible to deliver, as the consultant said, an equitable Health Service to a greater number of the sick.

Again, the core question is funding. Sinn Féin would support a financially structured 10-year plan that is consultative as it develops, and which has at its centre the collaborative participation of those at the coalface — health consultants, surgeons and junior doctors.

We know from our meetings with clinicians, consultants, nurses and midwives, who work on the floor of the Health Service, that a collaborative approach is needed. It is not good enough that one discipline should compete with another. Given that this Assembly acts collaboratively, medical care providers should be asked to collaborate as a profession. Cardiac departments should

not be fighting with orthopaedics or obstetrics departments; every element of the profession should collaborate to point the way forward for service provision.

Last week, during the day, it took me just six-and-a-half minutes to travel from Belfast City Hospital to the Royal Victoria Hospital. Those two major hospitals are situated minutes apart in the centre of Belfast, yet they operate differently and under different boards. The Health Service would benefit a great deal if those hospitals collaborated to provide the services that are needed in Greater Belfast. That is one example of an area in which an integrated approach should be taken. Again, the motion calls for urgent action to tackle the current crisis.

Does Ms Hanna refer to the £12.9 million allocation for extra community services, the £12.4 million for additional hospital services, the £2 million for additional children's services, or the additional £8 million that will be made available in the current year to make a start? Alternatively, does she refer to the bid by the Minister for Health, Social Services and Public Safety for £50 million, which the Minister for Finance and Personnel did not provide?

The primary obligation of a civilised society with any notion of its responsibility to its citizens is to provide for the sick and to find a cohesive and collaborative way to attack the problem. That should not be done disparately, or simply through targeting a Minister or even the Executive; providers should come together to heal the sickness in our society.

The people's health is the central responsibility of Government. Their success can be measured according to the quality of life of its people. For too long, sections of our community have died younger, suffered increasing ill health longer and battled daily. They exist rather than live. The public and hospital staff are disillusioned by the uncertainty of the crisis management of the Health Service. They are ready for a change, and they demand change. The end to crisis management requires funding that addresses realistically the crisis, not crisis funding.

I call on the Executive to make the health of our people their number one priority and to finance in full the bids made by the Minister. Failure to act now will result in a greater crisis of confidence that will further undermine the crumbling foundation of our Health Service.

Madam Deputy Speaker: Members will be aware that there is much interest in the debate and that many Members wish to contribute. The Business Committee has allocated three hours for the debate. Therefore, in this first round, I urge Members to restrict the length of their contribution to eight minutes and in the second round I shall recalculate.

The Chairperson of the Committee for Health, Social Services and Public Safety (Dr Hendron): As the Chairperson of the Health Committee and after — I hate to say it — 40 years of experience in primary health care, this is a subject about which I know, and about which I feel strongly. I welcome the motion put forward by Ms Carmel Hanna, and I welcome the amendment also.

4.00 pm

In his amendment Mr Kelly uses the word “alleviate” and thus accepts that money itself cannot reverse the situation, despite gross underfunding of the Health Service over many years. There are problems as well as financial constraints.

There is a major crisis in the Health Service every day, and it still has to face the difficulties of winter. Direct rule Minister, Mr McFall, introduced two documents in 1999, ‘Putting it Right’, which related to acute hospitals, and ‘Fit for the Future’, a new approach to future primary care. Massive consultation was carried out, and both documents were prepared for the Assembly. I appreciate that they are mentioned from time to time, but generally they have been pushed to one side, and we have review document after review document for consultation.

There is a crisis in cardiac surgery services — we read about people being sent to Germany and other places for operations. Last year 18 people died while on the waiting list for cardiac surgery. We have had reviews of that. A cardiac surgeon’s job was not advertised although it was known for a year that he would be retiring. I do not know what happened about that post.

The fracture service is available only in Belfast and Derry. The level of staffing and facilities available for trauma and orthopaedic services is the lowest of any National Health Service region. The waiting times for treatment of fractures are appallingly long. The average time between admission and surgery for hip fracture patients in the Royal is between five and six days. As a medical student I was taught that a fracture to the neck of the femur should be dealt with within 24 hours, because a patient’s condition deteriorates after that, and, if he does not die, his quality of life is reduced. In Scotland the waiting time is two days, whereas here it can be up to five or six days.

There is gross inequity for patients, with injuries, who go to hospitals outside Belfast or Derry — for example, to Craigavon and Antrim. If an elderly lady is admitted to Antrim or Craigavon with a fracture to the neck of the femur, which happens frequently, she will probably have to wait five or six days for a bed in the main trauma hospital. The elective orthopaedic facility in Musgrave Park is bursting at the seams. I could go on, but time is insufficient.

In all hospitals within 20 miles of Belfast, the situation is the same in the accident and emergency departments. Recently, Monica McWilliams and I visited the Ulster Hospital, where the situation is horrific. People were waiting on trolleys and chairs. A nursing sister was in tears when she told us of one poor man who had been in a chair but was so concerned about the welfare of the staff that he did not want to call them and so soiled himself.

We visited the Royal and the City hospitals recently where the situation is the same. Dr K E Dowey, the senior accident and emergency surgeon in the City, wrote to the Chief Medical Officer and said that the situation with acute beds was critical and that the staff were on “take in” daily. She said that lying in an accident and emergency corridor for up to 24 hours was totally unacceptable for patients, who sometimes have to be nursed all night there. The stress and strain on the staff is intolerable, and morale is at an all-time low. Young doctors cannot be attracted to accident and emergency work, and young nurses are leaving almost weekly.

Dr Ian Carson sent a letter to every doctor in Northern Ireland in primary care about the regional neurosurgery service in the Royal Victoria Hospital. It said

“The net effect of the problems are that our surgical capacity is limited almost completely to emergency and clinically urgent cases and consequently very few, if any, elective patients are being admitted.”

Where is the seamless transition in primary care where 90% of all patients are treated? Last January, the Committee for Health, Social Services and Public Safety tabled an amendment on fundholding, the purpose of which was to allow seamless transition. I welcome the Minister’s decision on the new primary care groups, but I do not see the seamless transition that is to take place between now and 1 April.

The sad thing is that the people of Northern Ireland deserve the best. Last January I said that we would not have another opportunity to get primary care right for several years. I still believe that we have a chance to do that. If we do not get primary care right, we will not get acute hospitals or other secondary services right either.

Nine per cent of all outpatient clinics are cancelled. Some are cancelled for good reasons, others for not so good reasons. Waiting lists were referred to. The latest figure quoted was 56,000 people on waiting lists, and the number is rising. The Executive and the Minister of Finance and Personnel seem to have got the message, judging by their statements and the recent allocations to the Health Service. For example, Mr Durkan revealed an increase of £205 million in allocation for 2002-03 to health and social services. That is an increase of 8.9% over the 2001-02 allocation, giving a total of over £2.5 billion. Substantial increases in funding have been made, but it is still not enough.

On 3 December, the Minister of Finance and Personnel told the House:

"It is not enough simply to put money into the Health Service. Many people rightly ask how the resources that have already been provided have been used. ...As with all public services, there are problems with management and efficiency which must be addressed. The way in which the services are organised begs many questions. Hard choices must be made which will affect the standard of care and the nature of hospital provision in the region." — [*Official Report, Bound Volume 13, p.190*]

Ms Hanna referred to the audit. Recently, some colleagues and I met with the Auditor General of Northern Ireland. He informed us that he has responsibility for the supervision of all Departments, excluding the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety. I do not pretend to understand the historic reasons behind that, but the situation must be corrected.

The Committee wants to work in partnership with the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety. We worked together on the new cancer centre. The Committee tried to be as helpful as it could, and it believes that the funding will be found. I agree with what Ms Hanna said about the overall strategy for the Health Service. We want to work with the Minister in the spirit of public service, but the Minister must meet the Committee halfway. Finance is important but it is not the only issue.

Madam Deputy Speaker: The Member's time is up.

Rev Robert Coulter: I thank Ms Hanna for proposing the motion. Ultimately, it concerns every home and every person in the country. The subject has given the Assembly much to think about in the past. In particular, the Committee for Health, Social Services and Public Safety has looked in frustration at so much that seems to be wrong in the Health Service. We have heard many speeches about the things that are wrong.

Three issues in the Health Service must be examined. First, there is the structure of the service. There is no need for a huge Department, four boards, 19 trusts and countless agencies. In England, one board controls areas that have a population exactly the same as ours.

Duplication in administration has been mentioned. When one examines the salary scales of the senior officers in trusts and boards, one sees immediately where the haemorrhaging begins in departmental funds. In the present structure, the perception that is given of wasting finance is such that it casts despair into the hearts and minds of patients waiting for operations, who read in the local papers that an officer is being given a rise of £25,000 per year. The whole structure of the service needs to be examined.

We have been inundated with consultancy documents and bombarded with review documents. However, ultimately it seems that very few decisions are made. It is not a question of tinkering with individual

sections of the Health Service: the entire structure needs to be examined, reviewed, and changed.

As the Assembly reviews the problems in the Health Service, the second matter that should be examined is its strategy — or the lack of it. One is tempted to ask, "What is the strategy of the Department of Finance and Personnel?" When we begin to enquire about the audit trails within the Health Service we run up against a brick wall. Money is given to the boards; the boards give it to the trusts; the trusts dispense it. As I remarked to the Minister of Finance and Personnel during the Budget debate, money becomes confetti currency within the Health Service. It is impossible to even begin looking at the audit trails never mind trying to follow them.

One is tempted to ask questions about the bonus system for managers. Comparing the salaries of nurses who are on the wards with those of managers who sit in offices, the perception is that the service is being run for the latter. It is not being run for patients, or for the nurses who are dispensing the service. The service is being structured by a strategy that deals only with finance.

I suggest that when communities find funds to provide equipment, the Minister and the Department should match that funding — pound for pound. There would then not only be accountability for community funding; the communities themselves would share in the accountability for the funds they would be given by the Department.

I mentioned the Health Service structure earlier. What is the strategy behind a structure in which one trust covers a fifth of the entire population of Northern Ireland? There is something wrong when only one out of 19 trusts is tasked with the community care of the people of Northern Ireland to that extent.

There is no question that there has been competition in the Health Service, and that is a huge drain on funds. Is it the Department's strategy to continue competitiveness among various areas of the Health Service? The Chairperson of the Committee for Health, Social Services and Public Safety has already mentioned this point. Everyone should be working together. The strategy should be clear, and everyone should know exactly where he or she is going. Where are the "care trails" within our Health Service? When a patient asks how he or she will be treated how often can that patient be told the trail that they will follow back to health?

There are three distinct sectors within the Health Service in Northern Ireland — acute care, community care, and primary care. We have discussed accident and emergency units associated with the acute sector, and we have seen the difficulties there. It is not acceptable when an ambulance is left sitting for 45 minutes

because the stretcher has been taken from it for a patient to lie on in an accident and emergency unit.

4.15 pm

Staff are leaving the Health Service to work abroad. Is that because the grading system needs to be changed? At the last conference of the Royal College of Nursing, that issue was brought to the fore. Until there is a situation where services are patient-driven and not finance-driven and where all of us — the Minister, the Department, nurses and consultants — are working together, we will not be able to make any change to the service. I support the motion.

Mr Berry: I commend the proposer of the motion. It is one in a long line of motions on the Health Service, although it is important to highlight the serious problems within it and how best to deal with them.

The state of the Health Service has become synonymous with the words “crisis”, “disaster” and “despair”. Newspaper articles on the Health Service since January this year all describe bed crises, cancer crises, staff crises, fracture crises and casualty crises. Sadly, the list goes on.

In November last year, the Chairperson of the Health Committee, Dr Joe Hendron, expressed concern about the crises in the Health Service. In October and November of this year, he again expressed shock at those crises. In other words, nothing has improved at all. Health is among the most frequently debated matters in the House. That in itself demonstrates the widespread perception across the House that things are not only bad but that there is no sign of any improvement. In March last year, the Minister said that waiting lists were a top priority, yet they are still a major problem this year. No improvement has taken place, and things are getting worse.

Complaints over cancer services continue unabated. There is to be another consultation, which should silence those complaints for another six months — that is the perception, and it is the line that the Department is taking.

We can all highlight different areas to portray the shambles and demoralisation in the Health Service. Problems facing junior doctors is one area that emphasises, in a very real way, how widespread the rot is. The lack of cover, combined with a general shortage of doctors, simply means longer hours for those who are available to work.

The Health Committee recently met the British Medical Association and the spokespersons for junior doctors. One junior doctor told the Committee that, on one day, he worked 21.5 hours solid because there was no one on duty after him. That is hardly something to recommend, considering the risk to both patients and staff, as well as the strain upon the doctor in question.

The junior doctors’ spokesman, Dr Peter Maguire, recently highlighted the problems. His concerns must be carefully listened to and heeded. He said that problems are continuing to amount at a worrying rate, that the situation is threatening to spiral out of control and that the Health Service is heading for meltdown and the winter crisis has not even begun.

He went on to say that waiting lists and the numbers of patients waiting on trolleys are increasing because there are no spare beds in hospitals. Something must be done soon to sort that problem out. Winter is approaching. If there is a flu epidemic, people will die. Dr Maguire said that we are currently on the road to nowhere, that the Health Service is in tatters and that we must get our act together. Time after time we have raised the same concerns in the Chamber.

This situation is not acceptable. Do we want to hear it all again next year, the following year and the years to come? At a time when waiting lists are already at an all-time high, non-emergency operations have been cancelled in hospitals throughout the Province. The number of patients who have been waiting for up to two years just for a scan has not been reduced, and the problem continues.

Extra money is essential if we are to deal with the crisis. Recently, the chief executive of the Southern Health and Social Services Board said that local services were suffering. He went on to say:

“We simply do not receive the amount of money we need to provide an adequate service...The lack of investment has resulted in little better than Third World standards in parts of the system.”

Besides the extra money, there is another essential ingredient. Management, from the top down and across the spectrum, is an area that is easily overlooked. We should consider again the language used by Dr Maguire about our Health Service: he talked of meltdown and said that the Health Service was

“currently on the road to nowhere”

and “in tatters”.

That underscores the role of management. There is a question mark over the current management of the Health Service. There are new initiatives of one sort or another, and reviews of all kinds of things are announced; it seems that any kind of activity is the goal, whereas overall, managed delivery is irrelevant. The situation lacks focus and perspective.

I welcome the money that will go towards providing free care for the elderly. There is, however, a wider perspective. If private nursing and residential homes continue to close because the fees paid are inadequate, how much better off is our Health Service? If the elderly are kept in hospitals because there is no money for care in the community and there are no beds in the private sector, how are we better off? I know of two

homes in my own area where relatives are asked to pay £15 more per week because the fees do not cover the cost of care. An overall perspective would take all the relevant issues into consideration at the same time. That does not happen with the current piecemeal approach.

When the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety issues a press release about a new initiative or extra money, it takes its cut, and the remainder is passed on to the trusts, even though it is not enough to allow them to carry out their task. No time is taken to check on progress or establish what improvements are needed, before yet another initiative is announced or a press release issued. There is a widespread perception that neither the Minister nor her Department is seriously interested in solving the crisis and that they exist simply to produce new rules, initiatives and procedures — in other words, red tape. The actual delivery of services, which is grossly underfunded, is ignored.

The motion calls on the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to take urgent action to tackle the crisis. Meanwhile, cancer services, cardiology services, orthopaedics and staff morale deteriorate. The maternity service is lost in a maze of consultations. Our Health Service is not being managed.

The Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety has no overall strategy to resolve the crisis. Management has no will to succeed, and the trusts do not have the resources to deliver the service. Until all those matters are resolved, the current shambles will remain. I commend the nurses, doctors and the professionals in the service.

Ms Gildernew: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I listened carefully to the points that have been made, and I welcome the chance to discuss this vital area. Morale in the Health Service is very low.

Our doctors and nurses work in a system that has been underfunded for many years. Successive British Ministers travelled in and out, making decisions that affected all of us. Some of those decisions were good, but very many of them were bad. They knew that those decisions would never cost them a single vote. For the first time in my life, directly accountable, locally elected representatives can make such decisions, but they must live with the legacy of a lack of resources and accountability, and there is much work to be done to bring the Health Service up to the standard required by the Minister.

The Health Service is still a sick organisation with insufficient staff, poor facilities and too few beds. Those problems, combined with a lack of community consultation and a policy of papering over the cracks, mean that there is a mountain to climb. As a result, money has been taken out of children's services and community care and put into the bottomless pit of acute services — without adequate planning.

The imagination and confidence to think “outside the box” are needed. I welcome good projects such as the breast milk bank; they should be encouraged. However, social issues such as fuel poverty should also be addressed as a matter of urgency to cut down on hospital stays, inhaler and antibiotic use and absenteeism from either school or work.

We should all work to tackle poverty and the social and economic conditions that impact on the health of our constituents. Fermanagh and South Tyrone has one of the highest rates of heart disease and cancer in Ireland, and it is no coincidence that it also has less economic investment, fewer public service jobs and some of the worst housing conditions in the Six Counties. It is little wonder that the health of my constituents is bad, but it will take more than investment in the Health Service to rectify that. A holistic and integrated approach is essential, and every Minister must take responsibility for that.

I welcome the Minister and the Executive's initiative to provide over 1,000 community care packages to free up acute service beds. I have raised that issue with the Minister; it is a direct reversal of previous policy, and as a result, the Health Service and the Executive are targeting an area that was starved of resources by previous Administrations.

However, the Minister cannot magic doctors, nurses and consultants out of a hat. She needs the time and resources to turn round 30 years of rundown in the Health Service, and that cannot be done overnight. The service that she inherited had become so debilitated in the years before her tenure that she has had to try to halt the systematic closure and rundown of our local hospitals by the people who we trusted to run them.

Mr Kennedy: Will the Member give way?

Ms Gildernew: No, I do not have enough time.

I listened to Members who raised the issues of duplication, administration costs and the waste of resources. That is the system that the Minister inherited, and that is the system that both the Minister and the Executive must try to change. It is a shared responsibility, and the Executive must rectify the mistakes of the past by working with the Minister.

There are two fundamental facts that we cannot change in a short space of time. In the past 30 years, the Health Service has been starved of hundreds of millions of pounds. A culture of bureaucracy has developed as a result of the Thatcherite agenda, the internal market and the trusts that have taken money away from front line services and primary and acute care. As an added complication, we have too few nurses, doctors and paramedics. At last the Executive have begun to respond to the Minister's demands for more cash. However, during the lifetime of the Assembly,

the Minister has only been allocated a fraction of the amount that she bid for, and that is the responsibility of all Members of the Executive.

I welcome the chance to participate in the debate. I support the amendment. Go raibh maith agat.

Mr McCarthy: I thank Carmel Hanna, John Kelly and Sue Ramsey for bringing this important matter before us today. It is the opinion of a great many people that the Health Service has been in crisis since Thatcher got her hands on the reins of power over two decades ago. That infamous British Prime Minister, with her Tory dogma, did away with hospital beds and staff throughout the National Health Service left, right and centre. She created unlimited management structures and introduced fat cats who were only interested in feathering their own nests. As Rev Robert Coulter said, she created huge bonuses for selected medical professionals. All those policies were to the detriment of the ordinary men, women and children who require decent health provision when they fall sick.

4.30 pm

Today, those disastrous policies continue to haunt the Health Service. Everyone who tries to maintain any semblance of giving their best is undermined by the lack of funding, staff, space, equipment, drugs, et cetera. I have heard of an occasion when a patient asked for an extra pillow. The patient was told that the hospital had none to spare, and that one would need to be brought from home or bought. That is the state of affairs in the Health Service — it is disgraceful. There are many more such instances, and nurses and ancillary staff could tell other stories that would make the Department of Health hang its head in shame. That must stop now.

For many years, the waiting list to be admitted to hospital has been increasing at a faster and faster rate. However, the waiting time for patients to see their GPs has also been increasing alarmingly. That situation disadvantages the ordinary patient, and causes enormous anger and frustration.

The same shortages exist across the whole range of health services. There are shortages in cancer care, in services for people with learning difficulties and in services for the elderly. The list goes on and on. Despite the extra funding that is poured into the Health Service, we are going further down the road towards a situation in which we will be unable to provide a reasonable service to the community.

The public cannot understand why the Health Service has deteriorated to such a dreadful extent. Is it because of the need to cater for modern, almost self-inflicted wounds, such as illegal paramilitary activity, drug and alcohol abuse, drink-driving accidents, et cetera? Such modern-day activities must soak up a significant amount

of funds, hospital beds, and doctors' and nurses' valuable time. An audit of self-inflicted health disorders might prove useful, and might be an appropriate way to prevent such accidents happening in the future. The resources could be redirected to those who fall sick, and who expect and deserve a nursing service that can make them well again.

Some time ago, the Government adopted a policy of care in the community. That was accepted as the way forward. Unfortunately, once again, insufficient funding was put in place to ensure that that policy ran smoothly. There are currently more than 70 people in the Ulster Hospital who should be out in their communities. However, due to the lack of funding for community care packages, those beds in the Ulster Hospital are still occupied. The result is ever-growing waiting lists, which creates unnecessary suffering. That state of affairs is probably replicated across Northern Ireland. I appeal to the Minister to do as much as she can to ensure that improvements are made.

I pay tribute to those people in rural communities who are fighting to keep their local hospitals open. They must continue campaigning. My constituency lost Ards Hospital and Bangor Hospital. At the time, we were promised that the Ulster Hospital would provide the same services. However, that was 10 years ago. Those services were never provided at the Ulster Hospital, and we are left in this predicament. Rural communities must be warned that the same will happen if their local services are closed down. I appeal to the Minister to get on top of the situation. It is not her fault — she inherited the problems. However, she has the opportunity to do something about it, and I ask her to do so.

Mr Watson: I thank Ms Hanna for tabling the motion. Unfortunately, unbearable pressures impinge on the Health Service all year round. The current crisis is the result of years in which no decisions were made and there were too many reviews that promised action, yet failed to effectively deliver on those promises because we were unable to develop appropriate mechanisms.

Funding for the Health Service in Northern Ireland remains inadequate. It must be distributed equitably across the Province, not only to selected hospitals. The proposed investment in the service is only a drop in the ocean; significant long-term investment is needed. Putting money into the Health Service during the year is not a solution to funding problems. The service must be properly resourced, and managers must be aware of the level of resources available, so that the service can be properly planned, run and maintained. Craigavon Hospital, the Ulster Hospital, Altnagelvin Hospital and the Royal Victoria Hospital currently require major investment to upgrade and update facilities, estate and infrastructure in order to manage the current and expected growth in demand.

We need an urgent commitment to development on the Craigavon site, which alone requires £80 million. Although that amount will help to address the hospital's long-term problems, it will not alleviate the current pressures.

Unacceptable trolley waits are a stark example of hospitals' lack of capacity. The issue was highlighted in an article in the 'Belfast Telegraph' on Saturday, 8 December 2001, which reported the story of an 81-year-old woman who waited on a trolley for 22 hours in the Royal Victoria Hospital. It read:

"She lay overnight on a trolley in a corridor, without even a pillow. By the morning she was in a 'distressed and confused' state."

When her son asked when his mother would get a bed, he was told that 21 patients were on the list before her. Her son rightly says that he is enraged and bewildered, but pays tribute to the hospital staff for doing a marvellous job in difficult conditions. Surely those unacceptable trolley waits represent an unsafe environment for patients and staff and must be tackled urgently.

It is simply appalling that there were 27 trolley waits of more than 18 hours in Craigavon Hospital two weekends ago. The staff in the accident and emergency unit work under difficult conditions due to the long overdue and ongoing building work in that department, and they are to be admired for their level of commitment and service.

Bed capacity problems are evident across the Province. The main hospitals do not have the beds, staff or resources for the number of patients that currently require treatment. That is evident in the long and growing waiting lists. The main hospitals in Northern Ireland have the biggest demand for services, yet some of our smaller hospitals have less demand and much shorter waiting lists. That discriminates against people waiting for treatment at the larger hospitals.

The Hayes review highlighted new management structures for hospitals, but that is likely to take years to implement. Can the management teams of the various hospitals work together more closely to ease the inequalities in accessing the service?

The pressure on acute hospitals has been well documented. In Craigavon, more than 90% of admissions are emergencies. Therefore, little elective or planned work can be carried out. However, the waiting lists are shorter in neighbouring hospitals such as Lagan Valley Hospital and Daisy Hill Hospital. Surely it is time to utilise the under-capacity in some of those hospitals. The Minister must acknowledge that, with limited capacity across all hospitals, necessary emergency work must be a priority. Alternative measures must be found to manage the planned work and reduce the unacceptably long waiting lists. That would affect the current policy of short-term waiting list initiatives that manage

relatively few patients and that do not make a long-term difference.

We need a long-term sustainable plan as to how to more effectively manage elective surgery. It is apparent that the legacy of downgrading some hospitals has fuelled a crisis in others. That has been the case in my area, where Craigavon Hospital has taken over the workload of South Tyrone Hospital. The Health Service is always blighted by bad publicity and there are difficulties in recruiting nursing and medical staff. Experienced staff are leaving because of low morale and lack of job satisfaction, and that, in turn, impacts on the remaining staff and makes it difficult to sustain even current levels of care. That matter must be addressed urgently if safe care and quality of care are to be maintained and improved. In spite of all that, Craigavon Area Hospital Group Health & Social Services Trust is to be congratulated on its new Macmillan building catering for cancer day patients. The planning of the building involved staff input, which resulted in a clearly patient-centred and congenial environment. The provision also avoids the need for many people in the area to take that long haul to Belfast.

The Hayes report sets out a view of the way ahead for the Northern Ireland Health Service, yet there is no sign of it being seriously considered or discussed with a view to implementation. The Health Service needs to take immediate decisions on the way forward. Decisions have been postponed for far too long. The service, as we have already said, is in a state of crisis, with pressure all year round, never mind the impending additional winter crisis. Repeated reports, consultations and reviews, et cetera, without the necessary action being taken to rectify the identified problem, only compound the crisis. The situation is not acceptable — our people deserve better. The service needs urgent action, not more promises. I support the motion.

Ms McWilliams: Today for the first time, I voted against the Budget — probably the only designated Nationalist to do so. I voted against that Budget because the Executive did not take sufficient account of the Assembly's concerns over the Budget's allocation to health. I felt that I could not continue to highlight the concerns of my own constituents — and the concerns of those whom I visit outside of South Belfast — on that matter, and then come to the Chamber and say that sufficient money was being made available.

We are only addressing the issue of money. However, if the resources continue to remain so inadequate, then all we can see in the future is more of a run-down service. When I became a Member of the Assembly, and when devolution came to Northern Ireland, I certainly thought that we could uphold the standards of the National Health Service, and tell people that we could bring them a decent quality of life and good services on the ground. I still hold on to that hope. However, unless

we make health the number one priority in the Executive and in the Programme for Government, we are only creating more rhetoric among ourselves by believing that what is handed down to us in the Budget will fix the problem.

Dr Hendron said that both he and I had visited the Ulster Hospital a few weeks ago. We hoped that changes would have taken place by now. However, we have once again found that there are 73 delayed discharges — the equivalent of three hospital wards. Three full hospital wards have patients in them who are waiting to be discharged. As a consequence, the back-up that we saw that morning — 29 people on trolleys — occurred again this morning. We found that the ambulances could not go out because their trolleys were being used. The ambulance staff, the nursing staff, the medical staff, and those on the wards were all in crisis. They were managing one crisis on top of another to the point where they were under incredible stress. They were considering closing the hospital to admissions that morning.

That is not the type of Health Service that we should be establishing in Northern Ireland at this time of year. If that situation continues, people will seek jobs elsewhere; they will leave the service and morale will decrease further. We know what the solution is. We know that if we can get acute care, community care, domiciliary care and residential care all working together in an integrated Health Service, we shall be able to start releasing the boiling points before they actually blow the whole system wide open. However, we have not even begun to put that package together.

I welcome the announcement by the Minister of the 1,000 community care packages, and I sincerely hope that she is not once again in the position of having to take money from elsewhere in the service to provide those additional packages. Those servicing the provision of community care packages tell me that they are having to wait until a client dies before another package can be offered. They wait for an elderly client to pass away, thereby freeing up a care package. That is an incredible position in which to put any practising professional.

4.45 pm

An enormous concern is that 20 independent residential homes closed in the past year. The cost of domiciliary and nursing home care has increased, but the Health Service has been unable to increase fees to recover that deficit. That has resulted in a huge argument about nursing care and consequent closures. That sector used to be described as being a profit-making one, but now providers cannot break even. At a time when the elderly population is increasing, nurses and social services staff cannot find them places in those homes, because those homes have gone. There is an increasingly vulnerable community of over 80s, who

are looked after by the over 60s. We cannot find places in nursing homes for the over 80s, so if the over 60s get ill, both groups will end up in hospital.

The waiting list target to constrain the hospital waiting list to the March 2002 level by March 2003 must be changed. We do not yet know the March 2002 level, but we know that there is a current list of 56,000 people, and that is rising. One reason for that increase is that tonsillectomies had to be cancelled because instruments needed to be decontaminated.

The needs and effectiveness evaluation must be carried out urgently so that we can understand the source of those difficulties. A serious task force is needed to relieve those pressure points so that people can integrate and co-ordinate their services in a way that at one time was possible. I appreciate that, in moving the motion, Ms Hanna has realised the seriousness of the matter; I shall support it and the amendment.

Day after day, those who work in the Chest, Heart and Stroke Association telephone us to tell us about an emergency or about a patient in a dire situation. There are 600 people on its waiting list, an increase of 50% in the past five years. The organisation pointed out that more than twice as much money was available in England than in Northern Ireland, despite the Minister's announcement in October. Therefore, the backlog and that organisation's current concerns cannot be addressed.

There is a shortage of intensive care nurses. More perfusion technicians, who are responsible for the control of blood supplies during operations, are urgently required. There is a shortage of anaesthetists and many other specialists. We recently visited the trauma and orthopaedic surgeons in Musgrave Hospital, who told us that young professionals are waiting abroad to come home to take up those posts, but that they cannot be attracted back. Others leave because not enough specialist operations are carried out to keep their skills up to date. That must be addressed.

I am opposed to the top-slicing of the Department's budget in the Executive programme funds. It is not good practice to allocate three years of funding for a service that should be funded from the core mainstream budgets. Those include the brain injury unit or the medium secure hospital at Knockbracken Healthcare Park. Those facilities should be core-funded, but the services with inescapable pressures that receive non-recurrent funding must be made recurrent; they should be made mainstream. That is the reason why I did not support today's Budget. We must avoid duplication, tighten up the administration, integrate the services and increase those funds urgently.

Mr McCartney: I support the motion. The Assembly has heard some excellent speeches today from Ms Hanna and Prof McWilliams, among others. Essentially, they have addressed the factual situation. We now

know that the Health Service is on the brink of disaster, that there are huge waiting lists, and that oncology, cancer, heart, stroke and orthopaedic acute services are, in many cases, on hold. There is no development; people are dying. We must address the concepts behind this crisis. Only by thinking about why we are here and how we can possibly emerge from a bad situation, which all are agreed now exists, can anything be done about it. The speech that I shall make in this limited time is entirely different from the one that I anticipated making. The anticipated one was essentially factual, but the facts have been more than adequately covered.

Let us look at what the speeches that have been made, the motion and the amendment tell us. The SDLP motion essentially urges the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to take urgent action, placing the responsibility for doing something about the situation on the Sinn Féin Minister. The amendment suggests that there is not enough money and that the Minister is not to blame because her Department is under-resourced. Mr Kelly tells us that what it should do to cure that is finalise in full the bids of the Minister to the Department of Finance and Personnel. The suggestion is that it is the responsibility of the Minister of Finance and Personnel, as he is not providing sufficient resources for the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to do the job.

The Rev Robert Coulter then got up on behalf of the Ulster Unionist Party — the party of the First Minister and three other Ministers in the Executive. He suggested that the whole structure needs to be reviewed. We have a large and expensive Department, four boards and 19 trusts, which makes us grossly over-bureaucratized when compared to the likes of Birmingham, which has a similar population and one trust.

What does all this mean? It means that the fundamental structures of Government — not of health — lie at the source of our indecision and difficulty. John Kelly asked why we do not take a leaf from the book of Charlie McGreevy, the Minister for Finance in the Republic, who has a 10-year spending plan for the rehabilitation of medical facilities in the South, or even Gordon Brown. Mr Kelly fails to realise that those people, whom he wants us to emulate, are masters of their financial resources and not merely the dividers of a limited cake provided by someone else.

Mr Kelly calls upon us and the Ministers to think about collective responsibility. Collective responsibility has always been missing from this form of devolved Government. There is no such thing as collective responsibility. That is why the SDLP suggests that the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety is to blame and Sinn Féin suggests that the Minister of Finance and Personnel is to blame for not providing sufficient funds. That is also why the largest party, the UUP, has asked the Department of Finance and Personnel's

strategy — the audit trails cannot be identified, let alone followed.

If we want to cure the problems in the Health Service we must look at the structures of Government. That is where it all begins — with the failure to have any collective responsibility. We need a First Minister who can take responsibility, say where money is going to be spent and direct policy. Instead, we have a collection of disparate warlords, all looking after their own portfolios.

I recall Prof McWilliams once talking about people ganging up on the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety. That is what happens all the time here, because there is no collective responsibility, and without it, in this failed and defective system of Government, one will never get the facilities to address core problems such as there are at present.

We must set up an emergency committee that consists of the First and the Deputy First Ministers, the Minister of Finance and Personnel, the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety, and the Chairperson of the Health Committee to devise a form of sub-collective responsibility to avert catastrophe in the Health Service. That must not be a committee for putting matters on the long finger. It must be done as a matter of urgency; the responsibility cannot be buck-passed.

I was appalled to hear the Rev Robert Coulter suggest, in his best Presbyterian minister manner, that everybody else was to blame. All Ministers are to blame; each looks after his or her own portfolio. That is where the problem begins.

Of course we are under-resourced. I support the Minister in doing what she can with limited resources. Of course Ms Hanna is correct that draconian measures must be taken to prune the excessive bureaucracy in the Health Service. From the beginning of history where bureaucracy has flourished, whether it was in Mandarin China, the Byzantine empires of the East or more latterly in Communist Russia, efficiency and delivery suffer where the citizen requires it. The detriment is in direct proportion to an expanding bureaucracy. If that problem is to be dealt with, start at the top. Prune the bureaucracy, introduce some form of sub-collective responsibility and inject a degree of urgency into a committee to tackle a problem that has been so brilliantly and so eloquently dealt with by the Members whom I have commended.

Madam Deputy Speaker: We move into the second round. Members must reduce their contributions to seven minutes. That will leave eight minutes for the winding-up speeches on the motion and the amendment. The Minister will have 30 minutes to speak.

Mr Gallagher: I support the motion and the amendment. We all realise that it will take a cash injection, or

a series of cash injections, to help our beleaguered Health Service.

However, if we are to make progress we must do it in a two-track system. Of course there must be more money, but there are matters unrelated to money that the Minister and her Department can deal with. It is time for action. We have been given examples of how people are suffering. The waiting lists are growing, people are being forced to suffer, to wait and, in some cases, almost beg for necessary surgery. Others, who cannot afford it, are being driven into the arms of private practice and must spend a great deal of money in order to ease their suffering.

We are all aware of the suffering of those who await heart surgery. Elderly people wait for hip replacements and fracture surgery. Even young people must wait for tonsillectomies while their health and education suffer.

5.00 pm

Elderly people in particular are being kept in hospital for no clinical reason, at a cost of up to £900 per week. The explanation for that is that no money is available for a home help service, which could provide safety and comfort for people in their own homes. That could be provided at a cost of £100 to £150 per week. Increasingly, people who are unable to return home are being told that no money is available for placement in a residential nursing home.

Quite simply, the arithmetic does not stack up. There is something perverse about a Health Service in which, potentially, £800 per week is being spent to keep a person in hospital, while at the same time that person could be kept at home for £150 per week. We are told that that money cannot be found, and there is a lack of funds within the crazy maze of trusts that we continue to tolerate. Nobody can deny the claim that there is bed blocking. It exists and it is a direct consequence of the mess that our Health Service is in.

There is a pressing need, particularly in rural areas, for satisfactory out-of-hours medical services. The travelling distances imposed on the people in my constituency who require a general practitioner out of hours are far in excess of anywhere else in Northern Ireland. People have to make round trips of 60, 70 or 80 miles after 5.00 pm or at weekends. That is not a quality service. Steps should be taken to correct it immediately, because people in rural areas are entitled to equal treatment.

I want to refer to the Hayes report. For years, hospital staff throughout the North of Ireland have been uncertain about their future. Many staff have told me — and perhaps other Members have also been informed — that the Hayes review was another unnecessary review. However, it was undertaken after devolution, and we all accepted that we could put up with it. We now have the report

from the independent, expert and representative body, but it has been put aside. We are told that it will not be acted on until some time in the future. We owe the dedicated medical and ancillary hospital staff in our hospitals some certainty about their future. We should not wait any longer, and we should act on the recommendations of the Hayes report.

Common sense, immediate decisions and money are needed to sort out the growing crisis. People are fed up with reviews and consultations; it is time to end the prevarication. The community needs actions and decisions. I ask the Minister to tackle the issues that I have outlined. Most importantly, none of us should lose sight of the fact that we are talking about the health and well-being of our families, our neighbours and the community. We are not talking about customers, numbers or lists. We are talking about human beings who deserve all the care and attention that society can give to alleviate their suffering.

Mr Beggs: I rise to support the motion.

Everyone must accept that the National Health Service is currently in crisis. The realities of the community health and social services sector and of our hospitals cannot be disputed.

During the course of my constituency work I have come across many issues of concern. There is a huge question mark over what the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety actually does in its oversight role of boards and trusts. Why did it take 18 months of lobbying before the Department accepted the views of the community, politicians and trusts that there was a shortage of places for speech therapy training? Why has this only recently been increased from 20 to 30? Sadly it will be a further three or four years before these students qualify, take up posts and address this need. I welcome the fact that this is now being done, but why did it take so long? Manpower planning should have been a basic part of the Department's role from the start.

Nursing training is another area where, again, there were deficiencies. Over a decade ago Northern Ireland exported nurses. The numbers in training were then virtually halved. Everyone is aware of the shortage of nurses, but only recently have the numbers been gradually increased. The result is that we are now paying extra for agency nursing. The Department needs to look collectively with the boards and trusts at ways of introducing additional flexibility and retaining more of the existing nursing staff.

The inappropriateness of the current relationship between the system of boards and trust has been brought home to me, again, through constituency cases. I have been told by women whose husbands have been in hospital that they wanted to come home to be closer to their families but were unable to do so. This is bed

blocking. In answer to questions in the Assembly, the Minister advised me that, as I suspected, large numbers of people are blocking beds in acute hospitals. On 31 August 2001, 12% of the beds in United Hospitals Health and Social Services Trust were blocked. Many patients who wished to return home were unable to do so, as the funds were not following the patient. That is what should be happening, rather than giving block funding to certain areas and not having flexibility. It costs twice as much, perhaps even three times as much, for an acute sector bed compared to a bed in the community.

As someone who lobbied for additional funds for community health and social services, I was particularly pleased that in the Budget which we have just passed, 1,000 additional healthcare packages are to be provided in the subsequent year. However, there is a need now, and we must all watch the situation carefully. There is a huge Department, four boards and 19 trusts. Apart from the inherent inefficiency, that is also delivering inequality.

When I asked the question on the average expenditure per person in different health and community trusts, huge variance was exposed. In the South and East Belfast Trust it is up to £540 per person; in Down Lisburn Trust it is £329 per person; and in my area Homefirst Community Trust spends £369 per person. With that difference in funding comes huge inequalities and variation in the delivery of services.

Mr Dalton: From what my Colleague and other Members have said, it is clear that the Health Service as it stands in the Province at the moment is an absolute shambles. It is clear that the Minister is making no effort whatsoever and making no progress in reforming it — and fundamental reform is what is needed. I urge both Sinn Féin and the Minister to get out of office, find someone who can do the job and let us see the Health Service that Northern Ireland deserves.

Mr Beggs: I share much of the frustration expressed. There is a need for inequality to be addressed. The Minister has to be aware of what this inequality is delivering. In my area, which had a £1.6 million deficit during the first six months of this financial year, services are being cut and waiting lists extended. Recently I was contacted by a family who care for a disabled relative. They had organised to move from a house to a bungalow. However, when they went to move, they found that, despite previous co-ordination, no home help was available initially.

That severely disabled man might have had to go into a nursing home, for want of home-help assistance for one hour a day. The proper care in the community was not being provided, and additional expenses to the public purse could have been incurred.

Occupational therapy is another area of concern. When I chased up the case of a constituent, I was told that priority cases are taking some six months to be

seen by occupational therapists. It is not the therapists' fault — they have tried to prioritise and to ensure that the important cases are seen quickly. Because of the lack of resources, morale within the service is going down. The constituent whom I mentioned was in need of a wheelchair, but in October there was no money available in the Homefirst Community Health and Social Services Trust area to provide basic wheelchairs. We are not talking about rocket science — money has to be made available for basic services.

I mentioned the issue of inequalities earlier. The need for basic facilities for the disabled is not even being addressed. I know of another disabled person who needed an occupational therapy assessment to have a ramp installed at his house to give him the basic human right of access to and from his home. He is living alone, and luckily he has a very good neighbour who has been helping him. That occupational therapy assessment took an undue length of time.

Basic services in the community must be provided. Like many people, I am concerned about the amount of money that has been put into the Health Service and the fact that there is little in the way of reforms to show how that money is being spent. The general public want more money to be invested in the Health Service, and that has rightly happened, but we need to have confidence that the money is being well spent. We need transparency, so that we know what the money has been spent on, and that it is providing value for money.

I understand, with concern, that the Northern Ireland Audit Office has not been able to approve some of the accounts. Why not? Surely we ought to know where the money is going and what it is being spent on. We must get value for the patients and improve the service to our constituents.

Mr Shannon: Yinst mair A maun speik up for the Depairtment o Halth, Social Services an Public Sauttie, for its Meinister disnae seem able for it. This maitter mebbe isnae o onie interest til the Meinister, sin it's nocht adae wi speikin the Erse or wi Erse cultur; at the hinner-end it's relate ti this kintra an hauldin its fowk — comprehendin thae fowk versant in Erse — haill an fere.

Once again I must speak up for the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety, as its Minister seems incapable of doing so. This subject may be of no interest to the Minister as it is nothing to do with speaking Irish or the Irish culture — it is, after all, relating only to this country and keeping its people, including those who speak Irish fluently, alive and well.

I want to highlight some issues in relation to care in the community. Some £13 million was set aside for care in the community services, and even that amount is unlikely to result in a break-even situation, because the Government are giving money to the Health

Service and to that particular area. The last time we spoke on this matter, in relation solely to the Ulster Community and Hospitals Health and Social Services Trust, at least £20 million was needed to address care in the community. The sum of £13 million across the Province is a very paltry sum in comparison — and it is spread across 19 trusts and 4 health boards. It is just over 4% of the sum awarded to England and Wales.

The amount of money needed to cover the community care bill is staggering. The Strangford area has seen less money and time spent on its elderly and disabled people than has been the case in many other places. It is incredible that, in the twenty-first century, people are still living in cold houses and will have to continue to do so for the immediate future, because the hospitals still cannot afford to provide adequate cover or support to ensure a comfortable life for all.

The lack of adequate funding has stretched resources for the whole of the National Health Service. Elderly or disabled patients are not being allowed home until adequate care facilities are available. There are currently no available community care places, which means that beds are being taken up by patients who could be cared for at home. That has the knock-on effect of increasing the time that people spend on waiting lists and increasing the numbers on those lists. In the Ulster Community and Hospitals Health and Social Services Trust area, 50 patients in beds could be released if there were enough money to provide community care. That means that reasonably well people who just need aftercare are blocking 50 beds.

The same scenario is being repeated in many areas of the Province.

5.15 pm

Funding has been sporadic and inadequate. It is hard for staff to see a speedy solution to the problem. Last year, the Ulster Community and Hospitals Health and Social Services Trust received funding for nine additional complex care packages. However, so far this year 60 additional complex care cases needed help, and they cannot be looked after. There is a great shortfall. Thirteen million pounds will help a little, but not enough.

We can petition the Government for funding, but they are too slow to react. The subsequent snowballing is a problem in our own areas. It does not help that the Government do not see the National Health Service as an entire problem. All areas in the trusts are affected, although members of the public get angry only about the problems that affect them at any given time.

The call for more money is not a request or an item on a wish list; it is a demand and a need. We do not want to see money being put into the bottomless pit of the Health Service. We want the money to go directly to the people who need it most. My Colleague Paul

Berry talked about the pressures on doctors and the help that they need. They are short of funding.

The underfunding and mismanagement of the Health Service has occurred under the present Minister. It is not due to Margaret Thatcher, as Mr McCarthy said. What has happened in the three years that the Minister has been in control? Her insistence on spending money on the Irish language and culture prevents some of those most in need from getting help. The Minister has given the go-ahead for pay rises for chief executives. How far behind the times is she? Has she not been listening to the nurses and doctors telling her that chief executives' pay has been eating into hospital budgets?

Administration soaks up money and takes funding away from those who need it most. Some chief executives earn 10 times more than nurses do, and they can double their salaries with bonuses, something which other Members have referred to. Would it not be more sensible to invest the money in nurses, doctors and equipment rather than in chief executives who sit in offices and direct others?

The funding is not sufficient to cover the problems with community care in one trust, let alone all the trusts in the Province. The country deserves more than the paltry £13 million that has been set aside for the care of the elderly and the disabled. The money will alleviate the problems for community carers, but not for many other people. Even then, it will only do so for a short time. It would be better if the Minister examined the efficiency of the trusts, the need for staffing and equipment and particularly the need for adequate funding.

Ms Hanna's motion is worthy of support, and I can go along with it. I want to mention an incident that occurred just over two years ago, when Northern Ireland suffered a serious flu epidemic. The nurses were also suffering, and the beleaguered staff were working on emergency rotas. Some nurses were working 12-to-14-hour shifts. The elderly and the young were not the only people affected, and the nurses were so run-down that they were in danger of being the next target for the debilitating bug. In their wisdom, the executives of the trust thought that it would be a brilliant idea to employ agency staff. They were mindful that they had to restrict themselves to their budget, but they paid the agency nurses almost twice the hourly rate of the regular nursing staff. Members can imagine the nurses' reaction when they found out. Unfortunately, they could not go on strike, because of their oath to care for the sick. The chief executives did not reimburse the nurses who struggled through the staffing crisis, nor did they show appreciation verbally. It must be soul-destroying to work for a boss who thinks only about his bonus while his staff are in the firing line.

We have the same problem today. We are talking about community care, while the chief executive still

gets his money. It is crucial that money is spent where it is most needed. It is unfair and unreal to suggest that the money that goes into the Health Service should end up in administration and stuck in the system. Give it to the people who need it. The Minister has failed miserably to do that in her three years in power. If she were in power for 33 years, she still would not address the issues to ensure that those who need care receive it.

Mrs Nelis: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. The motion concerns the crisis in the Health Service, and it urges the Minister to take urgent action to tackle that crisis. No one would disagree with the sentiments of the motion, least of all the Minister. During her short term in office she has endeavoured to deal with the crisis that has existed for at least 10 years and which was 18 years in the making.

However, the motion is not really about concern for the health of the people. It is about attacking Bairbre de Brún. It is party politicking of the worst kind. It is political point scoring on the back of the sick and the dying. Assembly Members should exercise our responsibility collectively and examine how we, as politicians, can address the issue of the Health Service.

Mr Kennedy: Will the Member give way?

Mrs Nelis: I will not.

Madam Deputy Speaker: Order. The Member is entitled to refuse to give way.

Mrs Nelis: The SDLP and the DUP resort to cheap attacks on the Minister for media consumption. Duncan Shipley-Dalton must be making a bid for the seat that he lost. When the SDLP had the choice of ministerial briefs, it chose to back off from health. The SDLP — *[Interruption]*.

Madam Deputy Speaker: Order.

Mrs Nelis: The SDLP knew that Bairbre de Brún had taken a poisoned chalice. So too did those other vociferous critics — those parties that did not have the guts to take on that brief.

The motion talks about a “current crisis”. There is a historical crisis in the National Health Service created by 18 years of Thatcher and Tory undermining.

Mr Kennedy: Will the Member give way?

Mrs Nelis: I will not.

They did not subscribe to the National Health Service. That was followed by six years of Labour mismanagement and refusal to recognise in the Barnett formula the special circumstances of the North of Ireland.

There is a crisis in the health service in the UK and in the Republic of Ireland. We have known about that crisis since the time of direct rule and Westminster decision-making that destroyed the service. While the

Tories were putting the nails in the coffin of the National Health Service that resulted in this crisis, the twelve apostles — the MPs from the Six Counties sitting at Westminster — presided over the wake.

Mr Kennedy: Will the Member give way?

Mrs Nelis: I will not give way.

The crisis in the Health Service is what the Assembly has inherited, and it must be put right. There are no quick fixes. Tony Blair is in the same position as Bairbre de Brún. During his election campaign he talked about 10 days to save the National Health Service. He is now talking about 10 years. He knows, and this Assembly knows, that the Health Service can work and that it does work. However, to work it needs commitment and resources. It needs a commitment from Members to believe that, collectively, politicians can deliver a service that people can rely on.

We acknowledge the additional finance provided by Mark Durkan. However, it is £50 million short of what the Minister requires. Last year there was a £700 million underspend in health in England. Mark Durkan should bid for part of that. We do not need to rehearse the Derek Wanless report into the undermining of the Health Service. We have watched over the years as managers and chief executives have been replaced by trusts, boards, and innumerable quangos. The stethoscope was replaced by the briefcase, and patients suddenly became clients.

We do not need brain surgery to tell us the obvious. If you employ fewer nurses and doctors; if you invest less on equipment and technology; if you create a system of private and public fundholding, you will get what Northern Ireland now has — an inferior Health Service on a starvation diet. We know about the waiting lists, the winter pressures, the breast cancer survival rates, and the beds in corridors. These things did not happen because Bairbre de Brún became Minister of Health. They have been there for years. *[Interruption]*.

Madam Deputy Speaker: Order. I will have order in this House.

Mrs Nelis: We know that if you need a hip replacement, you will have to live in pain for years. The mother of the Minister of Education, Martin McGuinness, was exported to Scotland for her operation after spending years on a waiting list. That was long before Bairbre de Brún became Minister of Health.

Madam Deputy Speaker: Order.

Mrs Nelis: During 30 years of conflict, additional pressures were put on our Health Service. However, far from being given additional resources to cope with the war, Health Service finances were siphoned off to pay for the British war machine, prisons, police, quangos, and endless bureaucrats.

Mr Kennedy: Will the Member give way?

Mrs Nelis: For the fourth time, I will not give way.

As if that was not bad enough, the move towards privatisation by the back door, which the Tories began and New Labour carried on, has starved the Health Service of money and prevented service delivery. We all know that privatisation of catering and cleaning services in hospitals was a disaster for workers, patients and medical staff.

The basic cause of the failure in the Health Service is inadequate funding. The Minister recognises that, and she recognises that a cultural change is needed. We must establish a patient-led service. The days of fat cat managers lining their pockets while doctors and nurses struggle to survive on a fraction of the salaries that are paid to some chief executives are gone forever — *[Interruption]*.

Madam Deputy Speaker: Order.

Mrs Nelis: Those days are gone because of what Bairbre de Brún is doing. The Minister has begun to address the problems of the fundamentally flawed, under-resourced and badly managed National Health Service in the Six Counties. She should be given every support and resource necessary. It is a test — not for her, but for the Executive and for us as elected representatives. It is our collective responsibility. We must do better. Go raibh maith agat.

Dr McDonnell: This debate is not an opportunity to attack or blame the Minister, the Executive or anybody else. The problems in the Health Service are everybody's problems. We are all responsible if the service is not working.

The Health Service badly needs a major injection of positive, creative management. The service must be proactively managed, with greater vision, some stability and some hope. In 25 years as a GP, I have never known nursing, medical and other staff to be as despairing or depressed. They are not sure what tomorrow will bring and what they will face. The only certainty is that they are faced with muddle, confusion and a lack of access to the necessary secondary care and service.

The people who work in the Health Service can make a difference, but they need to feel that they are encouraged and supported. That goes beyond rhetoric. They need some vision and some sense that their commitment will be rewarded. They must be given the opportunity to show local leadership, and they must be given credit when that local service is delivered.

The merry-go-round management in the bureaucracy of the Health Service must end. Under the guise of consultation, there are continual meetings and reviews, but no real decisions are taken. That is especially frustrating at the middle and lower levels of the Health

Service, where it can take years to reach a simple decision. Management at trust and board level has become little more than a grandiose exercise in passing the parcel. Things go round and round like the revolving door of a large supermarket.

Frustration is immense at the primary care end of the service. Hospital waiting lists are longer than ever. Although some people working in hospitals may not agree, many in the medical profession feel that efficiency in some aspects of the hospital service is less than optimum. I am not referring to the accident and emergency departments; I had every sympathy with Dr Liz Dowey in Belfast City Hospital when she screamed — almost in despair — for help and support a week ago.

5.30 pm

I am concerned about the lack of a proper surgical service. About six weeks ago, GPs received a letter from the neurosurgery department of the Royal Victoria Hospital saying that while they would struggle on with head injuries and such, they could no longer operate on brain tumours. I understand that at that stage some people with serious life-threatening brain tumours were sent home without having had an operation. The same situation exists in cardiac and orthopaedic surgery.

Those are the regional services, where people have no choice but to wait. There is only one service for those specialities in Northern Ireland. In some of the simpler services things are different; there is a scattering of provision across various major hospitals. If a service is not available in one, it may be worthwhile applying to another. When the regional services become clogged up, however, everything clogs up.

There is a critical lack of nursing and technical support staff in many surgical sub-specialities. While there may be surgeons, anaesthetists and all the people required to undertake surgery, they do not have the nursing and support staff to look after patients in intensive care following surgery. That creates major bottlenecks and obstacles to good healthcare and good practice.

On the other hand, as other Members have said, in many cases there is a shortage of medical staff. I was told by a friend that in the Northern Health and Social Services Board area there is only one rheumatologist to deal with rheumatoid arthritis. That person runs from pillar to post to provide a skeleton service. There is a need to examine such shortfalls.

Primary care must be freed up and allowed to get on with what it does best. GPs and community nurses have built up years of useful experience in dealing with people, but the problem is that many of my GP colleagues spend up to 25% of their time lobbying hospitals and trying to beg, coax and cajole their way past the waiting lists for those who are critically ill. Much of that time is taken up by unnecessary consultations with people

who plead to have their appointments brought forward because they are “going down the hill” and want something done for them before they die.

Perhaps 85% to 90% of National Health Service care occurs in primary care. The essence of the solution to much of our problem could be dealt with there. I commend the Minister and the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety. The recently announced initiative on winter care, the effort to unlock some of the potential in primary care, is very welcome. It could be better funded, but it is a start and a step in the right direction.

In the limited time available, I want to mention psychiatric care.

Madam Deputy Speaker: The Member’s time is up.

Dr McDonnell: Psychiatric care has been forgotten in the plethora of activity. If you will indulge me, Madam Deputy Speaker, I want very briefly to appeal —

Madam Deputy Speaker: I am afraid that the Member gets only seven minutes. I must ask him to sit down.

Dr McDonnell: I want to appeal for the elimination of some of the bureaucracy. I hope that we can get rid of some of the boards and amalgamate some of the trusts.

Madam Deputy Speaker: Order. The Member’s time is up.

Mr J Wilson: I will attempt to speak in — I hope — a good, sound south Antrim dialect. I hope that Members will not need earmuffs either to block it out or to work it out.

Mr McFarland: Not Ulster Scots?

Mr J Wilson: I speak Ulster Scots all the time. Earlier this week I addressed a group of senior citizens, and last night I addressed a group of my constituents who were touring the Building. I advised both groups to try not to be sick this winter. Those are not the words of someone who is trying to catch a headline or be alarmist. I believe that I gave them sound advice.

My constituency office in South Antrim receives calls on a variety of topics, but recently health issues have outnumbered all others. Daily, distressed constituents call for assistance. In the last few weeks alone, issues have included waiting lists for psychiatric treatment and the problem of no emergency beds for psychiatric care. Patients wait for days to have broken bones set. Elderly patients are left in bed at home unwashed and uncertain about when their care workers will call. People are concerned about the inconsistency and unreliability of health services. Patients are being released prematurely from hospital following surgery with no arrangements made for their convalescence. Elderly and disabled patients are discharged from hospital with no

satisfactory support at home. Families with severely disabled relatives are left to struggle alone, and there are reports — and I emphasise the term “reports” because I have no first-hand proof — of patients lying in hospital wards where hygiene standards are not as they should be.

At a recent meeting with representatives of the Northern Health and Social Services Board, colleagues from my constituency and I were alerted to the serious problems that lie ahead. We heard of the sheer frustration, despondency and poor morale that is seeping through the entire staff structure at administrative and professional level. That can have only a detrimental effect on the good work that they strive to do and is expected from them. We were told of many schemes that they would like to introduce to benefit patients, but cannot because of a lack of funds. The Minister should note that extra money coming into the system now will support only the status quo. It will not support new proposals for better care — it is needed to balance the books.

We hear day and daily about the lack of accountability and, therefore, responsibility that permeates the system. The Department gives money to the boards; the boards give money to the trusts; and along the way, as my Colleague Robert Coulter and others have said, the audit trail just leads to a bottomless pit. The audit trail has been described by some as leading to a big, black hole. Those are not my words; it is what I am told by members of the Committee for Health, Social Services and Public Safety and others. When other Committees carry out an audit, recipients of money can be identified — but not so with the Health Service.

The underfunding of the Administration during the years of direct rule means that if we are to achieve the standards enjoyed elsewhere in Europe, we must play catch-up in nearly every aspect of life. The funding of the Health Service has always been a cause for concern, but I fear that this crisis means that the Health Service can be described as having broken down.

I fear that it is the elderly, those most in need, who are being treated most abysmally. Those people in the early years of their life did not enjoy some of the modern services and appliances that we who were born in the post-war years have come to take for granted. Many of those people worked hard to save for their old age, and society has let them down and continues to do so. They deserve better.

As might have been suggested by Mr John Kelly, I am not playing games — but I do not want anyone to play games with my health. I support the motion.

Mr Gibson: We have heard many adequate and eloquent descriptions of the current crisis in the Health Service. About eight weeks ago, I had a bout of puritanical frustration. I discovered a 17-stone weight of documents

in my office that had been produced on the Health Service since 1998. There were several reports, including the Hindel and Pantell Reports, quality impact assessments, first, second and third editions of consultation documents, healthy-eating documents, and healthy-living documents. All that I could think of was the state of health of a patient who had just left a doctor's surgery and her hope to get a simple operation.

What I moved out of my office represented the devastation of hectares of trees; a waiting list that was growing by the furlong, and millions of pounds that were wasted because the information had to be written, printed, produced and circulated. I appeal to the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to stop producing expectations that cannot be delivered. This also applies to the recent Burns Report. We have had health charters, including the Patients' Charter, and various aspirations as to the delivery of services we could expect have been stated. However, they have been like many political manifestos — not surviving even past election day.

We have suffered from gross underfunding for over 30 years. Last night we read about the state of our transport system. People who live in the west of the Province could tell you about the desperate state of our road infrastructure. The Health Service has also experienced 30 years of underfunding. We quickly forget that we suffered 30 years of devastation caused by the Provisional IRA.

Mr Kennedy: To help amplify the point, will the Member join me in condemning the actions of Sinn Féin Youth, which is sponsored by the political party of the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety, whose actions were — *[Interruption]*.

Madam Deputy Speaker: Order. The Member will resume his seat. This is not in line with the debate.

Mr Dalton: On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. How can a comment on health expenditure, and the reason for that expenditure, not be relevant to the debate?

Madam Deputy Speaker: I have ruled that the Member's comment was not in keeping with the context of the motion.

Mr Kennedy: On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. It was clear from my intervention, which the Member for West Tyrone allowed, that I understood him to be making a point about the expenditure incurred by the Health Service due to the war of terrorism waged by paramilitaries. This war placed a significant burden on the health budget, and I was simply bringing the House up to date on the matter.

Madam Deputy Speaker: Order. I will consult Hansard and respond to the Member.

Mr Gibson: We have suffered 30 years of underfunding. Although we have committed 40% of our Budget to health, there is not an opportunity in the short term to make up for the 30 years of havoc and wrecking caused by the Provisional IRA.

5.45 pm

We must honestly examine how that 40% can be constructively utilised to deliver the best possible service. Members have eloquently described the budget trails and the administration of community care. However, Mr Robert McCartney was the only Member to put a constructive proposition to the Assembly. On the radio this morning, I heard GPs, consultants and employees in every aspect of primary care talk about this crisis and demand immediate action. In a crisis, we should pull out the stops and introduce emergency management of our 40% of the Budget to ensure that it is delivered in the most effective way.

The designer suits can no longer put a gloss on such evident failure. We must get down to the job of managing that 40% of the Budget in order to deliver, as far as possible, on the Minister's mission statement. The matter is much too serious for any political gimmick. I do not like the idea of one party jockeying against another. My constituents deserve the best healthcare possible, and other Members will wish the same care for their constituents. We have not examined how we will manage the crisis, nor have we heard a response to our questions. The Minister's task is to work out how we can manage the crisis; that responsibility falls not only to the Minister, but to every other Member.

(Mr Speaker in the Chair)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety (Ms de Brún): Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. Tá mé buíoch de Carmel Hanna as an rún tábhachtach seo a chur síos ar chlár.

Tig an díospóireacht seo i ndiaidh ár ndíospóireachtaí ar an Bhuiséad an tseachtain seo caite, agus mar sin taispeánann sí a dháiríre atá an Tionól faoi na géarfhadhbanna atá os comhair ár seirbhísí sláinte; seirbhísí atá an-tábhachtach go deo ag an phobal uilig.

D'éist mé go cúramach agus le suim mhór leis na pointí a luadh. Aontaím le cuid mhaith de na tuairimí a nochtadh agus is maith liom go n-aithnítear go leathan go bhfuil brúnna suntasacha ar ár seirbhísí sláinte agus sóisialta. San am a chuaigh thart ba séasúrtha iad cuid mhaith de na brúnna a tugadh chun solais le linn na díospóireachta; ba bhrúnna iad nár tháinig ach le linn bhuaic-amanna éilimh i míonna an gheimhridh. Anois, áfach, ó tá éileamh ag méadú de shíor agus ó tá seirbhísí ag feidhmiú ar a lánacmhainn, ach sa bheag, bíonn na brúnna seo ann ó cheann go ceann na bliana.

I am grateful to Ms Hanna for tabling this important motion. Following our debate on the Budget, today's

debate underlines the seriousness with which the Assembly views the real problems facing the Health Service. I welcome Members' interest in the services, which are crucially important to the community.

I also welcome the widespread recognition of the significant pressures on our health and social services. In the past, many of these pressures were seasonal; they arose only during peaks of demand in winter months. Now, as Mr Watson pointed out, this is a year-round phenomenon, as demands grow and services work almost to capacity.

More is being demanded of our health and social services. The number of patients being treated has risen by no less than 10% in the past five years, and the number of community care packages has risen by 27% in the same period. During the past year alone, medical activity in the Eastern Board area has increased by nearly 10%. We must add this considerable rise in numbers of people waiting for treatment to the stark rise in the numbers being treated in order to appreciate fully the scale of the increase in demand.

In the face of this rise in demand, hospital staff and community providers are tireless and dedicated in their work. We owe much to the commitment and dedication of the staff who provide the necessary skilled care and treatment, often in less than ideal circumstances. Despite the efforts of staff, it is simply impossible for any service routinely to absorb increases of that magnitude without pain. The recent additions to the Budget are welcome, but they do not allow us to match the extra funding that the NHS in England is getting at present. Matching that funding would require many millions of pounds. The NHS sets many of our costs drivers — our levels of pay and the cost of drugs are decided there. We cope here; we suffer costs that are beyond our control without the comparable funding required to meet them.

Bob Coulter, Carmel Hanna and Paul Berry raised the matter of the regional strategy. Planned, concerted work is being done to develop a soundly based strategy, and I have been carefully constructing the building blocks for the strategy by concentrating, first and foremost, on the key areas that must underpin any new direction.

These include prevention and health promotion; primary care development; the review of community care; the reorganisation of acute hospital services; establishing clear standards of quality and professional regulation; workforce planning; and securing a sound financial base. In doing this I have been conscious of the importance of interaction with the public, with the staff of the health and personnel social services and with service users. I have ensured that they have a say in developing my approach and, as I bring all the building blocks together in an overall regional strategy, I shall ensure that this important element of public consultation continues.

I welcome the wider debate here and elsewhere about the level of funding needed for health and social care. These services and our willingness to support those who are sick and vulnerable define our society. This is a challenge that the Assembly and society in general cannot walk away from — it is a collective responsibility in which we must all play our part and in which we must all work together. Mark Durkan's announcement last week is evidence that the Executive and the Assembly are ready to rise to this challenge. Our services have paid a price for years of underfunding, and I welcome the fact that many Members recognised that in their contributions. That past underfunding weakened our services and brought them to the brink. This historic neglect must be rectified; only now are we beginning to do that.

The additional resources give a positive signal to the Health Service. Clearly, they are not sufficient to turn the situation around, but they will allow us to help services that need urgent investment to maintain their effectiveness and to continue to meet growing demand. They will allow for some carefully targeted service development. In my time as Minister I have also sought to build the effectiveness of our services and to focus on key problems. Much has already been achieved, even under severe financial constraints. We have increased critical care provision significantly. By March 2002 we shall have 33 more intensive-care and high-dependency beds than I inherited as Minister.

There are now 100 more training places for nurses and extra residential childcare places. We have three permanent MRI scanners in place, and we have secured funding for three more. The number of people waiting for MRI scans has been reduced. While targeted improvements, such as those I have itemised, are being put in place, we are working to sharpen the effectiveness and the efficiency of the service. For example, the service now has a new performance management system to improve planning and accountability. Winter planning has been improved, and by March 2003 efficiency savings of £12 million will have been reinvested in services.

I recognise Members' concerns about winter planning, given the pressures on services. Boards and trusts have planned more comprehensively than ever before for winter and its associated pressures, and as in last winter, more primary care services and more community care support will be available. We are completing a targeted programme of flu immunisation, and we are building on the success of the 2000-02 campaign; more beds will be available at peak times and for emergency admissions, and there will be more specialist beds in critical care areas. Later this month I shall meet the chairpersons of the health and social services boards for a final review of arrangements for winter; arrangements for working together in integrated planning that have been going on all year at official level.

This is prudent, orchestrated planning to relieve the expected pressures of winter. The funding that was made available in the Budget and in-year additions will help us to make some extra provision for those anticipated pressures. However, services that are running almost at peak capacity for most of the year do not have the spare capacity to react instantly to sudden surges in activity. We must build that capacity and recruit and put in place the additional staff and facilities to cope with higher levels of demand. I have already taken measures to increase specialist nursing and medical staff; these measures may take time to yield benefits, but they are an important investment for the future.

In the interim, work continues on tackling nursing needs during the winter. The best and most effective way of guaranteeing that peak pressures can be met effectively is by ensuring that a properly resourced service is in place. That is the best — indeed the only — lasting solution to winter pressures.

The Department has embarked on a major initiative to improve workforce planning mechanisms, and the work should be completed during the next year. The document 'Best Practice, Best Care', which recently completed consultation, dealt with setting, monitoring and enforcing standards. Decisions on the way forward will be taken soon. Consultation is necessary, and the documents that some Members have referred to are essential for progress.

I shall return to the matter of financial accountability. We keep a close track of money, and it does have a real effect on the quality and volume of care and treatment.

The Department's role has changed from regulating an internal market, particularly under the British Conservative Government, to one of direct management under the re-established local Executive. Therefore we have implemented significant changes in how we manage our resources. We have much tighter control over the allocation of resources. For 2001-02 that can be traced from the Programme for Government through the public service agreement into the priorities for action, which set out the key priorities for the service. Boards are required to use that new approach in their service investment plans to describe how they intend to deploy their additional resources; similarly, trusts, in their service delivery plans, must set out how they will deliver my agenda. Regular progress meetings with the boards enable us to keep track of how money is spent and of the outcomes of that spending.

We shall take the same rigorous approach to financial management in 2002-03.

6.00 pm

The Comptroller and Auditor General does have audit authority over the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety, just as with any other Department.

While he does not have direct audit process powers over the health and social services trusts, those are subject to the scrutiny of the Health Service auditors.

I accept and absolutely agree with Members that a long-term approach to the issue of waiting lists is needed. In fact, our approach, as I set out in our framework for action last year, is based on a consistent long-term approach. I made some funding recurrent that had been non-recurrent in the past in order to have that consistent approach. We need long-term action, supported by the necessary resources and service capacity, to provide levels of service that will meet need. In the South and in England, where we have seen action, it has been not only on waiting lists but also on building the capacity of the service. In dealing with capacity generally, the only cure is more resources.

To aid efficiency, a significant programme of work is under way to improve the flow of patients through the system. That includes reducing the number of people who fail to keep their appointments and putting in place alternatives to hospital admission, such as physiotherapists in the community treating patients with back pain. It also includes ensuring that theatres are operating at maximum capacity and validating waiting lists to ensure that they are accurate.

The service has taken a number of initiatives, and I have outlined that several times during debates in the House. Despite the problems, the Health Service has continued to treat similar numbers of patients as in previous years and has made efficiency gains by, for example, treating more patients as day cases.

A number of measures have been taken to help alleviate the current difficulties with regard to fractures. These include the provision of additional theatre lists at the Royal Victoria Hospital, the Ulster Hospital and Musgrave Park Hospital, and the use of spare capacity at the Duke of Connaught unit on the Musgrave Park Hospital site. The Department continues to monitor the service to ensure that emerging difficulties are effectively addressed.

Joe Hendron asked about the cardiac surgery review. Implementation of some recommendations relating to changes in clinical practice is already in hand. Some of the extra resources allocated for next year will support additional cardiac surgery procedures. Implementation of some of the other recommendations will depend on the outcome of the consultation process and the availability of resources in 2002-03 and beyond.

However, my Department has already allocated additional funding for specialist nurse training posts in cardiac intensive care to support the existing staff and allow additional nurses to receive specialised training. Of the 13 additional nurses going through specialised training in the cardiac surgical intensive care unit, 12 have remained in post. A further four specialist nurses

are currently going through. A consultant anaesthetist is now also present in the unit during working hours. A significant number of the protocols recommended by the two reviews have also been adopted.

Dr Hendron also asked about the ending of GP fundholding and a “seamless transition.” At the beginning of the year, when we had a debate about ending GP fundholding, it was pointed out that the money currently being used to run the GP fundholding scheme and the commissioning pilots will be redeployed to meet the cost of the new arrangements. That is on top of additional resources that we made available to boards to allow them greater flexibility to enhance the quality and quantity of primary care services.

While every effort will be made to ensure that there is a smooth transition to new arrangements, it is clear that the money currently used to run the GP fundholding scheme will be redeployed. It will be available, once GP fundholding has ended, to meet the cost of the new arrangements. We are now making firm plans to end the GP fundholding scheme from 1 April 2002. That will allow us to move forward from there. As Members will know, work is already under way to set up the local health and social care groups.

I share Prof McWilliams’s expectation that the needs and effectiveness study will illustrate the extent of the pressures on the service. The study will also show that the service performs effectively in the present circumstances.

Bob Coulter and other Members asked about structures and administration, and those aspects will need to be looked at in the context of the Executive’s intention to review public administration, and of the recommendations and proposals made in the acute hospitals review. The Executive will decide if changes should go ahead. However, we should not fool ourselves that that will somehow solve the funding problems of the service, because it will not.

Carmel Hanna asked about the compatibility of information systems. The implementation of a project to introduce a unique identifier for patients across all areas of Health and Personal Social Services is due to begin early in 2002, as funding for that has now been secured. That will ensure that ICT systems throughout Health and Personal Social Services and in GP practices include the new identifier as part of their patient records. That is a first and essential step towards the reliable sharing of electronic patient data and the exploitation of modern ICT services to communicate that information. The recent Executive programme funds announcement also included funding for further bids that we have made to allow us to further improve ICT facilities in the service.

On 11 October, I announced a new pay and grading system, in response to concerns, which I have long expressed, about the award of substantial pay rises to

senior executives. That practice was derived from the old internal market, which gave trusts the freedom to develop their own pay schemes and to make their own pay awards. All new appointments will be made on the basis of the new scheme. Existing staff will have the legal right to retain their current contracts, but the Department will work with the service and employees to encourage staff to move on to the new contract and to ensure that the service is working with employees on the question of how to move forward.

Joe Hendron and Alasdair McDonnell raised a question about neurosurgery and the letter to GPs from the neurosurgery department at the Royal Victoria Hospital. The trust has told me that emergency head injuries continue to receive immediate attention. To help to overcome some of the difficulties that exist, the trust has increased the number of theatre sessions and has employed a staff grade doctor. That has enabled it to provide three extra neurosurgery sessions. It hopes that nurses will soon be ready to take up posts in this specialised area, enabling the neurosurgical unit to return to its complement of 40 beds early next month.

I recognise the difficulty in recruiting care workers, particularly to posts that involve unsociable hours. I appreciate that money is an issue, and that there are other questions. I am aware of the need for funding for the residential nursing home sector, and that will be among the matters that I will examine in the weeks to come, when I decide my detailed allocations for the forthcoming financial year.

Tommy Gallagher said that it was cheaper to keep people at home, rather than in hospital, and I recognise that. The funding allocated for 1,000 additional packages, and the additional £8 million provided this year, will help trusts to address this issue. The 1,000 extra community care packages to be provided next year have been made in recognition of those difficulties. The draft Budget, as Mr Gallagher knows, did not allow for development. We now have the ability to make some developments in certain areas. In the interim, the cost of a hospital bed is comprised mainly of staff costs. Those are fixed costs, which cannot be freed up readily for redistribution to the community.

Where we can put extra money into the community to free that up, we will do so. Money, of course, is not the only consideration. Statutory and independent sectors compete with large supermarkets, call centres and others in a decreasing pool of available staff. That has also created some difficulties.

On the acute hospitals review group report, the numerous comments made during the consultation period are now being analysed. Following consideration of the outcome of the public consultation process, and discussion with Executive Colleagues, proposals on the way forward can be put out for consultation. I

assure Tommy Gallagher that I hope to be in a position to announce decisions in the course of 2002.

Roy Beggs raised the question of the variation in the funding of community trusts. Community trust spending varies because of age, need and rurality. Those factors vary from trust to trust. The figures available may well include services to populations beyond the immediate catchment area of the trusts concerned. Some trusts have a regional function, and Muckamore Abbey Hospital, for example, falls into that category in relation to the North and West Belfast Health and Social Services Trust.

I share the desire of Members to put in place high quality and responsive services that are available to support those who need them, when they need them.

Mr Speaker: Order. If Members wish to have a conversation, they should use the Lobbies.

Ms de Brún: I share Members' concerns that waiting lists for hospital treatment are so high. I share their concerns that so many vulnerable people are waiting in the community for the care that they need to maintain their independence and often their dignity. I share their concerns about patients in need of emergency hospital admission, waiting for hours on trolleys. I am determined that the shortcomings in care will be addressed and improvements forged.

Work towards building the new health and social services has begun. I have ambitious plans for developing our ambulance services and for improving cardiology, and cardiac surgery. I have set out a framework for tackling waiting lists. I have set in motion a review of community care services. I have published proposals for improving the quality of care, and for getting our standards and governance right. Considerable work to improve children's services is under way.

All of that has been done alongside the vital work of addressing the day-to-day problems, and within the context of severe financial restraint. Building that new Health Service will take time and resources. I inherited a Health Service that had been starved of the investment that it needed to keep pace with services elsewhere. Last week's Budget announcement was an early, important step in the right direction. The extra funding from it will translate directly into more care packages, more operations, more key staff and more targeted growth in vital areas. However, it is no more than a first step.

One could say that any Minister who inherits a situation in which the population experiences some of the worst health status in western Europe, allied to one of the lowest budgets for health in western Europe, will have a major challenge facing them. Building up our services so that they are able to meet demand is going to require a sustained commitment over a number of years. It is that long-term commitment to underpin

the action that we in the Health Service are taking that is needed if things are going to be better in the future. I look forward to working collectively with all of my Executive Colleagues and with all Members of the Assembly — as well as with staff throughout the Health Service — to make the improvements that we need, with the resources that we need.

Ms Ramsey: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. I thank Carmel Hanna for proposing the motion. However, I want to outline why John Kelly and I tabled the amendment, which, we believe, complements Carmel Hanna's motion. There is a crisis in the Health Service, from children's services right through to community care and mental health. That has rightly been highlighted during the course of the debate. I also want to commend the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety for being here for the duration of the debate.

Some Members have mentioned the years of underfunding. In England, and in the Twenty-six Counties, both Governments have recognised that billions of pounds will be needed to stabilise their respective Health Services before they can attempt to develop services for the future.

6.15 pm

The problem is compounded by the fact that successive British Governments robbed the Health Service of close to £190 million every year. During the years of underfunding there was no debate or long-term plan, and the internal market was created. I welcome this open and honest debate.

However, we need to realise that the Executive and the Committees have to take responsibility for ensuring that there is openness and accountability in the Assembly. Some people have criticised reviews in the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety. Are they saying that the community should not have its say, now that we have this openness and accountability? Do they want to go back to direct rule, or are they afraid of accountability?

Some people touched on the boards and trusts. Sinn Féin has said for a long time that boards and trusts must go. However, reality needs to come into play here. The end of boards and trusts will not generate millions and millions of pounds, although it will generate a small amount of money — I do not think that people are thinking that out. The reason that we want the end of the boards and trusts is that they facilitated the internal market. We have to realise —

Mr Beggs: That is a fantasy.

Ms Ramsey: — that the additional money that was announced in the Budget should be welcomed, because it is a positive step. It shows that the Executive as a whole are listening not only to the Minister, but to the Department, to the Committees and to Assembly Members.

While I welcome the money, it still falls £50 million short of the Minister's original bid. Her words to the Committee for Health, Social Services and Public Safety at that time were to keep the services as they were and not to target any additional pressures on them.

I want to touch on a number of comments that were made by previous Members who spoke. Carmel Hanna, who supported the motion, said that a blank cheque is not the way forward. In no way would I suggest that, and I support Ms Hanna's thinking behind it. However, there is a need to target and tackle the years of serious underfunding of the Health Service. She and other Members, pointed to the increase in waiting lists, which is alarming, but the Committee took this on board and asked for research to be carried out on the cancellation of outpatient clinics. Nine percent of these clinics were cancelled, and the main reason was that no holiday arrangements had been made for consultants, so that needs to be tackled as well, and we can target waiting lists if there is planning in the acute sector.

It has been said that we should not call for more resources without knowing where the money will go. As a Member of the Committee for Health, Social Services and Public Safety I know where the money should go. As every Member who has spoken has said, that money should go to the new cancer unit, to mental health, to children's services and to community care. There is a need there for additional money. Arguing that there has been mismanagement of money undermines the argument for additional money. The Chairperson of the Committee for Health, Social Services and Public Safety says that there is a crisis in the fracture unit. I agree with him — we visited the Royal last week — and that brings me to the need for collective responsibility.

Mr Maskey: Will the Member acknowledge that while some Members from the Ulster Unionist party mutter under their breath, a number of their Members in the Westminster Parliament held the balance of power and never once lifted a finger or raised a voice about the way the Health Service and other services here were being destroyed by that same Westminster Government?

Ms Ramsey: I agree totally.

Mr Kennedy: We have heard much from the Member and her party Colleagues about underfunding and mismanagement. To that I align what has been significantly ignored: the cost to the Health Service of 30 years of paramilitary violence. To come up to date, will the Member join with me and condemn the actions of the youth wing of her party who inflicted an extra burden on the Health Service this week in south Armagh?

Ms Ramsay: I gave way for the Member to make a comment, not a speech. I commend the Member for getting that point in. It takes me back to my point about collective responsibility. Dr Hendron mentioned —

[Interruption]. You should not throw stones, Danny, you never know what you might hit.

Mr Speaker: Members should conduct business through the Chair, not that I wish the stones to come in this direction.

Ms Ramsay: I hope that Dr Hendron will agree with me about collective responsibility. It is reflected in the fact that the increase in the waiting time for some fracture services happened because some roads and footpaths were not gritted last year. Most problems that the Health Service faces are not under its control, including, for example, cryptosporidium, fuel poverty and the fact that 20% of children live in poverty. I am not trying to diminish the problems in the health sector, but we need a proper debate.

The Committee for Health, Social Services and Public Safety asked a few weeks ago for a meeting with the Office of the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister and also the Minister of Finance and Personnel to discuss the underfunding of the Health Service. We have received no answer. That makes me wonder whether they take the matter seriously. Do they take their commitments in the Programme for Government seriously, or are they just paying lip service to them?

I agree with what Mr Beggs said. He and I sit on the Public Accounts Committee. However, Mr Beggs should calm Mr Dalton down. If he takes a heart attack, it will add to the waiting lists in our hospitals. I also agree with the Minister that the Assembly and the Executive are ready to rise to the challenge. The problem of years of underfunding must be tackled, but the additional money should, in a mature debate, be welcomed. The funding is not sufficient, but I am pleased at the increase in funding for cardiac surgery and children and family services.

Many Members said that finance was not the main issue, before going on to call for more resources for their own area. That is the reason for our amendment; there is a crisis in the Health Service, and we must tackle it. I urge all Members to support the amendment.

Ms Hanna: I thank all Members for their valuable contributions. I particularly thank the Minister for listening and responding to our concerns. I welcome the Minister's comments on the ongoing action.

Mr John Kelly spoke about lighting a candle, rather than cursing the darkness. I hope that Members were more constructive than that. He also talked about the lack of resources; we must know exactly what resources are required. Dr Hendron gave some stark, frightening details of the number of people waiting for cardiac surgery and said that a number of people had died waiting for surgery. He talked about accident and emergency waits, neurology and primary care.

Rev Robert Coulter discussed the structures, the number of trusts and the financial wastage of over-administration. He also expressed his concern about pay awards and mentioned the need for a clear strategy and better management. Mr Berry spoke graphically about crisis, disaster and despair that the situation was getting worse. He said that we needed more debate and expressed concern about the hours that junior doctors work and the related safety implications.

Ms Gildernew referred to the link with poverty and the rural issues — *[Interruption]*.

Mr Speaker: Order. I have told Members from time to time that, if they wish to converse, they should do so in the Lobbies.

Ms Hanna: Ms McWilliams talked about the need for more resources and the problems with delayed discharges. Mr McCartney returned to the theme of collective responsibility. He also discussed the idea of establishing an emergency committee to deal with the situation. Mr Gallagher talked about the need for common sense and the requirement for more decisions and resources. He also said that we needed a clear plan.

Mr Beggs asked what the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety does. He talked about the need for more speech therapists and nurses, and the problems caused by the delayed discharge of patients. He highlighted the frustration that that causes. Mr Shannon spoke about community care, the chief executive's pay rises and agency nurses. He said that we must hold on to and value our health care staff.

Mrs Nelis made an unfortunate attack on the SDLP, and accused us of being party political. I am sorry that she feels that way. I feel strongly about health issues, and three of my party Colleagues are health professionals who have spent years working for the Health Service. I assure the House that we feel passionate about the issues about which we speak, and we are genuinely concerned about the patients. I resent that attack.

Dr McDonnell spoke about the need for good management and efficiency. His contribution was very constructive; he mentioned the shortfalls in funding for rheumatology and neurology and highlighted the importance of primary care and psychiatric care. Usually, psychiatric care is left until the end of a debate, with the result that we do not get around to discussing it. We could have a whole debate on that topic alone.

We have all tried to address the issue collectively, albeit from differing angles. A general theme of the debate was the need to develop a clear strategy and to make more decisions. We acknowledge that there has been a history of underfunding. However, we must ask where our expenditure is being directed at present. No

one doubts that the money is allocated to the hospitals and patients. However, there is a concern that we do not have a clear long-term strategy. If we constantly inject funding in an emergency, we are only sticking a plaster on the problem, rather than getting to the core of it.

In January, £14.5 million was allocated, and in February a further £18 million was allocated. Of that, £8 million was allocated for the work plan on the waiting lists. I would genuinely like to know what happened to that report, because the waiting lists are getting longer.

Northern Ireland does not have an official GDP, and our allocation from the Treasury is made according to the Barnett formula. However, within three years, the UK's expenditure on health will be 7.6% of the GDP, by comparison with an anticipated EU average expenditure of between 8% and 9%. In general, a higher proportion of the UK's GDP must be spent on healthcare. The Labour Government have committed themselves to meeting that aspiration. However, money is not the only problem. There is no direct correlation between the amount of money that some countries spend on health and their outcomes.

The UK's public health expenditure is about the same as Italy's; it is greater than Spain's, and it is only 1% behind that of France. We can learn a good deal from other countries. As I said, Northern Ireland spends more than 40% of the block grant on health and social services. For 2002-03, we have allocated £2.527 billion. That is a substantial sum. The Minister of Finance and Personnel noted, rightly, that the Health Minister was successful in well over half of her bids for the discretionary initiatives that she wanted to undertake. In other words, resources are a problem, but they are not the only problem.

We need to get off the merry-go-round of reviews and consultations. We must make some tough decisions, and we need a clear strategy. The patients are crying out for it. I look forward to working with the Minister and the Health Committee and to playing my role in contributing to a better future for the Health Service.

Question, That the amendment be made, put and agreed to.

Main Question, as amended, put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That this Assembly urges the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to take urgent action to tackle the current crisis in the Health Service, particularly in view of impending additional winter pressures, and calls on the Executive to make the necessary resources available to alleviate pressures throughout the Health Service.

Adjourned at 6.30 pm.

NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

Monday 14 January 2002

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

Members observed two minutes' silence.

ASSEMBLY BUSINESS

Mr Speaker: Two points of order are being raised. The first is from Mr Alban Maginness.

Mr A Maginness: Mr Speaker, I wish to raise a point of order in relation to the death of a constituent of mine in North Belfast, Mr Daniel McColgan. I understand that it would be inappropriate to move for the suspension of Standing Orders, or to ask to make a statement in relation to this matter. However, on a previous occasion — in the aftermath of the death of Mr Martin O'Hagan — it was deemed appropriate by the House that it would stand in silence for one minute as a mark of respect. Is it in order for the same tribute to be paid to Mr McColgan, who was so savagely murdered in a brutal sectarian attack at the weekend? Would it be appropriate, in the circumstances, to permit this at the beginning of the session?

Mr Speaker: I will take any further points of order before I respond. I understand that the second point of order has been withdrawn.

Mr Maginness must not have consulted with his Colleagues, because there was a clear understanding after the previous event as to how such matters should be handled. As regards this particular tragic and distressing event, several procedures might be followed, and one of those is presently being explored for later today. This is a sensitive and difficult issue, and it would be appropriate for the House to respond in a considered manner and not in a purely reflexive way. Therefore, I ask the Member to understand that explorations are presently ongoing as to how this matter might be addressed more fully than by simply standing in silence, though that is perfectly proper and appropriate. There may be a fuller way of dealing with the substance of this important issue. Given the sensitivities of the matter, I ask the Member whether he understands that this is a proper way of handling it.

Mr A Maginness: I am grateful for your remarks, Mr Speaker. I was unaware that the House was contem-

plating any further proceedings in relation to the murder of Mr McColgan. I accept your ruling on the matter.

Mr Speaker: I appreciate that.

Mr Campbell: On a point of order, Mr Speaker. On 14 December, you issued a statement to Members regarding changes to the SDLP ministerial team. You said that Mr Durkan had ceased to hold office as Minister of Finance and Personnel, and that Dr Farren was no longer Minister for Employment and Learning. You also intimated that, in her capacity as SDLP nominating officer, Ms Brid Rodgers had nominated the following: Dr Farren as Minister of Finance and Personnel and Ms Carmel Hanna as Minister for Employment and Learning. You said that they had accepted the nominations, which took immediate effect. Is it in order to congratulate the SDLP and its Ministers, despite their previous criticism of my party, on what looks like, sounds like and has the appearance of ministerial rotation?

Mr Speaker: It would be wrong for me to comment otherwise, and particularly inappropriate for me to stand in the way of any form of congratulations, however they might come about or however they might be couched.

Mr Durkan: It is a case of twisting rather than rotating.

Mr Speaker: Order.

NORTH/SOUTH MINISTERIAL COUNCIL

Environment

Mr Speaker: I have received notice from the Minister of the Environment that he wishes to make a statement on the meeting of the North/South Ministerial Council, in its environment sectoral format, which was held on 14 December 2001 in the Dunadry Inn, County Antrim.

The Minister of the Environment (Mr Foster): Following nomination by the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister, Ms Bríd Rodgers and I attended the meeting, which I chaired. The Irish Government were represented by Mr Noel Dempsey, Minister for the Environment and Local Government. This statement has been agreed by Ms Rodgers, and is also made on her behalf.

The meeting began with the Council noting the award of the contract for a joint web site of current environmental research to a Belfast-based company, Infinet Design. The web site will appropriately be named ANSWER, which stands for 'A North South Web site of Environmental Research'. Until now, there has been no central register of environmental research projects in Ireland.

The ANSWER web site will be a central repository of information for researchers, academics and voluntary groups. It should be accessible by March 2002 through its own web address and from the web sites of the two environment agencies. After the meeting, Ministers viewed a prototype of the web site.

The Council then considered progress in the development of an all-island land cover map. A sample cross-border area between Dundalk and Newry was selected to test whether the United Kingdom's mapping approach might be sufficiently compatible with that of the Republic of Ireland to enable an all-island map to be produced. The information will be of use to many interest groups, especially those concerned with forestry, natural heritage and agriculture and will assist them with their respective land management roles. The comparison of data for the sample area should take approximately three months.

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

Ministers were updated on progress in providing public access to environmental information and statistics. The two environment agencies have begun testing the compatibility of their separate databases using river-monitoring data. The more compatible the individual repositories are, the easier it will be to bring the information together for public access through the Internet.

The Council reviewed the work of the joint working group on water quality, which was established to consider water quality strategies for the Erne and the Foyle catchments and the implementation of the EU's Water Framework Directive. Ministers were given a very informative presentation on the technical aspects of delineating international river basin districts under the Water Framework Directive. The Council endorsed the general approach adopted by the group and asked it to make recommendations for the areas to be delineated.

The Council then turned its attention to waste recycling issues. Ministers approved the establishment of a steering group to develop proposals for establishing a market development programme for recycled materials on an all-island basis. The group will comprise representatives of the Environment Departments and agencies of both jurisdictions, as well as a representative from my Department's waste management advisory board.

The two Environment Departments are also exploring ways of establishing an all-island community recycling network with the help of the voluntary sector. The purpose of this is to encourage and facilitate the involvement of community-based organisations in reuse and recycling programmes and to promote partnerships between voluntary groups, local authorities and businesses in support of better waste management.

The Institute of Waste Management has also been asked to identify examples of successful recycling schemes and market development projects elsewhere in Europe, which might be examined as examples of best practice.

The Council was then updated on progress with the scoping study into the environmental impacts of agriculture. Ministers noted the establishment of the project steering group and approved the group's proposals for the recruitment, supervision and funding of two researchers, one from each jurisdiction. The study will compare farming practices and controls on both sides of the border and will provide a basis for developing co-operative arrangements for nutrient management planning.

The Council next considered proposals for developing co-operation in promoting environmental awareness and education. The Council reviewed existing levels of co-operation and agreed that officials should work together to explore and develop opportunities for further networking and information exchange and for co-operation in the production of publications and exhibitions.

Finally, Ministers agreed the text of the joint communiqué that was issued after the meeting. A copy of that communiqué has been placed in the Assembly Library. The Council agreed that the next sectoral meeting on the environment will take place in March 2002 in the South.

The Chairperson of the Committee for the Environment (Rev Dr William McCrea): As Chairman of the Environment Committee, I would like to raise two issues with the Minister.

The EU Water Framework Directive is a far-reaching and important piece of legislation, which has still to be transposed into Northern Ireland legislation to avoid infraction proceedings. My Committee has consistently been told by officials from the Department of the Environment that progress on a range of issues, such as the EU Directive, has been slow because of the difficulty of recruiting staff with suitable expertise, knowledge, experience and skills. Considering that the joint working group on water quality has been in existence for well over a year, can the Minister state exactly what contribution it has made to the transposition of the Water Framework Directive into Northern Ireland legislation? Is the Minister satisfied that his Department now has sufficient staff with the expertise, knowledge and skills to enable him to guarantee that the Directive will be transposed here in the time available?

The second issue concerns Northern Ireland's waste management strategy. The Department of the Environment appears to have more success with the North/South waste recycling initiatives than with the three council partnerships responsible for waste management plans here.

12.15 pm

The Minister talks about promoting initiatives and partnerships between voluntary groups, local authorities and businesses in support of better waste management. However, this week the Committee for the Environment will again have to call departmental officials to explain why none of the local partnerships have been allocated any of the remaining £2.5 million budget for this financial year to enable them to implement waste management plans.

Where does the funding for departmental officials involved in the North/South waste initiatives come from? For example, is it allocated from the £2.5 million budget? Are those same officials tasked with implementing the waste management strategy in Northern Ireland? Can the Minister assure the House that the £2.5 million will be spent on waste management plans in Northern Ireland in this financial year?

Mr Foster: It takes time to employ staff. The Department of the Environment wants to enable faster movement, and I refute the argument that it is taking its time. My staff work hard and satisfactorily. The Department is satisfied that sufficient staff are now available to implement the Directive.

Before public consultation, the three waste management partnerships submitted waste management plans to the Department of the Environment in June 2001. The Department did not receive the final plans at that

time — they were pre-consultative drafts — and that held up the process. The plans were reviewed by departmental officials and are being further developed by district councils in conjunction with the Department before the commencement of a major public consultation programme in February. The Department is distributing £2.5 million to deal with waste management issues.

Mr Deputy Speaker: There are 11 requests to speak. Since there are 50 minutes remaining for the debate, I ask Members to make their questions as succinct as possible to allow the Minister time to answer.

Mr Hamilton: Will the Minister outline some of the benefits of the measures that he announced, which were gained as a result of participation in the North/South Ministerial Council?

Mr Foster: The Council is involved in many important and useful projects, including the implementation of the Water Framework Directive, which requires co-operation on cross-border waterways, particularly in the development of water-quality classification systems and in the production of water-quality management plans. The Council provides for the joint-ministerial oversight of that work.

Agriculture is another major contributor to the economies of both jurisdictions. However, the Department recognises the environmental impact of agricultural activities, particularly the run-off of fertilisers into waterways. It will explore and advise on those issues. The excessive use of fertilisers results in economic loss by farmers. The joint scoping study commissioned by the Council will examine controls and good farming practices in nutrient management on both sides of the border.

North/South co-operation in promoting recycling and the development of markets for the use of recycled materials will provide the economies of scale that are needed to render viable any investment in recycling and recovering facilities. It will also provide a larger market for products made from recycled materials.

The steering group's work to establish an all-island market development programme for recycled materials will be critical in providing the economic incentives that are needed to make recycling and recovery a sustainable enterprise. The cross-border Council meetings have resulted in benefits, and they will continue to do so. I am satisfied with the progress that has been made.

Mr A Doherty: I thank the Minister for his statement and note the decision to set up a joint web site, which will appropriately be named ANSWER. Can we hope that the answers provided by the environmental research will be more forthcoming and forthright than the answers that we so painfully and despairingly try to wring from the UK Government about the environment —

Mr Deputy Speaker: Is this a question?

Mr A Doherty: Yes. With your indulgence, Mr Deputy Speaker, it will be a three-part question. Can we hope that the answers will be more readily forthcoming than those that we try to wring from the Government about the environmental consequences of installations such as Sellafield?

With regard to the joint working group on water quality, I note that the emphasis so far has been on the quality of inland water and waterways. This is important and valuable. However, is it possible for the North/South Ministerial Council to give urgent attention to what is considered to be the most polluted waterway in Europe? I refer of course to the Irish Sea, and again Sellafield is the *bête noire*.

Mr Foster: Waterways do concern us, and the last point is very important. The working group on water quality is working well and has made good progress. It is now focusing on implementing the Water Framework Directive, which requires cross-border co-operation on shared waterways. I appreciate that there are concerns about Sellafield and the Irish Sea. However, we continuously monitor the waters of the Irish Sea, and although we cannot be certain, nothing in our findings causes us grave concern about pollution in the Irish Sea because of Sellafield.

Mr McLaughlin: Go raibh míle maith agat. I welcome the Minister's statement and the report's strong theme of harmonising and developing compatibility between the various research methods and data retrieval means.

With regard to the all-island land cover map and the project in Dundalk and Newry, it seems strange that it will take three months to establish whether the research methods are compatible. I imagine that one hour's work would do that. I hope that we do not have to wait three months and that we will hear specific — *[Interruption]*.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Is the Member coming to his question?

Mr McLaughlin: Yes. If there are problems with compatibility, can we expect specific proposals to be framed in those three months? We need to hear responses and solutions.

I support the Committee Chairperson's comments about waste management. However, I am concerned that there is an emphasis on the community and voluntary sectors, when the main sources of waste material are obviously the manufacturing and industrial processes on the island. Should emphasis not be placed on them?

Is the Minister aware of the proposal to build a £30 million incinerator in north Monaghan, which is near this territory? If so, what is his response to it?

Mr Foster: The Member has asked quite a lot of questions, and it is difficult to remember them all.

I am not formally aware of plans to build an incinerator in north Monaghan. My Department has not been made aware of it either.

With regard to the length of time that it will take to develop the land cover map, we do not want to waste any time on these projects. However, such things take time, and we must move slowly to ensure that everything is done correctly. There should be no significant problems with the compatibility of the two land cover approaches that we are working on. The CORINE (co-ordination of information on the environment) land cover project for Ireland is a European land map that covers mapping projects used in the South. Northern Ireland is included in the more detailed UK land cover map 2000. A land cover map records in detail the extent and types of land — for example, forests, wetlands, farmlands and coastal areas. The North/South Ministerial Council project aims to integrate the UK and Republic of Ireland land cover mapping approaches to produce an all-island land cover map. A sample cross-border area between Newry and Dundalk has been chosen for initial comparison of the two mapping approaches, and that work should be completed by the end of April.

The benefit of an all-island map is that land types will be classified in the same way, North and South, and in the respective jurisdictions. It will be essential to have similar information, North and South, for characterising shared river basin districts under the EU Water Framework Directive. Moves will be made quickly, but cautiously, to ensure that the right thing is done.

Mr Ford: In the context of the market development programme for recycled materials, is the Minister aware of the Republic's successful scheme for the recycling of agricultural plastic? Should Northern Ireland again become covered with the refuse from big bale silage, will the Minister ensure that Northern Ireland farmers can benefit from that scheme or a similar one?

In the Minister's discussions with Mr Dempsey, the Republic's Minister for the Environment and Local Government, did he mention the three species that are the subject of his Department's special action plan — the chough, the curlew and the Irish hare? If not, will he do so as soon as possible?

Mr Foster: At the last North/South Ministerial Council sectoral meeting, Noel Dempsey and I approved the establishment of a steering group to encourage waste recycling and to develop proposals for the establishment of a market development programme for recycled materials on an all-Ireland basis. The first meeting of the steering group will take place at the end of January 2002.

A study which is being undertaken by the Clean Technology Centre in Cork in association with the Austrian Institute for Applied Ecology is examining

the development of markets for recyclables recovered from the municipal waste stream. The project is assessing existing and potential markets for recovered materials, instruments and tools for the development of new markets and outlets, and it will prepare a strategic approach for such development. I assure the Member that the Department continues to work on that issue.

Mr Ford also referred to the hare, the curlew and the chough. That matter was not dealt with specifically at our last meeting. However, the issue remains at the forefront of the work of the Environment and Heritage Service at all times.

Ms Morrice: I welcome the statement on waste recycling and the North/South approach to this important issue. I also welcome the proposal for partnerships between voluntary groups, local authorities and businesses. I join with Dr McCrea and Mr McLaughlin in asking what action is being taken at a local level. What incentives are being offered to encourage local authorities to become involved seriously in waste management?

Mr Foster: The Department advises local authorities. Three different groups in the Province are currently working on waste management issues, and their efforts are now coming to fruition. The Department has helped where it can; £2.5 million will be distributed to district councils to help to deal with waste management issues.

Mr K Robinson: What arrangements are currently in place for North/South co-operation in the event of a water pollution incident? Will adequate east/west arrangements be in place with the Minister's Scottish and Westminster Colleagues to deal with the concerns of my constituents in East Antrim should the proposed nuclear power plant proceed at Hunterston on the Ayrshire coast?

12.30 pm

Mr Foster: Mr Deputy Speaker, may I have that question again?

Mr Deputy Speaker: Mr Robinson, please take it a little more slowly.

Mr K Robinson: Mr Deputy Speaker, I was acceding to your command to speed it up. I am sorry if I overegged the pudding.

In the light of the Minister's statement, what arrangements are currently in place for North/South co-operation in the event of a water pollution incident? Moreover, will he undertake to ensure that adequate east/west arrangements are in place with his Scottish and Westminster Colleagues to deal with the concerns of my constituents in East Antrim should the proposed nuclear power station at Hunterston on the Ayrshire coast proceed?

Mr Foster: I apologise to Mr Robinson for putting him through that again.

Mr K Robinson: I enjoyed it thoroughly, Minister.

Mr Foster: I am sure that the Member did.

I am pleased to report that there have been no serious cross-border water pollution incidents recently. Emergency arrangements are in place with border-county councils in the Republic of Ireland for emergencies that involve shared river systems and with the Irish Marine Emergency Service (IMES) for coastal waters. Our water pollution incident response procedures identify key officials in Departments, agencies and local authorities on both sides of the border, and provide telephone numbers for 24-hour contact. A UK-wide 24-hour helpline number — 0800 807060 — is available for reporting all water pollution incidents.

The impact on a waterway will depend on the nature and volume of the pollutant involved, how soon the incident is reported, and the location. Those factors dictate the nature of any emergency co-operation between the pollution control authorities in each jurisdiction. Water-borne pollution is difficult to treat once a pollutant has entered a waterway. More can be done by way of booms and extraction if the pollutant is oil. Oil does not dissolve, but forms a surface film.

I have seen media references to the possibility of British Energy building a new nuclear power station at Hunterston on the Ayrshire coast, which could be operational by 2011. A spokesman for British Energy was quoted as saying that a replacement nuclear plant at Hunterston was only a draft proposal at this stage and would be assessed as part of the current GB-wide energy review. I understand that the Scottish Executive have confirmed that the possibility of building a new reactor in Scotland would depend on the outcome of the GB energy review. That review is expected to conclude in the near future.

In the event of any proposal to build a nuclear power plant anywhere in the UK, I shall seek assurances from my ministerial counterparts in Great Britain on the radiological impact on the Northern Ireland population and on the wider public safety implications.

Mr McGrady: I welcome the Minister's statement on the North/South meeting as a progress report on many issues. First, the community recycling network aspect of his report envisages local authorities, community groups, voluntary groups and businesses getting together to make a concerted effort to manage waste. Does the Minister agree that there has been a great deal of procrastination and pseudo-consultation for many years, especially in local government, without any real determination to make a decision? Can he give us an estimate of the date or the time by which he hopes to have a concerted programme for Northern Ireland, which can, it is hoped, be matched by an equally successful one for the Republic of Ireland?

Secondly, on the question he has just answered, I am pleased to hear that he is now aware that matters outside his jurisdiction can also impact on nuclear waste management matters within his jurisdiction. The power station in Ayrshire is not a replacement. It is new build — and I want him to watch that. Regarding a recent statement by an eminent scientist on the difficulty of decommissioning the number one pile at Windscale — that is, Sellafield — is the Minister aware of the dangers that are there? Will he ensure that, as promised, he will place nuclear matters in Great Britain on the North/South Ministerial Council's agenda?

Mr Foster: I assure the Member and the House that we shall work on those aspects to ensure that what is good for this part of the world is right and proper. We shall meet our responsibilities.

Mr McGrady is continually concerned about the Sellafield issue. As I am sure the Member knows, responsibility for regulating discharges from Sellafield rests with the Environment Agency for England and Wales. It is an excepted matter over which the Northern Ireland Administration has no jurisdiction.

My officials have undertaken joint studies with their counterparts in the Radiological Protection Institute of Ireland and with University College Dublin on the impact of discharges from Sellafield. Those studies consistently demonstrate low levels of radioactivity on the coastline of County Down, County Louth and beyond. In the near future, the British-Irish Council will consider the difficulties Sellafield presents. However, I assure the Member and the House that we shall want to move quickly and efficiently to meet our responsibilities.

Mr Shannon: The new body has been set up on a North/South basis. What east/west input will there be? What input will UK environmental rules and controls have? Will the Minister assure the Assembly that Directives, and requests from Westminster, the Scottish Parliament and the Welsh Assembly will be treated equally when the new North/South body draws up recommendations?

Mr Foster: As well as the North/South Ministerial Council, which I speak about today, there is the British-Irish Council. Therefore, we are working North/South and east/west. The work that we shall engage in involves both islands.

Ms Gildernew: I too welcome the Minister's statement, but I am disappointed that he does not seem to know about the proposed incinerator in north Monaghan, especially as councillors from his party have attended meetings with me on the issue. As MP for Fermanagh and South Tyrone, I ask the Minister to use his Department to seek information about that proposal as it will have adverse effects on the environment not

only in Fermanagh and South Tyrone, but across the Six Counties. It will also affect health and agriculture.

Mr Foster: I come from the Fermanagh and South Tyrone constituency, so I also have an interest in the matter. The proposed incinerator may affect the entire Province one way or another, and I assure the Member that we shall make enquiries to establish the intention.

Mr Hussey: I thank the Minister for his statement, and I welcome the proposed initiatives to promote recycling and market development. As we know, the lack of a market holds up many recycling issues. The Minister will realise that another point on which the waste management issue revolves is waste reduction. Will he outline the efforts that have been made by councils and by his Department to liaise with businesses to reduce the amount of waste entering the system?

Further to the previous supplementary question, and in the knowledge that there will be residual waste no matter which system is used, will the Minister undertake with the Institute of Wastes Management, when it is within Europe, to examine some of the more modern energy-to-waste methods that are being utilised there?

Mr Foster: Earlier, we talked about the North/South Ministerial Council's approach to promoting recycling and to developing markets for recyclates.

That is an important issue, and I am aware of the concern throughout about reducing waste. The reduction of waste during the design and manufacture of goods is a key long-term objective, and it will be a slow process. The prevention of waste is essential, and recycling to get the best value for materials is also central to the waste management plans. There are the three Rs and the D — reduce, reuse, recycle and deposit. People must examine those mechanisms. Councils' waste management plans are now almost fully developed. The more that we can recycle and, where appropriate, recover energy from waste, the less we shall lose to landfill.

I also assure the Member that we shall explore all avenues to determine the best way to reduce waste and deal with the surplus to which he referred. That is a difficult process; it must be worked on, and individuals must participate, not only councils.

Mr Gibson: The Minister referred to the Erne and Foyle basins. What are the first outcomes that he has learnt from the study on the delineation of waterways?

He said that all-Ireland co-operation on waste disposal is becoming more prominent. Does that mean that the three strategy groups that were set up to operate waste disposal in Northern Ireland will be abandoned? What is to happen to the £2 million or so that was to assist that programme? Can councils bid for that individually?

Moreover, will the Minister respond to the question that was put — will there be an east/west contribution to this debate on waste disposal, rather than just a North/ South one?

Mr Foster: There will always be an east/west relationship, because we are part of the east/west relationship that comes with being part of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland. A North/South dimension is working, with two separate jurisdictions respecting each other's views but able to work together for mutual benefit.

The Member referred to international river basin districts (IRBDs). I do not know whether he wants an explanation, but where a river basin district overlaps the territory of more than one European member state, the EU Water Framework Directive requires those member states to identify it as an international river basin district.

Recommendations on the districts to be delineated will form part of a consultation paper on the implementation of the Directive in Northern Ireland. That report will be published before the summer. Due regard will always be given to any advice or guidance that becomes available on the application or interpretation of the EU Water Framework Directive in relation to the delineation of IRBDs. Where appropriate, guidance may be sought from the European Commission on the matter. One area in which such guidance may be needed is on the issue of assigning international river basins to IRBDs for practical administration and cost-benefit reasons.

Dr Birnie: Can the Minister provide some further details on the environmental research register? We should compliment whoever thought up the clever acronym, ANSWER. In particular, when will the register be posted on the Internet?

Mr Foster: It is planned that the web site will go live in March. I look forward to launching this state-of-the-art source of information. The register is appropriately named ANSWER, and I gave details of it earlier. Access to the register will be through its own web address at www.answer-online.org, or through the web sites of participating organisations. The register will be of great value to anyone who is involved or interested in environmental research, such as Government Departments and agencies, universities and colleges, environmental groups, and industry and environmental consultants.

12.45 pm

The sharing of that information will help researchers and sponsors to avoid duplication of effort and cost, to identify new areas for research, to find partners for collaboration and to identify potential sources of funding. The register currently contains information on environmental protection research carried out by the two environment agencies. Work is under way to add nature conser-

vation research findings. Thereafter, it is planned to add information from academic institutions and the private commercial sectors.

Mr Dalton: Will the Minister explain what he means by an "international river basin district" and give some idea of what progress has been made towards delineating those?

Mr Foster: Where a river basin or catchment area covers the territory of more than one European member state the Water Framework Directive requires those member states to identify the district as an international river basin district. Member states are required to co-operate on the management of water quality throughout such cross-border international river basin districts in their respective jurisdictions. Each member state must establish appropriate administrative arrangements for water quality management within that co-operative context in order to achieve the Directive's long-term aim of good water quality status by 2015.

The Erne, the Foyle and Lough Neagh form part of catchments shared with the South, and, as such, they lie within the international river basin districts according to the terms of the Directive. At previous North/South Ministerial Council meetings, Ministers agreed some general principles for the delineation of international river basin districts in line with the requirements of the Directive. I intend to include recommendations on the districts to be delineated in a consultation paper on the implementation of the Directive in Northern Ireland, and that paper should be published before the summer.

INDUSTRIAL DEVELOPMENT BILL

Final Stage

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment (Sir Reg Empey): I beg to move

That the Industrial Development Bill (NIA Bill 18/00) do now pass.

The Programme for Government identified, as a key issue, the focusing of the economic development agencies on the new economic challenges. In taking the matter forward through the Industrial Development Bill, I have considered how the economic development agencies in the remit of the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment can be reorganised to meet those new challenges in the most efficient and effective manner.

The Industrial Development Bill will establish a single economic development agency as a non-departmental public body. I recently proposed that Invest Northern Ireland should come into effect from 1 April 2002. The Bill transfers the existing powers in the Industrial Development (Northern Ireland) Order 1982 and the Tourism (Northern Ireland) Order 1992 to Invest Northern Ireland, thereby allowing it to exercise broadly the functions in the current remit of the IDB, LEDU, the Industrial Research and Technology Unit, the business support division of the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment and the business support activities of the Northern Ireland Tourist Board (NITB).

The Bill paves the way for a new and vibrant economic development agency, and that is the desire of all Members of the House and of the wider business community. I place on record my thanks and appreciation to the staff, and the respective boards, of the existing organisations that have made such a significant contribution to the economic well-being of Northern Ireland.

In establishing Invest Northern Ireland, the Bill will enable that body to respond quickly, efficiently and effectively to the demands of an intensely competitive global marketplace, with the emphasis being on getting the job done, not on bureaucracy.

We are all aware that if we are to make the most of our opportunities, we have to modernise, innovate and seek new and better ways to do the job. The establishment of Invest Northern Ireland will enable us to realise our vision for a new and better Northern Ireland economy.

In conclusion, I thank Members for their interest in and contributions to the various stages of the Bill. I am particularly grateful to the members of the Committee for Enterprise, Trade and Investment for their diligent scrutiny of the Bill and for enabling officials and me to give evidence to them. I am also indebted to the officers and members of the Committee for their constructive contributions throughout the passage of the legislation.

Dr McDonnell: I welcome the Bill. The establishment of Invest Northern Ireland is urgently needed for many reasons, but mainly because it is essential in order to refocus our economic development efforts quickly at the beginning of the twenty-first century. I urge the Minister to get things moving as rapidly as possible.

It is essential that, in doing so, full advantage be taken of the greater flexibility of the arm's-length structure of the new agency. In this day and age, the agency must have a hard business nose rather than a bureaucratic one. I compliment those in the existing agencies who did a very useful job in times past. However, in today's world in which things move so rapidly — I think particularly of developments in the past ten years in information and communications technology — we need to be as tough as everybody else in the marketplace.

I draw the Minister's attention to schedule 1, paragraph 2 of the Bill, which deals with the membership of the new agency. We shall always need to have the best possible brains, skills and expertise, not only a spread of knowledge. We were behind the pack before September 11. We needed to make a great deal of progress then. In the slowdown that has occurred in the aftermath of that day, we may be able to catch up. I urge the Minister to ensure that we have the best possible brains on the board of Invest Northern Ireland in the future.

In the same vein, I refer the Minister to schedule 1, paragraph 11. My concern is that someone with a major contribution to make might be excluded on the fairly thin grounds of conflict of interest. I am keen for members of the board to have an interest and, if necessary, a conflict of interest that can be honestly and openly declared. To have the best people on board, it will be difficult to get anyone with insight and knowledge who does not have a conflict of interest to some degree. I strongly endorse the Bill and urge the Minister to move with it as quickly as possible.

Mr Hay: Everybody in the House will welcome the Bill. We owe thanks to the Minister and his Department, and to everyone else concerned with its passage. For far too long, we have had too many economic development and inward investment agencies in Northern Ireland. Bringing all of them together to form a one-stop shop is unique.

As someone who comes from the north-west of the Province, I am slightly worried about the final make-up of the new board and the spread of its representation across Northern Ireland. People from the north-west are also slightly worried. They hope that not every decision that the new board may get involved in will be centred around Belfast and the Greater Belfast area. When the new board is up and running, and dealing with economic development, inward investment and job creation in Northern Ireland, I would like to see a

mechanism in place in my city of Londonderry, which is the second largest city in Northern Ireland, whereby local people could make local decisions on economic development and inward investment. I do not wish to see a situation, as has happened in the past, in which businesses and industries come to a local area, but, on occasion, because they do not fit neatly into a small box in and around Belfast, people do not run with them. I remind the Minister that this is an opportunity to look at the rest of the Province — how job creation can best be generated, and how economic development and inward investment in the rest of the Province can best be created, thus ensuring that the rest of the Province is not left out.

Dr O'Hagan: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. In general, I welcome the Bill. There was a recognition that there had to be a new "one-stop shop". In that context, the new agency is to be welcomed, and the hope is that it will be much more efficient. I also hope that the mistakes of the past will not be replicated, particularly with regard to the accountability and transparency of the new agency, the targeting of investment in disadvantaged areas and the taking seriously of New TSN requirements.

I have raised one concern on previous occasions about appointments to the board. Any appointments need to be made through open competition, and the new board needs to be seen to be open and transparent. It is imperative that regional offices be opened as quickly as possible. The Minister has been looking at that. Those regional offices should be fully functioning as quickly as possible, so that areas such as Derry, Fermanagh and Tyrone — disadvantaged areas that have not been targeted previously — can be targeted for investment. Go raibh maith agat.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Before I put the question, does the Minister wish to respond?

Sir Reg Empey: Mr Deputy Speaker, with your permission I would like to respond. First, Dr McDonnell has made those points on several occasions throughout the passage of the legislation. It is my hope that we can provide the flexibility that we both understand is required. The organisation has to remain accountable to the Assembly, to the Minister and to the people of Northern Ireland. He will know, as a member of the Committee, that that accountability is not affected or inhibited in any way by the legislation. I believe that the organisation will be more accountable than any of its predecessors due to our current structures. However, at the same time, we wanted to create an organisation that did not have to continuously look over its shoulder, and that could develop some thoughts of its own. It has parameters within which it must operate; that is generally accepted. The Member's point concerning membership and any potential conflicts of interest is a

serious one. There is a very difficult balance to strike, because we have already run into such conflicts with members of other boards. It involves a very fine line.

1.00 pm

Equally, it is true to say that people who have hands-on experience of business and industry will, inevitably, have some conflict. That happens on the existing boards, and, as I have said, it has caused us some difficulty.

I accept that people who have got their hands dirty and who have hands-on experience need to be involved, and from time to time that poses a risk. That risk may not be apparent when individuals are appointed, but their businesses could develop in certain directions to the point where those companies would be asking INI for assistance, just as certain companies currently ask the IDB for assistance. Therefore, there should be a degree of tolerance in the House. While we must do everything to ensure that decisions are taken properly, openly and transparently, we do not want to close ourselves off from the knowledge and expertise available to us.

If we were to interpret literally the comments from the Member for South Belfast, Dr McDonnell we could argue that no business people should be on the board at all. Clearly such a position could not be supported. I agree with much of what the Member has said on the matter, but other Members have expressed concerns and views on other matters and other boards, and I must get the balance right. If we get the procedures in the organisation right, that might help with any conflicts. We will pay a good deal of attention to that area.

I assure the Member for Foyle, Mr Hay, that the needs of the north-west are currently in my mind, and the Member can take precedence from me. So far, out of the eight members on the board, he has managed to get only the Chairperson and one other. That is not a bad start, and I hope that there will be room for some of the rest of us when the final appointments are made.

However, taking seriously what the Member has said, I know that the regional office issue is of concern to him. The Member knows that several initiatives do focus on the north-west. I am confident that the board will have sufficient representation from that part of the country. I am satisfied that the case will not go by default.

I advise the Member for Upper Bann, Dr O'Hagan, that accountability and transparency will be built into the corporate plan and the operating plan of the organisation. The Member will also be aware that the IDB exceeded targets last year for bringing investment into New TSN areas. We set a target of 75% of visits to New TSN areas, and that was exceeded. We tried to get a target 75% of investment into those same areas, and that was also exceeded. The thrust of that is

entrenched in the thinking of the Department with regard to the establishment of the board.

There may be some confusion between the appointments to the board and senior appointments at official level. However, I can think of few other processes that are more open than the current one for appointments to the board. We had a competition last summer, resulting in 156 applications. The competition was widely advertised, and we had a positive response. However, as I reported to the House last year, regrettably we did not receive a sufficient number of applications from women. Out of 156 applications, only 13 were from women. I decided to appoint a shadow board of eight members, when in fact we hoped to have somewhere in the region of 15 members on the board. This was a two-stage process. Because the House had not passed the legislation, we could not assume that the House would accept our recommendation for a 15-person board. We took what was regarded as the minimum number for a shadow board in order to form the organisation. We concluded that it was not possible to complete the appointments to the board on the basis of the applications that we had received, because, although they were substantial, and some excellent people had applied, there was a substantial deficiency in applications from women.

A fortnight ago, therefore, we advertised another appeal for views and applications. We also engaged consultants to assist us to encourage women to apply. I am happy that, so far, 50% of the requests for information packs have been from women. If those requests for packs translate into applications, even at the same rate as those resulting from the last advertisement, an increase in applications by women can be expected. A senior female official is dealing with women's telephone enquiries about the application, and callers have related the concerns that made them feel unable to apply the first time.

We will learn from that information, and we will pass it on to the appointments body for future use. Applications are open until 31 January 2002, so there is still plenty of time for people to request an information pack and to apply. Previous applicants have been re-entered automatically into the competition. Men are not excluded from applying; half of the applications are from men.

Only seven further appointments are to be made, and the board must be balanced according to gender, community background and skills. I might need to exercise my discretion to ensure that a balance exists. Although the scope of this competition is limited, we intend to offer staggered-term appointments so that the entire membership of the board will not be due for reappointment at the same time, because that would result in a loss of continuity. Initially, the appointments will be for two-, three- and up to five-year periods, as provided for in the legislation. We intend to ensure, through the restructuring branch, that a board is in

place before the end of March, so that the organisation will be ready to begin at the beginning of April.

Mr Hay mentioned the need for regional offices; I have already given a commitment that the organisation will have a regional dimension. I discussed the matter with the chairman and the new chief executive last week, and they are seized of the urgency and importance of having such a dimension. They are fully committed to ensuring that that element will be provided.

I have avoided indicating the precise location of those offices, because I did not want to get into that argument. The board will put forward its own views about their location. The operation will not be entirely Belfast-focused, and it is recognised that the entire Province is making, and must continue to make, a contribution to our economy. The relevant agencies must, therefore, be organised in a way that maximises that contribution.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That the Industrial Development Bill (NIA Bill 18/00) do now pass.

PERSONAL SOCIAL SERVICES (AMENDMENT) BILL

Committee Stage (Period Extension)

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

That, in accordance with Standing Order 31(5), the period referred to in Standing Order 31(3) be extended to 28 February 2002, in relation to the Committee Stage of the Personal Social Services (Amendment) Bill (NIA Bill 1/01).

The Personal Social Services (Amendment) Bill had its Second Stage reading on 4 December 2001 and was referred to the Committee for Health, Social Services and Public Safety on 12 December 2001. That was just before the Christmas recess, and the Committee was unable to begin scrutinising it before 9 January 2002.

The Bill will allow trusts to provide a range of services to carers, and it will include a new statutory right to a carer's assessment. The Committee wishes to give adequate time for the scrutiny of this important Bill, yet it is facing a heavy workload in the coming weeks, which includes a major cancer inquiry report and many departmental regulations. I am therefore seeking an extension of the deadline to 28 February 2002 to allow sufficient time for the Committee to consider the Bill and report on its findings. I ask Members for their support.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That, in accordance with Standing Order 31(5), the period referred to in Standing Order 31(3) be extended to 28 February 2002, in relation to the Committee Stage of the Personal Social Services (Amendment) Bill (NIA Bill 1/01).

CRIMINAL JUSTICE REFORM

The Chairperson of the Ad Hoc Committee on Criminal Justice Reform (Mr Dalton): I beg to move

That this Assembly notes the Report of the Ad Hoc Committee on Criminal Justice Reform (02/01/R), established by resolution on 19 November 2001, and agrees that it be submitted to the Secretary of State as a Report of the Northern Ireland Assembly.

I must declare an interest in this matter — I am a practising member of the Northern Ireland Bar.

Following the resolution of the Assembly on 19 November 2001, the Ad Hoc Committee was established to consider the draft Justice (Northern Ireland) Bill and the Criminal Justice Review Implementation Plan. The Committee first met on 26 November, and I was elected its Chairperson. It is therefore my responsibility to present the Committee's report to the Assembly for endorsement.

For the benefit of Members, I will give a brief overview of the background to our proposals and the work that the Committee has done. Arising from the Belfast Agreement, the Government established the Criminal Justice Review Group to formulate proposals for future criminal justice arrangements. The terms of reference for that review set out several key areas for consideration. They included appointments to the judiciary and safeguards for protecting its independence; the organisation and supervision of the prosecution process; lay participation in the criminal justice system; mechanisms for addressing law reform; the scope for structured co-operation between the criminal justice agencies on both parts of the island; and the structure and organisation of criminal justice functions that might be devolved to the Assembly.

The review body reported in March 2000, and it was subject to extensive consultation at that stage. The draft Bill, which the Government have published, is the main delivery mechanism for the review's recommendations. It does not contain all the recommendations — some of them are in the implementation plan.

The Ad Hoc Committee held its first meeting on 26 November 2001 to resolve procedural matters and consider how it should fulfil its remit. At that meeting, the Committee agreed that the timescale for reporting was unworkable. By leave of the Assembly, I am presenting that report today instead of four weeks ago, which was a totally unrealistic deadline.

1.15 pm

During its proceedings, the Committee heard evidence from several bodies and received written submissions from others. Those who attended included the Committee on the Administration of Justice, the Criminal Bar Association, the Law Society of Northern Ireland, the Northern Ireland Human Rights Commission, the Northern Ireland Office, and the Probation Board for Northern

Ireland. I want to place on record the Committee's appreciation of those organisations, without which its report could not have been produced.

The Government set out their response to the review recommendations in the draft Justice (Northern Ireland) Bill, which is being laid before the Westminster Parliament now. That is the main delivery mechanism. The draft Bill has six parts. In line with the review's recommendations, Part I of the draft Bill makes provision for making appointments to the judiciary and safeguarding its continuing independence. The principal feature here is the establishment of a judicial appointments commission that will make or recommend appointments to specified judicial offices. Those offices are set out in schedule 1 of the draft Bill. The Lord Chief Justice will chair the commission. It will consist of a further 12 members, who will be appointed by the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister. The draft Bill provides for the commission to come into force after devolution.

Procedures for removing persons from judicial office have also been provided for, including the most senior positions — those of Lord Chief Justice and Lords Justices of Appeal. Other features of the draft Bill include amendments to the criteria for judicial offices. It requires that new appointees take a new judicial oath. Lay magistrates will be replaced by Justices of the Peace.

Part II involves law officers and the public prosecution service. Provision is made for the functions of the Attorney-General for Northern Ireland to be exercised by a locally appointed person, and for the functions of that office that are excepted under the Northern Ireland Act 1998 to be exercised by the Solicitor-General under the guise of the new post of advocate general for Northern Ireland. Part II also establishes the public prosecution service as the single, independent, prosecuting authority in Northern Ireland. It will be the responsibility of the prosecution service to undertake all prosecutions for both indictable and summary offences committed in Northern Ireland. Those were previously the responsibility of the Director of Public Prosecutions or the Police Service. Fixed penalty motoring offences will remain the responsibility of the police.

Provision is also made for the establishment of a chief inspector of criminal justice, who, under the terms of the draft Bill, is given a broad remit. The chief inspector must carry out the inspection of many bodies, including the Police Service of Northern Ireland, the public prosecution service, the Compensation Agency, and several others involved in criminal justice.

A law commission will also be created under this Part of the draft Bill. The commission will have a remit to review the criminal and civil law of Northern Ireland — including procedure and practice — with a view to making recommendations to Government for reform, codification, simplification and consideration of legislation.

It will consist of a chairperson and four other commissioners, all of whom will be appointed by the Secretary of State.

The draft Bill makes several provisions in relation to youth justice. It provides for a range of new orders that will be available to the courts, and for a system of youth conferencing. The draft Bill also extends the ambit of the youth justice system to include 17-year-olds.

The final two sections make further provisions across several key areas, notably arrangements for the display of the royal arms at courthouses, and the rights of victims of crime to information about the discharge and temporary release of prisoners.

The Committee considered those issues and made 17 recommendations covering several themes of the draft Bill and implementation plan. The first of those recommendations is in relation to the consultation period. The Northern Ireland Office originally provided a period of only four weeks for a response to consultation on these proposals. Although that period was extended, the Northern Ireland Office's attitude towards consultation was clearly at odds with the relevant code of practice. The Committee recommends that the Northern Ireland Office should observe and comply with that guidance in future.

The second recommendation involves the independence of the legal profession. There are several references in the draft Bill to safeguarding the continuing independence of the judiciary and other elements of the criminal justice system. In its evidence to the Committee, the Law Society suggested that it would be appropriate for a similar safeguard to be extended to the legal profession. The Committee considered and accepted that point. The Committee's recommendation reflects that view.

Recommendations 3 and 4 involve supervision of the implementation plan. The Committee was concerned at the lack of a clear timescale for the overall process. Many witnesses echoed that during evidence sessions. To ensure that the right focus is maintained in developing the proposals, the Committee recommends that the Secretary of State should consider appointing a commissioner to oversee the implementation plan and the draft Justice (Northern Ireland) Bill as it moves into practical application.

Additionally, the Committee suggests that the House might play a role by establishing a Standing Committee to ensure that the Assembly has an appropriate level of input in the future development and refinement of a large number of the proposals. In conjunction with others, the Assembly will be advancing many of those proposals.

The Committee recommends clearly that the Assembly should consider the establishment of a Standing Committee

at the earliest opportunity. It is a particularly important issue, and I strongly urge the Assembly to seriously consider enacting that recommendation at the earliest possible opportunity.

Recommendation 5 involves human rights and guiding principles. Much of the Criminal Justice Review Group's work was on human rights issues, on which the group made several recommendations. The Committee and others considered the Government's response to those recommendations, which was felt to be somewhat lacking. The draft Bill contains no references to human rights standards at all, and the Committee recommends that the Secretary of State should consider rectifying that apparent shortcoming.

Recommendation 6 concerns the devolution of justice matters — an area that obviously inspired a significant amount of debate in the Committee. Although the Committee agreed that it would have been inappropriate for its report to draw any binding conclusion on the matter, it was recognised that it should be resolved in a timely manner. It was therefore considered that the proposed Standing Committee should have reference to this and should consider the matter further. Again, that impacts on the overall importance of the recommendation that a Standing Committee be set up at an early stage.

Recommendations 7 and 8 concern the office of the Attorney-General for Northern Ireland, which will be a key post following the devolution of justice matters. It is important that the Assembly's Standing Orders have the appropriate provision to ensure that that person will be properly accountable to the Assembly. As before, the Committee agreed that it would be inappropriate to set in stone the limits of the Attorney-General's participation in proceedings. However, the Committee highlighted what it considered to be important areas that will need to be thrashed out. The Committee recommends that that work be taken forward by the Committee on Procedures. I am sure that the Committee on Procedures will give the matter its full consideration and be able to present its recommendations to the Assembly in time for devolution of justice matters, which may well take place at some time in the next 18 months.

The Committee also looked at the possible expansion of the Attorney-General's role. The Criminal Justice Review Group recommended a number of areas for which the Attorney-General could reasonably assume responsibility. Again, that should be taken forward following devolution of justice matters, and the Committee's recommendation reflects that fact.

Recommendations 9 and 10 relate to the public prosecution service. The Committee devoted quite a bit of time to considering the proposed new public prosecution service. A number of poignant concerns were expressed. This is not the first time that the

Government have sought to bring the elements of prosecution together in a central body. In Great Britain, that goal gave rise to the creation of the Crown Prosecution Service. Those Members who have read the conclusions of Sir Iain Glidewell's review of that particular body will understand that it was not a simple process by any means.

A key element in that process was the issue of resources. The Committee's recommendation seeks an assurance from Government that proper resources will be made available to create a public prosecution service in Northern Ireland. The Committee also considered the issues surrounding disclosure of reasons for not bringing prosecutions. While the Committee notes that there are sometimes clear and legitimate reasons why it is not always possible to provide reasons for not bringing a prosecution, the Committee recommends that greater transparency should be a key feature of the decision-making process.

Recommendation 11 involves the role of the Probation Board. In their review, the Government suggested that the Probation Board should be established as a Next Steps agency. Although the final decision has been left to the Assembly and the Executive, the board is vigorously opposed to such a move. With the House's indulgence, I will quote from the evidence given to the Committee by the chief executive of the Probation Board:

"We are trusted as a neutral body which goes impartially about its job and has no political or sectional interests. Communities are more willing and ready to work with us than with central Government. In other Next Steps agencies, such as employment ones, we do not see the same level of community involvement other than at an advisory level, and that is not close enough for delivering the service that we want to deliver, which involves working with communities."

The Committee considered that point, along with the Government's proposals, and is not persuaded of the benefits of the Probation Board's becoming a Next Steps agency. The board should continue to operate as a board, and the Committee's recommendation is that it should remain independent and impartial.

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

Recommendation 12 relates to openness and transparency. The judicial appointments commission gave the Committee some concerns. In particular, its level of judicial representation led some members of the Committee to consider that the lay element might not be effective. The Committee explored the possibility of introducing a political element but could not agree the precise outworking of the proposal. Instead, the Committee has suggested that the Secretary of State explore that matter further.

Conclusions were reached on the power of the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister to convene a tribunal to remove the Attorney-General. The Committee considered that it would be appropriate for such a

power to be afforded also to the Assembly, acting with a significant majority, in this case a two-thirds majority. The Committee's recommendation reflects that position.

Recommendations 13, 14, 15, 16 and 17 concern provisions on restorative justice. It was the clear opinion of the Committee that, although that area could complement the criminal justice system, the framework provided for in the Bill's implementation plan is much too ambiguous. Much work remains to be done in that area, and the Committee recommends that the suggested standing committee of the House play an additional proactive role, taking a thematic approach to the area of restorative justice and making a positive contribution to the development and outworking of the practicalities of the proposals.

I commend the report to the Assembly and urge all Members to lend it their support. It is an important issue, and the proposals will have a long-lasting impact on our system of delivering justice. It is important that appropriate steps be taken for their delivery.

The Committee could not reach consensus on several proposals. To reflect the view of the Assembly, and particularly the views of the parties, submissions were received from each party and are appended to the report.

That was my brief as Chairperson, but with Members' indulgence I will put on my party hat to speak on several issues.

First, I refer to the issue of symbols, especially the flag and the royal crest. The original review recommendation was that the royal crest should be removed from courtroom interiors. As an Ulster Unionist and, more generally, as someone who believes in the connection between this jurisdiction and the rest of the United Kingdom, I am extremely unhappy — to put it mildly — with that recommendation. It goes far beyond the Belfast Agreement, which enshrined the principles of mutual respect and recognition for different identities. The recommendation — effectively to tear out the royal crest from courtrooms — is in many ways a cultural vandalism of the Unionist identity which is so important to many people and to the majority in this jurisdiction. The Government should give serious consideration to the reversal of that proposal and to effecting that by amending section 62 of the draft Justice (Northern Ireland) Bill.

There seems to be no reason why the practice of flying the Union flag above courthouses should be different to that for other public buildings.

It would seem appropriate that the review's recommendation that the flag should continue to fly in line with those proposals and with Government policy should be applied. The Union flag should continue to fly above all courthouses in this jurisdiction on set flag days. I refer Members to Mr Justice Kerr's comments, when

dealing with the issue in the High Court. His comments are quoted in the Ulster Unionist Party's submission. If Members consider that quotation carefully they will see that Mr Justice Kerr struck a sensible balance, which should be applied more widely.

1.30 pm

It is appropriate that the criminal justice inspectorate will cover almost every criminal justice agency in Northern Ireland, from the Police Service of Northern Ireland to the Forensic Science Agency. The one glaring exception is the Police Ombudsman's office. There would seem to be a strong argument in favour of including that in the list of bodies that will be subject to inspection by the criminal justice inspectorate. The Police Ombudsman's office has nothing to fear; its operational independence will in no way be affected. It is unreasonable to accept that every other criminal justice organisation will be subject to independent and rigorous scrutiny from an outside body, while, for some reason, the Police Ombudsman's office is left out of the loop. I strongly urge the Government to consider amending the legislation to include the Police Ombudsman's office.

Members will know that some of the biggest complaints from constituents relate to criminal justice matters, although, technically, such matters are Westminster's responsibility. However, it is patently obvious from constituents' comments, from reading newspapers and watching television that criminal justice issues — especially the deleterious affect they have on the lifestyle of people in this jurisdiction — are extremely important. It is vital that the House take urgent action to ensure that the transition of those responsibilities to the Assembly can be smooth. It would seem to be an opportunity for the House to demonstrate its maturity and to take responsibility for an area that is so important to the day-to-day lives of the people of Northern Ireland.

There are many areas in which we could try to make a difference. In many cases, Government put forward legislation for England and Wales, and neglect to introduce such provisions in Northern Ireland. Constituents complain to me often about problems with juveniles, noisy children and fireworks exploded by gangs of youths who seem to roam at will. When challenged about that, police officers say that there is nothing that they can do because human rights legislation limits their power to restrict the free movement of those youths. Unless the youths have committed an offence, there is no power available to police officers to challenge them and prevent the harassment that is obviously taking place.

The Government introduced the Crime and Disorder Act 1998 in England and Wales and brought forward a scheme of juvenile restriction orders that allowed for limited curfews to be introduced in some areas where

juveniles posed a difficulty. After the devolution of justice functions, the House could introduce such measures to this jurisdiction in a speedy and effective way that could make so much difference to the lives of our people. It is essential that the House take on that responsibility at an early stage. I commend the Committee's recommendations and my comments as a party representative.

Mrs E Bell: Like others, I was apprehensive about my appointment to the Ad Hoc Committee because of the potential for disagreement among the parties about the implementation plan for the draft Justice (Northern Ireland) Bill and the criminal justice review. Therefore, I was encouraged by the constructive attitude of my Colleagues.

The report is a worthy first step towards outlining the Assembly's views and attitudes. It was drawn up on two understandings: first, as the Chairperson of the Committee mentioned, we were conscious that several points in the plan would need further discussion and debate, within parties and in the Assembly, before we assume responsibility in 2003. Secondly, there was a need to monitor the draft Bill and the implementation plan carefully. The latter may require further refinement. The Assembly may need to consider other possible amendments.

The report contains a note of the Committee's concern about the limited period given to produce a report on such a lengthy consultation. We were glad that the extension of the deadline recognised that.

We must make it clear to Westminster and the NIO that the Northern Ireland Assembly must be allowed to play its proper consultative role in the drafting of any legislation on reserved matters, especially when — as in this case — that legislation will directly affect everyone in Northern Ireland. Sometimes I wonder how much of the Committee's considerable work on its report, and the views therein, will even be looked at. That situation must change and due recognition should be given to our agreed reports. I hope, therefore, that Members will agree with the first recommendation.

Recommendation 3 reflects the Committee's opinion that, given the need to maintain the necessary momentum to drive forward the implementation of criminal justice reform, it would be advisable to appoint an oversight commissioner, similar to Patten. Separate resources should be allocated to the post, without touching the resources that were allocated for the plan.

I endorse recommendation 4, because the new criminal justice system will have far-reaching implications for everyone in Northern Ireland. Again, the Assembly must be consulted and allowed to comment on related justice issues, pending the devolution of responsibility for the matter. As the report states, we have a clear duty to be responsive to community concerns and to encourage confidence in the justice system. It should

be clear to everyone that the system must be delivered effectively, efficiently, and with full equity. A Standing Committee could be the answer. In that way, the Assembly would be fully online with the Bill by 2003, and it would be able to take over responsibility for criminal justice with confidence.

Recommendation 6 had to be worded to allow further debate on the precise remit and procedures of the department of justice. The appointment and duties of an Attorney-General is another matter to which further thought must be given. It is hoped that the recommendations pertaining to that will be approved.

While declaring an interest as a member of the Probation Board for Northern Ireland, I concur with the Committee Chairperson's remarks. I hope that the recommendation to retain the current status of the Probation Board, instead of establishing a Next Steps agency, will be approved. If we change that status, projects must change also.

Under the section heading 'New Approaches', it was agreed that it is vital to acknowledge the inclusion of youth and the youth conferencing system. It is also important to ascertain the appropriate role of the Probation Board. We have a wealth of experience in compiling young people's suitability reports in advance of decisions. Again, I hope that those recommendations will be approved.

Restorative justice has great potential. The system has been hampered by misconceptions and incorrect information. It can work effectively in the criminal justice system. That is why the report recommends that further research be done. Pilot programmes have been carried out in several areas, but the system should be considered on a larger scale. The results of the research could help to correct the current problems of perception. Criminal justice should be transparent to all, it must appear to be beneficial to all and it must be able to uphold the human rights of all. I hope that my party leader will speak about other matters in the report later.

I thank the Committee Chairperson and my fellow Committee members for making the proceedings interesting and largely consensual. In particular, I thank the Committee Clerk and his team for their exemplary work under great pressure — it bodes well for the future of the House. I hope that the Assembly will approve the report.

Mr A Maginness: One of the most remarkable aspects of the report is that the Committee reached considerable consensus on the criminal justice review and the implementation plan, and I pay tribute to the Chairperson, Mr Dalton, for his work in bringing about that consensus. The degree of consensus that has been reached serves as a model for Assembly Members — before the Committee began its deliberations, many people said

that it would be impossible for us to reach a consensus. However, we did, and everyone involved deserves congratulation. I also thank the Committee officials for their exemplary work. In a limited time, they worked well, produced a lot of material that was helpful to us and gave us considerable guidance.

There are several pertinent issues in relation to the criminal justice review. I shall deal with one in particular — the judicial appointments commission. It is an important innovation because there has been a serious lack of transparency in the appointment of judges at all levels. Indeed, the entire appointments' system has been shrouded in secrecy, and that must be considered unsatisfactory by anybody who desires openness in Government. Therefore, the establishment of a judicial appointments commission is to be welcomed, but although the SDLP welcomes that, it does not believe that it goes far enough. However, it is a good step forward, and it is progress, given the present opaque system.

The SDLP's submission says that the judicial appointments commission should not be chaired by the Lord Chief Justice. It should have an independent chairperson, or at least a lay chairperson, rather than a judicial figure. We also believe that there should be greater lay membership on the commission, or, at the very least, equality between the judicial or lawyer members and the lay members. The SDLP would prefer to see more lay members than judicial members because the danger in the system that we are reconstructing is that the judiciary will have too much influence, power and control in the appointment of judges. As politicians, we in the SDLP believe that that is too much power to give to that body.

One must welcome the establishment of the commission. However, we can constructively criticise the Government's proposals and hope that those criticisms will be taken on board. We want a judiciary that fully reflects or represents the community. That should be the basic criterion upon which the judicial appointments system should work, and that point should be firmly written into the legislation.

The issue of symbols has been raised, and that is important to many of us in the political arena. In a personal capacity, the Chairperson has quite rightly expressed concern about symbols being destroyed.

1.45 pm

We in the SDLP believe that there are three ways to approach the problem of symbolism. In no order of preference they are: parity of symbolism, which means having symbolism representative of the Irish Nationalist political tradition and the British Unionist political tradition; complete neutrality, which the present proposals prefer for courtrooms, is worth considering, and it is something that the SDLP believes has the potential to

create a unified approach in the community; there could be new and agreed symbolism, which, again, the SDLP says is worth exploring.

The SDLP does not prefer any one approach above the others. We ask political parties to look at the proposals and decide which is best in relation to symbolism. The agreement has created a new political dispensation in which parity of esteem is regarded as a fundamental principle — parity of esteem between the two major political traditions in this society. Therefore, one has to have an approach that meets the principle of parity of esteem. The Government's proposals on flying the flag over courthouses, for example, is wrong because again we are dealing with one symbol representative of one political tradition. The continuance of symbolism on the exterior of buildings is wrong.

Mr McFarland: Would the Member agree that the sight of stonemasons chiselling marble plaques off the inside of courtrooms — plaques that have been in place for many years and that are part of our architectural heritage — is something that no party would wish to see?

Mr A Maginness: The SDLP is not the Taliban — we do not go in for the demolition of pieces of historic architecture. However, in relation to the overall issue of symbolism, one has to take on board the three methods by which we believe the whole problem of symbolism can be approached and resolved amicably in our divided political community. I would like Mr McFarland and his party to consider that point because progress can be made here. The basic ingredients for reaching consensus across the political divide are in the context of those three approaches. We are not in the business of wrecking, and where there is something of architectural merit we are certainly not going to insist on its destruction. However, as the Chairperson of the Committee said, symbolism is important. We have to try and reach consensus on that particularly sensitive and difficult issue. Perhaps at some stage our society can be mature enough to reach agreement on that.

The criminal justice review is renewing, not destroying, our judicial institutions, and it is renewing our judicial system. It modernises our criminal justice system and brings in best practice from all over the world, and that must be welcomed. It is a positive and constructive development.

The separation of the prosecution service from the office of Attorney-General is important, and the creation of an independent prosecution service is of great importance to this society. The proposals in the criminal justice review do not go far enough, but at least we are going in the right direction.

The Probation Board should not become a Next Steps agency as proposed by the Government. The board is opposed to that; it believes that its independence

would be diluted, and I am glad that the Committee agreed to support the Probation Board on that point.

As far as restorative justice is concerned, the Committee reached a consensus. That is important, because here is an innovative area to which we all can contribute. That is very important, especially in the context of dealing with juvenile crime. We need new approaches. The orthodox approach to dealing with juvenile crime has not worked. Therefore, we need something new, and this is one way to do it. I agree with the criticisms that were made in Committee. The sections on restorative justice are not precise enough, they are vague and muddled. It is important that the Government clarify that.

As far as the Standing Committee is concerned, the Committee agreed to put that matter to the Assembly. There was agreement, not that a Committee actually be set up, but that the Assembly consider setting one up. The SDLP is sympathetic to that, but it remains to be seen what that Committee would do, what its terms of reference would be and so forth, until a final decision is made by our party.

Finally, let me reiterate that this is a good report from a hard-working Assembly Committee. I welcome it on behalf of the SDLP, and I look forward to further progress being made on criminal justice.

Mr Campbell: I join with the other Members who have paid tribute to the Committee Clerk and the other Assistant Clerks of the Committee who were faced, along with the Committee members, with a substantial number of documents and approaches from individuals and groups who wished to make presentations, all of which had to be dealt with in a very limited time. At the outset, that period was universally regarded as being outrageous, and we are glad that it was extended to some degree. I am not entirely content with the time that we were given, but at least it was an improvement on the previous position, which was totally and utterly unacceptable.

There have been some comments in the debate about the degree of unanimity in the Committee's approach to the issue, and, of course, there was some degree of consensus. However, I caution against reading too much into that, because of the practical viewpoint that one could look at the issues either in the Assembly or out there in the real world. The issues that are likely to cause real division are ones that we did not grapple with in the initial stages. It is somewhat premature to praise consensus when the really difficult issues are yet to come before us.

I am not one to lambaste consensus; where it is possible, I favour it. However, I make a cautionary note on the issue. I need to talk about several matters, many of which, including community restorative justice and the Probation Board, I could elaborate on for some time. I shall deal with those matters later. My initial

point relates to the future of the prosecution service: I hope that there is consensus in the House and in the community that any prosecution service, if it is to be successful, must be adequately staffed and resourced. The Committee touched on the matter, and I imagine that that requirement will receive widespread support.

I shall move on to the hoary chestnuts, such as symbols and the royal declaration. Mr Dalton made comments that were based on his political party affiliation rather than as Committee Chairperson. He said that the removal of symbols was not provided for in the Belfast Agreement, and that the matter was beyond its remit. Issues such as the criminal justice review, which go to the heart of society, are being built on the Belfast Agreement. We are told that the criminal justice review must gain the confidence of all parts of the community, yet the underlying premise of the review is an agreement in which there is not much confidence.

The criminal justice review and the Assembly, and all legislation that flows from it, are built on the premise that they require the confidence of all parts of the community, yet the womb from which they have come does not have the confidence of all sections of the community. Neither the Chairperson, nor anyone, needs be surprised that the report causes deep concern in the Unionist community, because it has come from the womb of something that is entirely objectionable. There are deep reservations and animosities toward the Belfast Agreement in the Unionist community.

The issue of removing symbols arose several times during Committee evidence sessions, including the meeting with the Northern Ireland Court Service on 4 December. I asked Mr Lavery of the Northern Ireland Court Service the following question:

"Whatever the political developments within Nationalism in Scotland, they have not yet led to the removal — simple or otherwise — of the current symbols of justice."

He replied:

"The Scottish court system has its own distinctive characteristics, but they have existed for longer. As far as the principal thrust of your question is concerned, there has been no change in symbols."

When the nettle is finally grasped, we shall have to analyse the fact that a cold house exists in Northern Ireland. When, four weeks ago, the Secretary of State said that he wanted to avoid the creation of a cold house, he used the wrong tense. It is not a possibility; it is a fact, and one that must be rectified. A cold house exists for the Unionist community. Despite the emergence of Nationalism in court systems in other parts of the United Kingdom, such as Scotland, and although the political manifestations of Nationalism have fluctuated and changed from year to year, there has been no demand for the removal of the royal emblems there.

That should alone have sufficient weight to warn against proceeding towards the removal of symbols from existing courts.

2.00 pm

The royal declaration is a related issue. The declaration is seldom used in today's courts, and yet it appears that change is being contemplated simply to placate political opinion within a section of the Nationalist community. What is the purpose? It is to turn the heat further down in the cold house that exists for the Unionist community.

Community restorative justice has been mentioned, and the issue came up several times in the evidence given by various parties. We need to be clear on the matter. From speaking to many people in the Probation Service and to the lay people involved, I get the impression that restorative justice per se will be supported. They want to pursue it and take best practice from other countries to try to implement it in Northern Ireland.

An issue that does not have widespread support, however, is that of "community" restorative justice. That issue has been utilised by one political party — IRA/Sinn Féin — and it is prevalent in a particular section of our community. It has all sorts of resonances throughout the community, and people are deeply unhappy and discontented at the possibility of some form of community restorative justice coming into the field of our consideration.

There is genuine consensus on the matter of the Probation Board. When the board gave evidence, it said that it did not want to become a Next Steps agency. It did not want to be removed from its present position, and there will be strong support for that view. My party is not in favour of a change of status for the reasons outlined.

Mr McLaughlin: Go raibh maith agat. On behalf of my party, I echo the thanks expressed to the Committee Clerk and his team, Library and Research Services and the legal advisers to the Assembly for their assistance. The Ad Hoc Committee had a difficult task in an impossibly short time frame, but it succeeded in performing its task, and I am happy to endorse the report on that basis. It will remain a matter of conjecture whether, had the Committee been given more time to explore individual and party views, some of the areas of common ground — though I do not want to overstate that either — might have unravelled. Nonetheless, heads of agreement were identified, and that should be helpful in processing the legislation and in the development of the implementation plan.

While recognising that the need for change has been highlighted, my party has a considerable number of concerns.

Change must be welcomed. Nonetheless, this must be seen as work in progress, and we must take a focused approach to addressing the outstanding issues. Some of the more contentious ones have already been referred to.

The broad areas of concern are the prosecution service, the judiciary and issues of human rights and equality. Parties will bring their own analyses to bear, and I hope that their sum total will allow us to proceed. The outcome will be a much more representative, transparent and accountable criminal justice system. Despite party differences that is certainly a common goal.

The fact that the review group, with some outside contributions, essentially consisted of the people who had previous responsibility for criminal justice meant that its remit was seriously damaged from the beginning. Though it is possible to welcome aspects of the report, the problems that remain could well propel us into the sort of acrimonious debate that we had over policing.

People have quite properly argued for proper resourcing of the prosecution service. We can agree to that. However, the question of transparency was effectively ducked by the review group and the NIO in their response, and this is reflected in the draft legislation and the implementation plan. In essence, we have little more than a simple name change. Serious issues arise from decisions by the prosecution service not to prosecute in circumstances that go to the heart of confidence in the justice system. The NIO indicated that it had accepted a recommendation from its own review group of greater transparency and more explanation of decisions not to prosecute, yet it is now being seen to be doing precisely the opposite. Is this not an example of total arrogance? Does it not care? Does it think that people will not read this documentation, and even if they do, will the NIO simply steamroller ahead?

Clear problems of accountability and transparency arise from that attitude. The Finucane case alone shows the type of issues that can subvert the creation of an independent criminal justice system which has integrity and is able to serve the entire community.

People generally welcomed the introduction of a judicial appointments commission. However, concerns have been raised, with a degree of unanimity, that the Lord Chief Justice will chair that body and have the power to appoint five of the 11 positions. One can reasonably anticipate a corporate approach to the appointments process. There is a real possibility of little or no change and another lost opportunity.

The fact that human rights training will be a voluntary rather than a statutory requirement for the judiciary begs questions about the commitment of the NIO to the Good Friday Agreement. I hope that in its approach to the legislation the British Government will take a

different view and reflect in the legislation the expectations and commitments that arose from the Good Friday Agreement.

In conjunction with other parties, Sinn Féin will be lobbying and campaigning, and will hope to influence MPs' deliberations on the Bill. These are crucial issues, especially given the experience of alienation and the manner in which policing and criminal justice has been subverted to a counter-insurgency project that gave rise to a catalogue of scandals over the years.

Reference has been made to emblems and symbols. Sinn Féin has serious concerns about the approach that has been taken. The Good Friday Agreement provides clear direction on the matter — and we agreed that. Notwithstanding the DUP's arguments about whether everyone agreed with it, three out of four voters agreed with it. While it is healthy practice in democratic discussion and decision-making for people to have a contrary view, when a decision is made by such an overwhelming majority we are entitled to see all parties accept that decision if we are going to institutionalise the process of conflict resolution. If people constantly undermine it, challenge it, deride it and deny it the legitimacy that it is entitled to, they will contribute only to undermining people's confidence in politics as a means of resolving the conflict and the division in our society.

The issue of a neutral environment in the court system is critical. The royal crest adds nothing to the administration or the experience of justice. Almost half of the community who live in the North are alienated from that promotion of one aspect of political opinion in the Six Counties, and we have to take account of that. It is not beyond us to create a neutral environment. We can achieve it without removing anyone's rights, and we can do it in a manner that reflects the rights of everyone.

The issues of the Royal Courts of Justice, the Crown Court, Queen's Counsel and the use of the British royal crest need to be addressed. They need to be taken out of the criminal justice system, which is meant to be in common ownership. It is meant to be a shared experience for everyone in the community whether you are Republican, Nationalist, Unionist or however you describe yourself. We need to be prepared to face the issue and to develop systems that will allow everyone to become part of the criminal justice process and to give equal allegiance, support and authority to it.

The fact that the draft Bill and the implementation plan failed to make recommendations about membership of exclusive or oath-bound organisations also needs to be addressed, because the criminal justice system, as it has evolved over the years, is subject to the same distortions and the same under-representation as other structures of government or the legal system.

We should seize the opportunity to do something effective, constructive and positive about that.

Members also referred to the restorative justice system. Sinn Féin's position on that is very clear. Restorative justice is a progressive development recognised and practiced in many societies across the globe. It is in our ability to create that synergy between policing, justice and the legal systems in which there could be an institutionalised role for restorative justice, though not in the manner in which it has developed at present. Restorative justice is at least a positive development in respect of punishment beatings and informal justice systems, but it is not by any means the end game. Insofar as restorative justice deals with the reality that we have failed thus far to find unanimity on policing and justice, there is clearly a role for it.

2.15 pm

It is our function to remove the conditions whereby informal responses emerge and to put in place agreed responses, which could, should and will incorporate restorative justice as an institutionalised response to antisocial behaviour in our society in a humane, peaceful and non-violent way. We should continue to study that subject and to approach it with a positive perspective.

I draw attention to the absence of proposals for co-operation on an all-island basis. The review group took time to make its report, and the NIO took an even longer period to study it, only to find that there were no structured proposals for co-operation on an all-island basis. This was omitted despite being specifically included in the Good Friday Agreement as part of the review group's remit.

Joint studies completed almost four years after the agreement indicate considerable resistance to the process of change and harmonisation on this island. That is to be regretted, and it is an issue that my party will return to strongly. Go raibh maith agat.

Mr Weir: At the start of the debate I declared that I had two interests, and I notice that others who spoke did not. I am a non-practising member of the Bar Council, and I am a member of the Council of Legal Education. This should be borne in mind as I make my remarks.

I welcome the report. It has been said that there are a number of aspects that everyone in the Chamber can agree with. The reference to support for longer consultation is important. There is also opposition to making the Probation Board for Northern Ireland a Next Steps agency. The House can unite behind a wide range of the issues contained in the recommendations.

However, the real value of the report is in the submissions of the various parties and organisations, because, as has been indicated, there is a range of

issues in the criminal justice proposals on which it would have been difficult, indeed impossible, for parties to reach agreement. Several of those issues have already been mentioned.

There is also a range of issues on which it is difficult for the report to comment fully at this stage because the key test will be in how they are operated in practice. I welcome the recommendations on youth conferencing that indicate that legal representation must be made available to young people, and on the role of the Probation Board for Northern Ireland.

The proposer of the motion, although he was not speaking in his role as Chairperson of the Committee, indicated that the key test of youth conferencing will be the extent to which it reduces youth crime. That is what people on the streets will be looking for. It would be wrong of us to draw conclusions before the system has been put in place.

I agree with the comments regarding the chief inspector of criminal justice. It is a mistake not to include the Police Ombudsman's role. I hope that the chief inspector of criminal justice will perform the duties in a way that commands greater public confidence and support than the Police Ombudsman has been receiving recently.

If there is to be a new prosecution service, it is important that it does not fall into the traps that the Crown Prosecution Service has encountered in England and Wales. It must be adequately resourced.

It is important that I place on record some of my concerns about the criminal justice review. These must be taken on board by the Government when they come to consider closely the level of implementation. It is right that the report recommends a strong, early consultative role for the Assembly, and I welcome the idea of a Standing Committee. It should be up and running as soon as possible. At this stage I urge a note of caution in the early devolution of criminal justice matters, whether to a department of justice or to the ever-expanding activities of the Office of the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister.

It would be farcical to devolve powers to an Executive that contains a party whose commitment to justice is reflected in the kangaroo courts of the punishment beating squads.

The focus of the report is wrong on inclusiveness in the legal profession. In particular, it has indicated support for the simplification of the dress code of members of the Bar by the removal of the wig and gown. In the grand scheme of things that may be a relatively minor point, but it does stray into the civil remit and would be opposed strongly by the Bar Council for a range of reasons.

As well as missing the target of inclusiveness, the deteriorating level of funding available for legal trainees has not been examined. Bursaries for trainee

solicitors and barristers at the Institute of Professional Legal Studies have decreased from 75% some 10 years ago to less than 33% today. As a society we pride ourselves that we get more people from working-class backgrounds into third-level education than any other part of the United Kingdom. If a barrier is then erected that eventually will limit the number of people entering the legal profession, that is the key test of inclusiveness; not changing the dress code in court.

I welcome recommendations 15 to 17, where a note of caution is sounded on restorative justice. As indicated by a Member who spoke previously, restorative justice has had a bad name in Northern Ireland. Gregory Campbell noted the difference between the concept of restorative justice and its practical implementation. The report recommends the greater use of pilot schemes and studies into restorative justice before any action is taken. Restorative justice should be court-controlled, and certain sectors of the community should not be given a free hand — that would be disastrous for justice in Northern Ireland.

I raise a concern about the independence of the judiciary and the legal profession. It is welcome that the report highlights the importance of the legal profession's independence. Any follow-through as to what that means in practice is sadly lacking. Here I diverge from Alban Maginness, who indicated that he wanted greater lay involvement in the judicial appointments commission. Among the Unionist community, concerns were raised during the period of the Anglo-Irish Agreement that judicial appointments were susceptible to pressure and influence from the Government of the Republic of Ireland. Whatever the truth of that perception, it existed. In moving away from that subtle pressure to a more open and transparent pressure by the appointment of a large percentage of lay people, there is a danger of perpetuating a political pattern. If growing cronyism is to be reinforced, with the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister having responsibility for almost half of the appointees to a judicial appointments commission, or even through representation of political parties, the independence of the judiciary will be threatened.

One Member said earlier that his key concern was to see a judiciary that was reflective of society, a viewpoint with which I disagree. It is not that I do not want a judiciary that is reflective of society, but the key test of any judiciary must be that people are appointed on merit.

Leaving appointments largely in the hands of the judiciary and the two legal professions provides greater opportunity for ensuring that the key test is merit, rather than some form of political balance or political correctness.

Finally, I want to talk about the erosion of Britishness that is contained in several aspects of the report, which

have already been mentioned. Mr Maginness gave us three options. He seems to have studiously ignored the fourth, which is that the courts acknowledge that we are part of the United Kingdom. On issues such as the oath of allegiance to the Queen, the flying of flags and the continuance of the display of royal arms in courtrooms, we must acknowledge that we are part of the United Kingdom.

It seems that the solution that has been offered — whereby royal arms are left on existing buildings, but no new buildings will have them — is an indication, not of our Britishness, but that we are moving into some sort of neutral state with a gesture to the past from the Government. The Secretary of State was concerned that “a cold house for Unionists” would be created; to allow these recommendations to go through would create arctic conditions for Unionists.

The report does not contain the obvious decline in Britishness that was associated with the Patten report. It is more subtle in its proposals. However, moving from a situation in which every symbol of Britishness is dropped to a situation in which our Britishness suffers death by a thousand cuts is not acceptable. The House must send a clear message that the acceptance of Northern Ireland as part of the United Kingdom should pervade our society. The retention of what is already there is important. Parity of symbolism is not something that the House should accept. In moving forward from the report and whatever criminal justice measures the Secretary of State and Parliament consider implementing, it is important that we address those concerns to ensure that we have a criminal justice system that delivers for the people, rather than dealing another hammer blow to the Britishness of this country.

Mr Deputy Speaker: As we will have ministerial Question Time at 2.30 pm, it would be inappropriate to call another Member to speak. We will resume this debate at 4.00 pm after Question Time, and we will suspend the sitting until 2.30.

Mr Kennedy: On a point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker. I understand that a private notice question was tabled and was scheduled for approximately 4.00 pm. Can you confirm that?

Mr Deputy Speaker: I believe that that is the case. Thank you.

The debate stood suspended.

The sitting was suspended at 2.27 pm.

On resuming (Mr Speaker in the Chair) —

2.30 pm

Oral Answers to Questions

EDUCATION

School Governors (Appointment Procedure)

1. **Mrs Courtney** asked the Minister of Education if he has any plans to review the appointment procedure for school governors. (AQO 558/01)

The Minister of Education (Mr M McGuinness): As this is the first Question Time of the new year, I extend my best wishes to everybody in the House for the year ahead.

Legislation provides for the appointment of various interests to boards of governors. Those include trustees, transferors, parents, teachers, education and library boards and departmental representatives. The Department of Education's nominees represent approximately 10% of the total number of appointments. The current appointments process for controlled and maintained schools is coterminous with that of the education and library boards. Reconstitution of voluntary grammar and grant-maintained integrated schools also follows a similar four-year timescale. Appointments are being finalised for the next four years.

The Department will undertake a review of school governance. The appointments procedure will form part of that review, which will begin before the end of the current financial year.

Mrs Courtney: I thank the Minister for his response. It is good to know that there will be a review because in recent times concerns have been expressed to me about the governance of schools.

Mr M McGuinness: Several people outside the Chamber have contributed to the debate. They will all be pleased to hear that the review will begin before the end of the current financial year.

Dr Birnie: Can the Minister inform the House whether the appointments procedure has been equality proofed — and if not, why not?

Mr M McGuinness: It is essential that every aspect of education be equality proofed. The Department has a good relationship with the Equality Commission and has contributed to the commission's deliberations. People can rest assured that equality will be a central feature of whatever we do.

Free School Milk Provision

2. **Mr McElduff** asked the Minister of Education to outline the criteria for free school milk provision in schools; and to make a statement. (AQO 566/01)

Mr M McGuinness: Free school milk is provided to pupils who need milk for a specific health reason and to all pupils at special schools. Free milk is also supplied to pre-school pupils under the welfare food scheme administered by the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety.

Mr McElduff: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire as a fhreagar. I believe strongly that free school milk should be available to all school children — at least until the end of their time at primary school. In the light of the ‘Catering for Healthier Lifestyles’ consultation, I ask the Minister to note that the increasing trend of children arriving at school having had no breakfast and then existing on a diet of crisps and soft drinks — soft drinks machines are being placed in schools — must be examined. That is crucial to the health and well-being of all children.

Mr M McGuinness: The new nutritional standards for school meals proposed in the consultation paper issued on 12 December 2001, ‘Catering for Healthier Lifestyles’, which was mentioned by Mr McElduff, will be compulsory for all free and paid lunches in all grant-aided schools. They are based on the five food groups, of which one is milk and milk products. The main thrust of the paper is to have more healthier options available.

The new standards propose that all pupils have something from the milk and milk products food group every day, and that drinking milk be available daily.

Dr McDonnell: Will the Minister consider that many school-age children are allergic to cow’s milk? It is not appropriate for all children, and it is important that an alternative be available. In some cases, a child could fall ill. Cow’s milk is not a panacea. It may be necessary to provide an alternative.

Mr M McGuinness: That is an important point from the learned doctor to which the Department is sensitive. It is incumbent on us all, including education and library boards and individual schools, to ensure that the needs of all children are adequately met.

North/South Ministerial Council (Funding for Schools and Youth Projects)

3. **Mr M Murphy** asked the Minister of Education when the sum of 5 million euros agreed at the last North/South Ministerial Council meeting will be made available to schools and youth projects. (AQO 586/01)

Mr M McGuinness: I am pleased to announce that a formal call for projects will be made shortly. Allowing

for projects to complete the application and selection processes, it is anticipated that the funding will be made available to the successful projects before the end of March. The measure builds on the already well-developed co-operation on EU programmes between my Department and the Department of Education and Science in Dublin.

Mr M Murphy: How will the organisations know that money is available and how to apply for it? Go raibh maith agat.

Mr M McGuinness: There will be an advertisement in the press, and interested parties and potential projects have been keeping in touch with both Departments about the timescale for the formal launch.

School Transport

4. **Mr McGrady** asked the Minister of Education what plans he has to amend the eligibility criteria for school transport; and to make a statement. (AQO 548/01)

Mr M McGuinness: The existing school transport policy supports parental preference and enables education and library boards to provide transport assistance when a pupil is unable to gain a place in a suitable school within the statutory walking distance of his or her home.

At present, I have no plans to change the home-to-school transport policy. However, my Department intends to conduct a review of it, and I will consider whether changes are necessary thereafter. The review will also consider the report of the review body on post-primary education and the recommendations of the Committee for the Environment’s report on home-to-school transport.

Mr McGrady: I am sure that the Minister and my Colleague from Strabane, Eugene McMenamin, will join me in condemning the attacks on school transport in Strabane and the threats to drivers of school buses.

On the substance of the question, I thank the Minister for informing the House of the review that will take place. In the review, will the Minister take account of the demographics that surround most school structures, which are parochial in nature? Will he consider amending the legislation to assist the parish network of school/church relationships when determining the parental choice, which is influenced by the availability of transport to school? Society’s structure should be reflected in the legislation, and that should assist transport.

Mr M McGuinness: I thank the Member for his comments on the damage to school transport. The attack on the school buses in Strabane last night was particularly reprehensible and an absolute disgrace. Those who were involved should be ashamed of themselves.

There is no doubt that the review will be comprehensive. It will take account of all the concerns that

have been raised by different individuals and the specific concerns on demographics. People can rest assured that the review will contain a remit that will deal adequately with the concerns that have been raised. In the course of the review, it is hoped that all of that will be worked out to a successful conclusion.

Mr Savage: I welcome the Minister's remarks, but does he accept that current school transport policy restricts, and in many cases prevents, parental choice? How does he intend to improve the situation?

Mr M McGuinness: I do not accept that the current transport arrangements restrict parental choice, although concerns have been raised in individual cases. The establishment of the review will provide an opportunity for anyone who is concerned about the issue of parental choice to contribute to an important consultation process.

Mr Gibson: Will the Minister, apart from condemning such unwarranted attacks as those last weekend on the buses in Strabane and five weeks ago at the Gibson Primary School in Omagh, consider having more secure compounds for buses or making tighter arrangements? Many of the buses in the Western Board area are in isolated and fairly insecure areas, and are therefore open to unwarranted hooliganism. Can the Minister give some assurance? Will he also congratulate the transport manager, Mr McClean, who on two occasions has turned out with his staff at weekends to make the buses available on Monday morning?

Mr M McGuinness: I certainly congratulate Mr McClean, and we should be concerned about the point Mr Gibson has raised. I am concerned not only about security for school buses but also generally about the security of schools in general. This morning, that issue came up in another context at an important and unprecedented meeting of everyone involved in education. The Department of Education intends to look at it very seriously.

Free School Meals

5. **Mr Gallagher** asked the Minister of Education if he has any research planned to establish the number of children with entitlement to free school meals but have not yet claimed it. (AQO 590/01)

Mr M McGuinness: One of the Department of Education's objectives in its new action plan for targeting social need is to ameliorate the disadvantage suffered by pupils from socially disadvantaged families by raising family income and by improving the accuracy of targeting expenditure through free school meals entitlement.

My Department aims to develop an action plan to publicise entitlement and to encourage greater uptake of free school meals. The first stage in the process will be to undertake research to determine patterns of

eligibility for entitlement. That will be conducted through the family resources survey, which will be undertaken by the Department for Social Development in April 2002. The results of the research will inform the action plan that is scheduled to be in place by December 2002.

Mr Gallagher: I thank the Minister for that information and for an indication that, if there is a significant difference, measures will be introduced to improve the uptake of free school meals by those who are entitled.

I welcome the Minister's recent announcement on the nutritional value of school meals. Does he agree that it is important to tackle that issue on both fronts — his initiative, accompanied by steps to improve uptake among disadvantaged groups who may not already have done so?

Mr M McGuinness: It is vital that we do everything in our power to ensure that as many pupils as possible take up their entitlement to free school meals. Alongside that, we should be concerned about the issue of nutritional standards. Better quality food does not necessarily mean more expensive food. Good catering practice, including cooking methods, has an essential role to play, and I do not expect any significant increase in the cost of a meal as the result of the new standards. Schools benefit from the cost reductions and economies of scales available through the joint purchasing arrangements operated by the five education and library boards. Therefore, they can keep food costs low.

2.45 pm

Mr K Robinson: I am encouraged to hear the Minister say that the people who attacked school vehicles and drivers at the weekend should be ashamed of themselves. I am sure that he would like to take the opportunity to condemn all of the attacks on school vehicles and drivers over the past 30 years.

Does the Minister accept that free school meals are not an accurate or suitable measure of educational disadvantage? Will he commission research to identify a more suitable indicator?

Mr M McGuinness: In the Department's opinion, free school meals are the best way to assess the difficulties that children must deal with during their education.

School Building Programme

6. **Mr McNamee** asked the Minister of Education what resources he will make available to address the backlog in the school building programme. (AQO 572/01)

Mr M McGuinness: The public expenditure plans for 2002-03 provide £106 million for new school buildings, ongoing capital works in schools and other areas of capital expenditure.

Mr McNamee: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire as a fhreagar, ach tá ceist eile agam air. The Minister will be aware of some of the health and safety issues that arise, both in schools that, from necessity, use temporary buildings — some of which are past their sell-by date — and in older buildings that require structural improvement. Those health and safety issues put additional pressures on head teachers and teaching staff. Therefore, will the Minister give priority to addressing those issues in the future school building programme?

Mr M McGuinness: I agree that the unacceptably large number of temporary buildings at schools creates great difficulties for schools, teachers and principals. The Department is determined to reduce that number year by year. However, much of the temporary accommodation is a legacy of many decades of neglect and underfunding. It is not a problem with an overnight solution. It will not be resolved in the school capital building programme that I will announce in March, but the Department is determined to tackle the problem, and to provide the proper buildings and resources for principals, schools and pupils.

Dr Adamson: Lang may yer lum reek wi ither fowk's coal. Can the Minister clarify how much progress has been made on the PFI projects announced in the 2001 capital building programme? Does he agree that it is rather disingenuous to announce a spending programme of £70 million in 2001, when it is likely that building in any of the PFI projects will not take place for three or four years?

Mr M McGuinness: Last March, I announced details of an investment package to address the backlog of building work in the schools estate. It included 17 projects to be implemented under the conventional school building programme, which represented an investment of £62 million, and eight secondary school projects, with a total capital value of £70 million, to be implemented under public-private partnerships (PPPs). A further £16.2 million for four school projects was made available under the Executive programme funds.

Those involved with PPPs know that it is a fledgling initiative in this part of the country. The Department has gained valuable experience, and the officials who deal with the negotiations in conjunction with our education partners are very experienced. However, the negotiations are lengthy, and that creates difficulties such as the expectation, which Dr Adamson mentioned, that all that can be accomplished speedily. However, as our negotiating techniques improve, it will be possible to reduce the timescale, and the Department is constantly endeavouring to do that.

Mr S Wilson: The Minister wished the House a happy new year. I hope that he recognises that for many,

still nursing the hurt of the terrorist campaign that he and his friends directed, 2002 will be far from happy.

With regard to the backlog of capital spending that is required in schools, will the Minister assure the House that the blatant imbalance that we have witnessed since he took over as Minister will not continue in this financial year and will not continue if and when additional resources are made available to deal with the appalling backlog? Schools that cater for the mainly Protestant community have faced an imbalance of three to one with capital spending. Money is required in all sectors of education, but the Minister seems unable to recognise that.

Mr M McGuinness: The Member should grow up. He should recognise that much has happened in the past 10 years. We have a peace process and the Good Friday Agreement. We would move forward more decisively if every political — *[Interruption]*.

Mr Speaker: Order.

Mr M McGuinness: We would move forward more decisively if every political party and every Member of the Assembly put their shoulders to the wheel with the rest of us to try to bring about the new society that the agreement promised.

I absolutely reject the accusations of imbalance — that is an old chestnut. The allegation is untrue and unjustified. We heard that nonsense last year. The schools capital programme is determined solely on the basis of educational need, wherever it exists, whether the money is for controlled schools, voluntary schools, or any other schools.

The make-up of last year's conventional school building programme 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 project, costing £12.5 million. I hear that Sammy Wilson used to be a teacher — well, my God, it appears that the man cannot even count.

Mr S Wilson: I hear that the Minister used to be a terrorist.

Mr Speaker: Order.

Teachers' Negotiating Council (Pay and Conditions of Service)

7. **Mr Hamilton** asked the Minister of Education to outline the result of his discussions with both sides of the teachers' negotiating council regarding pay and conditions of service. (AQO 554/01)

Mr M McGuinness: My meetings with both sides of the negotiating council on 13 December were very positive. The teachers' side explained its claim for an independent inquiry into teachers' pay and conditions of service. The management side described its offer of

a joint review to be carried out in the scope of the existing negotiating machinery. I said that I would have to give careful consideration to the respective views before reaching a discussion, based on what is best for the teaching profession as a whole. I shall make that decision shortly.

Mr Hamilton: I thank the Minister for his answer, but why has it taken so long to reach a decision on the matter? Why has the situation been allowed to reach the stage of teachers' unions balloting their members about possible industrial action?

Mr M McGuinness: As I said, my meetings with both sides occurred on 13 December last year. Given the Christmas and new year holidays, the time span has not been unduly lengthy. However, I concede that the matter was in the public domain prior to that. The decision will be taken shortly.

Mr J Kelly: Will the Minister begin an inquiry into teachers' pay, conditions of employment and, more importantly, the bureaucratic burden placed on them that makes actual teaching more difficult?

Mr M McGuinness: During the Christmas period, I gave serious consideration to all those matters. The outcome of the inquiry could have an effect on my Department's resource requirements and may have implications for other Departments. Therefore, I wish to consult Executive Colleagues before establishing such an inquiry.

Burns Report: Implementation

8. **Mr Kennedy** asked the Minister of Education to outline his initial conclusions regarding the Burns report and the practicalities of implementing its recommendations. (AQO 571/01)

Mr M McGuinness: I will not make any conclusions on the Burns report until I have considered carefully all comments received during the consultation period. Academic selection is at the heart of the issue, and I hope that there will be a mature and constructive debate on that central matter. Our aim must be to create a modern education system that will secure fairness and raise standards for all of our children. We can achieve that if we work together.

Mr Kennedy: Does the Minister accept that if the Burns report's proposals are implemented fully, it will be impossible for grammar schools to retain their academic ethos and excellence. Therefore, they will cease to exist in their current form.

Mr M McGuinness: I am encouraged by the way in which the Burns report has been welcomed and by the interest that it has generated. There is evidence of consensus on several issues, such as the guiding principles, ending the test, the value of the pupil profile

and the value of collaboration among schools, including grammar schools. There are also concerns about the practicalities of other issues, including the admissions criteria, details of the pupil profile and the operation of the collegiates. Those issues, and the central issue of selection using academic ability, are vital to the future of our education system, and it is important that the debate continues.

That said, there is no doubt that grammar schools have made a massive contribution towards academic achievement through the years. However, there is a debate about academic selection: less than one third of the cohort who sit the 11-plus go on to grammar school education, and two thirds are consigned to a system that is perceived as being unfair and full of inequalities.

The proposals are very important. The consultation process is ongoing. I expect that there will be wide-ranging responses to the proposals and I will be interested to read those contributions. We shall follow the debate with keen interest to pick up on the various issues raised, not least the one just raised by Mr Kennedy.

This represents a massive challenge for the education sector, the House, the political process and society. Many people, including young people in the Shankill Road and Falls Road areas, and other socially deprived parts of the Six Counties, are depending on their elected representatives getting it right.

Mr Paisley Jnr: I wish Members a happy new year. I hope that the commander is prepared to go to the rioters in north Belfast and persuade them, and his fellow members in Sinn Féin, to stop the rioting for the new year.

Mr Speaker: Order. I ask the Member stick to the substance of his supplementary question.

Mr Paisley Jnr: Is the Minister committed to delivering the Burns proposal on free transport for school children? If so, can he explain to the House how he reconciles that commitment with the cost allocations? Does he agree that the moneys identified for him by the Burns report fall well short of achieving any expectation raised for free transport? Will he admit to the House that he failed to cost that proposal and that those moneys will simply not deliver free transport as promised?

Mr M McGuinness: I advise everybody interested in the debate to make their contributions to the consultation process. Mr Paisley raised several issues concerning school transport. One must remember that the Burns proposals are "the Burns proposals". I am keen to see what contributions are made during the course of the consultation period so that, in conjunction with my Department and the Executive, we can move forward and deal decisively with those important issues.

Mr Speaker: Question 9, standing in the name of Mr Dallat has been withdrawn. I do not see Ms Armitage in her place, so Question 10 falls.

LMS Schemes (Common Funding Formula)

11. **Mr Hussey** asked the Minister of Education, pursuant to his Department's letter of 13 November 2001 to education and library board chief executives on the subject of changes to LMS schemes 2002/03, to detail a common funding formula towards which boards should aspire. (AQO 546/01)

3.00 pm

Mr M McGuinness: A consultation document seeking views on the Department's proposals for a common funding formula was issued to schools and other interested parties on 5 April 2001. The consultation period was extended to 21 September, and there has been a good response across schools of various types. On 4 October I announced that implementation of the common formula will be postponed until April 2003. The decision to postpone allows more time to consider the responses to the consultation in detail, to prepare the legislation and to complete the necessary groundwork and practical arrangements for the implementation of the formula. Work can continue in parallel on several of these issues, and I hope that following further consultation with our education partners, I will be in a position to announce final decisions on the formula in late spring or early summer of this year.

Mr Hussey: If I may diverge for a moment, I want to associate myself with Mr Gibson's remarks about the attacks on the buses in Strabane.

The Minister is well aware that a letter went out to chief executives on 13 November 2001 suggesting that they should be working towards the common formula. Are we being told that the period of consultation is worthless?

Mr M McGuinness: I have outlined the processes put in place to deal with these matters. I am satisfied that things are moving according to plan, and I hope that we can take final decisions about this in late spring or early summer.

HEALTH, SOCIAL SERVICES AND PUBLIC SAFETY

Health and Social Services Councils (Appointments)

1. **Mr McGrady** asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what discussions she held with district councils prior to the appointment of council representatives to health and social services (HSS) councils; and to make a statement. (AQO 549/01)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety (Ms de Brún): A Cheann Comhairle. Ní raibh aon chomhráite agam le comhairlí ceantair. Tá ceart reachtúil ag gach ceann de na 26 chomhairle ar shuíochán amháin ar chomhairle SSS a chlúdaíonn a limistéar geografach, agus tá suíocháin bhreise ag na cinn mhóra de réir a ndaonra.

I ndiaidh na dtoghchán rialtais áitiúil, iarradh ar na comhairlí ceantair uilig ainmniúcháin a chur isteach ar bhallraíocht chomhairle sláinte agus seirbhísí sóisialta. Tá 39 gcomhairleoir ceantair ceaptha agam ó shin.

Déantar gach ceapachán do chomhairlí SSS de réir nósanna imeachta ceapacháin phoiblí mo Roinne; déantar iad a rialú agus a mhonatóireacht ag an Choimisinéir Ceapachán Poiblí.

I did not hold any discussions with district councils. Each of the 26 councils has a statutory right to one seat on the health and social services council that covers its geographical area, with the larger ones having additional seats on the basis of population. Following the local government elections, all district councils were invited to submit nominations for health and social services council membership. I have since appointed 39 district councillors. All appointments to the HSS councils are made in accordance with my Department's public appointment procedures, which are regulated and monitored by the Commissioner for Public Appointments.

Mr McGrady: I thank the Minister for her reply and the appointments made to the health and social services councils, which are purely advisory bodies. Will the Minister consider the extension of democracy to where it counts — the health and social services boards, from which local government representation was withdrawn by the Health and Personal Social Services (Northern Ireland) Order 1991? In her review of the situation, will she take on board the need for having elected representatives on the decision-making boards for health and social services, and thus restore that element of democracy that has been missing for 10 years?

Ms de Brún: If Mr McGrady had wished to ask a question about boards, it would have been a good idea to do so before, rather than wait until today to ask a supplementary on a question that is clearly about the health and social services councils.

The Member will know that the health and social services boards, trusts and all other elements of public administration will be looked at as part of the review of public administration that the Executive intend to undertake. On several occasions I have explained to the House how we will proceed with the element referred to in the acute hospitals review on the structures of health and social services. Therefore, how we regard the health and social services structures will be considered in the context of the Executive's stated position on the review of all public administration here.

Mr J Kelly: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. Is the Minister satisfied that enough people at grass-roots community level are coming forward for public appointments?

Ms de Brún: The idea of public appointments is clearly that people should be appointed on merit. It is important to understand that the question of merit in this context is not limited to business or professional expertise. Appointment opportunities are open to people with non-traditional career paths, experience of voluntary or community work or direct experience of the problems faced by service users. I am keen to have such people on the various public bodies.

In pursuance of my wish to attract more candidates with experience at grass-roots community level, and to encourage more applications from women, disabled people, ethnic minorities and people from outside the Greater Belfast area, my Department has raised public awareness through major press advertisements, by targeting local advertising in community magazines and professional publications, and through the delivery of presentations to various community and interest groups and information stands at major conferences. I want to encourage a wider section of the community to apply for appointments.

In order to achieve that, my Department holds interviews locally or reimburses travel expenses so that people who are unemployed or on a low income are not unnecessarily disadvantaged. All possible outreach measures are being used, and I can only take the opportunity once again to appeal to those from a wider spectrum to put themselves forward in order to carry out that essential work in our public bodies.

Equality Agenda (Payment for Nursing Services by the Elderly)

2. **Rev Robert Coulter** asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety, taking into consideration that the elderly are the only section of the community who are compelled to pay for nursing services, to explain how this anomaly relates to section 75 of the equality agenda. (AQO 550/01)

Ms de Brún : Tá ceanglas reachtúil ann faoi láthair de bhua alt 15 agus alt 36 den Ordú Sláinte agus Seirbhísí Sóisialta agus Pearsanta (Tuaisceart Éireann) 1972, i gcás ina gcuirtear cónaitheach i dteach altránais agus ina mbainistíonn bord sláinte agus seirbhísí sóisialta cúram go ndéanfaí é nó í a mheasúnú faoi na Rialacháin Sláinte agus Seirbhísí Sóisialta agus Pearsanta (Measúnú Acmhainní) (Tuaisceart Éireann) 1993 maidir lena gcumas íoc as an chúram sin. Bainfidh an reachtaíocht nua atá mé a thabhairt faoi bhráid an Tionóil — An Bille Sláinte agus Seirbhísí Sóisialta agus Pearsanta (Uimh. 1) —

costas chúram altránais i dteach altránais as an mheasúnú sin.

At present there is a statutory requirement by virtue of articles 15 and 36 of the Health and Personal Social Services (Northern Ireland) Order 1972, but where a resident is placed in a nursing home managed by a health and social services board, he or she should be assessed by the Health and Personal Social Services (Assessment of Resources) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 1993 as to ability to pay for that care.

The Health and Personal Social Services (No 1) Bill will remove the cost of nursing care in nursing homes from that assessment. I agree that charging elderly and other vulnerable people for nursing services in nursing homes does not fit easily with the fact that nursing care in all other hospital and community settings is free at the point of delivery.

The elderly are the main users of nursing home care, and they are, therefore, most likely to be affected by the regulations governing financial support for community care. I intend to introduce free nursing care in nursing homes from October 2002. The provision of £4.5 million in the revised Budget for 2002-03 will pay for that change, subject to the successful passage of the necessary legislation.

Rev Robert Coulter: I thank the Minister for her reply — or should I say the two replies — and she has answered my supplementary question with her assurance that she will bring in free nursing care for the elderly. Thank you.

Mr Speaker: Few Members are honest enough to acknowledge when a supplementary has already been answered. They usually take a second bite at the cherry — sometimes on a completely different issue, it has to be said.

Ms Ramsey: I too welcome the Minister's announcement. How many people will benefit from free nursing care?

Ms de Brún : At present, approximately 2,000 people pay for all of their care in registered nursing homes. A further 6,000 are supported by the health and social services boards, and 1,200 receive the special higher rates of income support to pay for their care. Initially, the 2,000 who pay for all of their nursing home care will benefit from the proposed changes in nursing care funding arrangements by up to £5,000 per year.

Hospital Waiting Lists

3. **Mr Armstrong** asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to outline any plans to reduce the waiting list for operations for hip replacements. (AQO 569/01)

Ms de Brún: Is eol domh go bhfuil liosta feithimh suntasach ann do mháinliacht athchur corróige faoi láthair. Bhí méadú ginearálta ar ráchairt ar sheirbhísí ortaipéideacha; mar thoradh air sin agus mar thoradh ar an easpa máinlianna ortaipéideacha, tháinig borradh ar liostaí feithimh.

Rinneadh bearta le plé leis an ardú éilimh sin, lena n-áirítear ardú 50% ar líon na máinlianna ortaipéideacha atáthar a oiliúint agus obráidí a cheannach in Albain.

I am aware that there is a significant waiting list for hip replacement surgery. A general increase in demand for orthopaedic services and the shortage of orthopaedic surgeons have resulted in longer waiting lists. Measures have been taken to deal with the increased demand, including an increase by 50% in the number of orthopaedic surgeons in training, and the purchase of operations in Scotland.

Mr Armstrong: I thank the Minister, but I did not understand the first part of her answer. Will the Minister undertake to place on record in the Assembly Library a list of waiting list times for all categories of operations? The last time that a request for lists was made, those provided were incomplete. Does the Minister agree that not only is there a shortage of money, but there is insufficient staff to care for patients? How will the Minister encourage people to join this important profession?

Ms de Brún: If Mr Armstrong outlines the information on waiting lists that he seeks, I will forward it to him. If he has difficulties with any information that he received in the past, he should tell me. My officials will study Hansard tomorrow to note the information that the Member wants us to forward, and we will ensure that that is provided.

Initiatives designed to reduce waiting lists here include reducing the number of people who fail to keep their appointments. Last year, for example, over 13% of those with outpatient appointments for trauma and orthopaedics failed to keep them. The effect of this is that others are being denied the treatment that they need. The service is also creating alternatives to hospital admission. For example, a pilot initiative in south and east Belfast is aimed at treating people in the community and reducing the need for surgery. It involves ensuring that theatres are operating at maximum capacity and validating lists to ensure that they are accurate.

Mr Armstrong is correct that an increase in resources is one aspect of the staffing problem. As a result of the absence of resources to train staff in the past, there is a lack of orthopaedic surgeons and anaesthetists here and across the NHS. Simultaneously, hospitals are looking for specialists, who are in scarce supply. We are doing all that we can to attract specialists here, and we will make a sustained investment in our services covering future staffing and physical capacity.

Dr Hendron: The Minister will acknowledge that there is a crisis in orthopaedic surgery. The Minister mentioned the need to use operating theatres to their maximum capacity. Aside from those waiting for hip replacement, patients in Craigavon Area Hospital with fractures of the neck of the femur must sometimes wait for a week to be admitted to the Royal Victoria Hospital.

3.15 pm

There are two excellent operating theatres in what is known as the security wing of Musgrave Park Hospital, and I understand — although I am not totally sure — that the Ministry of Defence has given permission to use them. Are those theatres being used, and, if not, are there any plans to use them?

Ms de Brún: Immediate measures taken to alleviate the difficulties include the provision of additional theatre sessions at Musgrave Park Hospital and the utilisation of the Duke of Connaught unit on the Musgrave Park Hospital site. One major difficulty we had recently was the virus affecting the Royal Victoria Hospital fractures department and its knock-on effects. The Musgrave Park Hospital site has had to help out with fracture surgery, and that will have a knock-on effect on the activity of elective orthopaedic surgery. However, to minimise that knock-on effect, additional sessions are being arranged at the hospital.

Mr B Hutchinson: I was interested that the Minister said that there is a lack of resources. Does she not agree that the money would be better spent if there were some sort of restructuring? If we did not have the 19 chief executives in the trusts that run the Health Service, their wages would pay for 400 hip replacements a year. Getting rid of their 19 personal assistants would pay for another 150 hip replacements. The Minister said that she had obtained resources. From which Department were those resources taken to be put into orthopaedic surgery?

Ms de Brún: I bid for resources — I do not bid against any other Department. However, I notice that sometimes when Members ask for extra resources they want the resources to remain in all other Departments and to come to mine at the same time. Unfortunately, the Executive cannot facilitate that. I cannot, therefore, say from which Department resources were taken, because I have not taken resources from anyone. I have bid for resources to carry out vital work in health and social services, and I sincerely hope that all Members who have asked for those services to be improved will also applaud the allocation of funding to see those improvements carried out. We will need much more of those resources in the future.

Almost every time that I have come before the Assembly I have outlined that there is a process which the Executive have decided on to review public admin-

istration. Within that, we will be looking at the structures of the health and social services. In the short term some of that restructuring might cost more, and in the longer term some of it might produce savings. I have no doubt that savings can be achieved through restructuring in some areas.

Restructuring, however, will not generate enough money to make up for the £190 million that was taken out of health and social services by the Conservative Government in the 1980s and 1990s. That reduction in funding has resulted in a massive lack of capacity in the service today, affecting staff and staff training, beds, equipment and services in the community that could prevent people from having to go into hospital. No amount of restructuring can make up for that. People should not hold on to some idea that there is another way around the present lack of capacity other than putting capacity back in. That is the way forward.

We will do what we can. We will examine the structures, and I have outlined on numerous occasions how that work is advancing in conjunction with the Executive. In addition, and in the context of severe financial constraints, my Department has undertaken several measures to increase efficiency. It is to be hoped that that will make savings in the coming year which can be ploughed back into the service. We know that we need to help ourselves. However, the basic problem remains that in the 1980s and 1990s an amount of money, equating to £190 million at today's prices, was taken out of the Health Service baseline. In spite of that, in the past five years we have treated 10% more patients and produced 27% more community care packages. We have treated more people, increased the number of intensive care unit beds and produced more childcare places.

Mr Speaker: I draw the attention of the House to the fact that we have made it through only three questions so far. I hope that in the time remaining we can make it through a few more.

Nutrition and Health Awareness Promotion

4. **Mr Gallagher** asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety if her targets are being met in promoting awareness of nutrition and health, especially among the less well off. (AQO 589/01)

Ms de Brún: Léirigh suirbhéanna a choimisiúnaigh an Ghníomhaireacht um Chur Chun Cinn Sláinte gur tháinig feabhas suntasach ar an tuiscint atá ag daoine ar na teachtaireachtaí tábhachtacha ar chothú agus sláinte. Tá an cothú ar cheann de na réimsí tosaíochta a sainíodh i gclár sláinte poiblí an Choiste Feidhmiúcháin 'Infheistiúocht do Shláinte', a fhoilseofar san Earrach. Mar chuid den chlár sin déanfaidh mo Roinn athbhreithniú ar an straitéis bia agus cothaithe faoi Aibreán 2003.

Surveys commissioned by the Health Promotion Agency have demonstrated a significant increase in awareness and understanding of key messages on nutrition and health. Nutrition is one of the priority areas identified in the Executive's public health programme, 'Investing For Health', which will be published in the spring. As part of this programme, my Department will review the food and nutrition strategy by April 2003.

The inclusion of specific targets for promoting awareness will be considered in the development of the new strategy. We continue to work to promote the messages among the less well off. The Health Promotion Agency has developed a community-based nutrition education programme, 'Cook It', targeted at low-income families. It has also worked with the Department of Education to produce new nutritional standards for school meals — standards which were issued for consultation last month.

Mr Gallagher: Does the Minister accept that information about these targets is so hard to find in her Department that many members of the public know nothing about them? In view of the recent report on poor health, which indicated that the gap between the health of the rich and that of the poor is widening, will she undertake to make the information more widely available in her Department, throughout the trusts and from the Health Promotion Agency?

Ms de Brún: Mr Gallagher will be happy to know that surveys undertaken by the Health Promotion Agency show that people have an increased knowledge of the information available to them about nutrition and the problems that are of concern to him. Respondents in the 1994 survey did not show the same awareness as those in the most recent survey.

I am happy to say that several actions have been taken to promote healthy eating in early life, both by my own Department and by the Department of Education. Nutritional guidelines have been issued to support the work of the early years teams with under-5s in childcare. Schools offer an ideal venue for educating children about nutrition. Many schools have acknowledged this and have developed and implemented initiatives such as breakfast clubs, healthy snacking schemes, lunchtime schemes and healthy eating days organised in association with school meals staff. My Colleague, Martin McGuinness, talked about the nutritional standards for school meals, which were issued by the Department of Education for consultation on 12 December 2001. A considerable amount of work has been done to raise awareness.

In addition, the ministerial group on public health, which is considering inequalities in health, will look at this.

Mr McClarty: What effect will recent increases in meals-on-wheels charges have on the Minister's nutrition and health targets? This is the second increase in the past 12 months.

Ms de Brún: Those who commission meal services, whether in the hospital setting or through meals-on-wheels, will take account of the need to produce nutritional food at all times.

Ms Gildernew: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. What is the Minister doing to promote nutrition on an all-Ireland basis? I take this opportunity to congratulate her, her Department and the Health Promotion Agency on the graphic new anti-smoking advertisement.

Ms de Brún: The Food Safety Promotion Board, the all-Ireland body set up as part of the Good Friday Agreement, has established a working group comprising interested parties north and south to discuss the development of a food and nutrition forum. The group first met on 10 December 2001 and will meet again on 5 February 2002. Terms of reference are being developed for the forum, which will provide a more focused and effective dissemination of information on nutrition to the public on an all-Ireland basis. We hope to build on our successes in other areas, such as promoting awareness of the benefits of folic acid.

Health Service Funding

5. **Mr Savage** asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety if she plans to have an evaluation study to examine the deployment and effectiveness of all the additional finance invested in the Health Service in the past year. (AQO 547/01)

Ms de Brún: Déantar na cuspóirí ar a gcaitear an t-airgead breise a mhonatóireacht go dlúth in aghaidh spriocanna cuí. Mar shampla, cuireadh na hacmhainní uilig atá leagtha amach le seirbhísí breise a chur ar fáil i gcomparáid le hardú costais na seirbhísí faoi láthair ar leataobh laistigh de chreatlach an Chláir do Rialtas trínár gcomhaontú seirbhíse poiblí agus tríd na Tosaíochtaí le haghaidh Gníomhaíochta níos sonraí atá dírithe ar an SSSP go forleathan.

The purposes for which additional money is spent is a matter that is closely monitored against appropriate targets. For example, all resources designed to provide additional services, as opposed to the rising costs of existing services, have been earmarked in the Programme for Government framework through our public service agreement and the more detailed priorities for action, which have been directed at the wider health and personal social services. The outputs generated by those investments are monitored quarterly and are the subject of regular discussion with the area boards. Consideration of the effectiveness with which the Department's money is spent is an integral part of our existing procedures. I am, therefore, satisfied that no separate evaluation study is necessary.

Mr Savage: The Minister will agree that one of the most worrying aspects associated with additional finance

allocated to the Health Service over the past year is that it is a one-off payment that is unrepeatable. In the light of that, what steps has the Minister taken to significantly alter the balance of expenditure between direct clinical spending and administration costs?

Ms de Brún: I thank Mr Savage for his supplementary question. First, I absolutely agree with his point that although additional resources are welcome, the problem with money that is received in-year through the various monitoring rounds is that it is one-off money. It will not be in our baseline the following year, and so the service cannot make longer-term plans on the strength of it.

The nature of health and social services work is that it ought to provide a continuous service, maintaining standards and accessibility of service throughout the year. We cannot enter prudently into longer-term commitments that would require a multi-annual baseline increase with in-year money. In the absence of greater certitude about future funding levels, long-term planning is difficult, if not impossible.

The boards and trusts know that balance is necessary between administration and clinical services, and we have a situation where no more than 2% is being spent on administration costs in one board area and no more than 4.5% in others. Even within those administration cost figures, activities such as taking out files to hand to front-line staff account for some of those costs. Those activities would have to be carried out by front-line staff if support staff were not in post.

Mrs Courtney: I too welcome the Minister's response, but considering that we still hear hardship stories on a daily basis, is she satisfied that the current monitoring system is sufficient to ensure that the money is being focused where it is most needed?

3.30 pm

Ms de Brún: I am satisfied that the monitoring management arrangements that I have put in place are sufficient. That has also been stated by independent financial consultants. The Department has tight control over the allocation of resources from the Programme for Government, where my priorities for action are published and which sets out the key priorities for the service. The resources that are needed to deliver those priorities have all been ring-fenced this year, and no discretion is allowed for their deployment elsewhere.

Boards were required to set out in their service investment plans how they intend to deploy the additional resources. Similarly, trusts have to set that out in service delivery plans. There are regular progress meetings with the boards, which enable the Department to keep track of where the money is going. Should boards wish to redeploy some of the ring-fenced funds, they must first get the Department's approval. There is no room for complacency, and regular monitoring

takes place, so the Department knows where money is being allocated and can keep track of it.

Mr S Wilson: The Minister has stated that she does not believe that there is any need for further evaluation of the money that has been allocated to her Department. However, is she not appalled, despite the extra money, that there is still a crisis in the Health Service? When she was given an opportunity by a consultant in Craigavon Area Hospital, why did she refuse to observe the crisis at first hand? She ran away from the challenge rather than face up to the mismanagement that she has had —

Mr Speaker: Order. The Member will resume his seat. I am afraid that not only is the time up, but it is now well past. Therefore, we must bring to a close the questions to the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety.

FINANCE AND PERSONNEL

Public-Private Partnership Working Group

1. **Mr A Maginness** asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel to give an update on the progress of the public-private partnership working group.

(AQO 588/01)

The Minister of Finance and Personnel (Dr Farren):

The working group commenced its review on 26 September 2001, with one steering group and four focus groups involving representatives from the public, private and voluntary sectors as well as trade unions.

The steering group has met twice; first, to initiate the work of the group and secondly, to review progress against its plans. The four focus groups have each met twice in one-day workshops in which a range of relevant issues was addressed. Among the many important sources of evidence and information being considered by the working group is a recent report from the Committee for Finance and Personnel on the use of public-private partnerships (PPPs). I am pleased to report that the group is on target to complete its final report by March 2002.

Mr A Maginness: What criteria are used in assessing value for money for PPPs?

Dr Farren: In assessing the value for money offered by a PPP solution, it is essential to evaluate the cost of service delivery on a whole-life cost basis. That is normally helped by the use of a public sector comparator, which provides a quantitative comparison of a private sector bid in a public-sector-funded alternative. However, in addition to quantitative factors, an assessment has also to be made on qualitative factors such as the value

of risk transfers, any differences in quality of service delivery and differences in timing of service delivery.

Mr Hussey: I welcome Dr Farren to his first Question Time in his new role.

Public-private partnerships entail the use of public money also, and Northern Ireland's infrastructure needs massive investment. Our rail infrastructure highlights the problem that we face. In the light of the recent announcement of massive investment in the rail infrastructure across the water, is there a likelihood of consequential public funding for Northern Ireland?

Dr Farren: In my response to Mr Alban Maginness's supplementary question, I outlined the criteria that are used to assess PPP projects with respect to particular types of scheme, especially that mentioned by Mr Hussey. Responsibility for such a project lies with the Department for Regional Development, which, in the light of such criteria as I mentioned, and together with officials from my Department, would assess whether PPP would be the appropriate approach.

Mr Hussey highlighted the need for considerable investment in infrastructure, including transport provision. The need for investment in transport infrastructure is receiving urgent consideration in the Department for Regional Development, and other Departments are considering such investment according to their areas of responsibility. In the light of our experience of PPPs and of the review on the issue, it is likely that they will continue to feature in the development of our infrastructure.

Mr Molloy: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. I too welcome the Minister to the first Question Time in his new brief.

Will the Minister agree with the point made in the report of the Committee for Finance and Personnel's inquiry into PPPs/PFIs that the best way to provide public services in the present circumstances and financial climate is to use public money?

Dr Farren: The reason for our examination of PPPs through the working group is to determine whether it is appropriate to avail of this form of financing for the provision of public services and infrastructure. If the finance were available from public sources, recourse to PPPs would not be necessary, provided that we could be assured of value for money. That criterion applies equally to PFIs.

Rates Levy

2. **Mr B Bell** asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel if he will undertake to maintain the Executive's proportion of the rates levy within the bounds of inflation.

(AQO 552/01)

Domestic and Non-domestic Regional Rate

5. **Mr Poots** asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel to indicate the income derived for each percentage point above the rate of inflation added to the domestic and non-domestic regional rate.

(AQO 553/01)

Dr Farren: With the Speaker's permission I will take questions 2 and 5 together.

On 11 December 2001, the Assembly approved the Budget proposals for 2002-03, including increases by 7% and 3% in the domestic and non-domestic regional rates respectively. I have no plans to depart from those increases. Each percentage increase above the level of inflation in the domestic and non-domestic regional rates would raise an additional £1.1 million and £2.1 million respectively in revenue. A percentage increase in both rates would generate an extra £3.2 million.

Mr B Bell: I thank the Minister, and I wish to be associated with the remarks of welcome made to him by other Members. Does he agree that the rates levy is a highly inequitable tax, which hits hardest those who are least able to pay it? In the light of that, will he agree to examine other forms of local tax raising powers such as the local purchase taxes and income taxes that are levied in the United States of America? Will the Minister assess the potential of those taxes and, with the Assembly, approach the sovereign Parliament with a view to diversifying and making more equitable the tax regime?

Dr Farren: Members will be aware that a review of the rating system is under way. At present, the Executive are considering moving to wider consultation on the matter. Issues of local revenue raising, such as those mentioned by Mr Bell, might be considered within the context of that review. However, I must point out that, under the Northern Ireland Act 1998, the Assembly and the Executive do not have tax-raising powers. Those might be necessary if we were to move to the forms of revenue raising to which Mr Bell points. There have been debates, both inside and outside the Assembly, on whether the Assembly should acquire such powers. Whether it is desirable that we should have those powers is a matter that rests with the Assembly in the first instance.

Mr Poots: Does the Minister recognise that the current means of raising revenue through rates is a very broad brush and hits those who are most vulnerable in society? By raising the rate by 7%, as opposed to 3%, the Minister is gaining only an additional £4.5 million for his overall Budget of around £6 billion. However, it hurts many older and working-class people, who must put up with a 2% or 3% rise in their income. Will the Minister not review the matter now, instead of

imposing a foreign tax upon the people of Northern Ireland?

Dr Farren: The Member must understand that, having adopted the Budget only a month ago, we should not revisit it now. I accept the point that Mr Poots and Mr Bell made about the inequities that exist in the current rating system. That is one of the reasons for the current review.

Mrs Courtney: Will the Minister confirm that the review of the rating policy, which was agreed by the Executive last year, will consider the question of the regional rate and the most effective way of ensuring a fair system of paying for public services?

Dr Farren: The short and simple answer is "Yes". We must address that matter as widely as possible. It is to be hoped that we will proceed to the wider consultation on the question of the rateable base and the forms of local revenue raising of which we can avail ourselves.

Mr Speaker: As Mrs Iris Robinson is not present in the Chamber, question 3 falls.

Peace II Funding

4. **Mr Douglas** asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel to outline the likely impact on the Limavady local strategy partnership as a result of the proposed Peace II capita allocation for Limavady being reduced from that provided under Peace I funding and declared an interest.

(AQO 560/01)

Mr Speaker: Perhaps the Member would like to acquaint the House with the nature of the interest that he is declaring?

Mr Douglas: I am a member of the Limavady partnership.

3.45 pm

Dr Farren: My predecessor received proposals from the Special EU Programmes Body for the distribution of money available under measures 1 and 2 of priority 3 of the Peace II programme to the 26 local strategy partnerships in Northern Ireland. Proposed allocations were based on a formula consisting of three factors. First, there was the intensity of deprivation in each district council area; secondly, there was the scale of deprivation in the area; and thirdly there was the population of the area. This approach was consistent with the requirements of the Peace II operational programme as agreed with the European Commission, and it was applied consistently across the 26 district council areas. The resulting allocations to individual local strategy partnerships therefore reflect the needs of their areas as assessed in terms of population weighted by deprivation in comparison with other district council areas.

Mr Douglas: I thank the Minister for his answer, and I recognise the fact that he was not in place as Minister of Finance and Personnel when this matter was agreed.

The question is prompted by the fact that Limavady local strategy partnership (LSP) allocation has been reduced by 43% — £900,000 — the largest reduction of any partnership.

In total, £5.2 million has been reallocated from some of the LSPs. They are the most deprived partnership areas, and it has caused deep concern. Is the Minister satisfied that the reallocation is fair and equitable; that it has taken all of the indicators into account; and that it has been carried out with full and proper consultation?

Dr Farren: I am satisfied that the formula as outlined has been applied objectively — as all formulas are intended to be applied. This exercise has been concerned with the allocation of money available under only two measures of the Peace II programme; local economic initiatives for developing the local economy, and locally based human resource training and development strategies. The programme contains a wide range of other measures, including a substantial allocation of almost £46 million targeted specifically at the rural economy and rural population. I point this out because the Limavady district would qualify for description as a district that includes a large rural area.

Further to this, under the building sustainable prosperity programme the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development will implement measures worth over £250 million targeted at agriculture, rural development, forestry and fisheries. Also the LEADER and community initiative programmes will be worth an additional £15 million to the rural sector. All of this reflects considerable emphasis on supporting the rural economy and its population in the new round of European structural funds.

Therefore, it is more appropriate that we consider the allocations being made in a wider context and not simply examine the allocations being made through one or two measures.

Mr Byrne: Does the Minister agree that the Peace II initiative allowed many worthwhile projects and initiatives to develop in the community development sector? Would he outline how he hopes the local strategy partnerships could have a longer-term impact, given that there is less quantum of money being allocated to some district councils under Peace II as compared with Peace I?

Dr Farren: Members may recall comments made by my predecessor in that regard. I take this opportunity to thank those Members who conveyed good wishes to me in the course of asking their questions. My predecessor stressed the very point that Assemblyman Byrne is making: the local strategy partnerships, and the manner in which they are composed and work, can and, indeed, should establish ways of working at local level that

involve both the statutory sector and the community, local government and all the other interests that have become involved in such local partnerships. There may well be a future for them beyond Peace II.

Recreation Centres: Payment of Rates

6. **Mr Armstrong** asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel if he has any plans to reduce the payment of rates for centres of recreation; and to make a statement. (AQO 570/01)

Dr Farren: I have no plans at present to reduce rate payments for recreation centres. However, the current review of rating policy will consider all existing rate reliefs, including relief for sport and recreational facilities.

Mr Armstrong: Equestrian centres should also be recognised as recreation centres. There is an opportunity there to create a product that could be exported world-wide. Will the Minister consider a way in which equestrian centres could also be exempt from paying rates, or at least entitled to some relief? The current rates are strangling those leisure centres. The equestrian industry should be recognised and rightfully supported. The industry would more than compensate for any loss in rate revenue.

Dr Farren: I am not sure that I took in all the points of that supplementary question, but I remind Members that existing legislation permits rate relief on any hall that is used by the wider community. The degree of available relief is in direct proportion to the use of the facility for charitable and broad community purposes. As I said, the review of rating policy will include consideration of all existing reliefs.

Mr Shannon: Will the Minister consider giving some help and assistance, through rates reduction, to Orange halls, which are clearly centres for the community? Many halls have been used for meetings of the Women's Institute, church meetings, farmers' club meetings, dances and parties. Some Orange halls have been used for Irish dancing. Will the Minister consider Orange halls for rates reduction, as they clearly fit into the cross-community category?

Dr Farren: In my response to Mr Armstrong I indicated the general framework within which rate relief is possible. If the framework applies to any particular type of hall, bearing in mind the nature of the uses made of the hall, it may well be that the framework may be applicable to halls managed by the Orange Order.

NICS Human Resources Strategy

7. **Mr Maskey** asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel how the NICS human resources strategy will address the fundamental need to meet the challenges

arising from the establishment of the Northern Ireland Assembly and other political institutions and the interface with public representatives and the public on draft legislation and policy development. (AQO 593/01)

Dr Farren: The Northern Ireland Civil Service human resources strategy, which was recently cleared by the Executive through a written procedure, provides a framework for taking forward the corporate human resource policies and practices that are needed to support the rapidly changing business environment in which the Northern Ireland Civil Service operates.

To ensure that the strategy meets the challenges arising from the establishment of the Northern Ireland Assembly and other political institutions, and the increasing expectations of stakeholders and customers in a rapidly changing business environment, the framework will be underpinned by a rolling human resource strategy action plan. The plan will be based around the four key themes of the strategy: resourcing, learning, inclusion and leadership. The action plan is being developed and will be the subject of consultation with all Departments and the Committee for Finance and Personnel. The action plan will be monitored and evaluated on a regular basis.

Mr Maskey: I join other Members in welcoming the Minister in his first sortie with the Finance and Personnel portfolio. I wish him the best for the future in his role.

Given the stated aims of the Programme for Government in respect of this piece of work in the human resources strategy, would it be appropriate for the Minister to acknowledge that even at this stage, while the work is in hand, senior civil servants should be reminded that there is now a new situation? Ministers are locally elected, and there are locally elected representatives. I refer specifically to a recent situation in south Belfast in which staff from the Water Service completely ignored local community organisations' calls for consultation. While the work outlined by the Minister goes on, it would be worthwhile reminding civil servants that they have a responsibility to those elected representatives and to community organisations in those areas.

Dr Farren: Mr Maskey will appreciate that I am not in a position to comment on the particular instance to which he referred or to what might lie behind it with respect to the general issues raised in his question. However, the answer to his general point is that yes, certainly, the Civil Service is aware of the changing environment, of the demands that have been made by the changes that have taken place over the past two or three years and of the general cultural changes which are consequential to the political changes. That is also my experience of it. From my short Ministerial experience up until now, I want to acknowledge that there is a high level of consciousness in the Civil Service of the nature of those changes and of the consequences in

operation, culture, general attitude and outlook following from them.

Inter-Regional III Programme

8. **Mr O'Neill** asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel what progress has been made in respect of the Inter-Regional III Programme. (AQO 581/01)

Dr Farren: After taking account of the European Commission's comments, the INTERREG operational programme was resubmitted to the Commission in November 2001 and was agreed by the Commission at the end of December 2001. Confirmation of its formal adoption is expected by mid-February of this year.

The Special European Union Programmes Body's managing authority is now developing the programme complement, including more detailed information on the measures and activities and the selection criteria for projects under the programme. In keeping with the recommendations of the action team's report, which was approved by the North/South Ministerial Council in April 2001, the border corridor groups will have a minimum allocation of some £27 million to implement three measures under priority 1 of the programme. Those are integrated local development strategies that incorporate measures for economic and business development, the knowledge economy, human resource development and skilling.

Mr O'Neill: I thank the Minister for his reply and join with others to welcome him to his new position, in which I am confident he will excel.

What is the next stage in the development of the programme? More importantly, when does the Minister expect calls for projects to be made?

Dr Farren: The next stage in the development of the programme is the programme complement. That must be completed and agreed before calls for projects can be made. The programme complement contains more detailed information on how the money allocated to the programme will be spent and must be completed by the Special European Union Programmes Body within three months of the formal adoption of the programme by the Commission. It is therefore expected that calls for projects will begin to be made in April or May.

4.00 pm

Review of Rating Policy

9. **Mrs Nelis** asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel if the current review of rating policy will address the rating inequalities for small indigenous businesses to enable them to compete with larger retailers. (AQO 543/01)

Dr Farren: The current review of rating policy will consider whether small businesses should receive rate relief. It will also consider the impact that any change in the basis of evaluation may have on that sector of the economy.

Mrs Nelis: I too congratulate the Minister on his appointment. Will the review of rating policy give necessary consideration to the fact that many small businesses have closed, especially in the Foyle constituency, because they were unable to compete? Will it address the serious question of inequality?

Dr Farren: I emphasise that the review of rating policy, which has been referred to several times, is being driven to a considerable extent by a clear realisation that there are inequities in the present system. The Executive are anxious that those should be eliminated. If small businesses are affected by inequities, that is a matter for the review to address — in what format remains to be seen.

Comptroller and Auditor General's Reports

10. **Mr Dallat** asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel what plans he has to ensure reports prepared by the Comptroller and Auditor General are agreed by Departments in the shortest possible timescale; and to make a statement. (AQO 583/01)

Dr Farren: It is important that Departments agree reports that are prepared by the Comptroller and Auditor General as quickly as is practicable. Although the time taken to agree those reports is of great importance, of equal importance is the need to ensure that they are factually correct before being laid before the Assembly and considered by the Public Accounts Committee. That is a vital element of the accountability process.

Mr Speaker: Time is up for questions to the Minister of Finance and Personnel so Mr Dallat will not be able to ask a supplementary question.

PRIVATE NOTICE QUESTION

North Belfast

Mr Speaker: This morning, at the commencement of business, a Member asked me about recognising the terrible events in north Belfast in the past week and the murder of postman Mr Daniel McColgan. I advised the House that discussions were under way on the best way to recognise those matters — not merely as a reflex action, but in a considered way.

There are a number of procedures through which the House could properly address such a matter with urgency. An emergency motion is not a possibility, as Members know from our procedures. However, one possibility is a private notice question, which is, in effect, an emergency question. It is possible, if a question is put down, in this case to the Office of the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister, for the Speaker to accept that question to be answered on that day.

However, in the normal course of events, there is one disadvantage with that procedure. Normally, it is only the Member who puts the question down who has the opportunity to ask a supplementary question. On occasion, the Chairperson of the relevant Committee may also be permitted to do so. However, in discussions with the Office of the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister, there was clearly a sense that, as this was an occasion of such gravity, we should depart from the normal conventions and give the Member who put down the question, and other Members from the North Belfast constituency, the opportunity to put a supplementary question to the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister.

I trust that the grieving family, friends and colleagues of Mr McColgan will understand that in doing that, the Assembly has moved away from normal procedures and conventions because of its wish, not only to recognise the matter — and not only to do so in silence — but to say something and to recognise what has happened.

Mr G Kelly asked the Office of the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister what initiatives it is taking to address the terrible situation in North Belfast, which has resulted in pupils of Holy Cross Primary School and other school children suffering sectarian harassment, intimidation and serious threats to their safety.

The First Minister (Mr Trimble): I would like to express my horror and disgust at the return of sectarian violence to the streets of Belfast, and in particular, at the murder of Daniel McColgan in Rathcoole. I speak on behalf of the Deputy First Minister and, I am sure, the entire Assembly. Such sectarian attacks have no place in a civilised society, and we condemn those responsible.

In the past few days we have seen widespread street disturbances. Much of the violence has been focused on the security forces. Attacks on school property have spread across the area, and threats have been made against teachers and other school workers. Such threats against people who serve the community are totally reprehensible.

All children have the right to go to school, free from the threat of violence and intimidation. No grievance justifies the denial of that right, and no cause can be advanced by it.

Security and policing are the responsibility of the Northern Ireland Office and the police. We, like the rest of society, want to do everything that we can to assist. The Executive remain committed to doing all that they can to resolve the situation. Members will recall that a series of measures were announced in November and December, including a North Belfast Community Action Project; improvements to housing; traffic calming measures; educational measures to address the immediate needs of schools in the area; and steps to rebuild community relationships and support vital youth services. We are determined to advance those measures as quickly as possible. Members — especially those from North Belfast — will be aware of the work that our officials are doing on behalf of the Executive to ensure that those measures are introduced urgently. Members will also know that the Minister of Education met representatives from a wide range of educational interests this morning. In addition, the Deputy First Minister and I met a delegation from the Irish Congress of Trade Unions (ICTU). We understand the concerns that were raised by those organisations on behalf of their members.

The key to tackling the underlying division is dialogue. We are conscious of the sensitivity and delicacy of the situation. However, one basic truth is that everyone must advance together, if another cycle of hatred and violence is to be avoided. We are prepared to offer any assistance necessary to support a process of dialogue, but ultimately it is up to local community interests to grasp the opportunity.

Mr G Kelly: I send my condolences to Daniel McColgan's family. I thank the First Minister for his answer. I am aware of the North Belfast Community Action Group and its six-month remit. We have met with that group. David Trimble acknowledged that the local MLAs were doing their best to deal with the situation.

The problem is too immediate to be dealt with by that group's remit. There is a Loyalist commission, that was given some fanfare a while ago, which involves the UDA, paramilitary groups, church leaders and members of the UVF.

Have the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister been involved in talks with them? Do we know what their intentions are? There is now a threat to all Catholic workers in north Belfast, and people are worried about

what will happen in the immediate future. What pressure can be applied to them? It is not down to the British Government alone to apply pressure. There is little confidence in what they have done, after 300 bomb and gun attacks on Catholics. There is a worry about what we are doing, and about what people of influence in the Unionist community are doing, to try to prevent those attacks on our people. Has anyone spoken to the Loyalist commission? Do we have actions that would "out" them, or force them to speak publicly on the matter and to withdraw the threats against Catholics in that area?

The Deputy First Minister (Mr Durkan): I join Mr Kelly in extending sincere condolences to the McColgan family and to all his colleagues in the postal service. Mr Kelly is aware, as are the other Members for North Belfast, of the work that officials from the Office of the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister have carried out, and of how that relates to the work of other Departments. Security and policing are not the responsibility of the devolved Administration. However, I have no hesitation in expressing my support for effective policing action against the threats and attacks, and the organisations that are responsible for them. I hope that everyone in the House shares that view.

It is important to recognise that the most effective way in which Members can bring pressure to bear on the situation is by speaking with one voice. It is important that we try to do so on this occasion, despite the fact that there will be differing interpretations of the problem and that people will focus on different aspects of it. We must make it clear that we reject those who are behind the attacks and threats. Such attacks should not be seen as having been made on one section of the community, but rather as an affront to the whole community. I hope that the political representatives in the Chamber will make that clear.

I have had no direct engagement with the Loyalist commission. The First Minister and I issued statements at the weekend, not only condemning the murder, but calling specifically for the lifting of the threats against teachers, other education employees and postal workers. I am sure that this afternoon's exchange will prove that we speak not only for ourselves, but for the entire body politic in the Chamber.

Mr Dodds: I am sure that Members for North Belfast are grateful that a ruling has been made to allow other Members to ask the Office of the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister supplementary questions. I wish to reiterate what I know to be the view of all right-thinking people in north Belfast and further afield: the callous, brutal and unjustifiable murder of Danny McColgan is not only a terrible tragedy for that young man's family, it serves to raise real fears and tensions in both sides of the community in north Belfast and beyond. Nothing can justify such a murderous attack.

I am sure that the Office of the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister will agree that the threats that have been issued and the attacks that have been carried out on vital workers in a range of services are deplorable. Those who issue such threats are not doing so on behalf of the majority; almost everyone in society abhors such activity.

4.15 pm

Furthermore, will the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister accept, unlike Mr Gerry Kelly who tabled the question, and who only referred to Holy Cross Girls' Primary School, that the Assembly is already on record as saying that all school children, Protestant and Roman Catholic, must be protected as they go to and from school, and while they are in school. Can we make it absolutely clear — *[Interruption]*.

Mr Speaker: Order. Mr G Kelly has a point of order. I believe I know what the point of order is, but I shall allow him to make it.

Mr G Kelly: The question did refer to all school children, even though Holy Cross was mentioned.

Mr Speaker: It was the case that it included more than the school children of Holy Cross — it included other children.

Mr Dodds: Only one school was mentioned. The Assembly is already on record as saying in a previous debate that all school children, Protestant and Catholic, must have proper protection on the way to and from school, and while in school, and that goes for staff as well. Today there has been a bomb threat against the Boys' Model School from an organisation using a recognised code word. Likewise, we have seen children from the Protestant community threatened and their rights abused.

Therefore, I ask the Office of the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister to ensure, in its talks with the security forces and the Northern Ireland Office, that there is equality of security for everybody in north Belfast — adults and children alike — and that a number of issues raised by Members from that area about CCTV and proper resources for policing in the flashpoint and interface areas are endorsed strongly by them. Wearing my ministerial hat, I also express my support for the work going on through the community action project.

The First Minister: I thank Mr Dodds for his question and, indeed, for his general comments condemning the murder and deploring the threats made to all schools. As the wording of the question suggests, we are discussing the issue in the context of school children in north Belfast generally, and are aware that it is not only one school or segment of the community that faces threats and attacks — unfortunately, they happen in general. One of the depressing aspects of last week's events

was how serious trouble quickly developed from very small beginnings — very small incidents. The speed with which riots developed and threats were extended is disturbing.

We also note that threats to emergency services, especially the Ambulance Service, were in existence before last week's events, and the threats to other public servants have simply reinforced the matter. We do have a degree of contact with the security forces. Mr Dodds will have noted the comments made by Assistant Chief Constable McQuillan today, in the course of an interview on the situation, and we hope that his confidence about the ability to deal with it is well founded. Like him, we are glad that there has been a relatively quiet weekend, and we hope that that will hold true as we go into the week.

Resources for policing are a matter for the police. CCTV has been mentioned, and I understand that the police are looking for the best location. The presence of CCTV in other circumstances, and in other places, has made a significant contribution. Of course, this is an operational matter for the police, but if it comes within our purview, we will do all we can to assist.

Mention has been made of the Loyalist commission. Members will have seen the full text of a statement issued by the commission in the 'News Letter' this morning and will welcome the express call in that statement for calm and an end to street confrontation. I am sure that we would all like to see that.

Mr Cobain: We are in danger of adopting an almost tit-for-tat attitude towards the violence. All violence should be condemned completely, and this is clearly not a one-sided issue. As Mr Dodds has said, there are ongoing attacks on the Protestant community, and it is important that people have a proper perspective on the problems. MLAs should give whatever help and assistance they can in that area.

Can the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister tell the House how both communities have reacted to their recent initiative, and can they give Members some indication of progress on the various issues that were raised by both communities?

The Deputy First Minister: First, I join with Mr Cobain in underscoring the point that if we are condemning violence, we all have to condemn all of the violence, all of the threats and all of the sectarianism — whoever the victims or the perpetrators may be, whatever names the perpetrators work under and whatever the code words are that they use. We all must be clear on that.

Regarding the community reaction to the range of measures that was shared with all the community interests in recent months, there was a broad welcome for the package of proposals and the work that was to

be done. That was not because it was a fully fledged package in itself, but because it set out the various issues that needed to be explored, and the mechanisms and means that would give, not only Government, but the communities the capacity to do that. There was a broad welcome, not so much for the content of the package, but for the context that it appeared to be part of — seeing an end to the protest, allowing a school to get back to business and allowing families to try to restore some sense to their lives. It also allows the communities to address the different problems that affect them.

People have shown an eagerness to work well with the community action project to make progress at various levels. We wish, in particular, to encourage dialogue at community level, and to support any efforts to establish a community forum.

Mr Cobain raised some specific measures towards the end of his questions, including the road ramps for the Ardoyne Road and Hesketh Road areas. The first ramps were installed last Monday. However, work was temporarily suspended on Wednesday. Contractors have been asked to recommence work as soon as possible. Obviously, the design has been completed, and the statutory processes have been gone through.

Regarding the Alliance Avenue intersection, work is generally on track, but there are issues concerning liaison and brokerage with the local community interests that need to be addressed. Relevant communications are continuing in that regard. The Department for Regional Development and its Roads Service are handling the work in that area.

Other related measures on traffic calming are also on track, with design work under way and with the appropriate consultation to follow. The work on the community action challenge is continuing, and I note the Member's, and the Minister's, specific support for that work. All of us need to understand and appreciate the role that the community action project has. Some sections of the media misunderstood the role and remit of the project. In an area as delicate and complex as this, it is important to appreciate fully the specific roles that people are undertaking.

On other issues, Members will be aware of the range of education support measures that were announced by the Minister of Education following the Executive meeting before Christmas to help schools and youth services across north Belfast. There have also been several follow-through issues on the social services side, with some involving other services as well.

Mr A Maginness: I welcome the united condemnation by the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister of the sectarian murder of Daniel McColgan, and their absolute rejection of threats to anyone, especially teachers and school children in north Belfast. That example is important for the whole community and particularly for

the suffering family of Daniel McColgan. It is a good example of one voice speaking for the community. Long may that continue.

I also welcome the meeting that the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister have had with representatives from the ICTU. What progress, if any, was made with the trade union movement on using an opportunity to express publicly the united opposition of the trade union movement to threats on public sector workers? Is it a matter of urgency for the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister to set up a cross-community forum to create a genuine and sustained dialogue between the two communities that could lead to a permanent solution to the problems of sectarianism that have bedevilled north Belfast for so many generations?

The First Minister: The Member has raised a couple of issues, including the meeting that we had with the ICTU. That meeting was notable in that its representatives were joined by the national general secretary of the Communication Workers Union, who had come over for the occasion. It is a mark of the seriousness with which the Communication Workers Union regards the weekend's appalling murder that he has come here.

The ICTU is planning its own measures; it will hold a two-minute silence tomorrow at the time of the funeral and it also plans rallies on Saturday. The Member will understand my caution because we could not be seen to be supporting or calling for what amounts to strike action on Friday. People will want to take whatever measures they can to show their support for what is happening.

The Member also mentioned dialogue in north Belfast. Dialogue is important and we have encouraged that where we can. There are two aspects to that, and it is sometimes difficult to keep those two aspects separate in one's mind. First, there is the question of the community representatives from Ardoyne, upper Ardoyne, and the Glenbryn and Hesketh area whom we met in November. We encouraged them to work toward the establishment of a joint community forum in their area. Our senior liaison officer, who is mostly based in the Crumlin Road area, has been in regular discussion with both communities on this issue. The communities are in contact, and discussions are going ahead.

Some informal meetings have taken place, but it must be left to local people to develop the forum. Last week, we made it clear that we are ready to offer assistance and to facilitate development. We also offered to support mediation if that is the appropriate way forward. Our basic stance is to encourage the communities to develop. We hope that that will move forward appropriately.

In addition to that community forum action, there is development under the aegis of the North Belfast Community Action Project that deals with the development of a strategy for community and social issues across

north Belfast. There have been discussions with elected and community representatives about the development of that strategy. Through the work of the project, elected and community representatives will contribute to the development of a plan and a community forum.

4.30 pm

It would be nice if those forums were up and running now. People have not been slow in developing them, and progress has been made since November. It is unfortunate that violence broke out last week, but the development of the forums will go ahead; I look forward to their establishment.

Mr B Hutchinson: Thank you, Mr Speaker, for giving us the opportunity to ask a supplementary question.

I send my condolences to young Daniel's family, the postal workers with whom he worked, and his colleagues in the Communication Workers Union. This young man was killed early on Saturday morning for no other reason than that he was a Catholic. He attended Hazelwood Integrated Primary School and Hazelwood Integrated College in north Belfast. That brings it home to us that a young man, who spent his life in integrated education, mixing with Protestants and those from other religions, was cut down in his prime at the age of 20. Integrated education did not help him.

I thank the Executive and the Office of the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister for the measures that have been taken, and for what has happened so far.

Over the weekend there was much talk of threats against teachers, and about whether threats were made. We need to value teachers, irrespective of their religion or the type of school in which they work. They teach today's children, who are tomorrow's adults; some of those children will one day become leaders and will sit in this Chamber.

Do the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister believe that the initiative led by Rev Dunlop is focused on the right issues? Do they believe that the methodology used lends itself to drawing up wish lists for community development? Would it not be better to focus on relationships between the two traditions in north Belfast, working on a micro level now rather than on a macro level in six months' time?

The Deputy First Minister: I thank the Member for his questions and, in particular, for his earlier remarks about how brutal and futile the murder at the weekend was. That view is shared by all of us in the Chamber.

The role of the community action project is to deal with the issues that were expressed by a range of interested parties during the contact work by the First Minister, our officials and me. We want to make progress in that regard. As Billy Hutchinson pointed out, some issues do not reflect only the separate and diverse

community needs, they raise the need to develop dialogue and better community relations. We want to do that; we therefore support the development of community forums as a means of providing that dialogue at all levels to deal with all the issues.

The community action project will not simply be a vehicle for drawing up a wish list. It is an effort to ensure that communities feel that they are being empowered and enabled to deal with the issues that affect, concern and frustrate them. It is hoped that they will have a real and meaningful sense that the Government will be good partners and supporters in that regard. It is not only important that people try to achieve mutual respect and trust, people in north Belfast need a sense of assurance that all the diverse authorities, be they devolved or otherwise, have a real sense of people's anxieties, fears and hurts. That applies to all sections of the community in north Belfast.

The community action project is just one contribution. It is not the sole contribution or response to the problems that exist, just as it cannot fall only to the devolved Administration to respond to the problems.

Mr Agnew: I join in the condemnation of the brutal murder at the weekend. It took place inside the boundaries of Newtownabbey Borough Council, an area that I have represented and know very well. It was cowardly, stupid and idiotic. From a purely Loyalist point of view it was self-defeating. There are no words that can be used to adequately condemn the senseless killing of this young man.

It is ironic that on a gable wall in the Republican Bawnmore estate adjacent to the Longlands area, there is a slogan that says "White City prepare for another death". That type of sinister slogan does nothing but create and add to the tension that exists in the area. At this time the people in the White City area of Belfast are on the edge. They are tense and worried, because they are constantly under attack. As I have said in the past, it is a city under siege.

Tomorrow's funeral will go past their front doors. That has thrown up security worries. What happens if some Republican activists latch on to this funeral? What happens if, as they have done in the past, they use schoolchildren for their own political ends? Is there going to be further trouble in the White City? Are the people of the White City going to be afforded the protection that they need? One of the difficulties we have had in north Belfast — *[Interruption]*.

Mr Speaker: Order. I normally take points of order. On a previous occasion there was a clear point of clarification that was necessary.

Mr G Kelly: On a point of order, Mr Speaker.

Mr Speaker: I will take your point of order. However, I suggest to the House that it continue in the composed fashion that it has entertained up until now.

Mr G Kelly: I will take that as read. Other people were given a chance to ask questions of the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister. The Member has not used that opportunity.

Mr Speaker: I trust I have made it clear what I think is the wish of the House, and that is to continue in the composed way in which this difficult and sensitive matter has been addressed up until now.

Mr Agnew: I was simply going on to say that although I welcome many of the well-meaning and positive projects that are in place in north Belfast, I believe that one of the difficulties is that the infrastructure cannot be put in place overnight. In many respects, we need a quick fix that can restore the confidence lost by the community in north Belfast.

For example, the Police Service does not like static patrols in north Belfast. However, a static patrol can give confidence to the people living in some of those areas. I wonder whether the Executive and the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister could take that on board. Infrastructure cannot be put in place overnight, but is there some sort of quick fix available to ensure that something could happen in the short term?

The First Minister: In his comments, Mr Agnew dwelt on the tension that undoubtedly exists in many parts of north Belfast. There is a very real concern, shared across the House, that the violence should end and that we should not find ourselves in a spiral of tit-for-tat violence. There is no doubt about the tension or the serious reasons for it. One can only appeal to people to be calm, to restrain from using violence whatever the circumstances and, indeed, not to be on the streets in the evening unless it is absolutely necessary. Where possible, there is a need for parents to keep children who might otherwise get involved in violence at home. The past week has demonstrated how even comparatively small incidents can quickly develop into large-scale violence.

Mr Agnew spoke of a quick fix to create confidence. I wish that it were possible. If there were anything that we could do quickly to produce that result, it would be done. Since November, the Administration have brought forward measures to try to inject confidence into the community by showing that we are aware of the problems — several of which are of long standing — that they have our sympathetic concern and active involvement in the matter and that we have done what we can to create confidence. One ray of encouragement from last week's event is that there has not been a resumption of the protest at the Holy Cross Girls' School in the Hesketh area. There was concern and

fear that there was violence in the neighbourhood, but the protest that had been operating there until November did not resume. We are glad of that, and we are glad that folk there have exercised restraint.

I should repeat what I said in an interview last week, and it should have been said earlier today: we appreciate the work of so many community workers in north Belfast. We appreciate what the area's MLAs have done to encourage restraint and to deliver confidence to their communities and supporters. We want to encourage that good work.

Mr Speaker: Before we return to the normal business of the Order Paper, I ask the House, having in this exceptional way expressed in words its concern and feelings about the events of the last week, to stand for a minute in reflection on these and all the matters that have been spoken about and, particularly, in condolence with the family of Mr Daniel McColgan.

Members observed one minute's silence.

CRIMINAL JUSTICE REFORM

Debate resumed on motion:

That this Assembly notes the Report of the Ad Hoc Committee on Criminal Justice Reform (02/01/R), established by resolution on 19 November 2001, and agrees that it be submitted to the Secretary of State as a Report of the Northern Ireland Assembly. — *[The Chairperson of the Ad Hoc Committee on Criminal Justice Reform (Mr Dalton)]*.

(Madam Deputy Speaker [Ms Morrice] in the Chair)

Ms McWilliams: The review on criminal justice was part of the Good Friday Agreement. At the time I said that policing and criminal justice should be discussed together, because I do not always think that the citizens of Northern Ireland realise that if we do not get the criminal justice system right, there is no point in concentrating on policing alone. I am concerned that, to date, there has not been the same public debate on criminal justice as there has been on policing — *[Interruption]*.

Madam Deputy Speaker: Order.

Ms McWilliams: I want to consider the appointments, training, transparency and accountability of the judiciary. Representation and the symbolic nature of emblems have been discussed, as has the implementation of the recommendations; however, a matter that has received little attention so far is witnesses and victims and the services provided for them in the courts.

4.45 pm

I welcome the criminal justice review's recommendations on judicial appointments. Indeed, they are long overdue in Northern Ireland. I have also looked at the Northern Ireland Court Service's screening policies, and I am concerned that some of the recommendations seem to be taken more seriously than others. Needless to say, the law profession is more concerned that both barristers and solicitors should be considered for future appointments.

However, the numbers of people from ethnic minorities and women in senior judicial positions have not been dealt with in the debate so far. The Northern Ireland Court Service's screening policies on the issue of equity highlight the issues of religion and ethnic minorities, but they do not pay the same attention to disability or gender. I am concerned that they say that these recommendations will positively contribute to fairer participation in future but that no impact assessment is required on the eligibility criteria or equity monitoring, and yet on the issues of the oath of allegiance and symbols in courts, they call for a full impact assessment.

If we are looking at the criminal justice review in the round, it would have been useful if the Committee had had the opportunity, because this publication has been on our desks for some time, and the policies have

been screened by the Northern Ireland Court Service to see whether there will be a change in the future.

My concern comes from those who have been before the courts in the past. Concern is expressed outside Northern Ireland. If we are to broaden eligibility and introduce some element so that the composition of the judiciary truly reflects the composition of society, that should be based not just on religion, which has been the focus of the debate to date, but on gender.

If anyone has looked at the papers in the last week, they will note the concern that has been expressed in some of the comments that have been made by the judiciary, not only recently, but in the past, where rape and sex abuse cases have been in front of the courts. That is why I am concerned about the Judicial Studies Board, although it makes a recommendation that the induction training be mandatory, and the criminal justice review suggests that the induction training should be mandatory. However, the draft Justice (Northern Ireland) Bill does not require this. I am strongly in favour of training, because I do not believe, as the criminal justice review does, that the judiciary should just talk to the judiciary. That has been a problem in the past, and it has been the same in the medical profession. They ought to broaden that out in training.

I had an opportunity to participate in judicial studies training in relation to my research into domestic violence. It was important that a full day that I spent with other agencies from the community had a serious input to how the judiciary dealt with domestic violence thereafter. I hope that it also had a serious outcome. The Judicial Studies Board's make-up does not extend to academic input, although the criminal justice review suggested that it might. I fear that it may not, and then an opportunity would be missed.

With regard to appointments and training, if we in Northern Ireland do not open up the judiciary, move it out, make it representative of the community and make it more understanding of the problems that are faced in our society, then we truly have missed an opportunity. If it is said of the police, then equally it should have been said about the judiciary. As I have said, the judiciary have gotten off lightly in the public debate on this subject.

The judicial appointments commissioner in Northern Ireland has been appointed. It will be interesting to see Mr John Simpson's future work. I welcome the Commission's intention to extend its eligibility, as a major criticism has been how closed the judiciary has been in the past; a criticism that came from inside and outside Northern Ireland.

Future transparency has been a major issue, and I have had difficulty in understanding the decisions made by the Department of Public Prosecutions. I have on occasions written to the DPP — and herein

lies the issue of independence — after I received requests from victims for information on why the DPP decided not to prosecute. I have been alarmed at its conclusions on those occasions.

In turn, the DPP has reviewed its decisions not to prosecute. In future, that procedure to write on behalf of constituents should not be left simply to Assembly Members whose constituents are concerned that there have been no prosecutions. Little information is published, and it is difficult for anyone to understand at the end of the year which cases have been prosecuted. I have often had to request statistics from the DPP asking whether the charges had been downgraded. Of course, the DPP denies the existence of such a word. It has had to trace the statistics manually in order to follow through on prosecutions from start to finish. There are real concerns, and the situation has not increased victims' confidence. If the criminal justice system is to make itself more understandable, accountable and transparent, it must have victims' confidence.

It is to be welcomed that reports will be published and that there will be a code of practice, which at present is simply downloaded from the Crown Prosecution Service. I am not aware whether the Department of Public Prosecutions has had many codes of practice of its own. I hope that that will now change.

I would be concerned if, in future, the DPP claimed security as a reason for not prosecuting. We know that in the past that has not increased confidence. There may be a valid case for not publishing reasons, but if the DPP is to be as open and transparent as it now promises to be, that information should be available.

At the back of the report, where agencies' evidence is detailed, there is a recommendation that the word "realm" in the judicial oath be replaced with the word "jurisdiction". The judiciary adopts many Latin terms and antiquated language, and we have the opportunity to change some of that.

The use of symbols is also mentioned and will be assessed for equity, and impact statements will be made. Enough has been said about that matter in the Assembly. The concerns voiced by many of the witnesses and victims have not been about what is hanging above them but rather the trauma they face each and every day that they attend court. As victims, they have had the courage to give evidence, and too often they have had to sit in the same room opposite offenders and perpetrators. They have also been told that, although they are victims, they are only as good as their witness evidence. That attitude in the courts must change. Modern facilities should be provided in which victims feel safe so that they can give their evidence in a way that works for them not against them. My concerns lie with the practicalities of facilitating victims.

The Committee paid some attention to the issue of the oversight commissioner. The appointee could be male or female; however, the language of the report implied that only a man may be appointed.

We must also look at the courts' role in rehabilitation and reintegration as well as in prevention, and for that reason the issue of youth conferencing and children was stressed. The recommendation to raise the age of criminal responsibility from 10 to 12 would have been useful, and I am concerned that it was not taken up.

Issues relating to young people must be addressed. The Assembly has discussed the report from the Committee for Health, Social Service and Public Safety on secure residential accommodation for young people, especially those who come before the courts. Day after day, magistrates and judges tell that they are frustrated about how to deal with them.

There are some proposals about custody care orders. There was some concern that the word "custody" was used in front of the word "care". However, the matter must be fully debated. Given the lack of secure accommodation and resources to date, the report may end up as a group of mere recommendations, without serious resources being provided to deal with young people.

Restorative justice must be debated further. This should not be the last word on it. If we are to proceed with confidence, we must engage seriously in the debate on rehabilitation and reintegration. As we saw during the Christmas holiday, the juvenile justice system clearly is not working, when young people are absconding or being released on parole. The recidivism rate is so high that we must question the diversionary and other programmes that should be there to deal with the kind of behaviour that leads to a career in crime early in a young person's life.

The Probation Service should remain independent. Anything else may lead to its being accused of colluding with the court system or being biased or one-sided. Throughout the troubles, the probation service was independent, and that enabled its staff to go into places and talk to offenders in a way that would have been enormously difficult if they had been associated with the judiciary or the Court Service. Together with the probation service we must build more partnerships with communities.

Although I am not a member of the Ad Hoc Committee, I am pleased that it was able to arrive at a consensus on the recommendations, because that is difficult to achieve across the parties. However, I am concerned that insufficient time was given to local community safety partnerships. These seem to be such a problem for policing, and if we do not take them up in relation to criminal justice and prosecution, it will be only a one-sided discussion.

If we are to have equality before the law, and if the judiciary is to be independent and impartial, we must increase the level of confidence in the criminal justice system enormously. It has been at an all-time low. I am glad to see that the Ad Hoc Committee has recommended that there should be a Standing Committee on criminal justice. If we are to look at all the issues — prevention, rehabilitation, reintegration and sentencing — we need such a committee. We should not leave it until we have a devolved Department, because no one knows when that will happen. The sooner the Assembly gets its hands on criminal justice, the better, because some matters and recommendations have been left for the judiciary to deal with. Any criminal justice review that suggests that the judiciary is best dealt with by the judiciary needs to take a serious look at itself.

Mr Attwood: I agree with the comments made by several Members on the contribution of the Committee Clerks. I also want to acknowledge the work that was done by the Committee members. As other Members have said, it is not insignificant that there was a level of agreement that might not otherwise have been reached, especially as the criminal justice review was a product of the Good Friday Agreement.

5.00 pm

It is a reflection on the development of thinking across the parties in the Assembly that a degree of agreement was reached. Although I do not overstate the degree of agreement, neither do I underestimate it. People may travel different roads to reach the same conclusion. The important thing is that the same conclusion is reached: a representative, accountable, transparent police service or criminal justice service in Northern Ireland. Whatever path we may travel, the point that we have reached is significant for all of us.

Despite that, I do not travel in great confidence. The last justice matter that the Chamber discussed was a criminal injuries compensation reform. On that occasion, the Chamber achieved consensus on criminal injuries compensation proposals. Despite that consensus, no later than 19 December 2001, Mr Des Browne MP, the parliamentary under-secretary of state for Northern Ireland, wrote:

“I do not intend to defer implementing this important legislative reform pending a transfer of justice functions”.

A short time after unanimity was achieved on the Floor of the Assembly, the British Government had dismissed it. It was not only that the British Government rejected the Assembly’s proposals for changes to criminal injuries compensation reform; they even rejected deferring those proposals pending transfer of the criminal justice function, which the Government stated in the criminal justice review response they intended to transfer within 18 months. That reflects the response from the British Government to past criminal justice changes in the

North. Therefore, the Assembly cannot travel in any confidence that this British Government will behave any differently on this matter.

It is an example of Ministers in the North genuflecting to the needs of 10 and 11 Downing Street rather than a response to the politics of agreement — an advantage achieved on the Floor of the Assembly in that matter and in others. The Assembly will see whether, on this occasion, the British Government determine differently. If they do, there are several urgent matters referred to in the response by the Ad Hoc Committee and several other matters that arise from the criminal justice review.

The Ad Hoc Committee makes several strong assertions in its report on how the Government should amend the implementation plan and draft legislation. The first is overseeing the implementation plan. The Ad Hoc Committee notes the dearth of clear deadlines for the implementation plan and the lack of clear targets for the Criminal Justice Review Group’s recommendations. It says that the Government should give

“consideration to the appointment of a commissioner with a remit to oversee the implementation of the reform of the criminal justice system, having regard to the resources available to him.”

The strength of those statements by the Ad Hoc Committee reflects a higher degree of consensus on overseeing the criminal justice changes than might ever have been conceived by any British Government while it referred the draft Bill and implementation plan to the Assembly.

Further consideration of those recommendations uncovers their range, complexity and their inter-agency nature. When the Assembly considers that in 18 months’ time it might be responsible for those recommendations, it seems that the need to have — objectively and particularly — an overseeing mechanism is strong and compelling.

In that regard, the British Government should recognise the level of consensus and respond appropriately.

The statements on human rights and guiding principles in the Ad Hoc Committee report also impressed me. Human rights issues and disputes have been at the core of conflict over the past 30 years. Despite that, the Committee had the understanding, on a consensus basis, to assert that the Secretary of State should consider revising the clauses of the draft Bill to include references to the accepted human rights standards that acknowledge that human rights are central to the criminal justice system.

The British Government say that they want to affirm policing and criminal justice changes in the North, however they come about. To do that, they should respond to the fact that this Chamber was able to conclude that human rights should be at the core of the new criminal justice system. I am surprised that the Chamber could achieve that level of understanding and consensus. If

we are able to do that, it ill behoves the British Government to ignore it, given that it was achieved in spite of great difficulties.

In one way, however, I am not surprised that agreement was reached. As Ian Paisley Jnr and others will confirm, the Northern Ireland Policing Board is considering a code of ethics that mainstreams human rights standards into the policing service to protect both the citizen and the police officer. It goes way beyond the human rights standards and codes of ethics in virtually any other police service known to the board. If that level of agreement on codes of ethics and human rights standards can be achieved on the policing issue, and if agreement can be reached on future criminal justice structures, the British Government would be insulting the good work, good principles and high values of the Assembly if they did not respond by mainstreaming human rights, both in law and in the implementation plan.

I could list a wide range of areas where that could be done. If we are to achieve agreement we could perhaps borrow from the example of the Policing Board, where the draft code of ethics that is currently on the board's agenda includes human rights safeguards and requirements in respect of defence lawyers, those who have been detained and those who have been charged. Those recommendations come from the changed management team in the Police Service of Northern Ireland (PSNI). If they are good enough for the Police Service — as they appear to be — those good standards should also apply to the criminal justice institutions.

That is not to say that we agree on all matters. Clearly, we do not. Duncan Shipley Dalton and Gregory Campbell — and I anticipate that Ian Paisley Jnr will do the same — disagree with our view and that of the Criminal Justice Review's recommendations on the working environment. We are told that, because the constitutional position of Northern Ireland as part of the United Kingdom has been confirmed in the referendum, we must accept everything that those Members interpret being British to mean, including the display of symbols, emblems and flags.

We differ because we interpret the principle of consent as consenting to the constitutional position as part of the UK, not accepting all expressions of what it is to be British in Northern Ireland. Those who do not accept that interpretation should perhaps consider the equal validity given to the principle of parity of esteem in the Good Friday Agreement.

The principle of parity of esteem is given equal validity when it comes to the issue of the display of flags, emblems and symbols. However, if Members do not agree with that argument then, with some caution, I refer them to page 174 of the report where the Human Rights Commission moves the display of flags, emblems

and symbols beyond the issues of consent and parity of esteem.

The outline principles are, the Commission says, necessary to reflect the independence of the judiciary, of the courts and of due process. A wide range of international instruments is mentioned; from the UN Declaration of Human Rights to the UN International Covenants and the UN Basic Principles on the Independence of the Judiciary. All state that to be seen to be an independent judiciary and an independent court service, that court service must be independent. As a consequence, it should be free of symbols that might identify it as being less than neutral. So, from wherever they travel to reach it, I hope that Members come to the conclusion that good international standards and practice are consistent with the true interpretation of the Good Friday Agreement. In other words, without vandalising or interfering aggressively with emblems or symbols, court buildings, courtrooms and all to do with the precincts of a court should be free of symbols. I should like to think that the British Government will conclude as I have outlined.

My third point — and I have sympathy with what Monica McWilliams said — concerns the judiciary. One of the core values of our new political and policing orders, and of the future justice order, must be the accountability of those structures. That is a core value of the Good Friday Agreement, and it informs the practice of the various institutions set up under it. The judiciary is one of the most unaccountable institutions in this jurisdiction, in the South and in Britain. It is much more unaccountable than any police service or public-sector body of which I am aware on these islands. It is a body of people with unfettered power, immense resources and standing, whom few cross. The criminal justice review gives us the opportunity to begin to ensure that our judiciary is accountable in a way in which no other judiciary in these islands is, though all of them should be.

However, the British Government's responses do not follow the recommendations of the review. Consistent with some of the Ad Hoc Committee's statements, we must ensure that the draft law is changed so that the judiciary reflects the community and all judges are subjected to training in human rights. All appointments must be the responsibility of a commission for judicial appointments, which must not just advise on appointments but make them. The judicial and legal membership of the commission must not have undue influence, power or number. Consistent with some of the recommendations of the Ad Hoc Committee and with the review of the criminal justice system, we hope that the British Government will hear these arguments.

5.15 pm

I have two final comments. The first takes account of the prosecution service, because although the main

concerns about the administration of justice in the North have revolved around the activities of the Police Service, many people are concerned that it has been the further efforts of the judiciary at times, and the prosecution service at other times, that have created an environment in which those who are entrusted with upholding the law have broken it, occasionally abused human rights and not been held properly to account by those whose responsibility it is to ensure that they are. In the first instance, that means prosecution when appropriate and, secondly, conviction when the evidence leads, beyond a reasonable doubt, to that conclusion.

Although we may not have agreed on how to come to that situation, people are beginning to conclude that we have reached it. That was seen in the reaction to the collapse of the prosecution of the late William Stobie. Nonetheless, the proposals in the criminal justice review that are to some degree endorsed in the Ad Hoc Committee's report mean that the proposals in the draft Justice (Northern Ireland) Bill and the implementation plan do not lead to an accountable prosecution service. That is reflected in recommendation 10 of the Ad Hoc Committee's report that states that

"greater transparency should be a feature of the decision-making process of the new Public Prosecution Service."

That does not mean that reasons should always be disclosed when cases do not result in a prosecution. It means that there should be a presumption that the reasons will be disclosed, even though in some circumstances with just cause they will not be disclosed, not least to protect the victims. The presumption should be disclosure, whereas, at the moment, it is non-disclosure. Given the hint that that reflects the Assembly's consensus view, the British Government should amend the legislation.

With boring monotony, I will conclude as I have other speeches on justice and human rights. The SDLP is of the view that the draft Justice (Northern Ireland) Bill and the draft implementation plan are closer to the criminal justice review than the original Mandelson Bill and the original implementation plan arising from Patten were. They are closer, but not close enough. If the British Government use the Ad Hoc Committee's report as an example of where a higher degree of agreement is important to sustain confidence in the new institutions, the law and the plan should be changed. They should revisit some of the review's recommendations because, if they do not, we will be left with the hollow apology of T E Lawrence that

"the old men came out again and took our victory to re-make the likeness of the former world they knew."

Mr Paisley Jnr: I too wish to associate myself with the comments of several Members who congratulated the Committee staff, especially the Committee Clerk. I understand that he does not believe in Santa Claus because he was still emailing people about the report

on Christmas Eve. He was certainly hard done by over the Christmas period. However, it probably saved him a bit of expense on his credit card. It is important that we pay tribute to the work of the staff because given the timescale available to us for this so-called consultation — and most of the people who gave evidence criticised the timescale — the work of the Committee Clerk and his team was exceptional.

Mr Attwood and several other Members mentioned the high level of agreement across the Chamber and, more importantly, in the Committee. Perhaps Mr Attwood was being self-effacing, because I noticed that he did not always attend Committee meetings — maybe that was his recipe for ensuring that there was that high level of agreement.

Nonetheless, we should be honest about the report. We should not get too carried away when discussing what the Committee agreed on — the Committee agreed to differ. It agreed to include members' different political points of view as an addendum to the report, in order to get consensus on other areas where there was broad-brush agreement. Let us not get too carried away with self-congratulation. The champagne can be put back on ice because it is not required just yet.

Although the report was about agreeing to differ, there was some agreement. Everyone was frustrated by the lack of consultation time that the Northern Ireland Office Ministers allowed the Committee. They were unforthcoming in allowing for consultation on this Bill and other matters. They have demeaned the word "consultation".

The Committee agreed that it could not recommend many elements of the draft Bill, especially those relating to the so-called restorative or community justice programmes, because they were too vague and poorly thought out. That is a positive negative point. However, it was important that the Committee agreed not to ratify restorative or community justice simply because the option was there. The Committee recognised the usefulness of establishing a consultative or standing committee to make a more protracted examination of criminal justice issues as they arise.

Anyone in the Assembly can see that the Bill has been poorly thought out, and that it is cluttered and vague. That is because there was such a lack of time, prior to the review of criminal justice, to allow the Committee to be properly consulted as the Bill was put together, and to help to develop it. The establishment of a Standing Committee might allow us to deal at length with the issue of criminal justice. Every Member has touched on issues that affect us all.

Aside from those broad-brush agreements, the Committee was united on few matters. However, it is important to note that, because of the draft Bill's failures, the Committee report falls well short of endorsing it

— I welcome that. That point should not be lost on the Northern Ireland Office. It should be a central consideration for anyone who wants to argue in support of the draft Bill in the House of Commons. Anyone who might wish to twist that fact by claiming that the Assembly endorsed the draft Bill should remember that the report makes it clear that no endorsement was given.

Various parties wanted to exercise political influence over the area of criminal justice and the appointment of senior judges. However, there was strong disagreement about who should have that influence. I can understand why the Ulster Unionist Party and the SDLP would be relaxed about political control over senior appointments at the moment. However, that approach applies in the short term only, because after the next election those parties may not be in the Office of the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister. They should think long and hard about whether the control of justice by them, as politicians, is in the long-term interests of Northern Ireland. They must think about whether the criminal justice system should be handed to politicians, especially if one of the positions in that Office happened to be filled by Sinn Féin/IRA. It is important that people reflect on that and recognise exactly what they are doing.

The politicisation of the judiciary must be rejected at all costs. Witnesses put that view to the Committee, time and time again. The Law Society of Northern Ireland came before the Committee to talk about the politicisation of the legal profession. It said:

“We are making this point because we see that there is a potential risk. We are not in a position to say that the proposals answer our fears and concerns.”

The Law Society further added that

“where a department of justice is being created and where the role of the Lord Chancellor is being removed — as seems to be contemplated from the constitutional arrangements that are part of these proposals — important questions must be asked as to who makes decisions about the legal profession. Under the present constitutional arrangement, solicitors are officers of the court. For that reason, when it comes to matters arising within the Law Society that require to be appealed, the supervisory function is not carried out by a politician. It is in the hands of the Lord Chief Justice; and we would want to be clear that this is going to be preserved, or indeed, enhanced and reinforced.”

That is not my position; it is the position of the Law Society, the body that speaks for practitioners from a variety of backgrounds in Northern Ireland.

The Law Society took the same position in minutes of evidence from a Committee session on 29 November 2001:

“We need to ensure that the new constitutional arrangements do not impinge on the independence of the legal profession. It is a question of preserving the independence, rather than creating it.”

If the Law Society is not good enough for some people, what about the Northern Ireland Human Rights

Commission? When Prof Dickson gave evidence to the Committee on 29 November 2001 and was asked about the issue of politicisation, he said:

“There is always a danger that when a member of the Government has a large say in how an agency within the criminal justice system or the justice system itself — because the law commission here will have jurisdiction over civil as well as criminal matters — works, the doctrine of separation of powers is breached.”

Prof Dickson did not make those comments lightly. He recognised the dangers contained in the Bill if it were to be implemented in its current form. The House should be aware of that. By endorsing the report, that awareness is flagged up, and anyone who wishes to quote from it and use the Assembly’s position on the report recognises that it is not an endorsement of the Bill as currently drafted. Surely that weight of evidence counts for something when one considers the background of the people who submitted that evidence?

The Secretary of State said that he did not want Northern Ireland to become a cold house for Protestants. The recommendations in the draft Bill and in the implementation report would make the courts a very frosty place for the Protestant community. There is a failure — and I fear that it was repeated today by Members on the opposite side of the House — to recognise that the removal of the Union flag, the attack on, removal and denigration of the oath, and the removal of the symbols of the Crown are offensive to the Protestant community. Of course they are. The failure to recognise that the suggestion is in itself gratuitously offensive shows how far we still have to go in Northern Ireland. I hope that parties will reflect on that. Nationalists in this place must ask themselves if they really want a Northern Ireland that is a cold place for the Protestant community. If they do, the ramifications are appalling.

Mr Attwood referred to the Northern Ireland Human Rights Commission on the issue of flags and symbolism. When evidence from representatives of the Human Rights Commission is studied, it can be seen that the commission’s position is based on a false premise. It describes controversial symbols. The flag of the state, no matter who describes it as controversial, remains the flag of the state. It is unlike other controversial symbols that may represent one section or other of the community. The commission has done itself a gross disservice by describing the national emblem and symbols of the state as controversial items that can be easily dispensed with.

There is a lack of consistency from those people who wish to see the removal of the Union flag and the crest of the Crown. That inconsistency is amplified when those same people are silent on the recommendation that the Irish language be introduced into the courts. I would take criticisms much better from those people if

they were prepared to argue that there should be no symbolism of any kind at all — at least that would be consistent.

However, to say absolutely nothing, and to support proposals calling for the elevation of the Irish language and Irish Nationalism in courts that have had a devaluation of Britishness, shows a great inconsistency on their part.

5.30 pm

I am pleased that the new courthouse in Belfast is soon to be bedecked with the royal crest to identify it with this state, which is only right and proper. Although the issues of symbolism will draw most of the public attention, it is important that we do not ignore what is at the heart of the draft Bill — the creation of a single prosecution service. That procedure is, however, old, and it should not be inflicted on Northern Ireland. We heard much evidence to demonstrate that when it was inflicted on England and Wales it became an unmitigated disaster. Members should look at the evidence presented by the Glidewell report, to which the Committee referred.

In my party's submission we indicated that we were extremely concerned that we were about to repeat the fundamental mistakes that were made in England and Wales in relation to the working of the Crown Prosecution Service. Do not take my word for it — take what Glidewell said in his report. He said that, overall, the Crown Prosecution Service discontinues prosecutions on an average of 12% more cases now than it ever did. The likelihood of getting successful prosecutions under the Crown Prosecution Service system actually goes down, which is not in anyone's interest when we see the rising crime wave in Northern Ireland — increasing motor vehicle crime, and violent crime against the person. It is not in anyone's interest to see a mechanism put in place that reduces the ability of the prosecution to get a successful result.

The Glidewell report states:

"The overall conclusion from this study of the available statistics is that in various respects there has not been the improvement in the effectiveness and efficiency of the prosecution process which was expected to result from the setting up of the CPS in 1986."

We would be very foolish if we did not learn from the experience of England and Wales. It is clear that, in the Bill, the resources are not placed at Northern Ireland's disposal to ensure that we have a single prosecution service that will actually work. That would result in a Crown Prosecution Service that would be a disaster.

Mr Alban Maginness said that it would be a renewal of the prosecution service — I think that it would be a wrecking of the Crown Prosecution Service. He said that it would be a revival of the system — I believe that it would be a requiem for the system. It would be

wrong to impose something on Northern Ireland that was tried and tested elsewhere and which proved to be an unmitigated disaster. I hope that others will recognise that these problems are real. If we go down the road of implementing major change by introducing a single prosecution service, and by implementing major change to the prosecution service as it currently stands, we stand to be indicted later on by a failure of that system to actually achieve results — results that bring about justice and integrity in the criminal justice system.

The report also made some other important recommendations that must not be ignored too hastily. Recommendation 11 supports the Probation Board for Northern Ireland, and my Colleague Mr Campbell has already indicated our party position on that. We are pleased to endorse the work of the Probation Board for Northern Ireland and to endorse the recommendation that it should remain independent and impartial. It should not be replaced by what it describes as a Next Steps agency. I also believe that recommendations 15 to 17 on restorative justice indicate that the Committee had absolutely no satisfaction with the proposals on restorative justice, indicating that a great deal more work needs to be done by the Northern Ireland Office before a recommendation of moving to such a system could even be contemplated. That work on minor crime needs to be done over a long time.

Some Members have mentioned the issue of the transparency of decisions. We should tread carefully on that, because we could create a system where, willy-nilly, the reasons why prosecutions did not take place would be published.

I put on the record of the House the evidence that was supplied by Mr Kerr, a magistrate and a practitioner in the Criminal Bar Association, who said that there are compelling reasons for not always giving an explanation. A reason for not prosecuting might often appear to denigrate an injured party or victim, and that may be unnecessary and stressful for them.

An assessment of a witness might conclude that he or she is incapable of giving the necessary evidence, and it would not be in anyone's interest to humiliate a person further by telling him or her that. Indeed, the Department of Public Prosecution's (DPP) policy is that every case must be examined to see whether it falls into that category, and if it does not, reasons are given where possible. The Bar Council of Northern Ireland believes in openness where possible, and it approves of that course of action.

Ms McWilliams: Will the Member give way?

Mr Paisley Jnr: I will, but may I first make the point? I do not want the Member to misunderstand. In principle there should be as much openness and transparency as possible, but we should be aware of the dangers of creating a precedent or saying that all

information must be made available, although that might be very dangerous.

Ms McWilliams: The Member and the person who represents the Bar Council may not be aware that the DPP recently changed its policy of interviewing witnesses. Until then, decisions on whether to proceed with prosecutions were based on written evidence that was in front of it.

I am aware of one case in which a witness had cerebral palsy, and the assumption was made that she might not be a competent witness. It was only when I asked for the decision to be reviewed that the witness was interviewed and the discovery made that she was very competent. In turn they had to review the decision not to prosecute. That leads anyone to conclude that if the system were more transparent, people might not have as many concerns about constant final decisions not to prosecute. It is now policy for all witnesses to be interviewed before decisions are made on whether to prosecute.

Mr Paisley Jnr: I thank the Member for the intervention, which shows that when treading on sensitive ground, it is important to strike the proper balance. The comments from the Criminal Bar Association tried to strike that balance, and it is important that Members bear that in mind when arguing for changes.

All in all, a vote for the report is a vote for more consideration of the Bill and for giving the Assembly the right to drive that process of investigation. A positive vote tonight will indicate that the Assembly does not endorse the draft Bill and rejects significant chunks of it. However, it permits parties to agree to differ on those issues, and it is critical of the Northern Ireland Office's handling of the matter.

The Chairperson of the Ad Hoc Committee on Criminal Justice Reform (Mr Dalton): I take the opportunity to thank the Committee members, including those who served as deputies or who made a contribution to the debate and to the Committee's discussions. We worked reasonably well as a Committee. Although it is true to say that there is no complete consensus, we tried to achieve consensus on some of the broad-brush issues, and in our report we put forward to the House as positive a view as we could. I greatly thank the Committee's support staff who, as other Members have said, worked extremely hard and were extremely helpful to me as Chairman and to the other members. I also thank the Assembly's research and library services staff for providing a legal adviser who was an extraordinarily useful and valuable addition to the Committee and to me personally. I do not have enough time to cover everybody's contribution. However, I will work back through some of the points raised.

I am a little confused about Mr Paisley Jnr's point about the judicial appointments commission. The

Committee broadly recognised that it did not want to overpoliticise the appointment of the judiciary, but there was an acknowledgment that in any democracy the appointment of members of the judiciary is necessarily a political act. Appointments are made by members of the political institutions in some form or other. Although, technically, it is the monarch who appoints senior judges, in reality this is done on the recommendation of the Lord Chancellor or the Prime Minister. Therefore, in that sense it would not be such a shift to move that responsibility in Northern Ireland towards the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister.

I am surprised by Mr Paisley Jnr's comments about this matter when the DUP's submission recommended that the judicial appointments commission could consider having members appointed using the d'Hondt formula. Perhaps he was saying not so much that he is opposed to any concept of political involvement in the appointments but rather that the political involvement should be widespread and reflect all aspects of the community.

The Committee was well aware of the point made about the Glidewell report. The issue was raised on several occasions by Mr Paisley Jnr and by other members of the Committee. It is of great concern. It is important that in introducing a public prosecutions service to Northern Ireland that service should be properly funded, organised, structured and be able to complete its work effectively. There are many lessons to be learnt from the Glidewell report and from the experiences of the Crown Prosecution Service (CPS). The Government have assured the Committee and myself on several occasions that those lessons have been learnt and will be applied. We will have to wait with some trepidation to see whether that is the case. I hope that the Government will take our concerns into account.

As regards the points made by Mr Attwood, I cannot resist the urge to respond to the reference to the Northern Ireland Human Rights Commission's point about what it describes as the partisan display in a courtroom. The human right it relies on is one of equality before the law, which is reflected. Equality before the law and independent, impartial tribunals support a human right that is reflected in many international standards and that is one that everyone would support.

I fail to understand how the Commission stretches that right by saying that to include display of national symbols in a courtroom would somehow undermine that equality and impartiality. If one were to apply that logic then almost every state that displays any form of national or state symbol in its courtroom would necessarily be breaching that human right. It does not surprise me that a body that has not managed to figure out its own remit cannot work out how to apply human rights standards. However, that is another point.

The Committee felt that many of the timetables being laid down and the targets being set by the Government were not clearly identified. There was a relatively ambiguous identification of exactly what the Government intended to do and when. We felt that an oversight commissioner would be an appropriate way to focus the Government's mind on this. The Committee also felt that the Assembly could play a more active role in this through the formation of a Standing Committee. The Ad Hoc Committee has suggested that the Assembly should consider setting up such a Committee at an early stage. I would go further and say that the Assembly should set up such a Committee. It would be a valuable Committee of the House and would offer us a great opportunity to scrutinise the work of Government in introducing this legislation.

Prof McWilliams raised a point about having a reflective judiciary. The Committee discussed the issue, however it was not something that we reflected in the report. It was recognised that the reflectiveness of the judiciary should involve more than just a Catholic/Protestant perspective. There are also issues such as ethnic minorities and the appointment of women to the bench. Few women are appointed to the bench in Northern Ireland, and this does not reflect well on the legal profession considering how many extremely able female practitioners are involved. We would all welcome that.

5.45 pm

There is an opportunity to expand appointment to the bench to those people who would not previously have been appointed. Academics who are legally qualified but have not practised for any length of time would be eligible, and in due course that would broaden those who are appointed.

The point raised by Prof McWilliams about victims was not something that came up in the Committee. It was recognised that there was a greater focus on the victim, especially in relation to the release of prisoners and information given to the victim, as well as information in relation to the public prosecution service.

Mr Paisley Jnr and Prof McWilliams raised the issue of transparency. The Committee accepted in principle that there should be an intent to be as transparent as possible in relation to whether prosecution decisions are made. We also took into account the evidence given by the Bar Council. We were concerned and did not want to create a situation where a victim who had already suffered and been humiliated would suffer further by being told that their evidence was not sufficient on which to base a prosecution. That could be detrimental to the well-being of that individual, when they have already had a difficult time. There is the need to have balance.

However, Prof McWilliams's point that witnesses should be interviewed by a public prosecution service,

and that there should be close involvement of any public prosecution service with the victim at all stages during prosecution, is important. That would come up for a Standing Committee and would need to be looked at in due course. I hope that the public prosecution service, rather than being a disaster, would be an opportunity for us to create a far more effective prosecution service in Northern Ireland. In some ways the original review did not go as far as I would have if I had been given a broad brush to paint with, but you travel the road as far as you can.

I am surprised to find myself agreeing with so many points raised by Peter Weir. I can agree with him on some occasions — whenever he is talking sense. On this occasion, most of his points were very valid. The Committee stressed that judicial appointments should be made purely on merit. It is essential that the merit principle is underwritten in the appointment of members of the judiciary, and that is also reflected in the Bill. The Committee agreed that that should remain a core principle of appointment.

Mr Campbell mentioned symbols. I have spoken about symbols, and I do not think that I can usefully add to what has been said. The Unionist representatives in the House have given good flight to our feelings on this matter. The Government, and Nationalist parties, need to consider very carefully what effect that will have on the Unionist community, and I hope that they will consider that. I would not go so far as to use the description of a "cold house". I do not feel that Northern Ireland has become a cold house, but I am concerned about the amount of oil left in the tank at this stage.

Alban Maginness made a point about the destruction of articles of architectural heritage. That was welcome and showed great maturity on his part, and I think the House will welcome it. No one would wish to see a Taliban-style destruction of the royal crests and symbols that are built into the very fabric of buildings in Northern Ireland. That did not happen in the Republic of Ireland when it entirely changed jurisdiction. I hope that we will not see that in Northern Ireland.

I urge Members to take into account the issues that we were able to reach agreement on, look at the overall importance of the report before the House and see fit to support it.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That this Assembly notes the Report of the Ad Hoc Committee on Criminal Justice Reform (02/01/R), established by resolution on 19 November 2001, and agrees that it be submitted to the Secretary of State as a Report of the Northern Ireland Assembly.

Adjourned at 5.50 pm.

NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

Tuesday 15 January 2002

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

Members observed two minutes' silence.

PUBLIC PETITION

Trillick Agriculture Office

Mr Speaker: Mr Maurice Morrow has begged leave to present a public petition in accordance with Standing Order 22.

Mr Morrow: I beg leave to present a petition relating to the proposal by the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development to close the agriculture office at Trillick in County Tyrone. The petitioners — farmers and local clergy of all denominations — are concerned at the implications of such a closure not only on the Trillick area but also on the entire west Tyrone area, north Fermanagh and parts of south Tyrone.

Local farmers who use this office extensively for advice and form-filling believe strongly that its retention is extremely important. Several farmers in County Fermanagh use the Trillick office, and its closure will further inconvenience that rural community. The petition has been signed by 216 farmers and six local clergy.

Mr Morrow moved forward and laid the petition on the Table.

Mr Speaker: I will forward the petition to the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development and send a copy to the Chairperson of the Committee for Agriculture and Rural Development.

Mr Gibson: On a point of order, Mr Speaker. Do the rules of the Assembly not permit any support to be given to such a petition?

Mr Speaker: Standing Orders do not permit any comment with regard to the presentation of petitions. This is the first occasion on which a petition has been presented, and it has been presented in accordance with Standing Orders.

NORTH/SOUTH MINISTERIAL COUNCIL

Institutional Format

Mr Speaker: I have received notice from the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister that they wish to make a statement on the North/South Ministerial Council meeting in institutional format held on 17 December 2001.

The First Minister (Mr Trimble): We wish to make the following statement on the inaugural institutional format meeting of the North/South Ministerial Council, which took place in Parliament Buildings, Belfast, on 17 December 2001. The Deputy First Minister and I participated in the meeting, and the Irish Government were represented by the Minister for Foreign Affairs, Mr Brian Cowen. The meeting in institutional format flows from strand two of the Belfast Agreement, which provides that the Council will meet

“in an appropriate format to consider institutional or cross-sectoral matters (including in relation to the EU) and to resolve disagreement”.

The first meeting in this format offered a useful opportunity to take stock of the functioning of the Council in its first two years of operation. The Council discussed a range of institutional and cross-sectoral issues. Given that this was the first meeting, many of the issues raised will require further consideration, which will be taken forward by officials who will develop proposals for consideration by the Council in due course.

With regard to arrangements in the transport sector, the Council agreed that officials from both Administrations and the joint secretariat should explore the possibility of the next sectoral meeting on transport concentrating on road safety issues. In parallel with this, the Deputy First Minister and I will want to consider how best to take forward the strategic transport issues identified in the original work programme confirmed by the Council.

The Council noted the work undertaken and the complexities that have arisen in pursuing a transfer of the existing functions of the Commissioners of Irish Lights to the Lights Agency of the Foyle, Carlingford and Irish Lights Commission. It agreed that officials should review the matter further and offer advice to the next meeting of the Council in institutional format.

A paper setting out the existing areas of co-operation between the two Administrations that do not fall within the current North/South Ministerial Council work programme was noted and discussed in broad terms. The Council agreed that officials from both Administrations and the joint secretariat should consider areas of co-operation further to see whether it would be appropriate to bring them within the ambit of the

North/South Ministerial Council and offer advice to the next meeting of the Council in institutional format.

The Deputy First Minister (Mr Durkan): Progress to date on a range of cross-sectoral issues affecting the six North/South bodies and Tourism Ireland Ltd, which were established under the agreement, was acknowledged by the Council. These include areas such as budgetary arrangements, accountability matters including the preparation of corporate plans and annual reports, pension schemes, audit arrangements and freedom of information.

The Council recommended the budgetary provisions for 2002 for the six North/South bodies and Tourism Ireland Ltd and the contributions from the Executive and the Irish Government on which it had given an opinion at the plenary meeting on 30 November 2001. This had also included indicative projections for 2003 and 2004. The total budget for the North/South bodies in 2002 will amount to £54.37 million or €92.07 million, and the budget for Tourism Ireland Ltd will amount to £26.78 million or €45.33 million.

The Council had a preliminary and helpful exchange of views about arrangements for consideration of EU issues to reflect paragraph 17 of strand two of the agreement. The Council agreed that further work should be undertaken by a working group that would report to the next meeting of the Council in institutional format. Ministers noted the work undertaken by a working group of officials from both Administrations set up after the September 2000 plenary meeting to undertake a study to consider the establishment of an independent consultative forum as set out in paragraph 19 of strand two.

The Council agreed that such a forum should be based on a formal interaction between structures representative of civil society in Northern Ireland and in the South. The Council agreed that the working group should now consult the Northern Ireland Civic Forum and the social partners participating in the central review mechanism of the Programme for Prosperity and Fairness, with a view to bringing forward detailed proposals for consideration at the next meeting of the Council in plenary format in May.

The first meeting of the North/South Ministerial Council in institutional format addressed a range of important issues. It was a constructive and useful start in taking forward matters raised in the agreement and addressing problems that have arisen in the implementation of the bodies and areas of co-operation agreed on 18 December 1998 and ratified by the Assembly on 15 February 1999.

After the Council meeting, Ministers launched the first annual report of the North/South Ministerial Council. The report contains a helpful commentary on the operation of the Council and the North/South bodies during their first year of existence. It underlines, in tangible terms, the potential mutual benefit emerging across many sectors from North/South co-operation

for all of the people throughout the island. Copies of the annual report were placed in the Assembly Library prior to the institutional format meeting on 17 December.

The Council agreed that its next meeting in institutional format would be held in the South in April 2002. A copy of the communiqué issued following the meeting was placed in the Assembly Library immediately afterwards.

Mr O'Neill: I welcome the report and ask the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister to accept our congratulations on the significant first steps taken on the independent consultative forum provided for in the Good Friday Agreement. I urge them to proceed further and encourage the establishment of a joint North/South interparliamentary forum, which the agreement also asked us to consider.

The First Minister: As Mr O'Neill noted, we have taken steps towards making arrangements for a consultative arrangement, North and South. Given that the agreement referred to a consultative arrangement to bring in those with particular interests in social, economic and cultural matters, the obvious starting point in Northern Ireland seemed to be the Civic Forum. That forum has been established to be representative of those sectors, and it should be representative of civil society outside the elected bodies.

The equivalent range of bodies that have been brought together under the heading "social partners" in the Republic of Ireland is the other natural starting point. At this stage, we are encouraging discussion between the Civic Forum and the social partners in the Republic of Ireland about how they can interact to provide a consultative arrangement with regard to the North/South Ministerial Council.

The position with regard to an interparliamentary body, which is also foreshadowed in the agreement, both in North/South and east/west terms, is that the existing Anglo-Irish interparliamentary body has grabbed the initiative and run. It has almost tried to constitute itself as being the relevant body for both elements of this issue. That is not fully in accordance with what had been foreshadowed in the agreement.

We must find an opportunity to examine this in a constructive and coherent way so that the aspect that was foreshadowed in the agreement is put in place to bring the interparliamentary arrangements under the aegis of the existing structures in the British-Irish Council and the North/South Ministerial Council. The matter was touched on at the institutional format meeting, and it is something that we intend to re-examine.

Mr McElduff: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. I welcome this meeting, and I also welcome Mr O'Neill's call for the establishment of a North/South

forum for elected members of the Oireachtas and MLAs and MPs in the North.

In the light of Micheál Martin's strategy document for future health delivery in the rest of Ireland over the next 10 years, was future health planning discussed at the most recent meeting? What North/South co-operation is envisaged on future health planning?

10.45 am

I welcome the discussion on road safety planned for the April meeting. Stark signage on the roads, detailing the number of injuries and deaths that have occurred at accident black spots, also needs to be considered in places such as County Louth.

Mr Speaker: The Member has gone into substantial detail on particular problems, but the institutional format sector deals with issues at a higher level. Perhaps the Deputy First Minister can respond on that higher level.

The Deputy First Minister: The issues are at a higher level, but they are less interesting at times than those which Mr McElduff raised. The First Minister referred to interparliamentary arrangements between the Assembly and the Oireachtas as foreshadowed in the agreement, whereas Mr McElduff referred to matters on a different footing.

A meeting of the health sector of the North/South Ministerial Council will deal with health issues, and the matters raised by Mr McElduff are appropriate to that sector. Any institutional matters that arise with regard to limitations of the arrangements constituted would be relayed through a plenary session of the North/South Ministerial Council and, if need be, picked up at the institutional format meeting. It would not, however, have been appropriate for us to deal with the Member's points at that meeting.

We will not take specific initiatives on road safety in the institutional format, but our discussions will recognise that one area of co-operation in which little progress has been made is transport. Therefore, the important area of road safety will be ripe for early activity.

Mrs E Bell: I congratulate the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister on the work outlined in the statement and the report, which I read in the Library. It is encouraging for cross-border co-operation.

However, will consideration be given to more direct contact between the different working groups and the departmental Committees on areas of similar work and research, for example, on EU issues? The Committee of the Centre has already started to consider those matters.

The First Minister: This was an initial meeting in institutional format, and provision for discussion of EU matters is foreshadowed in a paragraph in the agreement that clearly relates to those issues. The Council has not yet been able to make significant progress on

EU matters. We will ask officials to consider how the Council can be used and how its views can be reflected more fully in the European context. The EU is based on a treaty and defines its own mode of operation. Our Administration participates in EU matters through the UK representation in Europe and the UK delegation in the Council of Ministers. The Irish Government also participate directly in the Council of Ministers. A memorandum of understanding between the devolved Administration and the UK Government details how devolved issues will be taken into account at meetings of the Council of Ministers.

With regard to the North/South Ministerial Council, what is being discussed is the way in which we can exchange information and alert each other to sensitivities and priorities that may arise in order to inform the way in which the formal arrangements within the Council of Ministers operate. We are exploring the opportunities for that, and if we develop procedures for the exchange of information, we will want to ensure that there is appropriate consultation through the Assembly Committees or other appropriate channels.

One advantage of the North/South procedure is that, through reports to the Assembly, it is as transparent as we can make it. The Assembly's confidence in the transparency of the arrangements is reflected by the way in which so many Members are content to leave the operation of the arrangements to us.

Mr Hussey: The First Minister will be aware — and the Deputy First Minister will be more than aware — of the difficulties that exist in marrying together strategic North/South transport issues. Is there an element of safety in concentrating on road safety issues, given the particular ministerial responsibility in this Administration? The marrying together of transport issues should be brought forward via the Department for Regional Development. How do the considerations of the North/South Ministerial Council meeting connect with those at British-Irish Council level, where we are taking the lead on transport matters?

The Deputy First Minister: Road safety merits significant attention from the Administrations in both jurisdictions. The respective Departments have co-operated and have made efforts to raise awareness of the issue through advertising. We must work to make that more effective. The issue is being progressed on its own terms and merits.

We share the concern that more work has not been done at North/South level on transport, which is a designated area of co-operation, not least on strategic matters. Nevertheless, it has not prevented us from creating a situation where the Executive have been able to commit resources to the improvement of the Larne to Dundalk route. That will complement improvements on the Dublin to Dundalk road on the Southern side.

The issues must be examined, given that they involve significant areas of infrastructure investment, which is significant and challenging for both Administrations.

The aftermath of 11 September has transport implications, especially for air links. It will affect not only our tourist industry but also business and market access. That does not concern only the North and the South; it affects other Administrations within the British-Irish Council. Transport, for which this Administration was given the lead in the British-Irish Council, touches on many issues at many levels. We are working to ensure that we make the most of our responsibilities and of the opportunities that exist through the North/South Ministerial Council and the British-Irish Council.

Mr Gibson: The final paragraph of the First Minister's statement states:

"A paper setting out the existing areas of co-operation between the two Administrations that do not fall within the current North/South Ministerial Council work programme was noted and discussed in broad terms".

Which areas were discussed?

The First Minister: I am glad that the Member raised that question, for two reasons. First, it may be that the DUP, since the failure of its legal challenge, now recognises the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister by asking them questions. The House is glad to note that development.

Secondly, comments by DUP spokespersons after the institutional format meeting revealed that they did not understand the position with regard to co-operation in the North/South Ministerial Council. I will explain that position for those DUP Members who fail singularly to understand it. Co-operation with the Council happens in two different categories: those matters that are jointly administered — the areas of the six implementation bodies — and the matters on which there is interdepartmental co-operation. When the Council was formed, six areas of interdepartmental co-operation were identified.

Much interdepartmental co-operation falls outside the ambit of the North/South Ministerial Council. Those numerous areas of co-operation were developed before, and during, direct rule. The Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister obtained a report of some 30 pages which lists the areas of interdepartmental co-operation. Officials have been asked to examine that report, to offer advice and to consider further whether it would be appropriate to bring those areas of co-operation within the ambit of the Council. That would result in considerable advantages, which the DUP would welcome: at present, those areas of interdepartmental co-operation that are outside the Council's ambit are not subject to transparency or reportage and are not brought before the Assembly. If they are brought within the ambit of the Council, there will be accountability.

Among the areas that are outside the ambit of the North/South Ministerial Council is energy, including the recent announcements regarding electricity and North/South gas interconnections. Environmental co-operation includes the disposal of clinical waste through facilities in Dublin, Cork and Antrim. An industrial pollution and radiochemical inspectorate has been working jointly with relevant bodies in the South on emergency planning and environmental monitoring issues.

In higher education there is collaboration within the university and research sector through the funding of joint projects. In the area of health and social services there has been co-operation in nursing, dentistry and human resources, involving the exchange of information and the secondment of a senior social services official to assist in the establishment of an inspectorate in the South. On social and community issues there has been co-ordination of social security provisions, involving official-level co-operation through a liaison group that brings together the Department of Social, Community and Family Affairs in the Republic of Ireland and the Department for Social Development in Northern Ireland. It might be appropriate to bring such co-operation under the ambit of the North/South Ministerial Council to ensure accountability. I am sure that the DUP would not wish to escape accountability on that aspect of the Department for Social Development's responsibility.

Mrs Courtney: I had intended to ask whether issues such as energy and higher education were being considered for further co-operation. However, the First Minister has already answered my question in his statement.

The Deputy First Minister: When the original areas of co-operation between North and South were established, it was decided that any new areas would have to be agreed by the Assembly and the Oireachtas. Any adjustments or additions to those areas of co-operation must be done properly under the auspices of an institutional format. Any outcome or decision would then be brought before the Chamber and the Oireachtas respectively.

11.00 am

As well as considering the existing areas of agreement, it is important to look at how well they are progressing and whether any due adjustments are needed. The House has already reflected on some of the obvious issues in relation to Irish Lights. If the functions of the Commissioners of Irish Lights are not to be continued, that will raise the issues of how that area is to be dealt with and whether the functions should be transferred to another body.

It was agreed at the meeting in institutional format that officials should look at other areas of co-operation and not just the existing areas. As the First Minister outlined, several active areas of co-operation have been pursued outside the auspices of the North/South Ministerial Council. Issues emerging on cross-sectoral

and interdepartmental bases may also be considered. We have made it clear in the initial meeting in the institutional format that we will ensure that we maximise returns from co-operation and the potential for sensible co-operation, which is in everyone's interest.

Mrs Nelis: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. I welcome the report. What are the complexities in pursuing a transfer of functions of the Commissioners of Irish Lights to the Foyle, Carlingford and Irish Lights Commission? Legislation in respect of the Loughs Agency is not in effect, yet it has been two years since its inception. Was the effect of that on the fishing industry in Lough Foyle discussed?

Will the strategic transport issues identified in the original work programme address the lack of progress in the roads infrastructure in the north-west? Was the question of joint finance to address the deficiencies there discussed?

The First Minister: There is a cross-border dimension to roads in the north-west of Northern Ireland, and they will be considered through the main roads programme. As the Deputy First Minister mentioned, strategic transport matters are related more to the route from Dublin through Dundalk, Newry and Belfast to Larne, which then connects to transport across the Irish Sea to Scotland and beyond. Strategic routes will be looked at only in that way, and, as the statement said, officials will carry that work forward. We will also be looking at how strategic issues can be carried forward. It is also necessary, as was pointed out in an earlier statement, to relate that to what is done in the British-Irish Council for strategic routes that go across the Irish Sea through Great Britain to Europe. We must look at all aspects of that.

The body set up to deal with loughs and lights is organised into two agencies. One agency deals with Carlingford Lough and Lough Foyle. As the Member said, legislation has been enacted and is proceeding. It was originally envisaged that there would be a separate agency within the Foyle, Carlingford and Irish Lights Commission that would deal with the Commissioners of Irish Lights. However, the problem as regards that body is rather complex and involves the history of the organisation. It is not a purely Irish body. It operates within a British Isles context and involves authorities in Whitehall, particularly the Department for Transport, Local Government and the Regions. Consequently there are east-west issues involved — it is not purely a North/South matter. This was an oversight at the time that the agreement was made; we did not have all the technical information on the Commissioners of Irish Lights that has subsequently become available.

There are east-west issues there, and there are financial issues as well. There would be some serious financial consequences if the existing arrangements were to change, so we are looking at whether there is a better

way of handling the lights issues. We do not want to disturb existing arrangements, which are working very effectively on the provision of lights around all of the Irish Sea coast and in regard to local interests. It may not be appropriate to explore the financial aspects at the moment.

Mr McMenamin: I welcome the statement, but can the Minister assure us that the report on the obstacles to mobility will be made available to Members of the Assembly? Can he assure us that it will be published promptly? I point out that at the North/South Ministerial Council plenary meeting on 30 November it was agreed that the report should be published. It is now 15 January.

The Deputy First Minister: The Member is correct in his observation that it was agreed at the plenary meeting to publish the report and also to conduct a full consultation on it. That is the intention. The report was carried out on the initiative of the Northern Administration, and, given the effort put into it, we want to ensure that publication does take place. The joint steering group will meet later this week to finalise arrangements for publication. We are encouraging prompt publication, so that the consultation exercise can begin and views on the worth and merits of the issues, problems and possibilities identified in the report can be expressed. We want to ensure that all the representative bodies which handle the interests of consumers, workers and users in relation to a range of issues covered in the report will be included in the consultation process. We are particularly conscious of the interest of Assembly Members, and they will be the first people on this side of the border to receive copies of the report.

Mrs Nelis: On a point of order, Mr Speaker.

Mr Speaker: I do not normally take points of order during questions to Ministers.

Mrs Nelis: I fear that my question has not been answered. When I asked — *[Interruption]*.

Mr Speaker: Order. It is not a point of order if a Minister has not answered a question to the satisfaction of a Member. Ministers are asked questions, and they may respond. Members are frequently not satisfied with the responses given by Ministers — for all sorts of reasons. Sometimes the Ministers are not satisfied with their answers either, but that is another matter. It is not a point of order.

Mr Morrow: In his half of the contribution, Mr Trimble said — and I follow on from my Colleague Oliver Gibson — that the Council agreed that officials from both Administrations and the joint secretariat should consider areas of co-operation further and see if it would be appropriate to bring them within the ambit of the North/South Ministerial Council and offer advice to the next meeting of the Council in institutional format. That will come as no comfort to the majority of Unionists,

who are opposed to those quangos — the unaccountable North/South bodies — because it must be clearly understood that the House cannot amend anything done by those bodies.

It was also reported in December that a budget of £54·07 million had been approved for the North/South bodies. Is Mr Trimble telling us today that there is going to be further expenditure on, and expansion of, those unaccountable quangos? Does he not agree that the moneys spent in that area would be much better spent on Craigavon Area Hospital in his Upper Bann constituency, where patients cannot have medical care?

There is little comfort in his statement. It seems to me, and to those whom I represent, that there is no limit to the funding that will be made available to this unaccountable quango. Surely that is of great concern to him, as it is to every right-thinking Unionist in Northern Ireland.

The First Minister: It is a shame that the Member has introduced such a farrago of nonsense in the guise of a question. The Member knows better. Having been in a ministerial post himself, he knows about the existing co-operation arrangements that have been in place for some time.

I referred to the co-operation arrangements between the Department for Social Development and the equivalent ministry in the Republic of Ireland. I could also have mentioned the week-long summer school that has been held for the past two years — first in Queen's University Belfast and then in Trinity College Dublin — at which officials from the Department for Social Development meet officials from the Republic of Ireland to focus on issues of mutual interest, share ideas and participate in a programme together. That is what the Department for Social Development has been doing, but it has not reported that to the Assembly. It has not acted in an accountable way.

It is not any additional co-operation that has been referred to here at all. What would be additional would be the accountability arrangements that would be here. Reports would be made to the Assembly if it came under the aegis of the North/South Ministerial Council. Furthermore, there would be, through the Executive, a requirement for the Department for Social Development to report its proposals in advance to the Executive. At the moment the Department for Social Development does not do that. Therefore we have the former Minister introducing, by way of a question, many attempts to make prejudicial comments when, in fact, he is trying to continue to cover up his actions and those of his Colleagues.

Mr Speaker: Order. Time is up for questions to the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister.

NORTH/SOUTH MINISTERIAL COUNCIL

Language

Mr Speaker: I have received notice from the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure that he wishes to make a statement on the North/South Ministerial Council's sectoral meeting on language held on 7 December 2001.

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure (Mr McGimpsey): I wish to report on the third meeting of the North/South Ministerial Council in language sectoral format on Friday 7 December 2001 in the Slieve Donard Hotel, Newcastle. Following nomination by the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister, Ms Bairbre de Brún and I attended the meeting. Ms Máire Ní Chochláin TD, Minister of State, represented the Irish Government. This report has been approved by Ms de Brún and is also made on her behalf.

The meeting opened with a progress report on the activities of the body by the joint chairperson of the language body, MaighrÉad Uí Mhairtín, the acting chief executive of Tha Boord o Ulster-Scotch (the Ulster-Scots Agency), Mr Stan Mallon, and the acting chief executive of Foras na Gaeilge (the Irish Language Agency), Mr Michael de Hál.

The Council considered the draft equality scheme for the body and approved the submission of the scheme to an eight-week public consultation process. The Council approved the draft targeting social need action plans for the two agencies and their submission to a public consultation process.

As it has been 40 years since the last official review of Irish grammar and spelling, the Council agreed that it was now timely to consider a review of the requirements of the language. The Council, therefore, invited Foras na Gaeilge, whose statutory functions include responsibility for the development of dictionaries and terminology, to take a lead role in the consultative process with a view to bringing proposals to the Department of Arts, Heritage, Gaeltacht and the Islands and the Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure on the steps necessary for a review of the official standard of written Irish. As part of that process, Foras na Gaeilge will consult appropriate individuals, groups and organisations.

The Council approved codes of conduct for the board members of Foras na Gaeilge and Tha Boord o Ulster-Scotch. A code of conduct for the staff of Foras na Gaeilge was also approved. A code of conduct for the staff of Tha Boord o Ulster-Scotch will be submitted when the agency recruits its full staff complement. Integrated codes of conduct for the members of the Language Body and another for staff will be submitted to a future meeting of the Council.

The Council also approved the selection process for the recruitment of a chief executive for Tha Boord o Ulster-Scotch. It noted the resignation of Ms Lyn Franks from the board of Tha Boord o Ulster-Scotch and appointed Mr Éamon Ó Domhnaill as her replacement.

11.15 am

(Madam Deputy Speaker [Ms Morrice] in the Chair)

Mrs Nelis: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I thank the Minister for the report, despite its being scant on detail. What was the expenditure for Foras na Gaeilge for the past year? Was there any discussion about an increase in its budget?

Mr McGimpsey: Funding for the North/South Language Body is on the record. The funding for Irish is as follows: £10·12 million for this financial year; and £10·55 million for the next one.

Mr O'Neill: I thank the Minister for his statement. Sometimes we must have mundane administrative meetings such as this. A great deal of administrative work was done. Can the Minister tell us more about the review of the official standard of written Irish? That will be largely welcomed. Will it add to the accessibility problems? How long will the review take, and what details are available?

What resource allocations are proposed for both agencies for the financial year starting in April? Can the Minister outline the key objectives and programmes that the allocations will deliver?

Mr McGimpsey: The funding is on the record. Funding for the North/South Language Body for 2001 amounted to £11·41 million. In 2002 it will be £11·97 million. Northern Ireland's contribution for 2002 will be £3·71 million, which is a rise of just over £200,000. The Irish language will receive £10·55 million, and Ulster Scots will receive £1·42 million. The funding relates to corporate plans. The Ulster-Scots Agency produced a three-year corporate plan last year and is now reviewing that in the light of its experience — it is a new body, working in this area.

Foras na Gaeilge was already functioning as a section of the Governments on both sides of the border. There has been an amalgamation and an increase in activity. The old Bord na Gaeilge has gone — Foras na Gaeilge has taken its place and is functioning well. However, it has had to change its chief executive. The previous chief executive retired, and Foras na Gaeilge is going through the process of recruiting someone for that key post. The process will be completed soon, and a number of things will flow from there — for instance, Foras na Gaeilge will fill its staff complement.

It has been 40 years since a review of Irish was carried out, and it is appropriate that a review should be done now. Language evolves, and it is important that the

body keep up to date on text and grammar, and so on. Its focus is on keeping the language relevant, and the work that it is about to undertake is important. It is interesting to note that that is also the focus of Tha Boord o Ulster-Scotch, and it too is beginning that process.

Dr Adamson: I believe that Gaelic is an integral part of the heritage of Unionists and Nationalists in Northern Ireland. Can the Minister assure us that Ulster Gaelic will be given its rightful place in the deliberations of Foras na Gaeilge — particularly the Gaelic of Donegal, west Tyrone and Rathlin Island? As with Ullans in Ulster Scots, there would be little use for a written official standard of Irish if the living streams of Gaelic were allowed to dry up. I commend the work of Barry McElduff in his brave attempts to preserve the authentic Ulster Gaelic of west Tyrone. Go raibh maith agat.

Mr McGimpsey: It is clear that most Members agree with Dr Adamson that Gaelic, in common with Ulster Scots, is a key part of our linguistic heritage. These islands are blessed with a strong linguistic heritage and culture, and, as Dr Adamson said, it is important that we do not allow that to dry up. That is the focus of the work of Foras na Gaeilge, in respect of Gaelic. As far as the different nuances in Ulster Gaelic and other forms of Gaelic are concerned, Foras na Gaeilge must use its expertise to address that matter. The Gaelic language has been standardised since the 1930s, and that was important when formally teaching the language in schools. As we are now developing a new text, or reviewing the current text, there is an opportunity to take on board the points that have been raised.

Mr Hilditch: The Minister has mentioned the recruitment process underway in Tha Boord o Ulster-Scotch. Can he tell me when the new chief executive and the full complement of staff will be appointed? How will staffing levels in Tha Boord o Ulster-Scotch compare with those of the Irish Language Agency?

Mr McGimpsey: The board is in the process of recruiting a full-time chief executive. It currently has a stand-in, temporary chief executive, Mr Stan Mallon, and I have no doubt that he is keeping the agency on the right track. The Ulster-Scots Agency is functioning well and has performed a number of important tasks, particularly with regard to cultural activities, linguistic development and education. In partnership with the University of Ulster, it opened the world's first Institute of Ulster-Scots Studies in January 2001.

The recruitment process is ongoing. I am not sure when a permanent chief executive will be appointed, but the agency is aware of the urgent need to make that appointment, and from that will flow a number of other matters, including the appointment of more full-time staff. The agency is required to draw up terms and

conditions and job descriptions, and so on, and that will be a key role for the chief executive. However, it is important to stress that that has not arrested the development of the Ulster-Scots Agency, which is functioning well.

Mr McCarthy: I welcome the Minister's statement. It has been said that it is 40 years since the last review of Irish grammar and spelling. The Minister may have answered this question, but are there proposals to do the same for Ulster Scots? The last thing we want is for it to be left behind in the development of dictionaries and terminologies. Is there a similar proposal for Ulster Scots?

Mr McGimpsey: I have already referred to the fact that the Ulster-Scots Agency is aware of the need to make progress with text and grammar. It is largely an oral tradition, although some of it has been written down. The agency is in the process of recording that oral tradition — formally writing it down and producing a text, grammar and dictionary. A mapping exercise is beginning, or will soon start, which will allow a text base to be developed for the first time. The agency is well aware of this, and it will be ongoing.

Mr McMenamin: I thank the Minister for his statement and warmly welcome the official review of Irish grammar and spelling. I would like to see the appointment of more Irish language teachers and special language counsellors in Northern Ireland to assist young people seeking to learn Irish. I also ask that pressure be brought to bear on the BBC to enhance regional autonomy and promote the development of local writing and production, including those in Irish and Ulster Scots.

Mr McGimpsey: The appointment of Irish-language teachers is a matter more appropriate to the Department of Education, and the Member should address those concerns to that Department. I do not have any authority over the appointment of, or provision for, more teachers. The BBC is a reserved matter. However, it is important to say that there is an Irish language television and film production pilot at an advanced stage of development. The first course is expected to start in February 2002. That is one of the undertakings that we have given in the past, and work is ongoing. There is also the extension of TG4 to Northern Ireland, which is a reserved matter to the Department for Culture, Media and Sport. It is to be welcomed that RTE will be available throughout Northern Ireland through satellite dishes, and that will assist somewhat the Member's concerns. The BBC is specifically a reserved matter, and questions about it should be addressed to the Department for Culture, Media and Sport or to the BBC directly.

Mr Gibson: The Minister said that there is £10.5 million for Irish and £1.42 million for Ulster Scots. A recent BBC2 programme indicated that in the Irish programme only Northern Irish was being dealt with.

Does this mean that, at present, four different kinds of Irish are being spoken in schools and other institutions? Will this lead to four different dictionaries of standard Irish? His report seems to be attempting to form or "hermaphroditise" the four existing trends in Irish into some form of standard that may be acceptable to none. Is the £10.5 million going to be wasted on this?

11.30 am

Mr McGimpsey: The money for the North/South Language Body that Mr Gibson referred to is a matter of record. The Ulster-Scots Agency and Irish language contribution by Foras na Gaeilge operate on an all-Ireland basis. However, it is important to note that 2002 shows a 12-fold increase in the funding for Ulster Scots compared to the level of funding prior to devolution three years ago, so there is a considerable increase in investment in that area.

As I have attempted to explain in previous answers, the Gaelic language is the responsibility of Foras na Gaeilge. It has been a standardised language since the 1930s. However, as Dr Adamson has said, there are various streams, of which Ulster Gaelic is one. However, there has been no suggestion of producing four dictionaries or of developing four languages with a text that is acceptable to no one.

There are small differences between the various forms of Irish Gaelic, and Ulster Gaelic and Munster Gaelic are interchangeable. Therefore, the Member should have no concerns that the Gaelic language might not be in good heart. Foras na Gaeilge is functioning well as the body that promotes the Irish language. It is not in the business of promoting four languages. It is in the business of promoting one language, which is Irish Gaelic.

Mr McElduff: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I thank Dr Adamson for his support for the campaign to preserve Tyrone Irish. Foras na Gaeilge should play a role in reprinting 'Scéalta Mhuinir Luinigh', the stories of the people of the Gaeltacht area of Tyrone, mainly Gortin and Greencastle.

Can the Minister elaborate on the progress report on Foras na Gaeilge by Ms Maighréd Uí Mhairtín? Where will the sub-office for the North be located, and when is it due to open. What are the proposed staffing levels, profile and visibility of the office? More interaction with the Irish language section of Foras na Gaeilge must be facilitated.

Finally, I welcome the lifting of the anti-democratic and illegal ban on Bairbre de Brún which prevented her from attending meetings.

Mr McGimpsey: Foras na Gaeilge has an office in Dublin and a sub-office in Belfast in a neutral location in the city centre. The Ulster-Scots Agency — which

also has an office in Belfast — has found premises for a sub-office in Raphoe in County Donegal.

Foras na Gaeilge is recruiting a new chief executive, and it is anticipated that he or she will be in post in the near future, after which full-time staff will be recruited. I will write to the Member regarding staff numbers in Belfast and Dublin.

GAME PRESERVATION (AMENDMENT) BILL

Final Stage

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

That the Game Preservation (Amendment) Bill (NIA Bill 15/00) do now pass.

The purpose of the Bill is to amend the Game Preservation Act (Northern Ireland) 1928 to extend the shooting season for partridge for commercial purposes and to relax the current restrictions on pest rabbits. The Bill was amended at Further Consideration Stage, so the Department of the Environment must ensure that the issue of permits to net hares from the wild for the purpose of coursing does not endanger the hare population in Northern Ireland or any part thereof. I am examining how to give effect to that amendment.

I want to refer briefly to the Irish hare. The Executive and I accept the amendment and acknowledge its conservation aspirations, but I must correct the impression given to the Assembly and others that I, or my Department, have failed to implement the species action plan for the conservation of the hare. The plan, produced by my Department in conjunction with our partners — the Ulster Wildlife Trust and the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development, among others — was informed by the research work partly funded by my Department and carried out by Prof Montgomery and Dr Dingerkus. There is nothing in their research to suggest that the trapping of hares for organised coursing is detrimental to our hare population. It is not, therefore, listed in the plan among the main causes of the decline in the Irish hare population.

It is widely accepted that the major factor affecting the status of the Irish hare is the loss of suitable habitat. That analysis is confirmed by the work of Prof Montgomery and Dr Dingerkus. It is also confirmed in the Northern Ireland countryside survey concluded by my Department during 2000, which indicates that suitable hare habitat has decreased significantly in the past 10 years.

To take account of the threat posed by loss of habitat, the Department is working in conjunction with the Ulster Wildlife Trust — our lead partner in the action plan to conserve the hare — and several measures are under way. A key action is the plan to update the survey of the hare population in Northern Ireland. That work was scheduled for 2001, but it could not be undertaken because of foot-and-mouth disease restrictions. I am pleased to say, however, that with the lifting of the restrictions, that work will now proceed. I hope to see the results by late summer.

In addition, work is already in hand to draw up habitat action plans, which are designed to maintain and improve many priority habitats that are important for Irish hares. Those habitats will also benefit from my proposals to strengthen the legislation and management arrangements for areas of special scientific interest, which I hope will take effect over the next two years, subject to the passage of the necessary legislation through the Assembly.

I want to take the opportunity to thank Members for the extent of their interest in the Bill, particularly the support for the extension of the partridge-shooting season, which will be welcomed by country sports enthusiasts. That, together with the relaxation of controls on the shooting of pest rabbits, regulating what has been common practice for some time, demonstrates that Executive Ministers and the Assembly can and do respond to local needs and circumstances. I also want to thank the Committee for the Environment for its commitment and assistance and for its support of the Bill.

Mr McCarthy: On behalf of the Alliance Party, I welcome the Final Stage of the Bill. I apologise that Mr David Ford, a member of the Committee for the Environment, is unable to be present this morning. The Alliance Party believes that the amended Bill is a better Bill than that first produced by the Department. In part, that is because the Committee carried out a detailed examination of the Bill. It is also because of the amendment on the taking of hares, which Members, led by David Ford, forced on the Minister. That amendment means that Irish hares can no longer be taken by nets for coursing, unless the Department is satisfied that there is no threat to hares in Northern Ireland.

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

The Minister has promised action on the species action plan for the Irish hare. There is still a great deal to be done, both by his Department and other agencies, to improve the situation for hares. However, we can now rest assured that the Department will no longer be able to issue licences for the taking of Irish hares for coursing, since there is a clear threat to hares throughout Northern Ireland. The Bill is much improved as a result of those changes. My party and I, therefore, welcome the amended Bill.

Mr Foster: I thank Mr McCarthy for his comments and his acceptance of what the Department is trying to do. I can assure him that the Department is very aware of all endangered species. The difficulty of trying to match hares — if I may say so in a somewhat lighter fashion — is that it will be difficult to throw salt on their tails to count them all.

The Ulster Wildlife Trust has convened a steering group. It is co-ordinating a work programme for the action plan, which contains several measures. These include the formulation and implementation of agriculture policies

which benefit the habitat required by the Irish hare; a review of and, if necessary, an increase in the level of protection given to the Irish hare in the Wildlife (Northern Ireland) Order 1985; an assurance that state-owned lands are managed, where possible, with a view to conservation of Irish hares and the establishment of hare sanctuaries; the development of a strategy for the conservation and monitoring of the Irish hare, which will include repeat surveys similar to the Northern Ireland hare survey, at intervals of three to five years, until 2010 to measure its success; the provision of advice to land managers and others on hare conservation; and the promotion of general research into the biology, ecology and population dynamics of the Irish hare.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That the Game Preservation (Amendment) Bill (NIA Bill 15/00) do now pass.

REPORT OF THE PUBLIC ACCOUNTS COMMITTEE

Mr Deputy Speaker: I call the Chairperson of the Public Accounts Committee, Mr Billy Boyle.

The Chairperson of the Public Accounts Committee (Mr B Bell): Mr Bell.

Mr Deputy Speaker: My apologies.

Mr B Bell: The bells are not ringing today, I'm afraid.

I beg to move

That this Assembly takes note of the Public Accounts Committee 'Composite Report on Issues Dealt with by Correspondence by the Committee' (3/01/R) and of the Committee Reports (1/99, 1/00R to 6/00R and 1/01/R to 2/01/R)) and the Department of Finance and Personnel Memoranda of Reply (NIA 22/00, 32/00, 37/00, 51/00, 59/00, 92/00, 99/00, 27/01 and 29/01).

I welcome the opportunity to debate, for the first time, the important work undertaken by the Public Accounts Committee since it was established in January 2000. I am pleased that the new Minister of Finance and Personnel, Dr Seán Farren, is here for the debate. I congratulate the Minister on his appointment and hope that we can work together and continue to develop the excellent relationship that the Committee had established with his predecessor, Mr Mark Durkan, and his officials.

It is important that Members have a clear understanding of the role of the Public Accounts Committee. I also hope that by reviewing the published reports of the Committee we will be able to demonstrate to Members the relevance of the Committee's work to the overall objective of improving standards of administration and performance in Northern Ireland's Departments and agencies.

What is the Public Accounts Committee all about? Its role is set out in simple terms in the Northern Ireland Act 1998. The Act provides that the Committee's role is to consider accounts, and reports on accounts, laid before the Assembly by the Comptroller and Auditor General for Northern Ireland.

I can understand how anyone reading this provision could easily come to the conclusion that the work of the Public Accounts Committee would consist of a series of meetings that would continually become bogged down in the study of a range of complex and detailed departmental accounts, and that little would be achieved. Such an assumption could not be further from the truth, and there are several reasons why that is so. First, we are fortunate that the Comptroller and Auditor General is the Assembly's independent auditor and an officer of the Assembly. He heads the Northern Ireland Audit Office and is responsible to the Assembly for the audit of central Government Departments and most of their sponsored bodies.

11.45 am

In performing this role, he provides independent assurance, information and advice to the Assembly on the proper accounting regularity and propriety of expenditure, revenue and assets, and on the economy, efficiency and effectiveness with which public sector bodies use their resources.

The Comptroller and Auditor General's independence is fully safeguarded in the Northern Ireland Act 1998. The Act made it clear that he would be totally independent in the exercise of his functions and could not

"be subject to the direction or control of any Minister or Northern Ireland department or of the Assembly".

The importance of that provision cannot be overstated. I am sure that all Members will join me in paying tribute to the Comptroller and Auditor General for the important role that he has played as we have sought to come to terms with our new responsibilities under devolution.

It is also appropriate to place on record my thanks, and that of the Public Accounts Committee, to the Committee Clerk and the Assistant Clerk. The success of the Committee has been in no small measure due to the work that they have done.

A second reason that the work of the Public Accounts Committee is both interesting and productive is that it has concentrated on value-for-money reports, which the Northern Ireland Audit Office has produced, based on its assessment of the economy, efficiency and effectiveness with which public sector bodies use their resources. Usually, 10 to 12 such reports are produced annually. Members have often heard me say in the House and in the media that before devolution those reports were sent to Westminster to gather dust on its shelves. I have repeated that statement due to frustration; I think that all those important reports were not fully acted on during the past 30 years. Fortunately, with the advent of devolution, that situation has changed.

The Committee has been instrumental in bringing about that change. Shortly after its establishment, the Committee decided that all Audit Office value-for-money reports would be considered in detail. That consideration is carried out either by correspondence with the relevant accounting officers or by taking oral evidence from them in a public session. That approach has led to greater financial accountability to the Assembly, and has proved particularly effective.

A further reason for the Committee's continued success is the hard work and dedication of its members. I thank them all for their support. The Committee has been able to agree that party political issues should not come before the interests of the taxpayer. It is interesting to note that all the reports that we have produced have been unanimous. That is not because of fudges in the

wording, conclusions or recommendations, but because we have been able to keep the interests of the taxpayer to the forefront of our deliberations.

The unanimity of our reports has meant that Departments and the Executive have been faced with conclusions that are difficult to ignore or avoid. I am pleased to say that the vast majority of our recommendations have been accepted and acted on.

When the Committee was set up in January 2000 it faced a formidable task. Mr David Davis, former Chairperson of the Public Accounts Committee at Westminster, speaking during the debate on the Northern Ireland Bill in July 1998, said that

“the history of the management of public sector spending in Northern Ireland is not very good”.

He also quoted the Rt Hon Member for Upper Bann, First Minister David Trimble, who described it as “ghastly”. I hope that that assessment has changed as a result of the Committee’s work.

I turn to the reports produced by the Committee. I shall deal first with the composite report published today, which represents a departure from the Committee’s normal procedures and is a novel approach in the United Kingdom. It is usual when the reports are published for the relevant Departments to have two months to reply to the conclusions and recommendations in the form of a Department of Finance and Personnel memorandum of reply. That ensures that the reports are not subjected to knee-jerk reaction and that a considered response is given to the carefully drafted conclusions and recommendations. In such circumstances, it would not be appropriate to have a debate on a report in the Chamber before a formal reply had been published. That is not possible. However, the Committee has decided to deal with the eight topics solely on the basis of written evidence contained in the report. The process, therefore, has been completed and a Department of Finance and Personnel memorandum of reply is not required.

Members will be pleased to know that I do not intend to go through all eight topics, but I would like to draw their attention to some issues that are raised in the report. Members will have noted on pages 8 and 9 of the composite report that the Committee has drawn attention to the loss of £2,161,000 in Vote 3, IDB Industrial Support and Regeneration account. The loss is due to the poor design and construction of a factory in Campsie industrial estate, Londonderry. That was largely due to the failure of the design consultants to make adequate provision in the design of the building for the internal controlled levels for temperature and humidity required to spin yarn. The IDB was required to carry out the remedial work at a cost of £3.5 million, but it could negotiate a settlement figure of only £1.35 million, which was set at the level of professional indemnity cover held by the design consultants. Further

litigation would almost certainly have put the defendants out of business, with no guarantee of any greater sum of recovery.

The Committee expects lessons to be learnt from this case, especially the need for Departments to ensure that design consultants, architects and contractors have the appropriate level of insurance cover relevant to the value and complexity of the building to be constructed. I welcome the fact that the Department of Finance and Personnel has pointed that out to departmental finance officers.

Vote 4 on page 9 raises an important issue with regard to clawback arrangements as part of the privatisation of public assets. That issue was raised in the context of a shortfall in anticipated clawback as a result of disposals by Northern Ireland Electricity of part of its Danesfort headquarters and its shareholding in the ShopElectric retail chain of 34 shops. Northern Ireland Electricity calculated that the clawback due was £250,000, although the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment calculated the total amount due to be £6.8 million. Therefore, the matter is currently at arbitration.

The Committee attaches great importance to Departments and public bodies ensuring that they have effective arrangements for clawback and vigorously pursuing any sums due. The Committee has, therefore, asked to be updated when the arbitration process is complete. The Committee has also requested the Comptroller and Auditor General to review all other aspects of the follow-up to the 1994 report on the privatisation of Northern Ireland Electricity and, if appropriate, to produce a further report.

I want to turn to some of the reports that the Committee has published over the past 18 months. The first report that we dealt with was on road safety in Northern Ireland. The Committee decided to put this issue to the top of its agenda because of the appalling road safety record here. Some of the key issues arising from the report were: the cost to the economy for road deaths and injury of £574 million — a staggering figure; the need for a comprehensive road safety plan that is driven strongly by a single lead organisation and for the plan to include clear and challenging targets — *[Interruption]*.

Mr Deputy Speaker: I have sent someone to find out what is causing the background noise. This should not be happening while you are on your feet, Mr Bell, and I apologise.

Mr B Bell: Thank you for your concern, Mr Deputy Speaker. It is a bit off-putting, but I do not attach any blame to you for that.

The Committee also wants to reduce significantly the gap between Northern Ireland and the rest of the United Kingdom in deaths and serious injury. The Department had proposed setting a target of a 20%

reduction in casualty rates on our roads by 2010. However, given that the target reduction in Great Britain was 40% in the same period, we have insisted that the Department set a target that will reduce significantly the gap in road casualties between Great Britain and Northern Ireland. We have also insisted on better co-ordination, co-operation and planning between all the agencies involved in road safety, such as the Department of the Environment, the Department for Regional Development, Driver and Vehicle Licensing (NI), Driver and Vehicle Testing (NI), the Roads Service, the Court Service and the police.

We still have a long way to go to improve our road safety record. However, we are now moving in the right direction. I hope that the reduction of 24 in the number of fatalities on our roads during 2001 is an improvement that can be sustained.

I want to turn to fraud in the public sector. One of the most worrying issues to emerge in the course of our work is the scale on which fraud and suspected fraud exists in the public sector, a massive waste of scarce resources. Fraud exists throughout many Departments, and it seems to be tackled differently by each Department. The public sector must rise to the challenge and combat fraud.

Our first hearing on fraud involved three cases under the National Agricultural Support Scheme administered by the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development. The first two cases involved an over-declaration of land by the applicants and a subsequent over-claim of £105,793 for livestock subsidies. In both cases the police were unable to pursue a criminal prosecution because of serious shortcomings in the Department's system. The Committee was astonished to find that subsidies for grazing were being paid to Sir Thomas and Lady Dixon Park — subsidies that also covered the flower beds and car parks — to Annadale Embankment and to Dunmurry golf course.

Amazingly the maps used were up to 64 years old and led to the Department being unable to prosecute. The Ordnance Survey of Northern Ireland, or even Eason's bookshop, would have had more up-to-date information than that.

12.00

The third case relates to several claims made by the same family. It was suspected that livestock subsidies were being claimed for animals that came from a source outside Northern Ireland. This case highlighted the direct connection between fraud and animal health issues that became all too apparent with the subsequent outbreak of foot-and-mouth disease in Northern Ireland. We had grave concerns that the controls in place did not detect fraud until 1999. The Department was, again, not able to prosecute — a common theme that we have heard from the Department of Agriculture and Rural Develop-

ment. However, we were encouraged by the accounting officer's evidence that he operates zero tolerance of fraud. We will be keeping a watching brief in order to ensure that these words are translated into action.

I am endeavouring to keep to time, but the slight interruption put me off my stride a bit.

The period of direct rule did not best serve the people of Northern Ireland. During that period the creation of large, bureaucratic institutions meant that Government lost touch with the reality of people's everyday needs in relation to healthcare, education and many other services. We have also inherited a legacy of underfunding in many vital public services. My experience as Chairperson of the Public Accounts Committee has given that belief a sharper focus.

I am convinced that the problems we face can be overcome, given that the key elements of local accountability have been greatly enhanced through devolved Government. I cannot emphasise that enough. The Public Accounts Committee will play an important role in ensuring that public sector bodies are fully accountable to the Assembly.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Thank you, Mr Bell. I apologise again for the distraction during your speech.

Mr Dallat: Before I refer to the report of the Public Accounts Committee, I wish to speak briefly in my capacity as Chairperson of the Audit Committee about that Committee's role in the oversight and ongoing scrutiny of the Northern Ireland Audit Office given that the Public Accounts Committee takes evidence on the basis of its reports.

The Audit Committee has access to the Audit Office's business plan and statement of accounts on an annual basis. We receive frequent updates on progress towards the planned targets and an opportunity to agree the estimates for annual expenditure from the Comptroller and Auditor General and members of his senior management team. My Committee prepares a report on this crucial area of work and lays it before the Assembly annually.

The size of the Comptroller and Auditor General's task is considerable. In 2001-02 it is estimated that his office will audit expenditure and revenue transactions totalling over £135 billion and assets and liabilities of over £49 billion. Analysing, certifying and reporting on these accounts is all part of the service provided to the Assembly by the Comptroller and Auditor General and his team. This comprehensive service is provided at a cost of under £5 million to the public. That represents excellent value for money.

I have been impressed by the professionalism and quality of the work carried out by the Northern Ireland Audit Office. I look forward to working with it in facing the challenges ahead arising from the proposed legislation on audit and accountability and the Sharman Report.

As a member of the Public Accounts Committee I would like to mention our report on school inspection. In May 2001 the permanent secretary and senior officials from the Department of Education appeared before the Committee to examine the role of school inspections.

The purpose of the session was to consider how effective school inspections have been in ensuring good quality of school performance and, in particular, in assisting an improvement in standards in schools. I am especially concerned about the literacy and numeracy levels among young people, and I selected that session for comment, as school inspection is fundamental in highlighting the reasons for a school's performance level falling.

I asked the permanent secretary about the Department of Education's failure to achieve the English and mathematics targets for 11-year-olds at Key Stage 2 and 14-year-olds at Key Stage 3 which were proposed in its original literacy and numeracy strategy in 1997. Given that so many pupils leave school and seek work with inadequate literacy and numeracy skills, the Public Accounts Committee made it clear that the schools inspectorate, which visits schools regularly, should have been screaming from the rooftops at the lack of improvement in standards. The inspectorate should have been telling the Department that teachers do not have the resources or the back-up to ensure that the bottom 20% get a fair deal. Instead, it bullied good teachers and let the Department off the hook for years by remaining silent.

I expressed dismay that the Department appeared to have walked away from the original targets because they were difficult to achieve. It downgraded the Key Stage 2 English and Key Stage 3 mathematics targets. Moreover, the previous Programme for Government revealed that the Department had moved the goalposts of its original strategy from 2002 to 2004. Surely this must be the only area of government in which a new Executive is promising lower achievement than we had under direct rule?

With 250,000 people aged between 16 and 64 with serious literacy and numeracy problems, the Department is behaving like the proverbial ostrich by burying its head in the sand and pretending that nothing is wrong. Against that background it is alarming that, since its response to the Committee, the Department has reduced the Key Stage 3 targets for both English and mathematics yet again.

I want to make it clear that setting targets and then reducing them when they appear difficult to achieve is not a sensible way of managing the education system. With that sort of direction from the top, it is not our pupils who are failing the literacy and numeracy test; it is the Department.

The Public Accounts Committee has made it clear that it will continue to monitor progress in that area, as will the Education Committee, I am sure. It is vital

that we hold the Department to account for effective management of the improvements to the education of young people, so that no child leaves school unable to read and write to an acceptable level. That is what equality is about; it is the foundation stone of the Assembly, and the Department has been found wanting by the Public Accounts Committee.

Referring to the composite report before the House, one area that caused me particular concern was the failure of the Northern Ireland Tourist Board to follow proper purchasing procedures when awarding £3.9 million worth of printing contracts. The Committee noted that, when awarding the contracts, a £64,000 bid from W&G Baird Ltd had been accepted, although it was £12,350 higher than the lowest bid, which was £51,650.

That company is connected to the chairman of the Northern Ireland Tourist Board, and in the light of that, the Committee requested further information to identify how many similar cases there were. In each case, the board was requested to state the amount of the company's bid and all lower bids, together with the reasons for rejecting the lower bids.

From the Northern Ireland Tourist Board's reply certain details emerged. Contracts awarded to W&G Baird Ltd without tendering, or where that company was the sole tenderer, amounted to £470,000.76. Contracts awarded where W&G Baird Ltd's tender was not the lowest tender amounted to £773,312; contracts awarded where W&G Baird Ltd was the lowest bidder amounted to £137,185.

The Committee considered the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment's reply to be disturbing. It revealed the extent to which substantial print contracts were awarded to W&G Baird Ltd. I was appalled to see that nearly £500,000 of printing contracts had been awarded without any competition. A further £770,000 had been awarded to the company when it had not been the lowest bidder. The Committee's view is that the reasons cited for rejecting lower bids were not convincing.

In the light of those concerns, the Committee has asked for a further report in 12 months' time on all printing contracts awarded since April 2000, including full details of all bids received and the basis on which contracts were awarded. Of further concern was the fact that the Department did not accept that it was undesirable to make an appointment to the board of a public body in circumstances where there was potential for a serious conflict of interest — the respective appointee's company was carrying out substantial business with the public body.

The Committee recognised that board members who have a private sector background can bring valuable business skills to bear in the running of public bodies. It also recognised that experienced people in the hotel and catering industry should not be precluded from appointments to the board of the Northern Ireland

Tourist Board because their business received grants from that organisation. However, the Committee considered there to be a clear distinction between that type of situation and making a board appointment in circumstances where the appointee's company is carrying out substantial commercial business with the public body. The Northern Ireland Tourist Board's failure to recognise that distinction smacks of extreme naivety. In the light of that, the Public Accounts Committee has recommended that guidelines on public appointments should be re-examined. The Committee will, of course, closely monitor developments in the Tourist Board for the foreseeable future.

Mr Carrick: I apologise to the Chamber for my absence at the start of the Chairperson's speech. I was detained in my constituency.

I pay tribute to the Chairperson of the Public Accounts Committee, Mr Billy Bell. He has dealt with every issue fairly and in a non-partisan way. However, I remind the House that he has a hard act to follow. The Chairperson of the Public Accounts Committee back in 1971 was a politician of considerable standing — none other than my party leader, Dr Paisley. I also fully endorse the tribute that Mr Bell paid to the Comptroller and Auditor General and his staff. They have provided a valuable service to the Committee and to the Assembly.

In the 18 months in which the Committee has been fully operational, I have been impressed at the range of topics that it has covered, reaching across all Executive Departments. The Committee has dealt with topics as diverse as road safety, the services provided by the pathology laboratories in the Health Service and fleet management in the Northern Ireland Fire Authority. That has undoubtedly improved accountability to the taxpayer on how public money has been spent.

Before I deal with some specific issues I want to make it clear that the Committee does not scrutinise policy or the allocation of resources. Ministers and the Executive are accountable directly to the Assembly on those issues. I emphasise that the interest of the Committee is to ensure that the Departments and their agencies are operating in an efficient manner and that they obtain good value for the money and resources entrusted to them by the Assembly.

12.15 pm

First, I will refer to the Committee's report on the Social Security Agency. The Committee was appalled at the enormous waste of public money by the Social Security Agency in its administration of income support benefit. This has been the sixth successive year in which the agency's accounts have been qualified by the Comptroller and Auditor General, demonstrating a long-term failure to reach acceptable standards of administration.

Although the Committee knew of the inherent difficulties in administering income support payments it was shocked to learn that, despite previous undertakings to the Public Accounts Committee at Westminster, one in eight income support awards was incorrect. That has led to an estimated 57 million errors — an increase by 36% on the 1999 position. Taking customer error and fraud together, the loss to the taxpayer has been a staggering £45 million. That is unacceptable.

Fraud, however, has not been limited to customers. The Committee was also informed of a fraud worth £250,000 involving a member of the agency's staff. That fraud was discovered only after a fire in a Belfast flat, when firemen found several payment books. The issue of fraud must be monitored closely.

Of further concern to the Committee were those whose assessments for benefit were undervalued and those who are unaware that they are entitled to benefit. The Social Security Agency must do more to ensure that those individuals, who are among the most vulnerable members of society, receive their proper benefit entitlement.

The Committee acknowledged that many good staff, with a genuine interest in their customers, work in local social security offices. However, it is potentially demoralising to work in an environment in which the level of error is so high. The Committee therefore encouraged the Social Security Agency to make a conscious drive to improve the quality of service. That is undoubtedly necessary, as it is in the interests of staff and claimants.

As part of its report, the Committee expressed its strong concern about the enormous waste of public money — errors amounting to £57 million. That concern about waste has been one of the reasons behind the Social Security Fraud Bill, which is aimed at reducing losses by creating improved powers to obtain information and providing for the power to remove benefits from persistent offenders.

The Social Security Agency has agreed to give more attention to targeting those who fail to claim their full benefit entitlement. To this end, it has recently introduced for pensioners shorter claim forms, reduced from 40 pages to 10. The Committee has urged the agency to investigate the potentially significant level of fraud stemming from additional benefits — sometimes known as "passport" benefits — that are available to claimants, which flows from erroneous income support awards.

The second report that I want to deal with is on river pollution in Northern Ireland. That key area failed to gain the level of priority it deserved during direct rule. In the course of the Committee's review I was not surprised to find that the cross-departmental approach to tackling river pollution was both fragmented and lacking in cohesion.

One of our particular concerns was that the Department of the Environment's failure to introduce charges for industrial consent in 1992 — its original target date — meant that the taxpayer had to foot a £9 million bill for running the consent operation in the intervening period. Fewer than 50% of dischargers complied with the conditions of their consent. Furthermore, as part of the former Department of the Environment, Water Service itself was a major polluter, and its activities were not fully controlled. Also, the Department of the Environment had not started the consultation process to implement the regulations on farm pollution. We are convinced that those failings sent out an unfortunate message to polluters.

This issue has generated many complaints in my Upper Bann constituency, where the response of the agencies involved has been less than satisfactory. In one case I reported that an oil flow had caused serious pollution in a Portadown river. I was horrified to find that some eight weeks later the problem had not been resolved. That is clearly unacceptable, and the Department of the Environment must do much better.

Another area of concern was that Northern Ireland was — and still is — the only part of the British Isles without an independent environmental protection body. There is, for example, the Environment Agency of England and Wales, and Scotland has the Scottish Environment Protection Agency. Real independence from Government will be essential if the public are to be confident that our environment is being properly safeguarded.

On a positive note, I am pleased to see that, following the Committee's report, the Department of the Environment has provided a progress report. Action has been taken to improve levels of compliance with industrial consents, and formal targets have been set. Consent charges are to be introduced in April 2002. Consultation is under way on the introduction of farm pollution regulations, and there has been an extension of controls over Water Service discharges. Information on the achievement of standards will be published, as we requested. However, I remain concerned that in Northern Ireland there remains a very low level of compliance with consents, and I hope that the actions taken will greatly improve the current arrangements.

I am fortunate to have been a member of the Public Accounts Committee. As a direct result of our activities we have made a positive contribution to enhancing the accountability of Northern Ireland Departments and agencies to local politicians and — most importantly — to the taxpayer. I pay tribute to the Committee's support staff, who have been of tremendous help throughout our deliberations and without whom it would not be possible to operate.

Mr Deputy Speaker: It is my intention to suspend until 2.00 pm. The Business Committee has allocated two hours to this debate and, while it is my fervent

hope to allow everyone a full opportunity to speak, the timing is something that I must keep under review. We have only two hours.

Mr S Wilson: On a point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker. To guide Members who intend to speak, can you indicate whether speeches will have a time limit and, if so, what will that time limit be?

Mr Deputy Speaker: That is a matter that I must keep under review. At the moment, I do not intend to apply a time limit. I hope that in the first round, at least, Members will have as much time as they wish. However, I must continually review the list due to the number of people who wish to add their names to it. It is too early for me to impose a specific time limit. I am sorry that I cannot be more definitive, but the situation changes continually.

The sitting was suspended at 12.26 pm.

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

2.00 pm

Mr Close: I echo the tributes that the Chairperson and other members of the Committee have paid to the work of the Comptroller and Auditor General and his staff in the Northern Ireland Audit Office. They provide a high-quality service to the Committee and the Assembly and, therefore, ultimately to the taxpayers of Northern Ireland.

I am delighted to see the new Minister of Finance and Personnel in position. I have no doubt that he is ready to respond to the points that will be made in the debate. I take that as an indication of the importance that the Executive attach to the Public Accounts Committee and its work.

The Committee is well served by an efficient and resourceful Clerk, Assistant Clerk and Committee staff. They help to draw together the various strands that make the Public Accounts Committee operate as it should; they help to make a team. The Committee is a well-oiled machine, by which I mean that we operate efficiently and effectively. The Committee is under the guidance, tutelage and leadership of the Chairperson, Mr Billy Bell. Few Committees in the Assembly operate so effectively and efficiently. The Public Accounts Committee has never been without a quorum. How many other Committees could say that? That is the proof of the pudding.

I am delighted to take part in this debate. The fact that my party is not represented in the Executive allows me to speak with greater objectivity — if I dare to call it that — than most other members of the Committee, whose Colleagues sit on the Executive, whether around the table or outside the door.

Accountability is a key element of the work of the Committee. It plays a pivotal role in the balance between the Executive's responsibility to govern and the Assembly's responsibility to protect the interests of the taxpayer, and thus the vulnerable people in society. The effectiveness of the Committee over the past 18 months owes much to the fact that it does not deal with policy. It has the responsibility of holding senior officials in Northern Ireland Departments and agencies directly accountable for the spending decisions that they make, and for implementing improvements in the services that they provide to the public.

As part of the Committee's proceedings, these senior officials — referred to as "accounting officers" — are called before the Committee to defend their actions and explain their failures. Accounting officers have often had to explain their failure to follow the Department of Finance and Personnel's rules and guidance. The requirement to carry out economic appraisals was blatantly ignored by the Department of Agriculture in delivering its rural development programme between 1990 and 1995. That failure meant that the long-term sustainability of many projects was jeopardised, and consequently, scarce resources in Northern Ireland were squandered.

In the case of the Irish sport horse project, which was funded by Peace I money, an economic appraisal was carried out. However, it failed to address many of the requirements of the "green book" guidance issued by the Department of Finance and Personnel. Again, the failure to address those issues resulted in the premature winding-up of that project.

In a recent hearing on the brucellosis outbreak at the Agricultural Research Institute of Northern Ireland in Hillsborough, the committee again found that there was a failure to complete an appraisal into restocking the herd. That highlights a breakdown in basic administration procedures, which appears to have been all too prevalent during the period of direct rule, when the watchdog was either sleeping or perhaps away being neutered by the vet.

I hope that with the introduction of devolved government and the increased scrutiny of Departments the management of public sector spending has improved and will continue to do so. I am reassured by the prompt action of the Department of Finance and Personnel in drawing other Departments' attention to the need to follow rules and procedures that have been carefully drawn up to ensure the proper, efficient and effective use of scarce resources. The need for accounting officers to defend their actions to the Committee is clearly having an effect.

I am aware of a recent case where accounting officers considered that they were being asked to take action that they thought they could not defend to the Public Accounts Committee, if required to do so, on the

grounds of value for money. They therefore invoked the long-standing procedure of requesting a written direction from Ministers. As a result of the automatic notification procedure in such cases, the Public Accounts Committee was informed by the Comptroller and Auditor General that the decision by Ministers last September to proceed with the gas pipeline project was taken against the written advice of officials from the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment and the Department of Finance and Personnel. That project is expected to require public grants of more than £60 million, yet the investment appraisal indicated that the pipelines do not offer the prospect of achieving acceptable value for money.

We are all aware that Northern Ireland is faced with extreme pressures in its hospitals, schools and other areas where the strategic infrastructure is decaying. Many worthwhile public projects have had to be postponed or set aside, even though they have passed the investment appraisal test and are seen to offer good value for money. It is worrying, therefore, that against that background, Ministers are prepared to give a direction, contrary to the advice of officials, to commit public funds to a project that appears to offer poor value for money, even when the identifiable intangible benefits are factored into the equation.

I would like the Minister to address two issues in his response to the debate. First, the Committee has been informed that the investment appraisal for that project indicated that the cost of electricity in the Province would be increased by 0.6% for domestic consumers and by 1.4% for commercial and industrial consumers. If that information is correct — and I believe that it is — it would mean that people in Fermanagh and other parts of the Province who have no prospect of receiving a gas supply would, nevertheless, be paying for those pipelines through their electricity bills. That is unfair.

Secondly, given the massive commitment of public funds to that project, and the importance of openness and transparency, will the Minister ensure that the full investment appraisal is made available in the Assembly Library?

I would like to look to the future. My experience over the past 18 months has convinced me of how vital the service provided by the Comptroller and the Auditor General is to the Assembly. However, we face significant changes in the way that departmental and agency accounts are to be prepared and presented to the Assembly. Resource accounting, and developments on the way in which Departments plan to deliver services, will mean that it is of paramount importance that the Comptroller and Auditor General has the ability to follow taxpayers' money, however and wherever it is spent. The audit trail must be clear and unimpeded. I therefore urge the Minister to honour the apparent

commitment of his predecessor to implement fully the recommendations of the Sharman Report in the context of the proposed audit and accountability legislation.

Finally, I encourage all Members to take a closer interest in the work of the Public Accounts Committee. It would be useful for them to follow up on issues that the Committee has highlighted as having potential for improvement. I am convinced beyond any doubt that Public Accounts Committee reports could provide a springboard for the development of more joined-up scrutiny of the Departments and the Executive in the Statutory Committees and plenary sessions of the Assembly. In this way we can all contribute to serving better those whom we are elected to serve, namely the taxpayers.

Ms Ramsey: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Before starting, I too want to pay tribute to the Chairperson of the Public Accounts Committee, without whose leadership we could not have got through as much work as we did over the past two sessions. As Mr Close said, this is one of the few Committees that does not have a problem with getting members to attend, and that is partly due to the fairness with which Billy Bell runs the Committee.

I want to thank the Committee Clerk and the Assistant Clerk for all the help they have given to the Committee and me throughout the past months. I also thank the Comptroller and Auditor General and his staff, who do much hard work for the Committee members by drawing up reports and giving us invaluable private briefings before we go into public session with Departments.

One thing that struck me, as a member of the Public Accounts Committee, is the lack of accountability in Departments over the past years. People have been able to make decisions without assessing a project's value for money or even if the project was needed. Now we are getting to the heart of the issue of accountability. We have a roads system that is light years behind those in most of Europe; an inadequate public transport system, with the rail system being nothing but a token gesture; a water and sewerage system in dire need of capital input; and a Health Service that, whether some people believe it or not, is being asked to carry the legacy of the Tory trust system and all the costs associated with that. Those are major challenges which the Assembly and individual Members will hope to meet in the coming years as we attempt to redress those failings.

As a member of both the Public Accounts Committee and the Committee for Health, Social Services and Public Safety I want to concentrate on the section of the report that deals with executive and senior management pay, contracts and termination settlements. From the outset, the Committee shared the public concern over pay increases made to chief executives and senior managers in trusts at a time when there were problems

in the Health Service as a whole. The size of the settlements made on the termination of contracts with some executive directors in some trusts, and the nature of contracts made throughout the health and personal social services in the past number of years, have also caused concern.

Our concerns also have an impact on public confidence, whether in the Health Service, the Department for Regional Development, the Department of Education or a number of Committees. When we talk about executive directors, and senior managers' pay, we are talking about more than annual pay increases. We are talking about the whole employment package. The information gathered by the Committee confirmed that there is some justification for the public perception that some members of senior management are benefiting from fat cat pay. That should be compared with the pay for other groups in the front line of the service, such as nurses, junior doctors and domestic staff.

2.15 pm

During the four-year period to March 2000 the chief executives of the Ulster Community and Hospitals Trust and the North and West Belfast Hospitals Trust — both trusts have serious problems — received travel expenses and subsistence allowances of £37,400 and £34,383 respectively. By contrast, three chief executives in the Western Board area were paid a total of £22,401, three chief executives in the Northern Board area received a total of £3,146, and four chief executives in the Southern Board area received a total of £3,249.

What is happening in some trusts? How is it possible that individual trusts are able to claim much more than several other trusts put together? Why is there such a big difference between the top and bottom levels?

The Committee also noted that the chief executive of the North and West Belfast Hospitals Trust made a total of 86 trips outside the North in that same four-year period, and the chief executive of the Ulster Community and Hospitals Trust made a total of 73 trips. By contrast, two chief executives from other trusts made no trips and several made less than five trips in the same period. What is going on? I represent the North and West Belfast Hospitals Trust area, and I know that there are problems associated with that area. I could talk all day about higher levels of children at risk, higher levels of people waiting for community care and occupational therapists.

I hope the Department has taken that on board. It is up to the Department to investigate and to satisfy itself that the travel, the expenses and the allowances are justified. I hope that the Minister of Finance and Personnel also takes that on board. Is there a need for all that travel and all those expenses? I am not knocking them if they bring benefits to their area.

The Committee also identified nine termination settlements totalling over £1 million. The former chief executive of the Eastern Ambulance Service Trust, who received a large settlement, moved to a new job in the Surrey Ambulance Service only one week after departure. However, there is no legal obligation on the individual to notify anyone or to repay the settlement. In effect, he took the Department and the taxpayers for a ride, even though nothing illegal took place.

I welcome the Department's plans to introduce a new, more transparent pay system for senior executives. It is essential that the system helps to restore public confidence in the use of resources and the management of senior staff in the Health Service. However, the existing policy framework should not have prevented Departments from being more proactive, giving guidance and having overall control.

The Department did not intervene, even when it became clear that things were going wrong. That is wrong and it must stop. The disregard of pay restraint by some trusts was totally wrong and insensitive. I was astonished to find that against the background of public concern, media interest and a ministerial request, some trusts did not comply fully with the Department's instructions. That raises concerns about where the control of trusts and boards lies.

Our reports and the report about chief executives' pay have highlighted the need for an open and transparent system in which pay would be related to responsibilities. However, I am pleased to note that that has been implemented by the Department. The Committee has obtained a commitment to investigate the provision of leased cars and a full review of the level of travel, subsistence and personal expenses paid to senior staff. Again, I welcome that.

The Committee also advised the Department to act now to resolve the issue of poor employment contracts before any further restructuring takes place in the Health Service, and it has made a welcome commitment to do that. In addition, the Committee has identified a need concerning the Department of Finance and Personnel's involvement in high-profile public sector pay issues as a result of the review. The Department of Finance and Personnel has undertaken to write to the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety, stating that it must be informed of higher-than-normal pay settlements. I welcome that, and I want to see that carried through. Perhaps we in the Committee and the Comptroller and Auditor General could keep an eye on that. This issue impacts not only on the Health Service but throughout Departments.

Mr Close mentioned the need for economic appraisals. The Committee emphasised the need for an economic case to be presented for the provision of leased cars in the Health Service. Should any other Department

embark on that car scheme or any similar scheme, an economic appraisal would be essential. We are not talking only about chief executives' pay, but their subsistence allowance and cars. I was astonished to learn the amount of money that some chief executives receive each month to lease a car; it would be enough to lease a helicopter or an aeroplane.

The identification of the need for Departments to maintain overall control is of paramount importance when they fund bodies. Rather than standing back, the Departments must adopt a hands-on approach. If they discover that anything is wrong, whether the issue is raised by the Committee or by media interest, they must become involved from the start. We must restore public confidence and move away from the idea that people are lining their pockets. I do not want to sound angry, because I know that much good work is being done in the Departments, but we must move away from the perception that big money is being paid out.

We must ensure we in the Committee and the Assembly learn some lessons from the reports before us today. We must ensure that the same mistakes are not repeated in the future. The work of the Public Accounts Committee is starting to restore public confidence. Committee members are stopped in the street by people who tell us that it was about time that someone did this work, because they have heard many of the stories for years. I hope that we are now working in a mature fashion. We are making Departments accountable not only for ensuring value for money but for every penny of taxpayers' money. Go raibh maith agat.

Ms Morrice: Mr Deputy Speaker, I am aware of the time allocated for this debate and your generosity in allowing the first round to go on longer than others might have done. I will keep my comments relatively brief.

I welcome the opportunity for us to bring these reports and the work of the Public Accounts Committee to the Floor of the House and to the attention of other Members and of the public at large. It is important that that be done. Great praise has been given to the Northern Ireland Audit Office, and to the Comptroller and Auditor General and his team. I will add my voice to that. Their tremendous work makes our job as a Committee much easier. The reports are very well prepared and the research is extremely detailed. I have heard other Members speak with envy of the polished professionalism with which our reports are written and presented. I commend the Audit Office for that.

I also commend the Chairperson and the Deputy Chairperson. The wonderful thing about our Committees is that a cross word is rarely spoken. That is highly commendable and reflects well on both the Chairperson and the Deputy Chairperson. I say "rarely" because of

course there is the odd argument, but nothing too contentious.

As Billy Bell said, every report has been agreed unanimously, and it is a pity that that does not hit the headlines. It is not seen, but it is good news, and it is important that we report it. I also want to commend the work of the Committee Clerk, and, through you, Mr Deputy Speaker, I am looking in his direction. I would like to praise his team for the superb work that they do. It makes our work easy. However, that is not to say that we do not work hard to do — we do.

The Committee has uncovered some very serious scandals, a disturbing mismanagement of money, and cases of fraud during its detailed examination of different Departments. It is nothing short of scandalous and it is shocking to read those reports. Whether it is river pollution, chief executives' pay, Irish sport horses or the spending of European money — issues that have been addressed by each Committee member — some practices are unacceptable, and the Committee is trying to put an end to them.

During the long period of direct rule, when reports were dealt with by Westminster Committees, dust was allowed to settle on those reports, and they were not given the required local interest, input and press coverage. More attention is now being paid to these reports as a result of devolution and, therefore, we can ensure that lessons are learnt and something is done.

I want to raise the issue of road safety, which the Chairperson and other Committee members have already mentioned. It is an issue that is close to my heart and it is extremely disturbing. The cost to the taxpayer of death and injury on our roads is more than £500 million, which is a huge amount of money. It reflects the cost of the loss of life, the cost of hospital services and the cost of all the different factors that arise from the lack of a proper road safety policy. I have tried to push for something to be done on that issue for many months, if not years. In the Committee we had the opportunity to quiz and interrogate the permanent secretary as to why something was not being done about that huge loss of finances from the public purse. That loss could be corrected and reduced if more care and attention were given to the issues involved in road safety.

One such issue was the decision that there should be fewer road safety education officers. When we asked why that decision was made, the response that we received was — and I am being polite and diplomatic — inadequate. Not enough priority was being given to the issue of road safety and the hurt that is involved when a mother, father, brother or sister sees a young child hurt or killed on our roads. The Committee tried to impress on the permanent secretary — the accounting officer — that priorities need to be set, and lives need

to be the number one priority, ahead of money and the cost of other priorities.

So that was a good example. As a result, the Minister has agreed to appoint more road safety education officers, which is important.

2.30 pm

I do not propose to go into detail on other areas. I wish to conclude by talking about the value of our work and where improvements could be made to render it even more valuable. I have always been disappointed that the Public Accounts Committee can close the door only after the horse has bolted, or, as was the case in County Fermanagh, been sold to the Irish Army. We look at the issue after the event. All that we, and the permanent secretaries, can do is learn from the lessons of the past. There is nothing we can do about that. However, we can expose scandals and make sure those lessons are learnt.

Almost monthly, we have public televised inquiries at which we ask the permanent secretaries to explain themselves. They are not always gentle affairs. Those inquiries should make good television and attract media interest, yet there is little press interest in those issues. I am surprised that the press do not do more to show the work of the Committee. It is good work, and it shows the public what devolution is all about.

I call on Members who are not members of the Committee to come to us. Northern Ireland is a small place; rumours are always rife. I urge them to ask the Committee to investigate matters for them; I urge the public to do the same. We are there to make sure that taxpayers' money is well spent.

Mr Beggs: I welcome the first opportunity for the Public Accounts Committee to report directly to the Assembly on its work to date. I join other Members in paying tribute to the Chairperson of the Committee, Billy Bell, his staff, the Northern Ireland Audit Office and the members of the Committee who have worked in close partnership for the benefit of the Northern Ireland public.

I value my membership of the Public Accounts Committee. I hope that other Members and the public, who will follow today's debate and examine the reports produced by the Public Accounts Committee, will see the benefits of our work.

There is more to the work of the Public Accounts Committee than bringing Departments to account for poor use of public funds in the past. It is about ensuring that lessons are learnt so that budgets — present and future — are properly spent for the benefit of the people of Northern Ireland. Scrutiny by the Audit Office and the Public Accounts Committee may be uncomfortable for departmental accounting officers and civil servants, but the message from my constituents

is that they welcome increased scrutiny. The civil servants are no longer in control. Their decisions are scrutinised, Committees are monitoring their actions, and they have to follow proper procedures in the use of public money.

The Northern Ireland Audit Office now produces reports with the same frequency as it did prior to devolution. However, it was competing on the United Kingdom stage for the attention of the Public Accounts Committee at Westminster. I have no doubt that the extra time for scrutiny given to those reports by local politicians with greater local knowledge has brought increased benefits to the people of Northern Ireland. They have a greater awareness of how their money is spent. Statements, and changes to current practices and policies, are more often made before accounting officers come before the Public Accounts Committee, and I welcome that.

Accountability concentrates the minds of accounting officers. Many of those changes should have happened earlier, but I welcome the current improvements. I do not wish to repeat other Members' points so I will concentrate my remarks on two reports — one on the structural maintenance of roads and the other on the Fire Authority for Northern Ireland.

Public representatives have commented on potholes in roads and have called for new roads and bypasses, but the inadequacy of Roads Service's maintenance programme has not been high on their agenda. However, the Audit Office report and the follow-up by the Public Accounts Committee show that current funds are being wasted and that the poor maintenance of roads has safety implications — for instance, 30% of current roads maintenance expenditure is on the patching of roads. The Department's target for that is 10%, and authorities on mainland Britain are much closer to that target. In other words, we are firefighting.

Frequently patches are laid on top of patching. That is not good use of money. The Audit Office report demonstrated that sometimes more money was spent, over 10 years, on patching a section of road than it would have cost to relay the entire section. Roads Service is starting to understand that.

In my constituency, I drew Roads Service's attention to the trans-European road link between Larne and Belfast where, in spite of repeated repairs, faults still occurred. I am pleased that that road was recently reinstated properly. Now visitors to Northern Ireland will not have to travel on a potholed main route that is part of the trans-European network. That money is being well spent so that we will not have to repatch continually. That example relates less to the activity of the accounting officer and the Audit Office report, but more closely to practice on the ground — I welcome that.

A significant factor that affects public expenditure on roads in Northern Ireland has been the focus on the

increased costs that result from the poor reinstatement of our roads by the utilities. That too is the subject of a detailed report by the Committee. The report focused on how Roads Service should manage the safety implications of the upkeep of footpaths, and so on. I welcome the best value initiative introduced by Roads Service. It has reduced public liability claims, and introduced the UK pavement management system, which is designed to plan structural maintenance more effectively and thus optimise the allocation of funds.

As well as being critical, we must welcome constructive change. The effect of the utilities on roads is starting to be recognised at ground level. Recently I complained to Roads Service about openings in roads that utilities had dug, and I told it which bodies were responsible. Last month Roads Service wrote to tell me that those utilities have agreed to return to the areas that they have dug up and to reinstate those sections to proper standards. A proper management system that enables us to find out who has caused a fault on a road or pavement, and to ask the utility responsible to carry out the necessary improvements, avoids the need for public expenditure. The Northern Ireland Audit Office report and the work of the Committee have been instrumental in enforcing the "polluter pays" policy in respect of our roads and pavements.

This will be of increasing benefit to Northern Ireland taxpayers in the future as utilities reinstate our byways to the correct standards.

I want to turn to the Committee's report on the Fire Authority for Northern Ireland, which highlighted the poor value of much of the work happening there. According to its figures, in one particular transport workshop it cost £127 to change three bulbs and more than £1,000 to fit a new set of front brakes. The report uncovered a payment of £95,000 that was made six months before a fire appliance was received.

Sickness levels in the Fire Authority for Northern Ireland are the highest for any fire authority in the UK. However, the absenteeism of non-uniform staff — the office staff — was of most concern to me. These people are not firefighters who have become injured or sick due to their work. There was an unacceptable level of absenteeism among office staff, and that indicates a management problem.

There was a £4 million investment in information technology, which ignored the Department of Finance and Personnel's guidelines. Computers were purchased, gathered dust and became obsolete. That is poor use of public funds.

Interestingly, this was a case of the Public Accounts Committee investigating a non-departmental public body — an area that would not have been drawn to the attention of the Westminster Public Accounts Committee. This was the investigation of a relatively small non-

departmental public body, drawing the accounting officer's attention to the fact that he is responsible for the money. The message is not only significant to that body but is applicable to all other non-departmental public bodies in Northern Ireland.

Through that exercise, not only were failings highlighted in the Fire Authority, but the attention of all accounting officers was also drawn to the fact that they are responsible for the funds that pass through Departments and that they must keep a close eye on the routes that the money takes. It is not a matter of blaming someone else once it leaves his or her hands.

I welcome the increased scrutiny of these bodies, which are at arms length from the Department. I welcome the assurance made by the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety — an acknowledgement — that the accounting officer will be scrutinising its expenditure in future.

I urge the Statutory Committees to examine closely the areas that have been addressed by the Public Accounts Committee so far. We will move to other cases as they arise. However, areas where issues have been raised are of concern and subsequent scrutiny should be undertaken by the relevant Statutory Committees. In addition, there may be Northern Ireland Audit Office reports that the Committee may not be able to fit into its schedule, and they may involve areas that the Committees, through liaison with the Public Accounts Committee, may wish to scrutinise further themselves in order to bring benefits from the expenditure of funds in Northern Ireland.

Mr Close raised the point that the Committee was made aware of a decision to expand the Northern Ireland gas network that did not have a positive economic appraisal. I also wish to learn more about this. I am concerned when public expenditure occurs without proper appraisals, and it is something that should be followed up. Why are we spending £60 million when this does not follow an economic examination? I have concerns, and I call for the information to be published for further public scrutiny.

The Northern Ireland Audit Office and the Public Accounts Committee are the Northern Ireland public's watchdogs on public expenditure, and they would benefit from the public bringing concerns to them. An effective partnership between elected representatives, Committee officers and Audit Office staff has been developed. I hope that further information will come forward from the Northern Ireland public which will identify areas that we should carefully examine to ensure that the best use is made of taxpayer's money in Northern Ireland.

2.45 pm

Mr O'Neill: In common with my Colleagues, I welcome the report. That might surprise the Chair-

person of the Committee, since we had some disagreement over the media spin on one report. Tremendous work has been done by the Committee in ensuring that there is no hiding place for those who would slackly administer their duties to the point that there would be loss of public funds.

I am the Chairperson of the Culture, Arts and Leisure Committee, and in our report on inland fisheries in Northern Ireland we recommended that the Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure carry out a feasibility study into the removal of Crown immunity. The issue of the protection of Water Service from prosecution for sewage pollution by virtue of Crown immunity was raised in 28% of the submissions received by my Committee. It was a major area of concern in our inquiry.

The matter was also raised before the Public Accounts Committee when it considered river pollution in Northern Ireland. It is difficult to see a practical option for the removal of immunity from a Crown body. I understand that the Department of the Environment is currently monitoring Whitehall consideration of the issue.

The Chairperson of the Public Accounts Committee informed my Committee that the Department of the Environment had decided that there had been an extension of controls on Water Service discharges and that information on the achievement of standards is now to be published. Formal procedures have also been put in place to ensure that all pollution incidents involving Water Service are followed up with a rigour equal to that applied to pollution incidents involving other sectors. The Northern Ireland Audit Office will monitor that situation and continue to keep an eye on developments on our behalf.

That is not a bad result for two Committees dealing with an issue with no clear route to resolution. The Committees were able to reach that degree of achievement. I raise the matter to reinforce the point, already made, of the necessity, rather than the desire, for Statutory Committees to work with the Public Accounts Committee to ensure that its best skills can be employed to the best advantage in the monitoring and control of issues that affect us all.

I hope that as a result of today's debate the word will get around and we will be able to consider putting a more formal mechanism in place so that communication with the Public Accounts Committee on these issues will be easier, thus making it more effective.

Mr Hilditch: We are pushed for time, so I will briefly pay tribute to the Chairperson and to Assembly and Audit Office officials for their diligence and attention to the detail of the report. It is of vital importance that public money should be properly accounted for at all times. Any deliberate or unintentional abuse must be exposed, lessons learnt and procedures revamped. Mr Billy Bell pointed out that overall consideration

has been and will be given to the matter so that nothing should come before the interests of the taxpayer.

That should always be the bottom line. He also referred to the value-for-money reports that were made by the Audit Office but which were left to gather dust on the shelves of Westminster. Unfortunately, that led sections of the community to target projects in order to obtain subsidies for fraudulent purposes. The revenue raised helped finance Sinn Féin/IRA terrorist operations, which were mounted in south Armagh in particular.

Clear evidence of this practice was exposed recently, with the outbreak of foot-and-mouth disease among sheep in south Armagh. Terrorists became millionaires, and excessive claims for livestock became so blatant that not even the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development could deny the obvious any longer. That is the extent of the problem that we have inherited.

It should be pointed out that the Committee had highlighted its concerns about the illegal movement of cattle during a previous inquiry, before the outbreak of foot-and-mouth disease. Therefore, when the accounting officer states in evidence that he operates a policy of zero tolerance to fraud, the evidence leads me to other conclusions. I ask that an effective and efficient procedure be implemented, which includes procedures to successfully prosecute those who dishonestly apply for, or obtain, public moneys.

When reviewing the rural development programme, I was shocked to find many incidences of poor administration, inadequate appraisal mechanisms, poor marketing, insufficient business plans and ineffective monitoring systems. The accounting officer told us that the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development had set aside the economic appraisal guidelines in order to get schemes off the ground, despite the Westminster Public Accounts Committee's insistence that only properly appraised projects be considered. The goalposts were moved, and, as a result, public money at best was squandered and at worst found its way into the coffers of paramilitary organisations.

A clear illustration of the misuse of public funds was the Seeconnell project where £520,000 was spent on an equestrian centre, which remains unfinished. The likelihood is that it will never be finished, and there is no possibility of any clawback. Other examples can be seen where community volunteers have been left with little or no back-up while administering £1 million schemes. It appears that spending European money quickly to meet deadlines became more important than the objectives of the projects.

Eleven of the 15 projects sampled had no economic appraisal. I welcome the Department of Finance and Personnel's letter to all departmental and agency accounting officers, which sets out the views of the Committee and highlights the importance of appraising

projects in line with departmental guidelines. Although there have been good examples of rural development programmes, I must conclude that the £51 million programme represents poor value for money.

Turning to the Social Security Agency, I want to follow up some of the points made by Mr Carrick. Social security benefits are the bread-and-butter issues of the community. The complexity and individual circumstances of each case makes calculating a person's entitlement to income support a long-drawn-out process. Despite the growth of advice-giving agencies — and the Assembly constituency offices over recent years — during the year 1999-2000, one in eight claims for income support was wrongly calculated. During the same period, 170,000 claimants received £564 million. The level of wrongly calculated claims is unacceptable.

The figure does not take into account the people who from a sense of public spirit or pride do not exercise their right to claim benefits. Every effort must be made to reach such people. Another consideration is that people who depend on benefits are usually from the most vulnerable groups in society. The 40-page application form, which has been referred to, may act as a deterrent. I welcome the proposal to introduce a 10-page application form for pensioners, but I urge that it should be available to all claimants.

I also urge caution because the measures to combat fraud may mean further complications for genuine applicants. I note that one of the key issues, according to the Public Accounts Committee, was that applicants would almost have required a degree in administration to fill out the claim form for income support. That must be bureaucracy at its worst.

I will bring my remarks to a close in the hope that Members can raise other matters on public accounts. The timing of the report is pertinent with our citizens about to see a 7% rise in the rates to pay for the Assembly in the coming financial year and with the last round of Peace moneys due to be allocated. A clear message should be sent from the House to tell fraudsters that we will no longer turn a blind eye to their activities and to tell accounting officers that no more short cuts should be taken.

Mr S Wilson: I welcome the Committee's report. Given that the Assembly spends over £6,400 million of public money every year, scrutiny of the way in which that money is spent and of the effectiveness of that spending is important. Since we are drawing some of that money from taxes imposed by the Assembly, it is equally important that people feel that they are getting good value for money. The Public Accounts Committee has done a good job in this report by highlighting the inadequacies in some areas of public expenditure.

As one of the few non-members of the Committee to have the opportunity to speak today, I apologise that

I am going to interrupt the bout of mutual back-slapping that has taken place in the House. I have noted what some of the Committee members have said. Jane Morrice talked about a wonderful Committee and its polished report. Had she stayed for the next debate, she would have seen a really polished report from the Education Committee. She also spoke of how there was never a cross word spoken in the Public Accounts Committee. I cannot imagine that I would like to be the member of a Committee in which there is never a cross word spoken. Nor, if Seamus Close is a member of that Committee, do I believe that cross words are not spoken on some occasions. He compared it to the old Public Accounts Committee, which was either asleep or at the vet being neutered. The implication is, therefore, that the current Public Accounts Committee is wide awake and certainly not neutered. However, I will not pursue that any further.

While the Public Accounts Committee has done a good job in highlighting inadequacies, its weakness has been getting something done about them. Four examples of that have arisen today. Mr Dallat highlighted the question of the awarding of printing contracts by the Northern Ireland Tourist Board. Contracts worth nearly £500,000 were awarded without tendering. Nine other contracts, totalling around £200,000 above the lowest bid, were also awarded. However, the response from Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment officials was that it was not wrong to have appointed the person who owned the firm to the Tourist Board. It also appeared to them that there was no wrongdoing in the awarding of those contracts. If the Department can brush off legitimate and serious criticism in that way, the Public Accounts Committee does not have the teeth to deal with that issue.

Another example was the inaccuracy of social security payments. A Member pointed out that it was appalling that as many as one in 10 payments were wrong. That means hardship for some people. It also means money being spent wrongly in other cases. However, when officials from the Department for Social Development attended the Social Development Committee meeting no less than a week ago, they were still talking about the same level of accuracy, despite the Public Accounts Committee having said that it was unacceptable.

Another example was the money that was spent on New Deal's rebranding. Contracts worth £900,000 were given without going to public tender. Does the Assembly want to spend money on branding offices and making them look flashy? The only answer the Department could offer was that New Deal had brought unemployment figures down. It could not, however, relate that fall in unemployment to the money that was spent.

The Department of Agriculture and Rural Development has said that it has a zero-tolerance approach to fraud.

However, farmers in south Armagh are walking away with millions and not being taken to court.

Mr Dallat mentioned education targets. Millions are being spent by the Department of Education on helping youngsters who have educational needs.

Despite that expenditure, the targets have again been lowered.

We must find ways to respond more effectively to a problem once it has been highlighted. Perhaps all Ministers who have a responsibility, not just the Minister of Finance and Personnel, should be here today. If the targets set by the Public Accounts Committee are not met, perhaps Departments should be told that a long hard look will be given to their next budget proposals.

3.00 pm

It is important that the House exercises proper scrutiny. I congratulate the Public Accounts Committee on its work so far, but it will need real teeth if it is to deal with the problems that have been highlighted.

The Minister of Finance and Personnel (Dr Farren):

I am pleased to respond on behalf of the Executive to the first Assembly debate on the work of the local Public Accounts Committee. I acknowledge the good wishes of the Chairperson of the Committee to me on taking up office.

This is my first substantive debate as Minister of Finance and Personnel. It is an appropriate debate for a Minister with my responsibilities to participate in. It is a good learning exercise not only in the context of my direct ministerial responsibilities but in regard to my departmental responsibilities relating to public expenditure.

The Committee's work has been prodigious. I express my appreciation to the Chairperson, Mr Billy Bell, the Deputy Chairperson, Ms Sue Ramsey, and other members. The Committee has shown itself to be well up to the task of holding Departments accountable for their expenditure, even though accounting officers may find it uncomfortable to be subjected to a more regular accountability process than that which existed in the past — several Members highlighted that point.

Increased accountability can be only beneficial in the pursuit of the highest possible standards of control, and of greater economy, effectiveness and efficiency in public expenditure. I stress that the Executive welcome that, because continuous scrutiny enhances public confidence in the democratic system and reinforces their ability to make a real impact on public service delivery.

I pay tribute to the work of the Comptroller and Auditor General for Northern Ireland and his staff in the Northern Ireland Audit Office, who provided regular reports and assistance to the Committee. The

Audit Committee, under Chairperson John Dallat and Billy Hutchinson as Deputy Chairperson, provides an important oversight to ensure that the public audit is delivered in the most cost-effective way.

The Committee has been a focal point for accountability; it has brought to the public's attention concerns that we must all address to ensure that we deliver value for money in our public services. Part of the Department of Finance and Personnel's role is to promote effective systems for the management and control of public spending. The Department has already followed up issues that have arisen from the Committee's work to ensure that they are resolved.

An important part of the Public Accounts Committee process is to make all Departments more aware of their responsibilities to the Assembly in their use of public funds. The accounting officers concerned must attend hearings and give account of their management and supervision of public funds. The whole process must be adhered to not only by the Departments under scrutiny but all Departments, because there are lessons to be learnt by all.

The Committee has reinforced messages for improved financial management. A benefit of local accountability is that Committee members have an in-depth knowledge of the issues concerned. That can give rise to better informed questioning together with more regular scrutiny than was possible under direct rule. The Executive have brought forward several initiatives that will improve accountability for public services. Some of them have been implemented, but others require a phased approach and are being implemented step by step. Their overall impact will, however, make a significant improvement in the open and transparent system of accountability which will apply in years ahead — *[Interruption]*.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order, please. The Minister is responding.

Dr Farren: The Public Accounts Committee has helped the Committee for Finance and Personnel by giving its views on accountability matters that were addressed in the legislation brought before the Assembly last year. That led to the successful passage of the Government Resource and Accounts Act (Northern Ireland) 2001, which is one of the most significant developments in Government accounting in over 100 years. Its main purpose was the introduction of resource accounting, which will provide a stronger focus on outputs and hence on what we are getting from our public expenditure.

Resource accounting also provides a clearer distinction between annual short-term spending and longer-term investment in public assets and infrastructure. That will fundamentally change the basis on which the Assembly provides funds to the Executive for the

delivery of public services and how the Executive account for the expenditure of those moneys.

The current financial year is the first for which resource accounts will be published. They will be laid before the Assembly in the autumn, and the Public Accounts Committee, together with all other Committees of the Assembly, will in future have annual resource accounts available to assist them with the important work of scrutinising Executive expenditure.

I take this opportunity to pay tribute to the work of my predecessor. I walk in the shadow of an exemplary Minister of Finance and Personnel, whose work in that capacity was widely acknowledged. Tribute has been paid to him from all sections of the Assembly.

Following representations and discussions with the Committee, my predecessor brought forward an important change which allows the Comptroller and Auditor General more extended rights of inspection than generally apply in the rest of the UK. He also gave an undertaking to bring forward in this session further legislation to deal specifically with audit and accountability matters.

Like my predecessor, I remain committed to the public scrutiny of the business of government, and I shall bring forward legislation to demonstrate that commitment. As Minister of Finance and Personnel, I am in favour of public services and effective accountability and scrutiny, which is clearly in the public interest.

While this debate is, strictly speaking, concerned with matters that fall within the ambit of the Committee, the principles of transparency, robust external audit and accountability should apply throughout the public sector. District councils spend over £400 million per year, and well over £50 million will be dispersed to councils from the Department of the Environment's vote for 2002-03. Council ratepayers should have no less right to information and effective external audit than do the taxpayers who pay for central Government services. Accordingly, I hope that the Assembly will support the Local Government (Best Value) Bill, so that the expenditure and functions of district councils will be subject to scrutiny similar to that to which Departments are rightly exposed. It is essential that the powers of local government audit are broadened and strengthened to achieve that end.

The work of the Public Accounts Committee will extend into that area as a consolidated picture of Government expenditure is provided in future through whole Government accounts. That will give a total picture of expenditure on all public services in Northern Ireland, including local government activities.

Those significant developments will provide better-quality information, as well as improved planning and management of resources. The work of the Committee and the Audit Office will be important to the develop-

ment of the new financial management regime for the public sector.

The Executive are also carrying out a review of public administration, and in that context many issues of accountability must be addressed. Our planning and control mechanisms for financial management must be constantly reviewed and enhanced, so the Committee's work is important.

The Department of Finance and Personnel, in particular, looks forward to working with the Committee during the course of the next year. The accountability process in Northern Ireland has been, and will continue to be, enhanced by the work of the Committee. The issues highlighted in today's debate will further stimulate work in that area.

I shall now address a number of the points and questions that were raised during the debate. Given the short time available and the level of detail required, I shall be unable to respond to all the points. However, there will be further opportunities to do so.

Mr Billy Bell and Mr Mervyn Carrick raised the important issue of fraud in some areas of public expenditure. Mr Bell made several important points about the challenge that fraud in the public sector poses to us. Fraud robs the public of valuable resources that could be used to improve public services. We must promote and insist on a zero-tolerance attitude to fraud and we must develop common working arrangements across the public sector to tackle it effectively.

We shall ensure that there is proper accountability for the resources allocated and for their actual consumption. The Programme for Government sets out specific actions that the Executive intend to take to reduce losses due to fraud. Mr Carrick also highlighted the level of losses to the public. The Programme for Government, incorporating the public service agreements with the Departments concerned, sets out the way in which arrangements will be designed to deter fraudulent or other dishonest conduct. We are committed to ensuring that public sector resources are used for their intended purposes, and that the risk of error and fraud is minimised.

Mr Bell also referred to clawback arrangements for the Industrial Development Board (IDB) following Northern Ireland Electricity's sale of retail shops. We recognise the importance of having robust clawback arrangements in place, and the IDB, acting on guidance from the Department of Finance and Personnel, has taken remedial action. We also acknowledge that everyone can learn lessons from that case. In the case of Northern Ireland Electricity, the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment is taking actions to recoup the sums that are due to it. The amount is in dispute and is the subject of arbitration.

Mr Bell and Ms Morrice raised the issue of road safety. We have worked across departmental boundaries to agree a new regional development strategy and to develop a new road safety plan. The details of how those will be implemented are set out in both the Programme for Government and in the public service agreement with the Department of the Environment. With regard to the Committee's specific concern, I am pleased to note that the Department of the Environment has appointed 10 additional road safety officers and that its annual budget for promotion and publicity was increased by 75% in the current year.

Mr John Dallat and Mr Sammy Wilson raised issues regarding the Northern Ireland Tourist Board. Mr Dallat raised important points about its purchasing procedures. The Tourist Board has taken steps to address the weaknesses that were identified in the Comptroller and Auditor General's report. The Public Accounts Committee will also receive a report in June 2002 which will detail the purchasing contracts awarded since April 2000.

3.15 pm

The Programme for Government highlighted the opportunity to provide greater accountability and to consider more coherent structures for delivering efficient, quality services. For example, the Executive will bring forward detailed implementation plans to improve public procurement. Those will include the policies, and organisational and procedural actions that are needed. The report will address more general concerns that the Committee has raised in the past about public sector procurement.

Seamus Close queried the conduct of economic appraisals. Accounting officers have acknowledged the shortcomings in the application of the guidance that the Department of Finance and Personnel issued on economic appraisals. Departmental officials have written to accounting officers about that. Further action to improve the matters raised will include the issue of new guidance backed by a training programme and seminars. I expect there to be a progressive improvement in the process of appraisals as an aid to decisions that the Executive may take. I thank Mr Close for his comments about my Department's prompt action on that matter.

Mr Close also raised the matter of the North/South gas pipeline. Roy Beggs echoed his remarks. Both Members asked about ministerial directions with regard to the North/South pipeline. The purpose of the ministerial direction procedure is to ensure that the issue of value for money is highlighted by officials so that it can be taken into account fully in Ministers' decisions. There is no question of interfering with Ministers' political judgement on how to proceed on particular issues. The Executive were of the opinion that the pipeline project should proceed in the light of the wider strategic

interests, which include the realisation of an all-island energy strategy, and the social inclusion and environmental benefits of access to greater energy choice. I acknowledge that the potential benefits of the pipeline must be weighed against the wider economic costs. Those costs are such that the accounting officer of that Department could not defend the plans on value-for-money grounds alone. However, the project will have wider strategic and political benefits. The accounting officer does not have the authority to proceed on a strategic or political basis — that is a policy matter for Ministers to judge. Therefore, the accounting officer must ask for a written direction to proceed on such projects.

Mr Close also referred to projected electricity increases. I cannot confirm any level of price change at the moment. However, any consequential adjustments to electricity costs will be a matter of judgement for the Executive. I cannot confirm whether a copy of the investment appraisal of the project can be placed in the public domain at this stage because it may contain commercially sensitive information. I trust that all Members appreciate that.

Sue Ramsey raised the issue of health and personal social services pay. She urged the Department of Finance and Personnel to write to other Departments about the wider pay issues in the public sector. I am pleased to confirm that the Treasury officer of accounts has written to the accounting officers of all Departments. Copies will be forwarded to the Public Accounts Committee and the Comptroller and Auditor General.

I trust that I have touched upon most, though perhaps not all, of the concerns raised by Members. Further information can be provided for those who need it.

I encourage Members to follow the work of the Public Accounts Committee closely, and Members on other Committees should follow up on matters dealt with in my Department's formal memorandum of reply to ensure that the recommendations and the views of the Committees are being dealt with in a timely fashion. That will add value to the process; it will provide a greater understanding of the financial issues involved; and it will help the overall financial management process by supporting the better delivery of public services — something to which we are all committed on behalf of our constituents. I thank Members for their patience and indulgence.

Mr B Bell: I would like to thank the Committee members, and others, who contributed to this useful debate. I wish to include you in that, Mr Deputy Speaker, because if you had not been conducting your presiding officer duties, you would have taken part in the debate also.

Mr S Wilson: You will not get any extra time for saying that.

Mr B Bell: Extra time was what I was aiming for. I do not wish to address all the issues that were raised because the Minister has already done so adequately, and I thank him for that. However, I can assure Mr Close and Sammy Wilson that to my knowledge the new watchdog has not been neutered. It has had its full course of injections, is in good health and is fully alert.

I feel a little embarrassed by some of the flattering things that have been said about me. I hope that Members who are not on the Public Accounts Committee do not think that we are running a mutual admiration society — we are running a serious Committee.

I thank the Minister for his positive response. It augurs well for the future and reflects the constructive relationship that the Committee has already built up with his predecessor and staff. I must pay tribute to the two departmental officers who most commonly serviced the Committee. One of them has now moved, but I look forward to developing a similar relationship with the new team and the new Minister.

In his reply, the Minister referred to the new audit and accountability legislation and the submission he received from the Committee. I urge him to take on board every recommendation in the report, because it has the unanimous support of the Committee. We will liaise further on the matter and will keep a close eye on it as the legislation goes through the Assembly.

Like the Minister, I believe in accountability. It is a healthy process that no one should fear. I also believe that the approach to accountability should be common across both central and local government. Speaking as a Member, I will support the forthcoming Bill on best value.

The first 18 months of the Committee's operation has exceeded all expectations. It has investigated and reported on more than a dozen major problem areas in Departments, including the rural development programme, Health Service directors' pay, school inspection and education performance. That is more than the Westminster Public Accounts Committee was able to do in the previous decade and shows the extent to which accountability has been improved in Northern Ireland as a result of devolution. It is my intention to maintain that impetus in the coming year.

The Committee has played a constructive role in pointing out to Departments the lessons that they need to learn to improve performance, and I have been impressed with the extent to which Departments have shown a positive response to our recommendations. One example is the promise of a more active effort to reduce public sector fraud. However, the Committee will continue to monitor the progress on our reports to ensure that these promises are fulfilled.

I want to refer to the point raised by Sammy Wilson about the award of contracts by the Tourist Board. From the report he will see that the Committee has not yet completed its consideration of this matter and it will deal with it again in the future.

The performance of the Social Security Agency has shown much improvement this year, and we hope that this will continue in the future. I thank Sammy Wilson for making those points. I also thank Mr O'Neill for his points. I hope all senior public officials have now got the message that their activities are under much closer scrutiny. They will be held more accountable for the spending decisions they make and for delivering the improvements in the services that the Public Accounts Committee and the public have a right to expect.

I commend the report to the Assembly.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That this Assembly takes note of the Public Accounts Committee 'Composite Report on Issues dealt with by Correspondence by the Committee' (3/01/R) and of the Committee Reports (1/99/R, 1/00/R to 6/00/R and 1/01/R to 2/01/R) and the Department of Finance and Personnel Memoranda of Reply (NIA 22/00, 32/00, 37/00, 51/00, 59/00, 92/00, 99/00, 27/01 and 29/01).

COMMON FUNDING FORMULA

The Chairperson of the Committee for Education (Mr Kennedy): I beg to move

That this Assembly calls on the Minister of Education to take full account of the issues raised and recommendations made in the report prepared by the Committee for Education on the Proposals for a Common Funding Formula for Grant-Aided Schools in Northern Ireland.

As Chairperson of the Committee for Education, I am pleased to bring this report to the Assembly.

(Madam Deputy Speaker [Ms Morrice] in the Chair)

3.30 pm

This, the Committee's second report, outlines our findings and conclusions regarding the proposals for a common funding formula for grant-aided schools in Northern Ireland. I am grateful to the members of the Education Committee for their assistance and their contribution to the report. Local management of schools (LMS) funding is complex, and the task of considering the consultation document — which ran to 164 pages — in a relatively short time required concentration and hard work. I also place on record a tribute to our specialist adviser and I thank the Clerk of the Education Committee, her staff and our Assembly researcher for their hard work in bringing the report into being.

The LMS funding system largely determines every school's annual budget. There are currently seven different LMS formulae in operation: one for each of the five education and library boards, one for the grant-maintained integrated schools and one for the voluntary grammar schools. While the factors used in all the current formulae are quite similar, there are some important differences in the amounts that are available to schools under each of the existing formulae and in the values attached to individual factors in each formula. Therefore there are variations in school budgets in different sectors in Northern Ireland.

The issue of how schools are funded has generated the most requests for meetings with the Education Committee, and there have been expressions of concern regarding the matter from all sectors and all sizes of schools. The Committee, therefore, welcomed the Education Department's consultation document, which was published in April 2001 and outlined proposals to introduce a common funding formula.

Initially it was planned to complete the consultation process by 29 June 2001 and to introduce a common funding formula by April 2002. After representations by my Committee, the consultation period was extended to autumn 2001, and the implementation date has been postponed to April 2003. Given the importance and complex nature of LMS funding, the Committee believes that that date is more realistic.

It is regrettable that the Department of Education could not provide real school-level data to the education and library boards. The absence of actual figures has made it almost impossible for respondents to be completely informed and to assess accurately the likely impact of the proposals. That has led to accusations of a lack of transparency, and therefore I welcome the Minister's attendance at this important debate. Perhaps he will wish to respond.

I will deal with the Committee's approach now. There was written and oral evidence from several key education organisations, which proved very helpful in identifying the main issues and concerns surrounding the proposals. The Committee believed that it was important to seek the views of the people who have to work in the current LMS funding system. We therefore discussed the proposals with several primary school and post-primary school principals. They represented a variety of small and large schools, urban and rural, as well as schools that face varying levels of social and economic deprivation.

We also looked at how schools are funded in England, Wales, Scotland and the Republic of Ireland and met with members of the executive working group that reviewed devolved school management in Scotland to oversee various issues, particularly teachers' salaries. As I have illustrated, the Committee consulted on the proposals in detail and was grateful to everyone who showed such willingness to contribute, especially the school principals who took time out of their busy schedules. The evidence received has been published as part of our Committee's report.

I now move on to our findings. I want to emphasise the importance of this matter. While the proposals may appear to be about an abstract financial formula, the outcome of any changes will directly impact on every school in Northern Ireland and how much they have to spend on teachers and providing the best education possible for our children. I am sure that many Members in the House are members of school boards of governors. They, like myself, will have experienced at first hand the difficult decisions that often have to be made, such as whether to make a teacher redundant and whether to use a part-time classroom assistant rather than a full-time one. All of those decisions have to be made to balance the books of the schools. Any changes to the LMS formula will affect all schools, and they must, therefore, be given careful consideration.

I now want to outline some of the main findings of the Committee and its conclusions. Unfortunately, in the time available, it will not be possible to cover all of the issues discussed in the report, but I hope that Members have studied the report carefully. The Committee for Education believes that the current situation where schools with similar characteristics, but in different areas or sectors, receive varying budgets is neither satisfactory nor equitable. We therefore support the

introduction of a common funding formula for grant-aided schools.

The evidence received by the Committee, however, suggests that there are several issues and problems in relation to the proposals as they currently stand. Those need, therefore, to be addressed. The first issue is the likely effect on education and library board central services. The Department's preference for a high aggregated schools budget model of school delegation will put an additional £15 million into delegated school budgets. However, there is currently no indication of where that money will come from. If the £15 million is simply removed from the education and library boards' funding for centrally provided services such as home-to-school transport, school meals, special educational needs or curriculum support, the Committee would be concerned about the likely negative impact that that would have on schools and pupils generally and, in particular, on small schools.

While the Committee fully supports the need to target resources as far as possible into school classrooms, we recommend that if additional funding is to be delegated to schools it should be without detriment to the current levels of education and library board central services to schools. The evidence shows that there is little, if any, scope to remove any funding from the boards without that having a severe impact on centrally provided services.

The Committee also considered the current distribution of responsibilities between education and library boards and schools. The division of responsibilities should not be altered at present, but the situation should be reviewed in the light of the results of the forthcoming review of public administration.

I now want to deal with the treatment of teachers' salaries. As Members will be aware, salary costs are the major factor in school budgets. The evidence that we received suggested that the proposals do not adequately address that issue. The current formula provides school budgets with the average costs of employing teachers, but schools are then often charged with the actual costs of their employment. To fund at average costs and charge at actual costs has created major difficulties for many schools. It appears, for example, that some schools are appointing younger teachers and more use is being made of part-time and temporary contracts simply because of school budgets.

It has also been necessary to supplement the budgets of many schools through a salary protection factor in order to protect classroom provision. The purpose of the salary protection factor is to assist schools with the cost of employing teachers in circumstances where a school does not have enough income to meet the requirements of the statutory curriculum. It is proposed to continue this system but to extend the protection factor to a greater number of schools.

While the Committee is content that the cost of teachers' salaries should be retained in delegated budgets, we believe that the current funding arrangements create difficulties for too many schools and in some cases fail to meet the core funding requirements of schools. We are also concerned that the protection factor adds complication to the formula and may have to be applied to a majority of schools overall, thus suggesting that the basic funding arrangements for teachers' salaries are not appropriate.

Evidence received suggested that 80% of all schools in the Belfast Board area, and 96% of primary schools in the Southern Board area, would need supplementary funding to cover teachers' salaries under the current proposals. The Committee's view is that teachers' salaries may be addressed more effectively through other arrangements. We recommend that the Department of Education undertake further investigations of alternative methods before a final decision is taken.

Such investigations should include consideration of the methods currently used by Scottish local authorities. For example, Angus Council in Scotland meets the costs of teachers' salaries in full for individual schools, enabling them to appoint the most qualified teachers irrespective of financial considerations and ensuring that the above-average salary costs do not generate budget deficits.

The Education Committee has also made several recommendations regarding targeting of social need (TSN). I emphasise at the outset that the Committee supports in principle the policy of targeting social need, and the recommendations that we have made are not intended to challenge that policy. Rather, they are intended to ensure that an appropriate level of money will be made available and that those most in need will be identified and receive adequate support.

The Committee has reservations about the amount of information currently available to inform decision-making about the most effective levels of TSN funding. The Department is proposing to increase total TSN funding from 5% to 5.5% of the total schools recurrent budget. However, the basis for this proposed increase is unclear. It is also unclear, despite the Committee's best efforts to obtain more information, what the proposed additional 0.5% — which equates to £4 million — is intended to achieve.

The Committee therefore recommends that a more informed discussion, based on additional information on current and anticipated outcomes, should be undertaken before any change to the current level of TSN funding is made. This would enable an appropriate level of funding to be identified and funding to be targeted more effectively. This is most important, as any increase in TSN funding will reduce the level of money available to schools.

The Committee also has concerns regarding the free school meals indicator currently used to identify pupils who are socially disadvantaged. These concerns include the fact that the indicator may not identify the whole range of such pupils and the fact that it appears that many families do not take up their free school meal entitlement.

Therefore we support the view that supplementary indicators should be identified to ensure that the whole range of socially disadvantaged children is identified. The Department also needs to take steps as soon as possible to assess and maximise the take-up rate of free school meals entitlement. In the area of special educational needs, the Committee recommends that levels of educational deprivation should be funded using an indicator or indicators derived from levels of educational attainment rather than double counting the free school meal indicator. In that way, both elements of TSN funding can be targeted to meet the needs that arise from either social deprivation or special educational needs, whether those overlap for some pupils or are distinct for others.

3.45 pm

The Committee believes that the use of end of key stage attainment tests to identify educational need is not acceptable. Those tests were not designed for that purpose, and the use of Key Stage 2 results in primary schools is unsatisfactory. Therefore we recommend that further consideration be given to the use of more robust and appropriate indicators, such as standardised testing or baseline screening, and that an appropriate indicator that identifies levels of need as soon as possible after entry into primary school be established.

The Committee welcomes the proposals to provide additional support for early years education. We have consistently argued that investment in the early years is an investment in the future. However, it would be unsatisfactory for that additional support to come at the expense of the post-primary phase of education. We recommend that the proposed additional support at primary level should not lead to a reduction of support for any other phase of schooling.

The Committee is concerned about the possible detrimental impact that the proposals for the Southern Education and Library Board's units for children with moderate learning difficulties would have. Those proposals appear to run counter to current initiatives to include, as far as possible, such pupils in mainstream schooling. We recommend that the Department reconsider its proposals and establish whether current practice in the Southern Education and Library Board should be protected and, indeed, extended to other board areas.

Connected to landlord maintenance responsibilities, and administrative services specific to voluntary grammar and grant-maintained integrated schools, the Committee

has made a number of recommendations to promote best value and funding transparency.

Thus far, I have presented the report on behalf of the Committee for Education. However, I wish to express my personal views regarding the issue of funding for Irish-medium schools and units. I do not agree with the proposal to give additional sums of money to Irish-medium schools and units within the funding formula. It is my view that all sectors must be treated equally within the formula; no sector should receive special treatment. I feel strongly that Irish-medium schools and units should be funded on exactly the same basis as all other schools — in other words, according to the number of pupils in the school, the size of the premises, the number of pupils receiving free school meals and special educational needs provision.

In considering those matters, the Committee grappled with their complexities. We were however, acutely aware that any decisions would directly affect all schools and pupils, and the services that they receive. I re-emphasise the importance of that. One witness pointed out to the Committee that equitable inputs, although laudable, do not mean equitable purchasing power for schools. The Committee, through the report's recommendations, has attempted to improve the situation. I trust that the report will contribute significantly to the decisions that will be made on the way forward. I look forward to contributions from other Members and from the Minister and invite them to support the motion.

The Deputy Chairperson of the Committee for Education (Mr S Wilson): The issue is extremely important for Members of the Assembly, including those who are not members of the Committee for Education. The effect of this will be felt at all levels in their constituencies when the proposals are put in place.

As the Chairperson said, the present system of funding is extremely complex, and it produces very unfair results. Let me illustrate the problem. One principal wrote to us about three schools of a similar nature in his area: a controlled school where the funding was £2,165 per pupil; an integrated school where the funding was £2,601 per pupil; and a maintained school where the funding was £2,481 per pupil. That is a difference of £500 per pupil between the lowest and highest amount. They were all average-sized schools with around 500 or 600 pupils. That amounted to over £300,000 on the school budget, which is a significant difference, and it is bound to have a big impact on the school.

The Department is trying to address that problem. It is important that it be addressed. However, if we divide the cake differently we have to accept — and this is where all Members will be affected — that some schools in every constituency will lose money from their budgets, which will cause problems, and some schools will gain money. The Chairperson has

already said that it is a great pity that the Department was not prepared to fully spell out the consequences for schools. However, the Department gave some figures that showed that some schools could lose up to £350,000 and some could gain up to £85,000. That is bound to have an impact on schools, especially in the short term.

One proposal which has been made — and which I am sure the Department will take on board — is that there ought to be a lead-in time of at least three years to allow schools to make the adjustment. Schools must not be hit with such big increases or decreases in their budgets, as it would be unfair.

We are told, however, that the aim behind the proposals is to have a fairer allocation of money. One proposal that is transparently not about fairness is the political preference of the Minister and his party for Irish-medium schools. It is defended on the basis that the Belfast Agreement lays down a prerogative for the promotion of the Irish language. However, it does not lay down preferential treatment for youngsters who choose to go to Irish-medium schools.

If the proposals were endorsed in full, the funding for a 200-pupil school would be about £600 more per pupil, on average, in an Irish-medium school. That would be made up of £100 for each pupil for the development of curriculum materials, £200 for additional administrative costs and over £300 for extra teacher costs. That is what the proposals state. The argument is that there are special considerations. This is not the main language which youngsters are subjected to when they are out of school. It is a second language. Contrast that with a similar group of people — those who have English as a second language. The consultation document indicates there are nearly as many such youngsters — 1,400 — going to our schools. The proposal for such pupils is not to give £600 per pupil per year for the length of time that they attend school; it is to give an allowance of £750 for two years, after which it stops.

Leaving aside the comparison with ordinary controlled or maintained schools it is quite clear that the proposal for Irish-medium schools is not driven by fairness but by the political preferences of the Minister. That must not be allowed. It was the only issue that the Committee did not agree on, and, again, it shows that this is being politically driven. Cognisance must be given to the Committee's response and the consultation that the Minister himself carried out.

The proposal on Irish-medium education drew most criticism. Six questions were asked about extra funding for Irish-medium schools. Disagreement ranged between 34% and 52%. There are about 90 other proposals, and none of them drew anywhere near the same amount of criticism or disagreement. If the Minister and his Department are listening to the results of the consultation,

and to the political voices of Unionists in the Assembly, then they must give cognisance to the opposition that there is to that proposal.

I want to look at the subject of targeting social need. The Committee made it clear that social disadvantage ought to be addressed through extra resources. However, one of the first recommendations made by the Committee was that the Department must prove, first, that the money is needed and; secondly, show what the money is to be used for and give some indication of how effective money already spent has been.

We received evidence that a House of Commons Select Committee carried out an investigation that indicated that while the money spent on targeting social need had raised standards for the people it was directed at, it had not narrowed the gap between youngsters, as standards had risen across the board. Therefore money spent on targeting social need did not seem to fulfil its purpose when the whole picture was taken into account.

We were talking about the Public Accounts Committee reports in the previous debate and the importance of looking at the effectiveness of Government spending. If more money is to go in that direction, then it must be justified. There must be some clear direction as to what will be achieved by it. If the Department cannot show that, and is simply plucking £4 million out of the air to put to this part of the Budget, then we must raise questions about that.

The Committee has made a recommendation — which is in the proposals, and I hope that the Minister will stick to it — that the money should be allocated on a per capita basis. At present it is not allocated in that way. The Belfast Education and Library Board, for example, takes the view that some youngsters who come from socially disadvantaged backgrounds should have extra money allocated to them and others should not. The result is that in the Belfast Board area those who get funding receive £525 per pupil, whereas in other board areas where money is allocated on a per capita basis — as the Department proposes — it works out at around £320, or £340, per pupil. If money is allocated because a youngster comes from a socially disadvantaged background, then all youngsters who come from such backgrounds should have access to that funding. The report makes it clear that money should be allocated on a per capita basis, and we are backing the Department on this.

4.00 pm

There is a lobby against that proposal, but I trust that in the interests of fairness the Department will stick by it.

The Committee is unhappy that some of the money is to be allocated on the basis of the take-up of free school meals. Witnesses advised us almost unanimously

that that is a poor indicator of disadvantage and, in particular, of educational need. The report details alternative ways in which funding allocations based on educational disadvantage should, and could, be determined.

I promised that I would limit my contribution to around 10 minutes. Members will take up other issues. I commend the report. Madam Deputy Speaker, I will repeat a point that you made earlier: I am sure that the Assembly accepts that, thanks to the work of our Clerks and advisers, we have presented a polished report.

Madam Deputy Speaker: Given the large number of Members who wish to take part in the debate, I must ask Members to restrict their contributions to six minutes.

Ms Lewsley: I apologise that after I make my contribution I will have to leave to attend another Committee. I hope to return before the end of the debate.

The distribution of education funding has been the subject of concern for a long time, and for many years my party has been calling for a common funding formula. That principle arises out of a commitment to equality of opportunity for all children to enable them to develop their full potential regardless of background or ability. Section 75 of the Northern Ireland Act 1998, which details the duty of equality arising from the agreement, obliges the Department to check that those proposals will result in an equitable allocation of funding. I look forward to seeing an equality impact assessment of the proposals.

A key requirement of the new funding policy is to ensure that social disadvantage is addressed and that TSN funding is directed towards the schools that are most in need. It is, therefore, scarcely believable that the budget that was allocated for TSN is a mere 5%. The proposal to increase it to 5.5% is less than reassuring, because, as the Chairperson of the Education Committee said, that translates into only £4 million. As I asked before, what impact could that make?

The proposed formula to allocate 50% of TSN funds on the basis of social deprivation and 50% on the basis of educational need would result in a loss of funding by some schools with the highest level of need. That is unacceptable. Although I accept that educational need must be targeted, I am not persuaded that in doing so the use of pupils' Key Stage 2 results is appropriate; the tests were not designed for that purpose. Further work to produce more satisfactory proposals is required.

The criteria for identifying social disadvantage should be defined clearly and should include children from families with a low income. To ensure that all socially disadvantaged children are targeted, the Department, in its calculations, should reconsider its emphasis on pupils' entitlement to free school meals. Some children

do not take up their entitlement to free school meals because of the stigma that is attached or for other reasons.

Allocation should be proportionate to social and educational factors. An open and transparent system of assessment is required that targets genuine educational need. An easy-to-administer formula is needed that is predictable in its outcome. Decisions about resources must also be based on other educational initiatives such as the curriculum review and the Burns report. Wider Government programmes are also relevant, for example, targeting social need and the forthcoming review of public administration.

There is insufficient funding for special needs children. With the development of LMS, specialised posts have disappeared and teaching for special needs children has been incorporated into the classroom. Funding is available only for children who have been statemented. The Chairperson of the Education Committee mentioned the issue of special units in the Southern Education and Library Board. That was a model of good practice, and I fear that it will be lost due to the proposals for the new LMS funding.

There is also the matter of how much reasonable adjustment has been made within the Budget to increase accessibility. For example, if mobile classrooms are in use in a school, they should be accessible to children with disabilities. I am not talking about access only through the front door but about access to the facilities and services in the classroom.

Regarding the need for equitable funding power, support for small schools is essential to promote security of funding and to enable delivery of the curriculum and effective management in those schools. The Government must recognise the degree to which this largely rural society requires and merits a distinct approach to policy. It is legitimate to expect a local Minister to move beyond the Whitehall model of Government that has failed us so dismally. For example, the British Government have a policy of giving extra funds to schools that achieve better results. Although I appreciate that it is intended to act as a motivating influence, it could have a detrimental effect on targeting social need in Northern Ireland. Consideration should also be given to the resource requirements of schools that teach children from traveller families. I advocate an additional allocation of funding for those schools.

Although I support the introduction of measures such as the premises factor, I would like to see them examined further. A major concern about LMS is that schools should not have to trade off staffing costs against school resources. The Committee is totally opposed to that. Teaching is a demanding and stressful job which is vital to our community and our children's futures. The provision for allocating salaries must be re-examined.

Teachers are an intrinsic part of the education system and, as such, are entitled to equality. The Department of Education argues that it must maintain parity with teachers' pay in England and Wales, and I say that we should have financial parity. Give us the equivalent resources on a pro rata basis for teachers here.

Madam Deputy Speaker: The Member's time is up.

Ms Lewsley: We have an opportunity to secure a more equitable distribution of funds in the education system. That in turn should target social needs and properly address the local needs of all children. I too thank the Committee Clerks and special advisers for all their work. I support the motion.

Mr McHugh: Go raibh maith agat. This is a comprehensive and polished report. I presume that we are supposed to say that at this point. There was not complete agreement in the Committee on the report — there would be something amiss if we all agreed. The Chairperson said that there was hand-to-hand fighting on occasion. We did not fight over LMS, because we had other things to fight about. However, even the witnesses had differing views on various issues. I welcome the report and pay tribute to the staff for the amount of work that they put into it and other reports.

The common funding formula will help to remove discrepancies and inequalities from the funding of grant-aided schools. The education system in the Six Counties carries the heavy baggage of division. The current selective system has contributed to the perpetuation of social inequalities. The Thatcher years inflicted on our schools the ideology of education as a market — pupils are clients, parents are customers and teachers are front-line service providers.

Some schools have had to endure chronic under-funding over several decades. Schools where two thirds of the pupils are entitled to free school meals, which is an indicator of low family income, struggle beside schools where fewer than 1% of pupils who are entitled to free school meals. Secondary schools, for example, have been severely penalised because of downward trends in demographic figures. The grammar schools take the cream of pupils, leaving the secondary schools to suffer detrimental funding.

Free school meals entitlement has been shown to be a robust indicator of socio-economic deprivation. It correlates strongly with other indicators of deprivation and is also a good indicator of educational performance. That should remain so. Teachers and managers in schools with high levels of social deprivation have told the Committee that the current 5% allocation of TSN funding does not begin to address the deficit created by the impact of poverty on their schools. Through the years there have been many demands that the TSN allocation to school budgets be increased from the original 5%. The Committee strongly agrees with that.

However, Sinn Féin disagrees with the Committee's recommendation that TSN funding should remain at 5% pending further informed discussion. How much more informed discussion is needed? Five per cent is patently insufficient. There are Members who have not read what the Standing Advisory Commission on Human Rights (SACHR) has written about TSN over the past number of years. They should do so. In the meantime, the TSN top slice should be substantially increased. To save time I will give an example from SACHR's report, 'Employment, Equality: Building for the Future', published in 1997, which states that the TSN allocation of 5% is merely old money with a new name.

Five per cent does not begin to address the disparity between the notional costs of students from the highest and lowest social classes. Expenditure is about 64% higher for the former than for their poorer counterparts. The ability of social deprivation funding to rectify disadvantage is hindered by three factors. First, there is inconsistency in the distribution of social deprivation funds. Secondly, all schools with pupils who are entitled to free school meals should receive social deprivation funds. Thirdly, additional money per pupil should be awarded on an incremental basis to schools that have a free school meals index of 10%, 20%, and so on.

Average spending on school premises and grounds is higher in Protestant schools than in Catholic schools. Such funding should be kept under review, particularly in the context of changes in pupil numbers and the relatively low amount of money involved in TSN. According to the SACHR report, more of the school budget should be devoted to targeting social need.

Too many of the North's schools suffer from the same poverty as the children who attend them. The Assembly must support a significant increase in TSN funding now. I support the Minister of Education and his Department in their intentions to increase TSN funding to well above 5%. The Irish National Teachers' Organisation suggested 10%. Perhaps that is something we will not get. The Education Committee report notes that some parents do not register their children's entitlement to free school meals, and others who live in poverty do not meet the criteria for free school meals. I support the broadening of those criteria to include low-wage families.

I direct the following remark to the Minister for Social Development: linear application of free school meals fails to reflect the impact of the group, and the neighbourhood, on a child's educational experience.

Madam Deputy Speaker: The Member's time is up.

Mr McHugh: That is one of the reasons why the Minister of Education is proposing the TSN increase.

Madam Deputy Speaker: Please draw your remarks to a close.

Mr McHugh: Go raibh maith agat. That is all I have to say.

Mrs E Bell: As my Colleagues have said, the report is a step forward in attempting to achieve full equity for schools. The Education Committee is, therefore, pleased that the consultation paper came out because it gave us an excuse to examine the common funding formula. Not many of us were keen on the current situation in schools. The Minister told us that there have been seven different formulae. I hope now that there will be only one — the common funding formula. As the Chairperson of the Education Committee stated in his press release, the Committee fully supports the introduction of that formula. Committee members have seen that the current situation is not satisfactory for schools, pupils or staff.

Any formula must be clearly capable of catering for the practical needs of each school, and the Committee is concerned that implementation of the formula will be difficult. The formula may eventually end up in total confusion over equality. That is one reason for considering the Committee's recommendations. The Committee has, therefore, outlined its concerns in the recommendations in the hope that a truly equitable formula will be arrived at that will engender total confidence in all schools.

4.15 pm

Many educational organisations highlighted points of concern affecting their own schools and sectors to the Committee. Some education and library board officers and some principals answered in a doubtful manner the important question of whether the proposals will help to improve the learning of all pupils according to their needs. One witness said that, if forced to give a one-word answer, it would be "No". Another slightly more hopeful answer was that nothing is perfect and while it is impossible to have a formula that will please everyone, the formula is a step in the right direction. That statement is close to the Committee's attitude, but the report states that there are issues that must be addressed to ensure more satisfactory implementation.

The report is large and detailed. I do not intend to go through each recommendation. Other Members have done so, and I generally endorse their comments. I will concentrate on several issues that should be highlighted, both as a member of the Committee and on behalf of my party.

The Committee had several long discussions on the TSN position in the proposals. As the Chairperson said, the Committee fully supports this policy. However, I have many concerns about it, as do other Members. The Committee is worried that the targeting system is not always specific. It is also clear that some pupils do not claim free school meals, not because they do not

need the support, but because their parents refuse to have them targeted as being in need.

The Committee therefore sees the need for a major review of the take-up process so that all pupils can benefit without feeling inferior. I fully support the recommendation that the current arrangements could be considered further. The Committee also asks if the proposed increase of 5% in TSN moneys has been considered in terms of value for money. We want to know, as other Members do, what the impact of that will be.

Integrated and Irish-medium schools already have budget problems with attracting and accommodating pupil numbers. There may be exceptional circumstances in which pupil numbers is not an appropriate criterion for funding, and not only when a school is being established. The Department should consider seriously the Committee's recommendation that a 5% figure for enrolment growth could be substituted in place of the proposed 10%.

Members are concerned about Irish-medium schools in particular as well as integrated schools. One reason that integrated and Irish-medium schools do not develop is that sometimes they are not allowed to. Those schools must be treated more generously than in the past. The Minister has made good strides in that direction, but further work must be done in those two sectors.

I add my concern to that of other Members who said that the proposals may have a serious impact on schools with special needs education difficulties. If the Department wishes to continue to promote mainstream education for children with special needs, it must reconsider the funding for that sector.

I endorse the recommendation on the effects on education and library boards' central services. The review of public administration is ongoing, but it will have an effect. There can be no further pressures on existing school budgets. I heartily support the recommendation that schools should be funded according to their relative need, and that includes mitigating the effects of social disadvantage.

I commend the Chairperson for keeping the Committee together on most points. I thank the Committee Clerk and staff, including the special adviser, for their commitment and work on this valuable document. The Committee has shown its concerns and its recommendations in the hope that an equitable formula will be arrived at that will engender total confidence in all schools.

I hope that the Department of Education will consider the recommendations seriously. I support the motion.

Mr K Robinson: I am conscious of the severe time limitations. I declare an interest as a governor of two schools, and I point out that the two schools are at opposite ends of the spectrum with regard to the LMS impact on their operation.

I welcome the opportunity to support the presentation of the Committee's report to the Assembly, and I urge the House to support its recommendations. I also pay tribute to the Committee Clerks, our special adviser, the Committee Chairperson and my fellow members for the professional manner in which they undertook this onerous but necessary task.

The quality of evidence brought before the Committee was of a very high calibre. The enthusiasm and commitment of witnesses to improving the funding of schools, and consequently the delivery of core services, was encouraging. The report includes 30 recommendations which members felt would positively benefit schools in their task of educating our young people.

At the outset I make it crystal clear that the proposal to transfer £15 million from the general schools budget into the schools delegated budget would do a great disservice to the generally competent central services provided by education and library boards to all schools. That money should be new money, and as a possible source for some of the shortfall, the Minister should perhaps look more closely at those mysterious pockets of money which from time to time emerge from the Department of Education.

The Committee also welcomed the principle that schools of similar characteristics but in different areas or sectors should no longer continue to receive varying budgets. Such a situation is unsatisfactory, inequitable and should cease immediately.

Central to the protection of the core function of any school is its ability to deliver the curriculum adequately. However, it is in that area of operation that many schools, most of them in areas of social need, find themselves facing overwhelming difficulties. Such schools — indeed all schools — must have their core functions protected. They need adequate staffing levels to educate our children effectively, especially those who already face enormous social disadvantage. The North Eastern Education and Library Board is quoted in the report as talking about the full cost of "an approved teaching cohort".

How does the sacred cow of the current LMS structure help such children and their schools? Does it do so by driving them into serious deficits, some of which are in excess of £50,000? Again, I note from the report that 78 of the 144 schools in the Southern Education and Library Board's primary sector are in deficit. How do a principal and his governors attack such a deficit? Do they do so by making one, two or even three members of staff redundant? Under pressure from the education and library boards and from the Department of Education itself — subtle though it may be — what is the impact of such a redundancy in a school sited, say, in a housing estate and displaying multiple deprivation factors? It leads to composite classes, the loss of

invaluable experienced staff, a reliance on cheaper, younger, inexperienced staff or temporary teachers. It leads to parental dissatisfaction, followed by the removal of pupils from the school and the school's slide into despair and perhaps eventual closure.

The reliance on average teacher cost must be replaced by the allocation of actual teacher cost to schools. Failure to do that will penalise schools which have experienced teachers — and consequently expensive teachers — more severely than schools with younger, less experienced staff. With the exception of the Department of Education, almost everyone who submitted evidence appeared to recognise that fundamental weakness in the existing arrangements.

Lest Members feel that only schools in TSN areas are ill served by the system, I cite an example from a document prepared for a board of governors and for release to parents. The school is full to capacity and has a staff of mixed age groups. The principal points out that he has £560,262 to cover his costs. His staffing costs come to £514,318, leaving him a balance of approximately £46,000. Ninety-two per cent of his budget is already eaten up by staffing costs.

He goes on to say that compared with many other primary schools, his school has again suffered from a lack of funding. The school in question is allocated little additional funding for social deprivation or special needs, and it does not usually benefit from other initiatives. That school is fully subscribed, it has good backing from the parents and it is in a "nice area". It has everything going for it, but it has less than £50,000 for its running costs.

That example illustrates the real impact of the current LMS regulations on our children. LMS is clearly not delivering at the chalk face. It is a blunt management tool that is impacting unequally on schools in different sectors. I notice from a previous statement in Hansard that Mr McHugh mentioned that it was a blunter instrument in many ways. Perhaps he will look that up and compare it with what he said in today's debate.

In presenting the report, the Committee's objective is to highlight the current deficiencies and inequalities. I trust that the points that have been made will help Members to focus on such factors.

TSN is an emotive subject, but the recommendations that the Committee makes will ensure that TSN moneys are targeted specifically to reduce the unequal educational outcomes. I am seriously concerned that the present arrangements may not include the whole cohort of the most needy pupils.

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

Mr K Robinson: I am not satisfied by the Department of Education's reliance on free school meals as

an adequate indicator, despite the Minister's restating of that stance in his answer to me yesterday.

Mr Gibson: Like the other Members, I thank and congratulate the Committee Clerk, her staff and the special adviser for their work on the report.

Mr Gallagher: On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. Can you explain the rotation system that you are operating for calling Members to speak in the debate?

Madam Deputy Speaker: We include the Chairperson and the Deputy Chairperson of the Committee in the round of Members to speak.

Mr Gallagher: Further to that point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. It seems to me that the normal practice is for the Ulster Unionist Party to lead, followed by the SDLP, the DUP and Sinn Féin. Is there a precedent that I am unaware of?

Madam Deputy Speaker: That is the normal procedure that we follow. The only time that the procedure changes is when the Chairperson and the Deputy Chairperson speak first and second. The round includes them. We are following that procedure. In fact, Mr Gallagher, you will be the next Member to speak.

Mr Gibson: I am very sorry if a Member was out of order. As long as I am allowed my six minutes, I would never usurp someone's time to speak.

The report contains 31 recommendations, which have been considered seriously, and I ask the Minister to note them. I point out — as I did during the Committee meetings — that despite the arguments and debates about the common funding formula, it should never be forgotten that the priority in a school, and in any educational system, is to ensure that we always deliver top-quality education to every pupil.

I witnessed the introduction of the common funding formula in schools. At that time, it was much in demand by some principals. I am afraid that I was one of the more sceptical people. I thought that as long as I could secure my teaching staff and ensure that I could reward staff members who performed well, it was up to me and the board of governors to negotiate the add-ons that were necessary to make a school work.

That system worked effectively. People began to realise that every teacher had a growing responsibility to deliver and manage the system. It was an even greater shock to realise that schools were not equal — funding was different for all schools.

4.30 pm

There are 31 recommendations in the report, but I wish to make only one or two points. The Council for Catholic Maintained Schools (CCMS), in particular, was concerned about TSN. On page 143 of the report,

Mr Flanagan, Mr McArdle and Mr McCallion were keen to emphasise that they had asked for some investigation into the way that TSN is used in the school system. They wanted to know whether it was delivering and achieving what it set out to do. This was an area of dispute. Therefore the Committee suggested that we should be careful at this stage and stick with the figure of 5%. We asked for reasonable empirical evidence to justify any further funding for TSN.

We dealt with the funding for small rural schools in some detail. The Committee is keen to see how the salaries for teachers in small rural schools could be protected. There was much debate about whether teachers' salaries should be covered by the common funding formula. The Committee was impressed with the evidence given by Angus Council. Mr Clement came from Scotland to give evidence. They introduced their system five years after we looked at ours and waited until 1997 before implementing the programme. It may be prudent to look at how Scotland — and Angus Council in particular — dealt with the issue. I make this plea because, under section 75 of the Northern Ireland Act 1998, we have a duty to ensure that small rural schools receive full delivery of a full curriculum. There must be equality of opportunity for all pupils, irrespective of where in Northern Ireland they live.

Ensuring that teachers' salaries are separate and guaranteed would help small rural schools. While salaries may be included in school funding, they should be dealt with as a separate item and guaranteed as part of the funding operation. That would mean that such schools did not have to spend time debating whether retired, seconded or other types of teacher would give the school the greatest opportunity and flexibility to form consortia and clusters that could provide the full school curriculum.

I want to make a final point to support that because —

Madam Deputy Speaker: Order. Will the Member draw his remarks to a close?

Mr Gibson: Eighty per cent of schools with seven or fewer teachers were unable to pay teachers' salaries within school funding. A school required up to 12 teachers to make that possible. I plead with the Minister to ensure that small rural schools receive adequate funding.

Mr Gallagher: I strongly support the Department's proposals for extra money for Irish-speaking schools. This is well justified because an *Ghaeilge* is the native language of the people of this island. As such, it is a key element of the cultural identity of many people in the North. Irish-medium schools play a vital role in the promotion of the language; they are a key element in its restoration, rejuvenation and resurgence. There is clear evidence that growing numbers of people wish to see their children educated in the native language.

Mr K Robinson: On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. The Member refers to the native language. Can he prove that point to the Members?

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

Mr K Robinson: I accept your ruling, Madam Deputy Speaker.

Mr Gallagher: Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker, for your ruling. Mr Robinson's point was rather absurd. *[Interruption]*.

Madam Deputy Speaker: Order.

Mr Gallagher: The growing numbers that choose that type of education should be given support. Language learning in all forms is extremely fulfilling, as I am sure everyone will agree. That is especially so when children learn to speak our ancestors' tongues. Likewise, it is rewarding for teachers to see their pupils become proficient in the language — both in school and in the community.

Teaching in Irish-medium schools places extra demand on the staff and incurs extra costs — a point that was well made in *Comhairle na Gaelscolaíochta's* submission to the Committee for Education. It is the SDLP's duty to ensure that those who wish to speak their native language have the full resources, teaching materials and necessary budgets at their disposal to help them along that path. Out of respect for diversity, and in the interests of fairness and justice, that same support should be made available for the development of the Ulster-Scots language, when and where there is a proven demand for it.

I am proud to request extra funding for Irish-medium schools, and I make no apology for calling on the Department of Education to ensure that the theory of parity of esteem translates into action.

One of the most disagreeable aspects of the old system was that schools were treated either as winners or losers. It is disappointing that the Department again brings up those terms in its proposals — they have no place in education. Now that an Equality Commission for Northern Ireland has been established and each Government Department is obliged to undergo an equality impact assessment, I hope that those terms will not appear in any future education publications. It is unacceptable that, under the proposals, some schools will gain while others will lose. Many schools will have to cope with a double penalty. They will have their budgets cut, which is understandable, but they may also have their services reduced because the centrally held services that come from the boards may be reduced, as the Department must find £15 million to back up the proposals. Additional moneys should be found, as we do not want to see key services being cut.

I wish to refer to the well-established link between underachievement and social deprivation. Everybody agrees that schools in socially deprived areas need extra resources so that pupils can improve their literacy and numeracy and overcome many of the other educational disadvantages that arise as a result of poverty. TSN plays a central role.

The Department plans to increase resources, but I am concerned about the way the plan proposes to distribute them. Everyone expects that schools with the highest levels of deprivation will benefit most, but according to the Department's own admission the most difficult problems arise in schools where social deprivation is highest. Under these proposals, schools with more than 50% of their pupils from socially deprived backgrounds will derive the least benefit. This has been indicated in the submission by the Equality Commission. We need more research, discussion and debate in order to deliver TSN moneys to the children and the schools that most need them.

Mr McElduff: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Ba mhaith liom fáilte a chur roimh an díospóireacht seo agus roimh an ábhar atá faoi chaibidil, siúd is nach bhfuil Sinn Féin mar pháirtí ar aon intinn lena bhfuil sa cháipéis.

I welcome the Minister's presence, particularly in the circumstances of a family bereavement, which should be noted. I welcome the debate generally and lend support to many of the issues raised in it. I disagree with the content and emphasis of some of the recommendations, which was made clear in the course of deliberations by Mr McHugh — often on my behalf due to my commitments on other Committees.

It is inevitable that there will be discord in a debate such as this, and the report will not necessarily be the collective distillation of all our thinking on every issue. At the outset I want to commend our Committee Clerk and her hard working colleagues, all those who took time and trouble to make submissions, our specialist adviser, and our senior education research team who serve our Committee very well in many debates and deliberations.

I support increasing TSN money substantially now — do not delay, pending discussions on its impact. I welcome the Department's acknowledgement that 5% has not been enough in the form of its proposal to increase the amount by 0.5%. An increase of 3% would be closer to the mark, so that it can begin to bite into problems in our schools caused by social disadvantage. Mr McHugh quoted from documents from the Standing Advisory Commission on Human Rights (SACHR). Interestingly, there is a quote I want to cite:

"Social and economic disadvantage is found disproportionately among Catholics, who are 2.3 times more likely than their peers in other schools to be eligible for free school meals."

To those people who argue that there should be no increase in TSN moneys until additional information is available I ask them to collect the data. That is important, and there is a real urgency about having serious research on social need and how the money has been spent so far. However, it should not halt the march of more TSN money to schools. There is established evidence about the educational attainment of individual pupils being affected by their school environment, which includes group attitudes and expectations regarding education.

In schools where there is a high entitlement to free school meals there is the compounding effect of social disadvantage. It has been proven that the socio-economic background of parents is a more accurate indicator of a child's academic performance than any other single indicator. One can only imagine the additional pressure that accompanies a school with 70% of children entitled to free school meals — and they do exist. I strongly feel that free school meals is as good an indicator of social deprivation as currently exists.

I want to take issue with the Chairperson and Deputy Chairperson of the Committee in relation to their remarks about funding for Irish-medium schools. I do not find it surprising given that neither has taken up a particularly enlightened position with respect to the Irish language generally. Both are on public record saying very unenlightened things.

4.45 pm

Irish was once banned in the education system. It has come a long way since then. However, it must travel further. It has come a long way since the time when pupils were subject to corporal punishment for uttering "cúpla focal as Gaeilge". The Department of Education, among others, has considerable catching up to do on the requirements of the Good Friday Agreement to

"take resolute action to promote the language".

Teachers in Gaelscoileanna have additional time commitments and additional costs in translating materials, and they are often left to their own devices because teaching resources in the medium of Irish are lacking. We have often heard about the bureaucratic burden on teachers, but it is certainly heaviest on múinteoirí who must often stay after classes to translate material.

The lower pupil-teacher ratio is crucial in the immersion education system. Sinn Féin agrees with an additional £100 per pupil for Irish-medium primary schools and units. That should not be reduced to £25 per pupil for post-primary schools. We agree with developing an Irish-medium unit factor and with funding Irish-medium units in the same way as special units. We approach educational management with the same resolve and determination as we approach any other aspect of education in order to deliver the best possible education system to all our children. Go raibh míle maith agat.

Mr Hussey: First, I congratulate the Chairperson, the Deputy Chairperson, members of the Committee, officials and all who were involved in producing this timely report. I must declare an interest as a member of the Western Education and Library Board and vice-chairperson of that board's finance committee.

No one in the Chamber will disagree with expanding the general principles to underpin common funding formulae in order to include mitigation of the effects of social disadvantage. I unreservedly support that basic principle. The report emphasises the need to ensure that if the common formula were implemented using the high aggregated schools budget model, additional resources of £15 million above the existing baselines would be needed to ensure that present levels of education and library boards' central services to schools were not undermined. That is of crucial importance. Indeed, the Western Education and Library Board alone requires an additional £5.7 million in order to avoid cuts to central services.

The Committee suggested that if the additional £15 million cannot be made available, the transition period should be extended from three years to five years. It must be emphasised that merely extending the transition period will not solve the fundamental funding problem for services provided to schools directly by boards.

On targeting social need (TSN), the report recommends that further research and discussion are necessary before any changes can be made to the current 5% level of top-slicing. Many of the areas need further research.

Schools in the west would clearly benefit if top-slicing were increased to 5.5%. However, the perceived underfunding of schools in the west would be lower if TSN funding were left at 5%. The focus on funding arrangements by the Southern Board for pupils with moderate learning difficulties provides the Assembly with an opportunity to explore funding for special education in general. This is timely in light of increasing pressure to integrate pupils with special needs into mainstream schools. Recent figures suggest that spending by all education and library boards on special education has risen by 30% in the past two years.

I support the view that the proposed use of test results from Key Stage 2 is not a satisfactory means of assessing a primary school's special education funding. A perverse incentive would arise in some schools. Would it not be more appropriate to apportion funding on the basis of the number of pupils on a school's special needs register?

With regard to teachers' salaries within local management of schools (LMS) arrangements budgeting, the Assembly and the Minister should agree to further investigation of alternative methods of providing schools with the actual cost of employing teachers, even though that might undermine the Department's timetable for

implementing a common formula. Is it not better to get it right first time? A careful study should be undertaken of the arrangements in Scotland for funding and the general management of schools. Scottish arrangements offer an alternative approach that appears to enjoy wide public support. Surely it is acceptable that the inescapable costs of employing teachers in schools are provided for in the formula.

Arising from its consideration of contingency funding for enrolment increases, the Committee suggests that the Department may wish to consider whether a three-year rolling average of enrolment might be used for any per capita indicator in a common formula. It is worth noting that the Burns review recommends that a three-year rolling average of enrolment be used as a basis for the LMS formula. It is also interesting to note that the Department has not yet given a clear indication for next year's formula for the use of actual as opposed to composite enrolments. Clearly, a decision must be taken as soon as possible.

I welcome and support the Committee's emphasis on additional funding to ensure that post-primary schools are protected and that boards can undertake to provide administrative and landlord services to voluntary grammar and grant-maintained integrated schools.

The Committee for Education's report is an important, well-informed critique of the Department's proposals. Acceptance of the report's recommendation means that the basis of the common funding formula document will need to change and the proposed timetable will need to be extended. I support the report 'Proposals for a Common Funding Formula for Grant-Aided Schools in Northern Ireland' and trust that the Assembly will do likewise.

Mr Hamilton: I was surprised as I listened to Mr McHugh. Many of the things that he seemed to be complaining about this afternoon were things that he agreed with at Committee meetings. For example, I cannot understand how he can make a statement in defence of free school meals, when in the Committee he is recorded as describing free meals as

"a stigma akin to a failure in the 11-plus".

Nevertheless, he defended that in the Chamber this afternoon.

The report made recommendations on actual teacher costs as opposed to average teacher costs. Several of the bodies that gave evidence to the Committee, particularly the education and library boards, highlighted the financial pressures that the use of average teacher costs placed on many schools. Teachers' salaries — and I speak as one who served on a board of governors and who relied on a teacher's salary for many years — use up the vast bulk of a school's budget.

All sorts of problems are caused to boards of governors if they must manage a budget most of the cash of which is based on a theoretical average rather than on what it actually costs their schools. In working out a budget, which the boards of governors must do, it would be much better if governors knew that built into their budget was all the money needed to pay the salaries of their teachers. Building that in would be a much better approach to the organised planning of school budgets. It would help governors to decide where to spend the rest of the money. They would know exactly what amount was for teachers' salaries and what exactly was left, and thus they could begin to plan to spend it.

As a teacher, I felt that Key Stage 2 tests were not designed for use as indicators of underachievement. On the contrary, they were aimed at highlighting a school's achievements and progress. The performance of schools was judged according to the results of those tests; some were highlighted as being successful because their pupils were seen to be achieving and making progress, while others lagged behind.

A school, if it meets the Key Stage 2 test criteria aimed at determining pupils' improvement, might be allocated fewer funds to target underachievement, especially if the test results reveal that its pupils have made progress. The amount of funds that a school receives to spend on its underachieving pupils would be cut. It would lose out, even though it might have the same number of underachieving pupils, as the same test results are used to determine school funding allocations to assist underachieving pupils.

The proposal that the pupil count should revert to the previous arrangement is to be welcomed. It was ridiculous that a school's budget was determined not only according to the average teacher costs — which it was never certain of — but according to the school principal's estimate of the pupil intake for the coming year. The earlier system, whereby pupil-count funding was allocated on the basis of a school population, was a clearer and more easily managed method. That was carried out in October, and a top-up was allocated if any additional pupils came to the school later. I would welcome a return to that system.

I thank everyone who was involved in compiling the report. It is a genuine and well-intentioned effort to try to bring equality of funding to schools. It is to be welcomed by the House.

The Minister of Education (Mr M McGuinness): Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I welcome the Education Committee's report and Members' contributions. We have had a constructive and informed debate. Before making a final decision on the issue, I will consider carefully all the points made.

Funding is a critical issue for all our schools. It is on the agenda of almost every meeting that I have with

school representatives, and it forms a considerable proportion of the correspondence that my Department receives. Not surprisingly, the main concern is the lack of funding, and I share that concern. Our primary and post-primary schools are underfunded, by comparison with schools in England, Scotland and Wales. I have consistently argued the case for additional funding in the Executive and the Assembly. As the record shows, that has resulted in some success, but our schools remain underfunded, and I will continue to press for further resources.

Although the amount of money that is made available to schools is an important issue, the main focus of the common funding formula is on how the available resources should be distributed. It is vital that the distribution of funding is seen to be fair. The effect of our current system of seven different formulae is that similar schools in different areas receive different levels of funding.

5.00 pm

My key objective in introducing the common funding formula is to remove these inequities to ensure that schools of similar size and characteristics receive similar levels of funding, regardless of their location or sector.

It is reassuring that there is overwhelming support for a common formula. The issue, not surprisingly, is the make-up of that formula. As Members may be aware, my officials and I have worked closely with our education partners and the Committee in developing our proposals for consultation and in considering and responding to its outcome. This high level of co-operation and constructive participation has been helpful in ensuring that our proposals for a common formula reflect the needs of schools.

The Committee's understanding of the key issues is reflected in the comprehensive report before the Assembly. It is heartening that so many of my proposals have been supported by the Committee and by those schools and organisations that responded to the consultation documents. The consultation exercise generated the largest response that the Department has received in recent years. It even exceeded the response to the consultation by the post-primary review body. This has been open and genuine consultation. My officers explained the proposals at 10 seminars across every board area, and most of our partner bodies organised conferences to discuss them. The analysis of the responses received has been placed on the Department's web site for all to see.

I am pleased that the Committee's report supports the funding principles, and I am content to accept its suggested amendment that schools should be funded according to relative need, including mitigating the effects of social disadvantage. I agree that the division of responsibilities between boards and schools can be

reviewed in the light of the outcome of the review of public administration, and I note the Committee's general endorsement of the proposals for small schools and premises. I am happy to reflect further on the proposals for landlord maintenance and vocational education and training as requested.

Some concerns have been expressed about the impact on education and library boards services if £15 million is transferred from these budgets to schools delegated budgets. I should first clarify the fact that the consultation document refers to a sum of up to £15 million. Ken Robinson, Tommy Gallagher and a number of others raised that matter. The figure was based on the amount of money required in the 1999-2000 financial year if the four boards brought the level of their age-weighted pupil units (AWPU) up to the level of the highest AWPU. The Department continues to urge boards to increase delegated funding. It is hoped that by April 2003 the disparity between the levels of delegation in boards will not be as wide.

I will also confirm that the £15 million does not necessarily have to come from a realignment of centrally managed budgets within boards. The Department will review the overall budget position in the context of the 2002 spending review and will seek additional funding from the Executive to assist the move to the common formula. We will of course accept the support of Members in that endeavour.

I remind Members of the reasoning behind this proposal. Under present arrangements, there are wide differences across boards in the levels of funding delegated to schools and the levels of funding retained centrally. Some, but by no means all, of this is due to differences in characteristics, such as higher transport costs for boards in rural areas. To achieve true common funding requires not only common funding delegated to schools but a common level of funding for services provided from the centre. Otherwise, inequalities in the support for schools will continue to exist.

Our clear priority is to increase the level of resources in the classroom, which means increasing the level of resources delegated to schools. The high aggregated schools budget (ASB) option will move a further £15 million into school budgets, money that schools would currently receive if the levels of delegation across boards were equally high. Those are the reasons the Department favours the high ASB option.

Members should therefore understand that a simple summation and redistribution of existing delegated budgets — the low ASB option — will be detrimental to schools in those boards that have higher levels of delegated funding. Their additional funding would be skewed to schools and boards with lower funding levels. Those schools would continue to benefit from higher levels of central support from the board. Provision for

central services must be brought onto a common footing alongside the introduction of the common funding formula.

TSN funding was raised by Ms Lewsley, Eileen Bell, Mr McHugh, Mr McElduff, Sammy Wilson, Ken Robinson, Mr Gibson, Mr Gallagher and others, and it represents a huge issue. Our proposals for this key area have attracted much comment from the Committee, the respondents to the consultation and from Members today. Again, it is reassuring that the Committee supports the continued inclusion of a factor in the formula that seeks to recognise the additional costs incurred by schools in mitigating the effects of social disadvantage and low educational achievement.

The key issues are the level of funds to be made available and how they should be distributed. The amount allocated to TSN is a matter of judgement, balancing the needs of schools where pupils require additional support against those with few, if any, such pupils. It is essential that all schools have sufficient core funding to meet the needs of their pupils. It is proposed to increase the level of TSN funding from 5% to 5.5% of the total schools recurring funding budget. That would raise expenditure on TSN within the LMS arrangements by about £4 million. The increase is designed to facilitate the change in the TSN indicator by supporting schools in addressing low educational achievement, regardless of social background, while also ensuring that schools currently in receipt of TSN funds do not lose out. We need to monitor how effectively the funds are used, and the document outlines proposals to do that.

There is clear evidence of improvement in the performance of free school meal pupils and schools that have high proportions of pupils with entitlement to free school meals. However, we must continue to ensure that best use is made of TSN funds. The Committee has suggested some measures relating to the use of entitlement to free school meals as the indicator of social deprivation. As the report acknowledges, the issue of uptake will be researched in the family resources survey to be conducted later this year.

Arrangements for determining entitlement to free school meals have traditionally mirrored those applicable in England, and I understand that consideration is being given to extending entitlement to include families who are entitled to working families tax credit, which will extend coverage of the indicator.

Financial assistance towards the cost of school uniforms is based on the same criteria as entitlement to free school meals. Whatever indicator is used for social deprivation, it must be robust, objective and capable of being updated regularly as circumstances change. It must also be pupil-related, not least because pupils do not always attend their nearest school. That is a

problem which reduces the value of census-based indicators such as Noble and Robson. Entitlement to free school meals remains the most robust indicator of social deprivation — a view widely supported by schools in the consultation. I will keep the issue under review and I will utilise more effective indicators should they become available.

A key aspect of our proposals for TSN was the inclusion of an education indicator in order to target more effectively schools with pupils who are not socially disadvantaged but are nevertheless performing below the expected level for their age. This addresses one of the long-standing criticisms of the current TSN allocation within the LMS arrangements. I recognise fully the concerns expressed with regard to my proposal to use key stage assessment results as the primary indicator of special educational need in primary schools, and I shall give careful consideration to all the alternatives suggested. As we discussed with the Committee, the difficulty is in identifying a suitable alternative that measures ability on intake, differentiates between pupils and is robust. Baseline assessments and Key Stage 1 results do not meet all these requirements. A standardised test may be developed, but that would involve additional testing and bureaucracy for schools.

I also note the point made by the Committee regarding the incorporation of a free school meals indicator within this element. The Department was aware of that issue. The suggested approach sought to reflect the close correlation between free school meals entitlement and educational performance and provide a balance for the use of Key Stage 2 results, which is an output measure. As I indicated to the Committee during our earlier meeting, I am happy to consider the issue further.

Another issue that has attracted considerable attention is the position of teachers' salaries within LMS. I welcome the recommendation that teachers' salaries should remain within LMS. I agree with the Committee that the removal of teachers' salaries would undermine the principles of LMS. I note the Committee's recommendation that my Department should undertake further investigations with a view to moving to a situation where salaries are funded.

The Department looked at the devolved school management system in Scotland, an issue raised by Mr Gibson and Mr Hussey. Our conclusion was that the Scottish system operates in an entirely different context. The introduction of a system here along those lines would require the development of a new set of arrangements including standard staffing formulae, agreed maximum class sizes in all classes and standard organisational arrangements, all of which would require careful planning and, doubtless, a new round of consultations, especially given the high level of support from schools for the current arrangements. Therefore, I intend to proceed with the proposals in the document. However,

I will ask my officials to continue to examine other approaches to funding teachers' salaries.

Members raised several other issues, and I am not sure if I will have enough time to deal with all of them. Mr Kennedy raised the issue of the release of data. I thought that it was important for the consultation to be conducted on the basis of what is best for the education of our children rather than whether a particular school receives a slightly larger or smaller budget. However, we recognised that the impact on schools is a key consideration. The document did not contain details of the outcome for individual schools, because there would be a danger of seriously misleading schools due to certain assumptions having to be made where up-to-date data are not available, and the situation may change substantially between 2000-01 and implementation in 2002-03. The document would also have become unmanageably bulky.

However, the document contained comprehensive information on the financial impact on school sectors and on a wide range of different school models, and would reflect variations in the key factors that affect school funding. This was followed on 19 June by an illustrative outcome for a large grammar school. On the same day, the Department informed all recipients of the consultation document that the values of the age-weighted pupil unit used were 1,236 in the high ASB model and 1,203 in the low ASB model. I am satisfied that that enables schools and other organisations to get a reasonably clear picture of how commonality is likely to affect them.

Mr Kennedy also raised the issue of balance between primary and post-primary schools. I want to reaffirm the commitment to increase funding for primary schools. Investment in early years should avoid costly remediation in later years. There is no doubt that this investment will assist secondary schools.

I also want to point out that the proposed skewing of resources to the primary sector has been supported by 85% of schools, with 53% strongly supporting it. Indeed, almost 50% of post-primary schools agreed to the change. I acknowledge the concerns regarding the impact on nursery and post-primary schools, but I should explain that, within a fixed amount, if one sector is to gain, another must lose. The issue is to keep change manageable.

Mr Hussey, Ms Lewsley and Mr Kennedy raised the issue of the Southern Education and Library Board's special units. The proposals for special units took the advice provided by the education and training inspectorate into account and are designed to bring arrangements across education boards to an even footing. The Southern Education and Library Board is the only authority that allocates an additional lump sum to special units, although other boards have units that fulfil the same

role. Contrary to the views expressed by those who seek to retain the lump-sum allocation, there is no evidence that the level of provision for pupils, or the extent of inclusion, is higher in the Southern Education and Library Board area than in any other area.

5.15 pm

Mr Kennedy and Sammy Wilson also discussed Irish-medium education. I note that the Committee was unable to reach an agreement in respect of my proposals for Irish-medium schools and units, and that no consensus emerged as a result of the consultation. One funding principle is that schools should be funded fairly and on an objective basis. In so far as it is possible, allocations should be determined by using objective measurements of the factors that give rise to unavoidable and significant additional expenditure. I am satisfied that the proposals are equitable. Specialist provision in Irish-medium schools and units results in significant additional costs, and the formula must take account of those costs. The approach is in full accord with the principles upon which the formula has been developed, and it will result in funding according to relative need. Before deciding on the matter, I will consider every point that was made.

Sammy Wilson spoke about the proposals for the funding of Irish-medium schools and units. Strictly speaking, it is incorrect to assume that everyone who disagreed with the proposals did so because they felt that there should be less funding. Some objectors wanted more funding.

Eileen Bell mentioned increased enrolments. There is widespread support for basing funding calculations on the census return. That change will be introduced before the introduction of the common funding formula to facilitate its implementation. Alongside that arrangement it must be ensured that schools at which additional pupils enrol each year will have access to the additional funding that they need to provide for those pupils. As was the case when those arrangements operated in the past, cumbersome or unnecessary administration must be avoided. It was suggested that a threshold of 10% of enrolments be applied, but the Committee suggested a lower threshold. The Department is examining that proposal with its partners.

Ms Lewsley raised equality issues. The Department is considering points that the Committee and others, including the Equality Commission, made in respect of the equality impact assessment.

Ken Robinson stated that teachers' costs could be higher if a school has staff who are at the top of the pay scale as a result of their incremental progression. Other factors include protected salaries for principals and vice-principals, and decisions by boards of governors in respect of responsibility points. It is difficult to determine genuine cases of need in the latter category.

The problem of teacher redundancies will persist under any agreed staffing formula, especially when enrolment figures decrease.

Some Members may be unaware that the LMS formula tends to change each year; the common funding formula will also do that. It will need to be refined, where necessary, to adapt to new circumstances. The Department will wish to make changes manageable so that schools have the capacity to plan ahead with confidence. However, there is no reason why there cannot be fine-tuning and further developmental work on aspects of the formula in the years to come.

Madam Deputy Speaker: I ask the Minister to draw his remarks to a close.

Mr M McGuinness: I thank the Committee members and all those who contributed to the debate. I shall consider carefully all the points that were raised and shall respond in detail to the Committee's recommendations soon.

Mr Kennedy: I am conscious of the time restriction. I am pleased by the response to the report, and I thank everyone who contributed to the debate. I thank my Committee Colleagues for their contributions today and for helping to bring the report to the Assembly.

I will try to address some of the issues that Members raised. The Deputy Chairperson, Mr Sammy Wilson, said that the effect of the proposals would be that some schools would lose money, while others would gain. Mr Gallagher referred to the Department of Education's description of "winners and losers". Regardless of the terms used, the importance of the decisions to be made in the creation of a common funding formula is emphasised. Sammy Wilson spoke about TSN funding, as did most contributors. He highlighted the need for accountability for the amount allocated to TSN and the way in which it is spent, and I agree with his comments.

Ms Lewsley asked what the proposed increase is intended to achieve for TSN. Mr McHugh disagreed with the view that additional information was required to inform the discussion on the appropriate level of TSN funding, and Mr McElduff called for a full percentage increase in the funding, rather than the 0.5% increase proposed. I was surprised at Mr McHugh's comments, because he attended many evidence sessions where witness after witness questioned the 0.5% increase. The witnesses said that they did not know what the basis for the proposed increase was, or what it was intended to achieve. Hence the Committee attempted to reach some agreement that further information was needed and that further research should be undertaken to prove the need for an additional percentage increase. Indeed, in that respect Mr Gibson pointed to evidence provided by some of the witnesses, particularly those from the Council for Catholic Maintained Schools.

Mr Hamilton and other Members also referred to the inconsistencies in evidence.

Mr S Wilson: Will the Member give way?

Mr Kennedy: No, I will not give way. I am sorry, but I do not have much time.

The Committee wrote to the Department on several occasions. However, it did not receive a satisfactory answer. The problem is that not enough information is available to make an informed decision on the appropriate level of funding. The Committee is not disputing that more money should be spent, but it has a duty to discharge moneys from the public purse in a sensible way.

Ms Lewsley and Mr Hamilton stated their concerns about the use of Key Stage 2 results to identify educational need. The Committee recommended that other indicators of need should be identified. I particularly welcome Mr Hussey's contribution. He is the only Member to speak who is not a member of the Education Committee, so I thank him for his interest and his support on that issue and on the treatment of teachers' salaries.

I thank Eileen Bell for her contribution, and for the points she made about the possible effects on education and library boards' central services and the mainstreaming of children with special educational needs. Those are important matters.

Ken Robinson raised a key issue about the need for schools to have adequate funding for a full cohort of teachers to provide the statutory curriculum. He demonstrated eloquently that the current proposals do not address that fundamental weakness. The Committee's recommendations are a genuine attempt to assist in solving the problem. Mr Gibson highlighted the importance of covering actual teachers' salaries to enable small rural schools to deliver the full curriculum. Mr Gibson is well known to the Committee for his strong support of small rural schools. He represents a rural constituency, as do I. Mr Hamilton highlighted the advantages of forward planning for school principals so that they know that the actual costs of salaries will be made available to them.

The issue of funding for Irish-medium schools and units generated contributions from the Deputy Chairperson, Sammy Wilson, as well as from Mr McHugh, Mr Gallagher, Mr McElduff and others. It is clear that views differ widely, which was clear from the consultation exercise. The Minister should reconsider his proposals in the light of those differing opinions. A Member referred to the fact that I was, perhaps, unenthusiastic about the Irish-medium sector. I can confirm that. However, the issue for me is not that the Irish-medium sector should not receive equal funding, but that it should not receive special funding. I hope that I have made that clear.

I welcome the Minister's acceptance of several recommendations. I acknowledge his attendance in the Chamber today, given that Mr McElduff mentioned that there had been a family bereavement. Regarding the Minister's comments about delegated budgets, I want to reiterate the Committee's support for directing resources into classrooms as much as possible. Nevertheless, I emphasise that in the current financial climate it is important not to have a detrimental impact on education and library boards' centrally provided services.

I welcome the Minister's commitment to press hard within the Executive for further funding. However, if the practical outworking of these recommendations means that there is a deficit at any stage, even as much as the £15 million that has been outlined, it would be hugely irresponsible for the Minister to proceed. It would create a large gap in the funding of an essential service for schools. It would be almost impossible for schools to survive.

The issue of LMS funding is difficult and complex. The Committee recognises the importance of these proposals. It is acutely aware that any decision on those matters will affect all schools directly. I welcome the Minister's commitment to consider the recommendations in detail. I look forward to receiving his full response. I urge him to look closely at the payment of actual, rather than average, teaching salaries, and in particular to give serious consideration to the Scottish reality, where that has been achieved and adequate educational services have also been provided.

(Mr Speaker in the Chair)

I thank those Members who contributed to the debate. I commend the motion to the Assembly.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That this Assembly calls on the Minister of Education to take full account of the issues raised and recommendations made in the report prepared by the Committee for Education on the Proposals for a Common Funding Formula for Grant-Aided Schools in Northern Ireland.

Motion made

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

HILLSBOROUGH PRIMARY SCHOOL: CAPITAL DEVELOPMENT

Mr Poots: A year has passed since the Assembly debated the capital schools programme budget. During that debate the Minister made complimentary remarks about the contribution that I had made. Some people described that as a kiss of death. However, I am still here. I am not particularly concerned about how the Minister describes what I have to say today — whether he finds it good, bad or indifferent — as long as Hillsborough gets a new school. That is all I am interested in.

Currently there are around 340 pupils at Hillsborough Primary School. I have raised several of the relevant issues on previous occasions in the House. I must go through them again to set the context which makes it essential that the school receive a new building.

Ten of the 14 classrooms are second-hand mobile classrooms.

Of those 10 classrooms, nine are undersized and therefore wholly unsuitable for educational use. Recently a child sustained a serious cut requiring 14 stitches while attempting to enter one of them.

5.30 pm

There is poor insulation due to single-glazed windows. There is damp plaster and dust on the equipment, which is not an ideal environment for children, particularly those who are asthmatic. Draughts from the single-glazed windows mean that curtains are frequently drawn, leading to a subsequent reduction in lighting.

Toilet facilities in the school are deplorable. If every boy were to use the toilets during break time, they would have approximately eight seconds each to get in and out. Of the 20 staff in the school, the vast majority are female. There is one toilet for female staff.

Teachers must park their cars on the school playground, thus reducing the space available for children to play on. The school has sought to compensate that to an extent by organising two lunch periods, but the playground is still absolutely packed. There is less than one square metre in each classroom for each child.

That is the environment in which children are being educated in Hillsborough Primary School. It is a very popular primary school that delivers good results and carries out a great service in the community. There is excellent special needs support for children who require it. However, children are using a 14-classroom school that was only designed for four classrooms. That must be addressed urgently.

The South Eastern Education and Library Board has proposed amalgamating Hillsborough Primary School and Newport Primary School, and that has disappointed me. Previous work to bring new schools to Lisburn Borough by the board has been faultless. It has done its job well. In this instance, however, the board attempted to pull off a private finance initiative by doing a land exchange with a local developer. The land exchange was never going anywhere — it never had any such prospect — and just led to a delay in the application for Hillsborough to get a new publicly funded primary school.

As a means of ameliorating past mistakes, the board is trying to hasten that process to cover its tracks and has proposed the amalgamation. In so doing, the board is compounding one injustice, which is that the children of Hillsborough have had to be educated in those conditions for the past three or four years when a new school was patently required, by imposing another injustice upon the children of Newport Primary School. The families and children of Newport are very satisfied with that school. Yesterday I received a petition which only two parents were not prepared to support, parents who are dissatisfied with retaining Newport as a primary school.

Newport Primary School has over 70 pupils. I cannot argue that pupil enrolment has not fallen, but it has not fallen to such an extent that the school is on the point of closure. Ten years ago, the enrolment was 75 pupils. It has now dropped from around 100 at its peak to 74. Those figures are not alarming by any stretch of the imagination. Last year, the Minister kept open two schools in the Mid-Ulster constituency that had 25 and 26 pupils respectively. To say that a school with an enrolment of 74 pupils is not feasible is not a viable argument.

We must not concentrate on the amalgamation proposal that the South Eastern Education and Library Board has made. That proposal was put forward on the basis of an inaccurate economic appraisal and without consulting parents. Therefore we must look more closely at why Hillsborough should have a new stand-alone school. The board made a fundamental mistake in arguing that Hillsborough should be upgraded from category 3 to category 2. That should have been taken a step further. To upgrade the school to category 1 would have ensured that Hillsborough received a primary school.

I understand that it is difficult to obtain category 1 status; the definition and criteria are strictly applied. However, under the recent Lisburn area plan, approximately 76 acres of residential land have been released for development in the Hillsborough area. Planning applications have already been submitted for much of that land. An advertisement for the planning application for the most substantial area — 45 acres — was in the local paper last weekend.

Some Members may not be fully aware of development in the Hillsborough area. The most recent sale of development land in Hillsborough was of 4.7 acres,

which was sold by the Down Lisburn Trust. That made approximately £4.5 million, so the land has a real estate value of up to £1 million per acre. I do not need to tell anyone that someone who is sitting on £1 million per acre will not wait long before selling. Houses will be built quickly. If we get the nod for a new school in Hillsborough in this round, many new houses will be up before the school is in place.

The chief executive of the South Eastern Education and Library Board indicated that, with a fair wind and with approval at this stage, it would probably be 2005 before the school could be opened. Therefore we need to look at current planning applications and at what the Hillsborough area requires. For example, from 76 acres with nine houses per acre, approximately 170 more children will need to avail themselves of the educational facilities available in the area. Newport Primary School currently has vacancies for 70 children, but Hillsborough Primary School has none. Therefore, by 2005, 100 children will have no school to attend unless we get the go-ahead now. In that sense, Hillsborough falls into category 1, because there is simply no room on the site to provide the facilities needed for the children. I asked the board of governors of Hillsborough Primary School how many more mobiles they could put on the site of the school. Its answer was that, at a push, one more mobile classroom could be put on the site. The educational facilities will not be able to meet the requirements of the development proposals that are in place. Hillsborough urgently needs a new school and should therefore be awarded category 1 status.

The amalgamation proposal is not in the long-term interest of the people of Hillsborough or of Newport. The Belfast metropolitan area plan is currently under consideration. After some debate, it was recommended that 60% of development should occur on brownfield sites. There is very little brownfield development land in Lisburn Borough, but there is one site. Some people may be more familiar with it than are others — it was the site of the Maze Prison. That land has been described as brownfield. It is half a mile from Newport Primary School, and as a political representative involved in the Belfast metropolitan area plan, it is fairly evident to me that that land is likely to be developed for residential purposes.

What logic is there — from a strategy perspective — in closing a school that is situated within half a mile of a proposed substantial housing development?

It was recently reported in the press that there are problems with educational facilities in Downpatrick and Saintfield — schools in those towns cannot meet current demand. There has been a call for the reopening of Killyleagh High School. We do not want to be in the same situation in five or six years' time. We do not want to realise that we need a new school in the area having closed one only two or three years previously.

I ask the Department to consider the matter seriously and strategically and to recognise the need that exists in Hillsborough. The Department should acknowledge the injustice that has been done to the children in Hillsborough and recognise that there is a requirement for a school in the Maze area, which is currently being serviced by Newport Primary School. It should take those facts on board and make the right decision.

Ms Lewsley: It is important to say that all of the MLAs from Lagan Valley want the best education for all of the children in the constituency and that they believe that those children should have the best facilities to deliver that education. We all agree that the conditions in Hillsborough Primary School are unacceptable and that the school, in its own right, should be replaced.

I want to raise issues concerning the process employed throughout the application for the new school. The Minister should look at the important matter of consultation. In this case, proper protocol was not observed, and the parents of the children at Newport Primary School feel that their voices have not been heard and that they have not been part of the decision-making process. Both parties met with the Department, but only one party had the opportunity to meet with the Minister. There is some debate about whether both parties asked for a meeting with the Minister, but I assumed that the Minister and his Department were one body. Such a situation only adds to the lack of confidence that these parents have in the Department of Education.

People were misled about whether the application for Hillsborough Primary School could enter category 1 status. The Minister explained yesterday that the school could not meet the criteria for category 1 while the application is being processed. It worries me that emotional blackmail was used on the parents from Newport Primary School. They were led to believe that, if the schools failed to amalgamate, the application would drop from category 2 to category 3. I am also worried that even though the school may be given priority in category 3, it could still come up against much bigger competition and, therefore, the opportunity for a new school could be lost.

At a time when relations between the schools should be trouble-free, there has been a great deal of heightened tension and friction. I ask the Minister in future to look closely at the way consultations are carried out and to ensure that all voices are heard.

Mr Close: I commend Mr Poots for bringing the issue to the House and for the coherent and logical manner in which he presented a case that is beyond dispute. I find it very sad that the potential and, it is to be hoped, imminent provision of a new school in Hillsborough appears to have become a subject for division.

5.45pm

On the one hand, the teachers, governors and parents of pupils at Hillsborough Primary School feel that their new school could be delayed by the parents and pupils at Newport Primary School. On the other hand, the people at Newport Primary School feel that they are being forced towards closure by their Hillsborough counterparts.

I must emphasise the point that Mr Poots and Ms Lewsley have made — I have not come across one person in the Hillsborough area who would deny that Hillsborough Primary School is in a dire state and needs to be replaced urgently. I do not think that there is one person in the Lagan Valley constituency who would deny that. Over the past 15 years, the school has gone from bad to worse. It is a further example of how badly underfunded we were under direct rule.

To emphasise Mr Poots's point, we can only marvel at the way in which the dedicated teaching staff have, literally, battled against the elements to provide education in the most trying circumstances. The truism "small is beautiful" can be attributed to Newport Primary School. The parents of pupils at the school wish to maintain that at all costs. They believe — rightly or wrongly — that they are being railroaded towards closure. They are angry at the lack of early consultation and the perceived "behind-the-door" manipulation of their case by what they refer to as the "greater number". They feel isolated and ignored. The parents also feel that they were forced to take up the cudgels against the Department and that they were given only a short timescale in which to collect their arguments and present their case. They want to save their small rural school.

The parents at Newport Primary School are not satisfied with the situation. No one has properly explained to them why Hillsborough cannot have a new primary school tomorrow, with Newport Primary School also remaining open. They do not see why they should be blamed if Hillsborough Primary School is in category 3 instead of category 2. Furthermore, they do not understand, given the circumstances that have been well documented, why Hillsborough Primary School is not in category 1. The parents want to see a new school at Hillsborough. They do not want to see that delayed for one moment more than is necessary. However, they demand openness and transparency.

Everyone here this evening hopes that the Minister, in responding, will answer the Newport parents' questions about the various categories and make it clear why Hillsborough has not had a new school. Everyone hopes that, if the Minister finds it necessary to close Newport Primary School, he will explain the logic of his case.

Mr Roche: No one is opposed to a new primary school for Hillsborough. The problem arises when that proposal is combined with one to amalgamate that

school with Newport Primary School, because that would require the closure of Newport Primary School.

I would like to go into detail on the issue of the lack of consultation on the proposal to close Newport Primary School. Other Members have touched on that issue. The parents of pupils at the school were not consulted on proposal 148 by the South Eastern Education and Library Board or by the school's board of governors. The parents were not aware of proposal 148 until they met with the South Eastern Education and Library Board at the school on 17 September last year. The board published proposal 148 on 18 September — one day after it met the parents. That is conclusive proof that the meeting on 17 September cannot be regarded as a consultation with the parents on proposal 148.

In a letter to Mrs Margaret Bailie of the concerned parents' group dated 30 November 2001, the board of governors of Newport Primary School conceded that no consultation had occurred between it and the parents. The letter stated that

"We as board of governors members understood that there was no need for us to consult with local parents as the SEELB would arrange a meeting with the parents in June 2001."

The meeting referred to in the letter did not take place until September, one day before the South Eastern Education and Library Board published proposal 148. However, the South Eastern Education and Library Board consulted the board of governors of Newport Primary School on proposal 148. That is stated in the letter from its chief executive to Mr Thomas Palmer of the concerned parents' group dated 25 October. The letter states that

"Consultation meetings have taken place with the board of governors and staff of Newport Primary School."

Those considerations strongly show that, during the meeting on September 2001, there was an attempt to present to the parents that the closure of Newport Primary School was a *fait accompli*.

Those considerations are reinforced, first, by the refusal of the board of governors of Newport Primary School to bring forward the annual board and parents' meeting scheduled for 22 November 2001. This was requested by concerned parents to facilitate discussion of proposal 148. However, the board did not reply and thus, in effect, refused the request.

Secondly, the concerned parents' group was refused the use of Newport Primary School to hold a meeting to consider proposal 148. The principal stated that the South Eastern Education and Library Board had instructed her that the meeting must not take place in the school. The meeting of concerned parents — the public meeting — was held in the Maze community hall on 5 November, but the representatives of the South

Eastern Education and Library Board, who had been invited to the meeting, simply refused to attend.

Thirdly, the South Eastern Education and Library Board delayed sending information on the board's economic assessment to concerned parents. The delay meant that 33 days of the 56-day consultation period on the publication of proposal 148 had elapsed before concerned parents were in possession of even the minimum amount of information required to assess the economic appraisal underpinning that proposal.

Finally, I understand that the chief executive of Lisburn Borough Council has sent a letter to the Department of Education stating that the council supports proposal 148. In fact, that is not the case. Those considerations mean that the contents of a letter to Mr Thomas Palmer from the South Eastern Education and Library Board letter, dated 25 October 2001, which stated that parents' meetings had taken place and that the response had been strongly positive are not true as far as the parents of children at Newport Primary School are concerned. They were not consulted by the South Eastern Education and Library Board, and therefore could not have given a positive response to proposal 148. The claim by the South Eastern Education and Library Board is in fact the opposite of what is the case. The response by the parents of children at Newport Primary School to proposal 148 has been almost entirely negative, and the following evidence indisputably backs that up.

First, it is supported by the results of a survey sent to parents by the concerned parents' group to record objections to proposal 148, and which was submitted to the Department on 15 November.

Secondly, it is supported by the fact that the parents of 73 out of 75 of the children at Newport Primary School have signed a letter of opposition to proposal 148, which was sent to the Department on 12 January 2002. It is nothing short of amazing that the South Eastern Education and Library Board stated in a letter to Mr Thomas Palmer dated 19 November 2001 that

"It should be noted that the Board has more than satisfied its statutory obligations regarding consultation and publication of a proposal."

That is simply not the case. As regards proposal 148, the South Eastern Education and Library Board has acted outside the letter and the spirit of the Department of Education's requirement.

These Department of Education requirements were set out and stated on 6 December in the context of a decision by the Department to refuse an amalgamation that would have closed a school in County Tyrone. The position of the Department is that

"there will not be approval of any proposals for closure of schools unless there has been full and open consultation with local communities."

As far as Newport Primary School is concerned, that is precisely what has not happened. This means that proposal 148 simply cannot be carried further.

I will not take up more time, but there are issues in the economic assessment underpinning proposal 148 which suggest that the whole scoring of the unquantifiable factors, for example, was not done in an arbitrary way but in a way that would produce the required result — that is that Newport Primary School should be amalgamated. In their objections to the Department the concerned parents have shown that proper scoring would result in a top score for the retention of Newport Primary School.

As well as that — and Mr Poots touched on this — questions can be raised about the number of students that will require primary-school accommodation here over the next few years on the basis of a detailed assessment of planning proposals for the area, which has been made by the concerned parents. They calculate that the position for schoolchildren has been underestimated by at least 128, and in that context they are arguing for the retention of Newport Primary School.

Mr Davis: This is a difficult discussion. In seeking money for school accommodation, this is the first time in Lagan Valley that I have encountered two conflicting interests. I want to pay tribute to the residents of the Newport area for the brochure they produced, which outlines the entire situation.

Given what has been already said — and I do not want to repeat it — in this case there is a heavy responsibility on the Minister. Approximately two years ago Members for Lagan Valley debated Ballycarrickmaddy Primary School. We met the Minister then, and he was able to produce the finance for a brand new school at Ballycarrickmaddy. In this instance there are certain options to be considered. We could continue to use the existing primary schools at Hillsborough and Newport. We could refurbish or extend Hillsborough Primary School to cater for increased capacity and retain Newport Primary School. We could replace the existing Hillsborough Primary School with a new one on the existing site to cater for increased capacity and retain Newport Primary School. We could amalgamate Newport and Hillsborough primary schools in a refurbished, extended primary school on the Hillsborough playing fields to cater for 526 pupils. Or, finally, we could build a new school on a greenfield site to replace both schools and cater for the same number of pupils.

We now come to this conflict and, as Mr Close said, it is time to start pouring oil on troubled waters, because there is division. I pay tribute to Newport Primary School, which said in its submissions that it wants to see Hillsborough Primary School going ahead, and I congratulate it on that. The difficulty arises when we come to these categories. On 17 December the two

deputations came to meet the Lagan Valley Assembly Members, and, in my opinion, both got a fair hearing.

6.00 pm

The minutes of the Newport meeting state that the Deputy Chairperson of the Education Committee, Mr Sammy Wilson, left and returned to say more or less that Hillsborough Primary School would qualify for category 1 status for funding. There is a great deal of confusion about that status and about whether Hillsborough would qualify or not. I hope that the Minister will clarify the matter. Ms Lewsley touched on the primary objective, which is the provision of adequate and suitable educational facilities to meet the curricular needs of the 526 children in Hillsborough of primary-school age.

The Hillsborough residents say that the boards of governors of both schools agree to the amalgamation. They also say — and this is open to dispute — that all members of staff at both schools agree, as do as most parents. They go on to say that Lisburn Borough Council, with the exception of one member, agrees. Mr Roche touched on that debatable point, which needs to be clarified, although I would not like to touch it today. Perhaps that is open to dispute. Most children from Newport and Culcavy already attend Hillsborough Primary School. Therefore, Newport Primary School has a decreasing roll, which will not be justifiable in a few years' time. The residents go on to say that the local community scheme, which is supported by the village and the local council, will fail if amalgamation does not proceed. As I understand it, the principal of Newport Primary School, supported by the board of governors, wants amalgamation.

On the other hand, Mr Ken Robinson and I visited Hillsborough Primary School two years ago, and we shared the opinion that it was an outright disgrace. Only one of the 10 temporary classrooms has a toilet. The children from the other nine temporary classrooms have to use toilets in the main school building, and there are only seven girls' toilets for 181 pupils and four boys' toilets for 200 pupils. Anybody who has visited Hillsborough Primary School will say that they need a new building.

Will Hillsborough be deprived if no amalgamation takes place? The responsibility lies with the Minister. He can solve this problem, because he supplies the funding for Hillsborough Primary School. I assume that the Newport residents would be happy if he supplied the funding for Hillsborough on its own. The difficulty for Newport in later years might be that the school will not have enough pupils, although according to some statistics, planning applications indicate that it might. That is the major difficulty for the Members who represent Lagan Valley.

I ask the Minister to make a note of this. I understand that there was a consultation period, when the borough

council, individuals or groups could make submissions to the Minister. If that has taken place, I have no doubt that the Minister has the facts at his disposal, and I do not think he needs anything else. I congratulate Mr Poots for bringing forward the debate. It is very timely. The Minister has all the information, and he must make a decision that will benefit the residents of that area.

Mr B Bell: I did not intend to speak in the debate, because some other Members and I met the Minister yesterday, and we put the message to him very clearly. I agree with what has been said. We are all concerned about Hillsborough and Newport, and I rise to ask the Minister a question. At our meeting yesterday, the Minister asked his officials whether the residents had made a request to meet with him. He was told that they had not. There seems to be a problem with consultation. At that meeting we handed you the facts from the Newport residents. I understand that a copy was left into your political headquarters. You are in possession of those facts, but my question to you is —

Mr Speaker: Can I encourage the Member to speak through the Chair, because when the Member says, "Can I encourage you", he is actually imploring the Speaker to do so. The Speaker will take on many responsibilities, but not that one.

Mr B Bell: Will you not take that one on?

Mr Speaker: Not that particular one.

Mr B Bell: Of course I am speaking through you, but I must look at the Minister when I am speaking to you, to indicate to him —

Mr Speaker: It is much better to look at him than me.

Mr B Bell: Is the Minister prepared to meet the residents of Newport, even at this late stage? It might help matters if he did.

The Minister of Education (Mr M McGuinness): Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. As Minister of Education, one of my major concerns is the replacement of sub-standard accommodation in schools. I am conscious of the fact that, while many schools need capital improvements, the resources are simply not available to replace all defective accommodation as quickly as I would like. In the interests of fairness and equality, it has therefore been necessary to prioritise capital building schemes so that the most needy schools receive attention first.

My Department's capital priorities list, which comprises proposals by school authorities, currently has around 160 building schemes. The highest-priority projects are contained in the first three categories on the list and can compete for funding if the economic appraisal and development proposal processes have been completed.

There are clearly defined criteria for those three categories. Category 1 deals with unmet demand and is reserved specifically for schools in exceptional circumstances where there is clear evidence that the immediate demand for a large number of additional school places cannot be met sensibly by the existing accommodation, even with temporary classrooms. The position in these cases is exacerbated by the fact that schools in the immediate area have no spare capacity. Such schemes are given priority over other projects, because a capital building scheme is the only means of providing the necessary accommodation for all the pupils. A key principle underpinning this and other categories is to erect the appropriate size of school to ensure that there is no provision in advance of need.

Category 2 deals with the issue of essential works to effect rationalisation and is reserved for schemes where capital building work is essential to facilitate the amalgamation of two or more schools, and where there is sub-standard accommodation. Schools qualifying under this criterion will have serious accommodation inadequacies, with health and safety risks.

Category 3 deals with serious sub-standard accommodation and contains the remaining high-priority schemes that my Department prioritises by an assessment of the extent of the serious accommodation inadequacies that exist in each school.

The topic for this Adjournment debate refers specifically to capital development for Hillsborough Primary School. For some time the South Eastern Education and Library Board has been carrying out a programme of replacing old sub-standard primary schools in its area with new school buildings. Recently the board has provided new modern schools in a number of areas, including west Hillsborough and south Lisburn. As part of this continuing programme to improve school accommodation, the board has been considering options for the replacement of schools in the Hillsborough area.

The permanent accommodation at Hillsborough Primary School is, as Edwin Poots has said, sub-standard and undersized and lacks many facilities. That should be set against the background of a substantial increase in the number of new housing developments in the area. To facilitate the increased demand for primary school places, over two thirds of the pupils in Hillsborough Primary School are now taught in temporary accommodation.

My Department recognises the serious nature of this sub-standard accommodation. There is no dispute about that. At the same time, enrolment at the nearby Newport Primary School is falling each year, and the school is operating at less than half its capacity, with only 61 pupils. As Newport Primary School and Hillsborough Primary School are only one and a half miles apart, the board considered that an amalgamation with Hillsborough Primary School was an obvious option for consider-

ation. Accordingly, the board carried out an economic appraisal which examined the various options and concluded that the two schools should amalgamate in a new building.

The board was able to agree a land-swap arrangement with Lisburn Borough Council to acquire a suitable site adjacent to the existing Hillsborough Primary School on which to build a new school. The board considered that this large 2.2 hectare site would not only be sufficient for a 19-classroom school with an enrolment range of between 526 and 555 pupils, but would have scope to accommodate more pupils if necessary.

The classification of this scheme is that it has category two priority because it is a rationalisation proposal that replaces sub-standard accommodation, and capital works are essential to effect that rationalisation. The higher category 1 classification is not appropriate for Hillsborough Primary School because there must be clear evidence that there is an unmet demand in the area created by insufficient places to accommodate all the pupils. Current demand in the area is being met by a combination of permanent and temporary accommodation at Hillsborough Primary School along with the accommodation at Newport Primary School, over half of which is surplus to requirements.

The South Eastern Education and Library Board has proposed a solution to the education needs in the Hillsborough/Newport area. Its economic appraisal findings are now subject to the development proposal process, which I must decide on, and there has been considerable interest in the proposal, both for and against.

Several Members raised the matters of consultation and possible future housing development in the Hillsborough area. The main objections are that the board provided insufficient information and there was a lack of consultation with the parents and other interested parties on the proposed amalgamation. The board met with the staff and boards of governors of both schools, and the governors included parents' representatives. There were also individual meetings with parents at both schools to explain the proposal. In addition the board met with Lisburn Borough Council, the Hillsborough Community Group and representatives of the Concerned Parents of Newport Primary School, who were supplied with an abridged version of a recently completed economic appraisal. That appraisal considered various options and recommended a new amalgamated school for 526 pupils with 19 classrooms on a site adjacent to the existing Hillsborough Primary School. This group also forwarded detailed submissions to the Department, arguing its case for the retention of Newport Primary School.

Officials from my Department met Jeffrey Donaldson, the MP for the area, and deputations from both Newport Primary School and Hillsborough Primary School.

The views of Newport Primary School were taken on board as part of the development proposal process.

6.15 pm

It is important to note that the site of the proposed new school could accommodate up to 25 classrooms, which would provide for between 706 and 735 pupils. That would easily meet the needs of all Hillsborough's housing development proposals.

It is true that I met with MLAs from the area yesterday. It was a constructive meeting, at which I listened carefully to what was said. I have listened carefully to all the attendant points that have been made on the subject. I said yesterday that I regarded today's debate as an important one, and that I wanted

to hear what Edwin Poots and others had to say. I shall consider carefully what happened at that meeting and what has happened since. I shall take on board all the views expressed and make a decision on the matter in due course.

It is also clear from the contributions that have been made that what may happen in the coming period could present difficulties. As Ivan Davis said, it is in all our interests that we pour oil on troubled waters. I want to play my part in bringing the matter to a successful conclusion as quickly as possible. I shall go away and think about all that I have heard, and Members will be made aware in due course of how I intend to deal with the matter.

Adjourned at 6.17 pm.

Committee Stage Records

**NORTHERN IRELAND
ASSEMBLY**

**COMMITTEE FOR
THE ENVIRONMENT**

Thursday 15 November 2001

**LOCAL GOVERNMENT
(BEST VALUE) BILL
(NIA 19/00)**

Members present:

Rev Dr William McCrea (Chairperson)
Mr Ford
Mr McClarty
Mr McLaughlin
Mr M Murphy
Mr Poots
Mr Watson

Witnesses:

Mr J Corey)
Mr P Casey) Northern Ireland
Mr B McLennon) Public Service Alliance

The Chairperson: I welcome the representatives from the Northern Ireland Public Service Alliance (NIPSA). We are interested in what you have to say to us concerning the Local Government (Best Value) Bill.

Mr Corey: The Northern Ireland Public Service Alliance is grateful for the opportunity to address the Committee. I propose to speak briefly. Our written submission captures the essence of what we wish to say about the Local Government (Best Value) Bill. I hope that the Committee finds that submission helpful.

The written submission did not, perhaps, do justice to the role of district council staff in the whole best value process. Best value is about services that are delivered to the public. Almost all district council services must be delivered by staff. The provision of services is a highly intensive operation, and staff play a critical role in the whole best value process.

District council staff want to work in high quality places of employment, delivering high quality services. The Northern Ireland Public Service Alliance believes passionately that the way to guarantee high quality public services is to have them delivered by public servants who are subject to all the scrutiny and all the checks that go with that role. That is why the Northern Ireland Public Service Alliance opposed compulsory competitive

tendering (CCT) so strongly. As paragraph 2 of our submission says, we were convinced that CCT threatened public service quality, as well as threatening public service jobs, and we maintained opposition to it.

We welcomed, in principle, the move from CCT to best value, and that is stated in paragraphs 3 and 4 of the submission. Although the Local Government (Best Value) Bill concentrates on district councils, the best value approach is being adopted by other public services. The education and library boards and the Housing Executive have undertaken extensive work on best value. The approach is fairly widespread, and it is important to note that the work is carried out on a voluntary basis and with the co-operation of the trade unions.

I am not saying that we are entirely happy with the way in which best value has been practised. We are unhappy with the district councils' approach to best value; for example, we believe that the best value process should be inclusive. However, at the joint negotiating council, we have found the employers' side reluctant to establish consultative arrangements on the best value process. That was disappointing.

We are concerned that best value could be driven the wrong way, and our concerns are set out in paragraphs 5 and 6 of the submission. Best value offers an opportunity for public services, but the shadow of CCT still hangs over it. One way to overcome that problem is to create space between CCT legislation and the enactment of new best value legislation. There is a strong case for that. The link between the CCT era and the best value era is too strong. We doubt whether it is necessary to have best value legislation in Northern Ireland. We are operating best value without legislation, but we accept that there is a wider point.

We have no doubt that the Bill is not the way forward. In paragraph 6 of the submission, we say that we are concerned that the Bill will create an audit- or accountancy-driven process. That would be a grave mistake. That approach will stifle innovation, and it will reduce the scope for councils to improve services or to invest more in services.

Another reason for thinking that the content and timing of the Bill is wrong is set out in paragraph 7. Our view is shared by others, including the Association for Public Service Excellence, to which we, as a trade union, are affiliated, but which also represents the interests of many councils in the process. We are considering the Bill at a time when Scotland is still determining the best way to approach best value. Paragraph 7(b) mentions the important review of best value instigated by Stephen Byers, the Minister responsible for best value in England. An important element of that review, as the Committee may be aware, is the focus on achieving higher standards and not just on providing the same services at lower cost, which was the recipe under CCT. Those important points should influence the timing of the Bill. Paragraph

7(c) mentions the major review of public administration scheduled for Northern Ireland, which will have an impact on district councils. We are concerned about that. The effects of best value legislation may transfer to successor bodies without proper assessment of what that really means.

If the Assembly passes the Bill, and Scotland then develops a sharper and better model for best value, and the Byers review produces a different focus on best value, there will be a big time delay before Northern Ireland can follow that up. The legislative process inevitably takes time. In the light of those developments, there are good reasons for stepping back from the Bill.

Paragraphs 9 and 10 of the submission raise three equality issues. First, we do not accept the Department's analysis that there are no equality issues in the Bill. Legislation as important as best value should be subject to rigorous equality scrutiny. We are more than surprised at the Department's analysis that no equality impact assessment of the implementation of the Bill is required.

Secondly, and in support of that argument, we draw attention to an Equal Opportunities Commission report of 1996, which identified the adverse impact of CCT on the number of women employed and on the terms and conditions of female employees. Departments did not have much to say about that report, but it is still on record. That factor should be considered in the context of best value, especially as CCT still hangs around the best value process.

The third point, highlighted in paragraph 10, relates to the interface between the best value process and reviews and the statutory obligation on all district councils, as public bodies, to subject all policies to equal opportunities screening and equality impact assessment. Those processes — particularly equality impact assessments — are extremely rigorous investigations into the implementation of policy. Councils are coping with that. They have had to produce equality schemes and must now subject all policies to equality impact assessments. To impose the strict statutory obligations of a best value Bill — annual best value reviews and service improvement plans that are subject to audit inspection — could cut across the work on equality impact assessments and equality screening.

NIPSA believes that there is a case for allowing screening and equality impact assessments to be developed fully. Such requirements would apply to any best value activity that councils are engaged in without imposing an additional layer of statutory duties on them. There is a case for leaving open the option of a voluntary approach and allowing the equality impact assessment work to develop rather than adding statutory best value obligations.

Paragraph 11 of our submission considers the argument made on paper by the Minister and the Department that a

failure to enact best value legislation would mean the return of CCT by default. NIPSA finds it difficult to give credence to that argument. The legislative process is not as regimented as that; there is scope to deal with the issue. The Scottish Parliament has dealt with the problem by altering by legislation an effective date. Furthermore, we think that it would not be possible to return to CCT, given the Equal Opportunities Commission's report on the impact that it had. A return to CCT by default, as a policy or otherwise, would be in contravention of the councils' equality obligations under section 75 of the Northern Ireland Act 1998.

NIPSA's strong preference is that the Bill be delayed or set aside, but, as a last resort, there are some amendments that we would like to see made. One of our concerns — perhaps I did not emphasise it enough — relates to scrutiny and investigation of best value improvement plans. It is set out in paragraph 12(iv) of the submission. NIPSA staff and members are concerned that the process will become an accountancy or audit process. That is not the proper way to approach the process. It is not yet clear that a better model has been established, but, in Britain, the inspection process is widened to include a range of inspectorates such as the social services inspectorate and the police inspectorate. That gives it a different focus from the Northern Ireland proposition, which is to make it an audit function. We would not argue that the English model is the best option, and it may be that, following the review in England, which will focus on the provision of high quality services, there will be changes relating to inspection processes. However, we are concerned about the prospect of an audit or accountancy process.

The Chairperson: I will summarise what the Minister said in the House:

“experience to date of the voluntary implementation of best value indicates that a statutory framework for best value is essential if we are to deliver...transparency, accountability and consistency”.

He continued:

“While councils have, as expected, taken the opportunity to stand down CCT, they have not yet fully implemented some key aspects of best value”. — [*Official Report, Bound Volume 12, p91*].

The Minister said that that strongly suggested the need for a statutory approach. What is your view of that?

Mr Corey: We are surprised at the Minister's comments. District councils have willingly and voluntarily embraced best value and have sought to develop it. Councils have been engaged in best value practice since 1998, soon after it was first developed as a policy in Britain. The Northern Ireland Public Service Alliance is surprised at the view that district councils need to have a statutory obligation imposed on them to get them to work on best value. There is no evidence to support that.

The best value process is not meant to be — nor can it be — a nice, neat and simple process that we can implement overnight. It is meant to be a rigorous examination of services and how they are delivered, and it is meant to be a search for best practice. Best value is also designed to achieve the best services that can be provided with the available resources. That takes time. The Minister's analysis is unfair, if it is based on the idea that councils have not delivered or that there has been no public evidence of best value practice. Councils have willingly embraced best value, and it is not meant to be an overnight process.

The Chairperson: Will Members please declare any interests? Some Members may wish to declare an interest as district councillors.

Mr McLaughlin: I am sure that you know that the Committee takes a robust approach to the issue. Last week, the Minister was at pains to decry any confusion, and he said that he was surprised at the confusion about ending CCT and immediately legislating for best value. The Committee Chairperson and others set the record straight on how that perception had emerged.

How, in your view, will the system be scrutinised and monitored? I think that your view of the role of the auditor is in line with the Committee's.

Mr Corey: We have not found the best system for scrutinising councils' delivery of best value. The public will provide the best scrutiny, because councillors are responsible for the service that the electorate receives. Therefore, the public will be the final arbitrators. We examined the models in England, where they produce separate documentation on the inspectorial role. However, that process is a mixture of audit and inspection and does not seem to be the right model for scrutinising councils' delivery of best value. We do not have a nice answer — we cannot point to one model as the right kind of inspectorate. A new breed of inspector may be required, and one option is to establish a new unit to undertake the work.

The work could be done through the democratic process in a similar way to the Public Accounts Committee's scrutiny of the way in which public money is spent. I admit that we have not yet developed our thinking on that. However, it would be wrong to make the work a purely audit or accountancy function. What worries us most is the prospect of councils focusing on price when applying best value. By doing so, they would lose one of the main purposes of best value, which is a better quality of services.

Mr Ford: It is not a formal declaration, though I should state that, as a public sector employee for 16 or 17 years, I was a member of the Northern Ireland Public Service Alliance (NIPSA) and a branch officer. I am

announcing that, in case anyone thought that I was concealing the fact, although it is not technically relevant.

Mr McLaughlin: Did you have to change your designation?

Mr Ford: You will have to find a better joke than that, Mitchel.

In paragraph 10, you refer to the fact that equality might be hampered by a rigid definition of best value, which is a concern that has not come up in previous discussions. However, having been a member of a district council that has examined such problems over the past couple of years, I agree with your concerns. The more rigidly best value is imposed, the more difficult it will be to cover the equality aspects.

Paragraph 11 and the start of paragraph 12 seem to say that equality legislation means that we cannot go back to compulsory competitive tendering. Would you agree with the Committee, if it took the view that CCT should be formally abolished through a two or three clause Bill, on allowing the voluntary process to develop?

Mr Corey: Yes, we would.

Mr Ford: The submission reads as if you think that the courts should decide which option should take priority. However, I would say that we should resolve the matter at this stage, if we can. Rather than throwing out the Bill, we should reduce its effect to a simple abolition of CCT.

Mr Corey: I agree. In paragraph 11, I was trying to respond to the Minister of the Environment's comment that if we do not enact the Bill, CCT will return by default. That is the point that NIPSA challenges. It should not happen. A council could be challenged if it sought to re-introduce CCT. Before a council subjected a service to CCT, the service would have to undergo an equality impact assessment. NIPSA thinks that there is potential for an adverse impact, as the Equal Opportunities Commission found in 1996.

Mr Ford: You referred to the voluntary implementation of best value in the Housing Executive and the education and library boards. What success has come from that approach? Last week, the Minister of the Environment made a strong case that the review of public administration was not a reason to delay best value legislation for district councils, but you disagree. Is there anything more that you would like to say on that matter?

Mr Corey: I am more familiar with the work that the education and library boards have done on best value than that of the Housing Executive. The education and library boards' best value approach was much wider and more focused on the quality of services. That was not the case with district councils; they tend to assume that if a service such as refuse collection or leisure

facilities was previously subject to CCT, best value should now be applied to it.

The education and library boards have moved beyond that. For example, a best value review is being undertaken for special education. NIPSA is concerned about the areas that the review is examining and the implications. However, the review is focused on the overall quality of the service, as opposed to just the delivery or financial cost. Therefore, our experience of the voluntary approach, particularly outside the district councils, is that there is a much greater scope for a public authority to examine the totality of a service and look for better practice rather than focus on audits. NIPSA feels that removing the statutory base creates a freedom that currently does not exist.

NIPSA's point about the review of public administration can be argued in different ways. However, if best value legislation — which NIPSA thinks is not good legislation — is applied to district councils, prior to a review of public administration that might create successor bodies to district councils that, hypothetically, might provide a different range of services, the question arises of whether best value legislation automatically applies to either those successor bodies or those services that did not come under the framework of the legislation. Therefore, NIPSA is concerned that due to the upcoming review of public administration, best value is a leap in the dark. It could be argued that if there were to be successor bodies to district councils, it would require legislation, and that legislation could deal with the best value point by repealing the application. NIPSA understands that, but it seems to be a leap in the dark.

Mr Poots: The Committee received a letter from the Department of the Environment on 29 August about the best value steering group, which includes members of NIPSA. The letter states that

“At the 22 August meeting, members unanimously agreed that, unlike Compulsory Competitive Tendering, Best Value offered District Councils the opportunity to provide quality services, with the emphasis on public consultation and with transparency, accountability and value for money as key components in procurement and service delivery.”

Were representatives of NIPSA at that meeting, and was that NIPSA's view?

Mr Corey: You have an advantage over me, Mr Poots, for I was not at the meeting and am not sure if NIPSA was represented. I do not think that we would demur as regards the quotation. Unless you are returning to my point that we were concerned about district councils engaging us in a consultative process, we have no difficulty with what you have said.

Mr Poots: In paragraph four of your submission, you say that

“The stated purpose of Best Value is indisputable — to give rate payers the best possible quality public services at optimum cost.”

The Department has said that there have been problems when things have been done on a voluntary basis, that timescales have not been met and that some district councils have not provided the information at all. You say that the purpose of best value is indisputable, and the Department says that the voluntary system is not working. You said that amendment of the Bill was your least favoured option, but, bearing in mind what the Department says is happening on the ground and NIPSA's view that best value is beneficial if done properly, would it not be better to opt for statutory best value with an amended Bill?

Mr Corey: You must view the situation from our perspective. We are moving from a legislative requirement for compulsory competitive tendering, which we thought completely wrong, unfair and not in the interests of the service, to the concept of best value. For the past three years, councils in Northern Ireland have been running the best value process voluntarily, and we feel it is operating well.

We do not argue that there should never be legislation in the area. Best value may be deemed part of district councils' relationship to central Government, for both are elected. Central Government cannot tell what district councils should or should not do every day, and there may be some requirement for a legislative base to make the system operate. We argue not that there should never be a Bill, but that this is not the right Bill. Our main reasoning is that there is no reason to rush into the Bill now when we know that developments are afoot, particularly in England, which may change the face of best value, altering the process and the legislative base behind it. It is unfair to argue that district councils have missed deadlines and so on, for that reduces the process to some narrow thing that is simple to implement; it is not meant to be so.

Our other point is that we have not learnt all the relevant lessons from the voluntary operation of best value. Time should be allowed to develop the process before we move to legislation. We do not argue that there should never be legislation in the area, for it may be required simply to deal with the relationship between central Government and locally elected bodies. You will need someone with more constitutional knowledge than I to comment on that.

The Chairperson: Mr Poots asked you about the meeting on 22 August, and I know you have the difficulty of not having been present. However, the Committee received a letter saying that

“members unanimously agreed that, unlike Compulsory Competitive Tendering, Best Value offered District Councils the opportunity to provide quality services”.

It was at that meeting that it was unanimously agreed that the Bill offered a way forward. The letter goes on:

"In discussing the revised Bill, local government representatives recognised the changes that had been made to the original Bill, and each endorsed the revised draft legislation as an acceptable basis upon which Best Value could be further developed."

If my memory serves me right, I posed the question about the Bill to Mr Barr of the Department, and he suggested that he had asked the opinion of each individual attending that meeting. Mr Corey, were you, your colleagues or your union asked about this specific Bill? The letter stated that

"each endorsed the revised draft legislation as an acceptable basis upon which Best Value could be further developed."

Mr Corey: I need to go away and investigate the matter, Mr Chairperson. Some notes I have indicate that an official of NIPSA was asked to attend the meeting, but it was not a senior official. I will have to clarify to my own satisfaction the original basis on which a trade union representative attends that group, because I doubt that that representative is empowered to speak authoritatively on behalf of the trade unions. In the equivalent body with respect to the education and library boards, the trade union representative attends as an observer and does not contribute in an executive capacity.

The Chairperson: I do not want to place too much emphasis on the point, and it may not be of specific relevance to you, but it was stated in the letter that local government representatives and a number of chief executives were present at the meeting to discuss the revised Bill. Is it the case that the three chief executives present endorsed the revised draft legislation, or was it referring to the meeting in general?

Mr Corey: I am fairly satisfied in my own mind, Mr Chairperson, that the trade union official who attended that meeting was not there to speak authoritatively and to accept decisions of that body as applying to the trade union movement. That would not be the normal basis on which a representative would attend, so I will go on record as saying that nothing should be read into the presence of a NIPSA official at that meeting in terms of our policy or approach.

The Chairperson: However, we received letters from various councils saying that the three chief executives did not voice their views and also that their agreement or endorsement was not the view of the council.

Your statement on the equality considerations disputes the Department's claim that there are no potential inequalities in the proposed legislation and that no impact assessment is required. Are you referring to the explanatory and financial memorandum, which states at paragraph 10 under the heading "Equality Impact Assessment" that

"The Department has undertaken equality screening of the Best Value legislation. No potential inequalities were identified, and therefore an impact assessment was not undertaken."

Is it the case that you are challenging that statement?

Mr Corey: If the passage of the Bill per se is being considered, as opposed to the outcome, it could be argued that it would not need to be subjected to an equality impact assessment. That issue and others have never been resolved. For instance, at what point should the equality impact assessment take place — should it take place around the projected legislation or on the application of the legislation? Our view is that the equality impact assessment should be applied to the projected legislation and not just to the policy flowing from its implementation. However, the implementation of the equality impact assessment has never been addressed in any discussions or debates in which I have been involved.

If a piece of legislation came before us now to enforce CCT, our clear argument would be that it should be subject to an equality impact assessment. The situation is less clear in relation to best value because an argument could be put that CCT is not an automatic part of best value, but it is still a part of it.

The Chairperson: Are you saying that CCT is an automatic part of best value?

Mr Corey: Our view is that best value should be subject to some analysis. That analysis should be made public to satisfy concerns that there is no equality impact. However, the Department has not provided anything more than a single line stating that it has undertaken a screening and that no potential inequalities were identified. Therefore, I do not know exactly what it has done.

The Chairperson: Standing Order 33 may be of help in the matter:

"(1) For the purpose of obtaining advice as to whether a Bill, draft Bill or proposal for legislation is compatible with equality requirements (including rights under the European Convention of Human Rights) the Assembly may proceed on a motion made in pursuance of paragraph (2).

(2) Notice may be given by:

- (a) (any member of the Executive Committee, or
- (b) (the Chairman of the appropriate Statutory Committee (or another Member of that Statutory Committee acting on the Chairman's behalf), of a motion 'That the ... Bill (or draft Bill or proposal for legislation) be referred to an Ad Hoc Committee on Conformity with Equality Requirements'.")

Are you suggesting that that should be done?

Mr Corey: I have no reason not to.

The Chairperson: Yes, but do you feel it is important enough to do it?

Mr Corey: It is important enough, yes.

The Chairperson: The Minister attended the Committee and made a number of statements in the House conveying the message that both he and the Department are forcefully committed to this legislation and that he therefore intends to bring a Bill before the House.

Why is the Department so committed to the Bill if it is not in the best interests of society in general and councils in particular?

Mr Corey: The short answer is that I do not know why the Department is attaching so much importance to enacting the legislation. I assume that there is a departmental view that unless the legislation is there, the district councils will not move forward on best value. There is evidence, however, that district councils are moving forward on best value and that a lot of substantive work has been accomplished. The Local Government Staff Commission of Northern Ireland has been playing an active role in assisting councils and co-ordinating work on best value.

The Department may have its own thoughts on why the legislation is necessary, but we argue that there is evidence that that is not the case. To respond to Mr Poots's point, we are not arguing that there should never be legislation. The strongest arguments are about the timing of the legislation in the light of events.

The Chairperson: The Minister indicated that he would discuss a date for deferral, but that seemed to have

been withdrawn from the table at the last Committee meeting. If the union were given the option of either removing CCT in the Bill or deferring the eleven clauses to April 2003, what would be your thoughts on that?

Mr Corey: In considering the options, we would go for a simple Bill eliminating CCT. A deferral of the Bill to 2003 would create a space that would allow us to consider the developments arising from the Stephen Byers review. We would also be able to see the Scottish developments, because Scotland has gone about the matter differently and may develop alternative models in that area which might be useful to Northern Ireland. If you put us to the pin of our collar, we would prefer to eliminate CCT and move forward on best value on a voluntary approach.

The Chairperson: And then, as the issue became clearer, a proper Bill would be put to the House?

Mr Corey: That is right.

The Chairperson: Gentlemen, thank you for your attendance. We appreciate your submission and your time, which were helpful.

**NORTHERN IRELAND
ASSEMBLY**

**COMMITTEE FOR
THE ENVIRONMENT**

Thursday 22 November 2001

**LOCAL GOVERNMENT
(BEST VALUE) BILL
(NIA 19/00)**

Members present:

Rev Dr William McCrea (Chairperson)
Mr A Doherty
Mr McClarty
Mr McLaughlin
Mr M Murphy
Mr Poots
Mr Watson

Witnesses:

Mr John Buchanan) Local Government Auditor
Mr Brian Kernaghan)

The Chairperson: You are welcome, Gentlemen; it is a pleasure to see you. It is also a pleasure to have Hansard in attendance, reminding you that “anything you say will be taken down and may be used in evidence against you”. May the Committee hear your submission?

Mr Buchanan: When I attended a Committee meeting on 15 March I gave details of the work of the Local Government Auditors’ Office on best value in councils. To date, it has worked with the Department and with councils in developing that initiative. While awaiting a statutory role that would allow auditors to report publicly on each council’s progress, we have limited our approach to providing informal feedback to individual councils on their performance improvement plans, and have held discussions on the councils’ approach to best value.

As chief local government auditor, I have also provided remarks on progress on best value through my reports, which are circulated to all councils. When I last spoke to the Committee I provided members with a copy of my report to councils, issued in February, entitled ‘Audit Review of Performance Improvement Plans and Performance Indicators in Northern Ireland Local Authorities’. The report highlighted some of the key points that auditors had drawn to councils’ attention on the preparation, presentation and content of their 2000-01 performance improvement plans. In my report

I pointed out that 12 of the 26 councils had completed and submitted their plans by the target date of April 2000. I said that those 12 councils were to be commended on what were their first plans.

Many of the plans were well presented. However, there was a wide variation in the standard of presentation. Nevertheless, it was accepted that 2000-01 was the first year in which councils had to prepare a plan and that the suggestions made by auditors could be implemented the following year. Since then, the position on the preparation and submission of plans for the current year has deteriorated. I understand that the Committee has already received progress reports on this: several plans are still outstanding.

Having issued my February report, I issued my usual annual report on the audit of the 26 local authorities in May. In that report I pointed out that some councils were not applying best value as originally intended — three years after its introduction. I stressed that it was important that the weaknesses be overcome, otherwise it may be difficult for those councils in the longer term to demonstrate clearly to their communities and to other interested parties that they are being efficient and effective in service delivery.

Some of the key points in the report were as follows. First, member involvement in the best value initiative in some councils, by participation in service-review teams for example, has been very limited. Secondly, and perhaps as a result of this, the reviews have tended to be operational rather than the fundamental reviews that were required. Thirdly, the areas of challenge and competition have yet to be fully developed in many councils. Although assessment of council efforts in these areas will require more in-depth audit work, to date there is little evidence reaching councils’ performance improvement plans that these essential, and riskier, aspects of the best value process are being tackled in the reviews. Fourthly, there has been a divergence among councils in how they package their long-term service review programmes; many council programmes contain numerous reviews aimed at very narrow areas.

I know that the Committee is particularly interested in our statutory role in the audit of councils and in our present and future role in best value. The audit of each district council’s accounts under the Local Government Act (Northern Ireland) 1972 is carried out in accordance with a code of audit practice. Its financial emphasis is on financial statements, financial controls, the legality of transactions and the prevention of fraud. The audit report on each council is available to local electors. Unlike other parts of the United Kingdom, there is no specific statutory requirement for a local government auditor here to review a council’s arrangements for economy, efficiency and effectiveness in service provision.

In 1985 new powers were introduced for the Department of the Environment to appoint auditors to carry

out comparative studies across councils. These studies are known as value for money studies and are aimed at making recommendations for improving economy, efficiency and effectiveness in service provision by councils. However, unlike Great Britain, this is at the discretion of the Department and rather than part of the audit function. Not all suggestions for study are necessarily taken up. Over the years, studies of leisure services, environmental health and building control were undertaken. However, since the introduction of compulsory competitive tendering there has been less emphasis on these formal studies, although we continue to work with councils on matters such as absenteeism.

We in audit have observed developments in the rest of the United Kingdom and how the audited bodies there have taken forward their role under best value. In England and Wales, where a strong statutory base for value for money work already exists, the audit role in best value was covered by new statutory arrangements from the outset. In Scotland, the audit and reporting role in best value has been developed under existing audit powers of value for money. In Northern Ireland, it was envisaged that local government auditors' role in reviewing progress on best value would be based on the original twelve best value principles, without replicating the comprehensive inspection regime of services that has prevailed in England and Wales. However, it was understood that this initiative and its audit would be supported by statutory powers as soon as practicable. We considered that to be essential, given our limited statutory powers in that area.

The Committee requested an audit perspective on the proposed Bill. Best value is essentially about councils demonstrating their performance to their communities. To me, outcomes are the main focus of best value legislation, the purpose of which is to improve the user's experience. The local community should judge whether best value has been achieved, although I am sure that the local electorate and service users would welcome an independent audit opinion before reaching a conclusion.

The Local Government Audit Office considers there to be a need for a sound statutory base for best value that will set out clearly what is expected of councils in demonstrating their performance to the local community. It will also give the auditor the power to provide an independent opinion.

We believe that a statutory as opposed to a voluntary arrangement for best value is essential for three reasons. First, to provide the statutory framework for councils; secondly, to keep attention focused on that important area; and thirdly, to give local government auditors the power to report publicly on best value application in individual councils.

With regard to the statutory framework, local government audit recognises the debate on the most practical

approach to best value and on the pros and cons of prescription. It is useful to have general duties for best value. However, if the public is to be reassured these must be supplemented with specific duties supported by independent audit. Local government audit considers the most important of those duties to be the preparation of an annual statement of past and anticipated future performance — the performance improvement plan. Our experiences have shown us that, in some respects, the lack of a common service review timetable and common definitions for services has contributed to councils' difficulty in benchmarking — resulting in extra paperwork and effort — and has also allowed reviews to move away from the strategic level, where the main benefit lies. Several players in local government have also emphasised the need for more consistency among councils.

During our discussions with councils, some senior council staff spoke of the competing demands of the non-statutory best value regime compared to the statutory requirements, such as equality. The implication is that if there are no statutory requirements best value will become less important.

Local government auditors have been engaged in best value since 1998. Since then my auditors have indicated to me that certain issues concerning best value are not being tackled in some councils and that this could ultimately result in reporting in the public interest under the proposed statutory framework. However, they said that they will not be able to issue a formal public audit report on best value in an individual council unless the necessary legislation to support their role is in place. Voluntary audit of best value is unworkable as it does not provide for a formal public audit report on each council; and that is the key outcome of an external audit. In effect, such an audit would be more akin to an internal audit — the purpose of which is to reassure the management of the audited body. Such a role is incompatible with our function as external auditors. Although it is for the Minister, the Committee and the Assembly to decide on the statutory framework for best value, local government auditors have a long tradition of reporting in the public interest on behalf of electors.

Although there may be debate on the level of prescription associated with the best value process, serving the public interest through the independent examination and reporting of councils' application of best value cannot be done properly without statutory accountability.

The Chairperson: You made several sweeping statements; I hope that you can back them up. Would it surprise you to learn that there are those who believe the timing of best value to be inappropriate? Would it also surprise you to learn that they believe in the importance of accountability, efficiency and effectiveness?

Mr Buchanan: I do not doubt that they believe in those principles — one would expect them to hold by such values. Timing is a different matter.

The Chairperson: It is a question of perception.

Mr Buchanan: Perception or otherwise, all we can report on is our experience of working with councils on financial audits over a long time.

Mr Poots: What would we be replicating from England and Wales? I understand that a best value review is being undertaken there and that a new code of practice will be launched in April for the review in England. I also understand that best value is to be replaced in Wales by a Wales Improvement Programme. Are we replicating the old or the new?

Mr Buchanan: When best value was first mooted for Northern Ireland, at every opportunity I recommended that we should not slavishly follow what was recommended for England and Wales. My strong view is that the elaborate inspection system of England and Wales is not necessary here. From the outset, Northern Ireland has decided not to go for such heavy inspection. Inspection in England and Wales appears to be excessive, and it has been heavily criticised. England needs a review of its inspection; we have no inspection in our legislation.

Mr Poots: The situation in England and Wales is different. They have greater responsibilities in local government than we do, and therefore differences are necessary. However, we are building a regime that is quite similar to the one in England and Wales. While that is being revised and replaced we are going headlong into something quite similar to what they are revising, and you are supporting that.

Mr Kernaghan: What is proposed for Northern Ireland is radically different to what is proposed for England and Wales. There is no question of inspection, and the intervention proposals have been dropped. When best value was first mooted in Northern Ireland it was clear that we should not wait to see what would happen in England, Wales or Scotland; it was about developing a form of best value that best suited the circumstances in Northern Ireland. At one point, Northern Ireland was about a year ahead of England and Wales in carrying out voluntary reviews. It was never intended that we should slavishly follow England and Wales. The present proposals are radically different.

Mr Poots: Should we not wait and see what happens in England and Wales to learn from their experience?

Mr Kernaghan: Our colleagues in the local government division have been doing just that, and we also contributed. We considered the proposals for England, Wales and Scotland and took the view that certain aspects were not appropriate to Northern Ireland, especially with regard to inspection.

Mr Poots: The review in England has not been completed, so we do not know what they believed were the best and worst aspects. Would it not be wiser to wait until the review has been completed? We would only have to wait until April to introduce our legislation rather

than go headlong into it now without the benefit of the review's findings.

Mr Buchanan: The legislation in its present draft is quite light compared to legislation in England and Wales. Inspection features prominently in the local government press. I suspect that England and Wales will reduce their present level of inspection. However, while waiting we may reach the conclusion that we need some inspection in Northern Ireland. It is unlikely that England and Wales will abandon a regime of massive inspection for no inspection at all. We are unlikely to have the full regime but we should have more than the present proposals allow. I believe that our legislation is radically different and much lighter.

The Chairperson: You say that there is no inspection in our proposals. In the Local Government (Best Value) Bill, clause 3 subsection 4, it states

"he may (as part of that audit) carry out an inspection of the council's compliance with those requirements or that guidance in respect of that matter."

Mr Buchanan: The legal advisors could better explain why that is there. However, I think that word has been retained from the cutting down from the original.

The Chairperson: Gentlemen, you know well enough that when "inspection" is inserted it will be used. Inspection will be done; it is not there by chance. It was suggested a few moments ago that there was no inspection. I will read clause 3, subsection 4 again

"Where, in the course of the audit of a council's best value performance improvement plan, it appears to the auditor that a council may not, in respect of any matter, have complied with —

- (a) the requirements of this Act; or
- (b) any guidance under section 2,

he may (as part of that audit) carry out an inspection of the council's compliance with those requirements or that guidance in respect of that matter."

How can you say that there is no inspection when it is included in the Bill? It sounds as if you were told in the letter from the Minister that compulsory competitive tendering can only be repealed by primary legislation. Therefore that is one of the main reasons for introducing the Local Government (Best Value) Bill. However, we have since found that one can have it removed under the legislation without back-to-back best value.

Mr Kernaghan: What was proposed there —

The Chairperson: Clarity is the best thing to have proposed, and that is what we are looking for.

Mr Kernaghan: I think any use of the word "inspection" is purely as part of the audit. It was indicated that there were no plans to set up a comprehensive separate audit inspectorate to carry out inspections in Northern Ireland.

The Chairperson: Where does it state that there is no intention of a comprehensive audit inspection? Where is it denied that this could be set up under the Bill?

Mr Buchanan: Personally I think there would have to be specific powers in the Bill to set it up. At the moment there is only provision for the audit, and we would not have the power to set up an inspectorate.

The Chairperson: With the greatest respect — it says inspection. Listen. It is correct that there can be a play on words in law, but the word “inspection” is not there by chance. Do not suggest to us that inspection does not mean inspection.

Mr Buchanan: As my colleague has said, the only interpretation we can put on it is inspection within the terms of audit. It is not a separate inspectorate like that in England and Wales where recognised statutory inspection regimes for different flavours, be it education or health, are relied upon.

The Chairperson: With the greatest respect, Mr Buchanan — you were not suggesting that inspection was in the Bill at all. You suggested the very opposite.

Mr Buchanan: In best value terms, I only see audit. Perhaps if this were referred back to the legal people, more would be read into the word inspection, but I only see it as audit and certainly not as the work of any separate inspection.

The Chairperson: We will move on to further questions and come back to that.

Mr McLaughlin: All of the Committee members have spoken strongly in support of accountability and transparency throughout. We are dealing here with an issue that appears to us to be disjointed thinking in terms of the very public commitments that have been given — particularly by the parties that form the Executive — to the review of the public service. Clearly, that review will include local Government. We want to see best value across the board. Local Government is responsible for somewhere in the order of 5% of the public expenditure programme. In light of the very clear evidence and the experience of best value in England, Scotland and Wales does it not make sense that in bringing forward a review here, we take account of those reviews at the same time? This is particularly pertinent because as a result of the review we might well arrive at a different configuration of local Government, with the possibility of powers being devolved back to those councils. Therefore, working with enhanced budget baselines, does best value itself not commend the argument that we should wait until that evidence is available and then go forward on the basis of best practice for all our sakes? Whether or not we have tweaked and amended and studied what other people have done in other places, there seems to be some disjuncture in a review that will require us to repeat the exercise. I do not understand the reticence of

the Executive in announcing a date for the commencement of that review, and I very much look forward to it. Nonetheless, whatever the date, would we not then be required to recast the very exercise that we are describing in those new circumstances? Does that not provide a perfect example of wasteful expenditure and wasted time for people who are already busy enough?

I wonder if you would comment on our argument in your capacity as a local Government auditor. Would it not make sense to continue with the voluntary practice until such times as the Executive were in a position to proceed on the evidence of their own review?

Mr Buchanan: Towards the end of my opening statement I mentioned the voluntary — as opposed to the statutory — arrangement. First, we do not have the power to comment publicly on a voluntary arrangement. We have statutory power to carry out financial auditing, but we do not have the power to report publicly. Secondly, from my experience of working with councils, I think you will find that some councils will go ahead on a voluntary basis and use best value to focus on the service reviews and the way they deliver services. Those councils would want to be pro-active. You will also find that there are other authorities which will not be pro-active, and even the experience of the activity under the voluntary arrangement shows that.

With reference to your point that linking might be a waste of time, the experience gained by district councils while they had fewer responsibilities would be useful to them in taking on more — if that was how the review panned out. If local government were to grow, working best value beforehand would be a valuable experience.

Mr McLaughlin: Does that not disregard the negative experience of England, Scotland and Wales where more responsibility is being taken on at local government level? That is a compelling argument with reference to the use of public money. Mr Buchanan, perhaps due to my presentation, you did not pick up on my point that the evidence presents an argument for you as a local government auditor to encourage the Executive to bring forward the review of public services. Is that not a better use of time and money?

Mr Buchanan: I do not have any influence on that argument. Our statutory base and influence relates to the audit of local government, and I am sure that a letter from me would carry very little weight with the Executive.

Mr A Doherty: Our Chairperson mentioned the variety of perceptions involved in the exercise; I have no special insights. The Chairperson also suggested that you made some sweeping statements, and I am happy to make some of my own rather than deal with specifics.

My perception is that local government has been selected as the subject of an experiment in public administration, and is being judged on that basis. Why has local government been singled out for this experiment?

If other realms of public administration were examined as rigorously as district councils, would other bodies perform any better under the prevailing circumstances?

The Department, the Minister and you yourselves have clearly stated that district councils are being guided, as otherwise they will not know how to go about their business properly. The Department and the local government auditor seem to know the wants and needs of the public better than the councils who daily deal face to face with the public.

Although I no longer have an interest to declare in local government, I can still express a deep concern about the perception that councils cannot be trusted to work on a voluntary basis. I am not sure if the auditor's stance on the issue of working on a voluntary basis is the one to which we should adhere. The people I dealt with as a councillor were very quick to tell me when they thought the council was not performing properly. Can that status quo not remain, as Mr McLaughlin suggested, until we have a better understanding of the situation in England and Wales where there are grave doubts about the policy of best value?

Mr Buchanan: Our experience is in the wider scene of public sector audit — we audit local government, but are also involved in auditing a number of non-departmental public bodies. Neither I nor my colleagues have any remit in auditing central Government, so we have no experience in that sector.

I have the impression that a number of councils are looking for guidance. They are asking what the format should be, and whether the situation is a charter to bring in consultants and do whatever they like. If there is no broad framework or guidance, councils will do their own thing. That would not necessarily be for the best. Councils should do their own thing, but within a framework.

Mr A Doherty: It all depends on what you mean by the term “guidance”. You have already said what you mean by the term ‘inspection’, which was not to the satisfaction of the Chairperson. There is guidance and there is guidance — sometimes it goes beyond guidance and becomes prescription. Why is there a lesser degree of trust in what local councils will do, than in what the Department will do? Why is the Department not subject to best value? It is argued that the Department is so upright and so heavily audited that it does not need a best value programme, whereas the councils do. I do not agree with that argument at all.

Mr Kernaghan: Councils are not being singled out. Best value practice has been applied to councils elsewhere; it has grown up in England and Wales, and it is being applied in Scotland. Therefore, existing practice is being transferred here. In addition, in Scotland, the best value task force's review suggested that the system should be applied to the whole Scottish Executive Budget. That has been considered there, and the proposals have

been accepted. That is outside our remit when looking at local government, but it should be considered.

Mr A Doherty: You cannot get away from the fact that councils feel as though they have been singled out. Councils feel that all other elements of public administration continue to work for better or worse, while best value is applied only to them.

Mr Kernaghan: Although best value is not being applied to many other bodies, several other non-departmental public bodies are applying best value on a voluntary basis. Some of those bodies provide services that are provided by local government in England.

Mr Murphy: Edwina Hart, the Minister for Finance, Local Government and Communities, said that

“The process is intended to improve local authorities’ overall performance in delivering services and to ensure that public money is used sensibly and effectively. It is most certainly not to strip them of their service functions or turn them into providers of the last resort. Local authorities’ role as community leaders — which the Assembly is keen to encourage — depends upon local authorities being service providers.

However, there have been complaints that the new system of best value is bureaucratic with over detailed guidance, a stultifying and costly auditing and inspection regime.”

What do you have to say about those comments?

Mr Buchanan: You must bear in mind the fact that the level of detail in the best value regime, which is being applied on a voluntary basis, exists because of councils’ contributions to the process. Councils have been very involved in the system from the start. They had a major influence on the draft of the best value arrangements. It is strange that parts of local government complain about the details when, in many ways, they have been party to drawing up that detail. At the start, the steering committee heavily involved local government representatives. The working party that shaped the outline of the system with the firm of consultants had many representatives from local government. I find their frustration strange, because they have had a fair amount of input into shaping the detail of the system.

Mr Kernaghan: It is apparent that almost 26 different approaches, and different timetables and reviews are applied to best value. To some extent, it can be argued that if the reviews and timetables were more co-ordinated, with a more consistent framework, it would cut down on a lot of the excessive bureaucracy and waste. The absence of a detailed framework is contributing to that excessive bureaucracy.

The Chairperson: Why could you not understand how the councils came up with their opinions when there was a weight of local government opinion on the steering committee and the working group?

Mr Buchanan: A large proportion of the steering committee and the working group represent local government.

The Chairperson: What size is the committee?

Mr Buchanan: I am a member of the steering committee for best value. Other members include three or four chief executives from councils, one or two departmental officials and a representative from the trades union side. There is also a seat for Member representation. Therefore, the local government auditor's view forms a small part of the committee. Most of the members are from local government.

The Chairperson: How many members are there?

Mr Buchanan: There are about eight to ten members. The local government auditor has one seat, sometimes two.

The Chairperson: You mentioned that the problem in England, Scotland and Wales is due to the emphasis being on inspection, but Edwina Hart, the Minister for Finance, Local Government and Communities in Wales said

"However, there have been complaints that the new system of best value is bureaucratic with over detailed guidance, a stultifying and costly auditing and inspection regime."

That is a wide objection that does not simply refer to the inspection process.

Mr Buchanan: The press cuttings that I read place stronger emphasis on the inspection process and the fact that local authorities can score from nought to three. Obviously, it is not well received if an authority scores nought. Therefore, they had to radically review the inspection process.

The Chairperson: The Minister also said

"That there are problems has been recognised by the Partnership Council, which has commissioned a joint Assembly/local government best value stocktake to examine the scope for simplifying and enhancing the effectiveness of the best value regime in Wales."

A report in the 'Journal Contract' stated that the agreement between the local government chiefs and the National Assembly for Wales was that

"the regime is 'seriously flawed'".

It also stated that

"best value lacks credibility".

Also,

"Moves are now under way for best value to be re-packaged under the Wales Improvement Programme, which would involve less bureaucracy and fewer inspections."

Therefore, the whole process is seriously flawed—not just the inspections. Should we not ascertain the serious flaws in the system? Are you sure that that which you give credence to may not have a serious flaw, regardless of whether or not you perceive it now?

Could it be seriously flawed, or is this a perfect Bill?

Mr Buchanan: It is far from perfect.

The Chairperson: Should we be putting forward something that is far from perfect?

Mr Buchanan: From an audit perspective we would want to see more in it, but we appreciate that that might not be the case.

Mr Kernaghan: There was an indication that some aspects were wider than just inspection. The legislation being considered in Northern Ireland is not as prescriptive of what councils are required to do or in terms of the detailed guidance they are expected to follow. In addition to the reduced inspection side there is also a lot less prescriptive onus on councils of what they are expected to do.

The Chairperson: We do not know that as yet, because that is a generalisation. Again, does inspection mean "inspection"? In your interpretation it does not—that word should not be there. On the point of inspection, the Government has put out some notes as well as the Bill, which is very helpful. Perhaps that will help your interpretation of what inspection means. Let us just read what the notes say about clause 3 on the audit of plans—does this mean inspection?

"This clause requires the local government auditor to undertake an audit of a council's Best Value performance improvement plan. This audit would check whether the plan was consistent both with the legislation and with any guidance issued by the Department. As a result of this audit, the auditor may, at his discretion, decide to examine in more detail any or all aspects of a council's approach to Best Value".

Does that not mean wide inspection?

Mr Buchanan: No. I am happier with the words "may want to examine further", which is done in audit as it is.

The Chairperson: It says "may, at his discretion"—therefore it is as wide as your discretion wants it to be.

Mr Buchanan: Yes, but it is not an inspection as in one which is carried out by a separate inspector, which is the whole connotation of what inspection is about.

The Chairperson: To be quite honest, I was not looking for a separate inspector—I was not reading that into this at all. I am talking about the inspection which you said was not in the Bill. Allow me to read it again:

"the auditor may, at his discretion, decide to examine in more detail any or all aspects of a council's approach...".

I suggest that that is pretty wide inspection.

Mr Buchanan: It could be pretty wide auditing as well. We look further than just the financial accounts; we look at matters behind them, which would be the same here. Regarding the issue being raised, I was picking it up that the Committee's view was that a separate body of inspectors could be written into that Bill.

The Chairperson: Of course, one would never know what actually could be written into it, or how it could be finally interpreted. I was taking the best, rather than worst, scenario.

Mr Kernaghan: On inspection, the emphasis is on the “may carry out an inspection”, and the requirement that it must be seen in the context of the audit of the plan. That is different from requiring an inspection across all services.

Mr Buchanan: Also, the other side is that if we were simply restricted to looking at the performance improvement plan and not the documentation behind it, councils could rightly think that that was not particularly helpful. If they are spending a lot of time working through service reviews they may well think that. Indeed, I have recent correspondence from one council asking — if we are not doing that in the short-term — whether we have any paperwork that would assist them in reviewing their own service reviews. There is an expectation that we

would not just simply keep ourselves to the performance improvement plan, but that we look beyond that to add help and value to their own approaches.

The Chairperson: How far are you from delving into policy here?

Mr Buchanan: I do not think we will be delving into policy.

The Chairperson: Are you close to it?

Mr Buchanan: Admittedly this is a new field of work. However, at the end of the day it is for the authority to decide the levels of service and the cost and balance between those two. I do not think we will be getting into that.

The Chairperson: Thank you very much for coming. I trust this morning’s question time has been helpful both to your and to our understanding of your position on this.

**NORTHERN IRELAND
ASSEMBLY**

**COMMITTEE FOR
THE ENVIRONMENT**
Thursday 29 November 2001

**LOCAL GOVERNMENT
(BEST VALUE) BILL
(NIA 19/00)**

Members present:

Rev Dr William McCrea (Chairperson)
Ms Hanna (Deputy Chairperson)
Mrs Carson
Mr A Doherty
Mr Ford
Mr Leslie
Mr McLaughlin
Mr Poots
Mr Watson

The Chairperson: At the commencement of our discussion concerning the decisions on the clause-by-clause deliberation of the Local Government (Best Value) Bill, NIA/1900, I would like, for formal record, to bring some matters to the attention of the meeting.

Members will recall the Minister's opening statement to, and follow-up discussions with, the Committee on 8 November 2001. In his statement he said:

"I am not persuaded that deferral [i.e. of the best value statutory framework] on these grounds is justified [i.e. awaiting the outcome of the best value review in England and Wales or the forthcoming review of public administration in Northern Ireland]".

At the 15 November 2001 meeting, the Committee considered a paper outlining six options on a way forward with the Bill. Members agreed that they were not opposed to the best value principles of consistency, transparency, accountability, auditability and value for money for council residents and ratepayers. However, based on the evidence received, members had serious reservations about the introduction of best value on a statutory basis at this time.

Members also agreed on the option to repeal compulsory competitive tendering (CCT) and to consider the introduction of a statutory best value framework only after the full outcome of the current review of best value in England and Wales, and the ongoing deliberations in Scotland, are known.

Also, it may be appropriate to include in this consideration any progress with a review of public administration in Northern Ireland. The consideration would include a full and effective consultation exercise by the Department of the Environment with district councils and others, leading to any proposals being put forward on the introduction of best value on a statutory basis.

The Committee at its meeting on 15 November 2001 also noted a paper detailing the suggestions by district councils and other witnesses to amendments to the 11 clauses of the Bill. The Committee asked the Committee Secretariat to consult with the Assembly's legal advisers on the specific amendments necessary to the 11-clause Bill to meet the Committee's objectives of repealing CCT and removing the best value clauses/part clauses from the Bill.

The Committee, at last week's meeting on 22 November 2001, was informed of the Assembly's legal advisers' advice and considered the means of achieving its objective of a revised Bill with the sole purpose of repealing CCT on 1 April 2002.

Based on the advice received, the Committee agreed to conduct its formal clause-by-clause consideration at today's meeting.

We now come to the formal clause by clause consideration of the Local Government (Best Value) Bill. Before considering the first clause, I wish to remind members that the Assembly's convention is to seek the views of the members on the question:

"That the Committee is content with the clause."

If members are content they should answer "Yes". If members are not content they should answer "No".

Clause 1 (The duty of best value)

The Chairperson: This clause describes the best value duty and applies it to all district councils in Northern Ireland. I propose, in light of the decision already taken by the Committee, that the Committee recommend to the Assembly that this clause should not stand part of the Bill.

Let me explain to members what would happen if we were to agree this course of action. Following the publication of our report, I, as Chairperson, would sign a Bill amendment form indicating that at Consideration Stage in the House we would oppose the question that clause 1 stand part of the Bill. Are there any comments from the Committee at this time?

Mr Ford: The course of action you have outlined is entirely consistent with the stance that the Committee has taken through all its consideration, and I support it.

Mr Leslie: In the course of trying to find some merit in this Bill I can see that clause 1, as far as the end of line 15, seems to be of value and creates a general requirement for best value. The consultation provisions in

subsection (2) are probably of reasonable value. It is when you get to subsection (4) and then to clause 2 that all the rigmarole starts. I was wondering whether lopping out subsections (4) and (5), but keeping the rest of clause 1, would work. I have not fully considered what the knock-on consequences of that would be — it may leave things hanging too much.

Mr Ford: If we were to take that approach we would certainly have to take out subsections (3), (4) and (5). However, it seems to me that subsections (1) and (2) reflect what councils are already doing on a voluntary basis. The message from this Committee is clear. We support the concept of best value, but we are concerned about the statutory basis. It has been introduced without proper consultation and without taking account of the various reviews which are taking place in different parts of the United Kingdom at the present time.

The Chairperson: That certainly summarises the previous discussions that we have had in light of the situation in Scotland and England, and also in light of last week's knowledge that in Wales there has been a complete about-turn. They now say that best value is seriously flawed and that it lacks credibility. The Minister has decided to look at the whole thing again. It is clear that no one was suggesting that there is no need for best value. We were suggesting that there is a need. However, very serious reservations were expressed about the introduction of best value on a statutory basis at this particular time without the knowledge of the outcomes of the current review of best value in England and Wales and the ongoing deliberations in Scotland. Serious flaws have been highlighted, and the reviews need to be taken into account.

We certainly do not believe that a flawed Bill should be introduced into our legislation. We should have a proper and appropriate Bill. However, the timing of that Bill should also be proper and appropriate. In the meantime, we have to remove CCT. The timing of that is not of our choosing, but we must take account of it. That is why I was clearly reflecting all the debates that we have had on this subject and also the in-depth deliberations that we have had in recent meetings about this Bill. That is why clause 1 should not stand part of the Bill.

Mr A Doherty: Would a consequence of that be that if we do not accept clause 1, all the other clauses automatically fall?

The Chairperson: We have to go through it clause by clause. We cannot automatically do anything. We have to look at each clause. If there are amendments to clauses, we should make them accordingly.

Mr A Doherty: Does it not all hang on clause 1?

The Chairperson: It is certainly important.

Question, That the Committee is content with the clause, put and negatived.

Clause 2 (Best value guidance, performance indicators and standards)

The Chairperson: This clause empowers the Department of the Environment to issue guidance to councils on how the duty of best value is to be discharged. In light of our previous discussions, I propose that the Committee recommend to the Assembly that this clause should not stand part of the Bill.

Question, That the Committee is content with the clause, put and negatived.

Clause 3 (Audit of plans)

The Chairperson: This clause requires the local government auditor to undertake an audit of a council's best value performance improvement plan. In light of our previous discussions, I propose that the Committee recommend to the Assembly that this clause should not stand part of the Bill.

Mr Leslie: I am sorry that I missed the session with the local government auditor last week. There is an issue of how what goes on in local government should be audited. Absent this clause, what powers will the Local Government Auditor have?

The Chairperson: The same powers that he has today.

Mr Leslie: But what do they amount to?

The Chairperson: They are very wide powers.

Mr Leslie: I think that those powers derive from convention, rather than law.

Mr Ford: No. The Local Government Act (Northern Ireland) 1972, which is referred to in clause 9(1), clearly establishes the statutory basis of the local government auditor's function.

Mr Leslie: OK. There might be merit in preserving that. We will come to clause 9 later.

Question, That the Committee is content with the clause, put and negatived.

Clause 4 (Audits under section 3: ancillary provisions)

The Chairperson: This clause gives the auditor reasonable rights of access to council premises and any relevant information and documents. In light of our previous discussions, I propose that the Committee recommend to the Assembly that this clause should not stand part of the Bill.

Question, That the Committee is content with the clause, put and negatived.

Clause 5 (Response to audit)

The Chairperson: This clause sets out councils' responsibilities on receipt of an auditor's report. In light of our previous discussions, I propose that the Committee

recommend to the Assembly that this clause should not stand part of the Bill.

Question, That the Committee is content with the clause, *put and negated*.

Clause 6 (Contracts: exclusion of non-commercial considerations)

The Chairperson: This clause provides the Department of the Environment with powers, subject to the Assembly's approval, to specify matters that cease to be "non-commercial matters" in subordinate legislation. I propose that the Committee recommend to the Assembly that this clause should not stand part of the Bill.

Question, That the Committee is content with the clause, *put and negated*.

Clause 7 (Power to disapply)

The Chairperson: This clause allows the Department to disapply councils' statutory obligations under best value, either for individual councils or for local government as a whole. In light of our previous discussions, I propose that the Committee recommend to the Assembly that this clause should not stand part of the Bill.

Question, That the Committee is content with the clause, *put and negated*.

Clause 8 (Interpretation)

The Chairperson: This clause explains the meaning of the words and expressions used in the Act. In light of our previous discussions, I propose that the Committee recommend to the Assembly that this clause should not stand part of the Bill.

Question, That the Committee is content with the clause, *put and negated*.

Clause 9 (Amendment and repeals)

The Chairperson: This clause lists the changes to primary legislation resulting from this Bill. In order to repeal the requirement for compulsory competitive tendering (CCT), it is necessary only to retain subsections (2) and (3). I therefore beg to move

That the Committee recommend to the Assembly that clause 9 be amended as follows: in page 5, lines 21 to 23, leave out subsection (1).

Mr Ford: That was the point that James Leslie mentioned a few moments ago. It appears to me that we are correct to strike out subsection (1), because this was the matter of giving the local government auditor additional powers over and above the current financial powers, and that was a point of some concern. Despite what Mr Leslie said earlier, I think that the view outlined by the Committee should stand.

Mr Leslie: I agree. It would be consequential to clauses 1 to 4.

Question, That the Committee recommends to the Assembly that clause 9 be amended as follows: in page 5, lines 21 to 23, leave out subsection (1), *put and agreed to*.

Clause 10 (Commencement)

The Chairperson: The proposed legislation is scheduled to come into force on 1 April 2002. As Members have agreed to recommend to the Assembly that clauses 1 to 8 and 9(1) should not stand part of the Bill, this commencement date will apply only to subsections 9(2) and 9(3), which are necessary for the repeal of CCT, and, if agreed, to the subsequent amendment to the short and long titles of the Bill.

Question, That the Committee is content with the clause, *put and agreed to*.

Clause 11 (Short title)

The Chairperson: As Members have agreed to recommend to the Assembly that clauses 1 to 8 and 9(1) should not stand part of this Bill, we are in effect proposing that the Bill should deal only with the repeal of CCT. I beg to move

That the Committee recommend to the Assembly that clause 11 be amended as follows: in page 5, line 32, leave out "(Best Value)" and insert "(Amendment)".

The Bill would then be called the Local Government (Amendment) Bill.

Question, That the Committee recommends to the Assembly that clause 11 should be amended as follows: in page 5, line 32, leave out the words "(Best Value)" and insert the word "(Amendment)", *put and agreed to*.

Long title

The Chairperson: As members have agreed to recommend to the Assembly that clauses 1 to 8 and 9(1) do not stand part of the Bill, we are proposing that the legislation should deal only with the repeal of CCT. I beg to move, therefore,

That the Committee recommend to the Assembly that the long title be amended as follows: in page 1, leave out

"imposing on district councils requirements relating to economy, efficiency and effectiveness; and for connected purposes."

and insert

"for the abolition of a district council's duty to operate compulsory competitive tendering."

Question, That the Committee is content with the long title, subject to the Committee's proposed amendment, *put and agreed to*.

The Chairperson: That concludes the Committee's consideration of the Bill.

**NORTHERN IRELAND
ASSEMBLY**

**COMMITTEE FOR HEALTH, SOCIAL
SERVICES AND PUBLIC SAFETY**

Wednesday 9 January 2002

**PERSONAL SOCIAL SERVICES
(AMENDMENT) BILL
(NIA 1/01)**

Members present:

Dr Hendron (Chairperson)
Mr Gallagher (Deputy Chairperson)
Mr Berry
Rev Robert Coulter
Mr J Kelly
Mr McFarland
Ms M McWilliams
Ms Ramsey
Mrs I Robinson

Witnesses:

Ms H Ferguson)
Mr T McNeill) Carers Northern Ireland
Mr T McGurk)

The Chairperson: I welcome Ms Helen Ferguson, Mr Tom McNeill and Mr Tony McGurk from Carers Northern Ireland and apologise for keeping you so long. Thank you very much for your helpful documentation. If you would make your presentation the Committee then may wish to ask questions.

Ms H Ferguson: I am the director of Carers Northern Ireland, which was formerly known as Carers National Association. I am one of three staff in our Northern Ireland office, so you can see that we are not a large or well-resourced organisation. However, we have the benefit of a large and highly committed membership of carers who somehow manage to find the time and energy, on top of their great responsibilities and commitments, to become involved in issues such as policy and trying to improve things for their colleagues and for future carers.

Tom McNeill is one of those carers, and is a member of our committee. He has caring responsibilities for his wife, who has multiple sclerosis, and for an adult son with learning disabilities. He is actively involved in supporting carers in his locality in a very practical day-to-day way, and has had some involvement in the development of the carers' strategy for Northern Ireland through the departmental working group. We are conscious that this Bill is being developed alongside the

strategy, and we are certainly pleased to see that a coherent approach is being taken in developing policy and support for carers.

Tony McGurk works for Barnardo's, specifically for a young carers project in the Homefirst Community Trust area. As the Bill touches on services and support for young carers I thought it might be useful for the Committee to have a chance to talk to someone actively involved in working with the existing structures to provide support and identify help for young carers in Northern Ireland.

I will focus particularly on assessment and services. Mr McGurk will say a few words about young carers and their services, and how they may be affected by the implications of the Bill, and Mr McNeill will make a brief comment about the practicalities of living with current service and assessment arrangements. We will answer questions on any aspect of the Bill.

Thank you for the opportunity to discuss this important legislation with you. I was pleased to be here for the earlier discussion on the crisis that is occurring at present within the acute sector. I am particularly pleased to hear a number of comments relating to the importance of seeing the whole picture, and to addressing difficulties in community care. I am glad to see recognition of the vicious cycle that can develop if proper community support is not in place. The underlying motivation for the development of this Bill is to support carers who are the cornerstone of community care services. The health and social well-being study recently produced by the Department is an excellent piece of intelligence, and confirms that one in five women and 14% of men in Northern Ireland have some level of caring responsibilities. Approximately one third of these would be caring for more than 20 hours a week. Therefore, what you have is a very significant unpaid workforce — one that is often unrecognised, untrained, unsupervised and unsupported. Good assessment backed up with action can actually do much to address the problems that arise from that lack of training and support.

Out-of-date estimates show that carers' unpaid work would cost the UK economy at least £34 billion per year. In Northern Ireland it would cost approximately £800 million. If you compare that to the overall health and social services budget the contribution and input that carers make could not possibly be replaced by statutory services. There are pressing economic reasons for providing support to carers as partner providers within health and community care, as well as ethical and equal opportunities considerations.

With regard to assessment, at present carers can receive a separate assessment under Departmental guidance that was issued around the same time as the legislation was passed in Britain. We are happy that the issue of equity on the statutory rights of carers here with those of carers

in other parts of the UK is being addressed. Carers' assessments are a crucial tool for recognising carers and identifying their training, support and information needs. No one is born an occupational therapist, a physiotherapist, or a nurse, yet carers are often thrust into those roles with little background and training. Assessment can provide an opportunity to identify carers' training and information needs, and can be valuable even if the resources are not available to provide additional services. Most carers have never had a carer's assessment because they do not know that they have the right to have one. If you go to any group of carers and ask them to put their hands up if they have had an assessment, you may get one or two hands. If you ask if any carers have heard of an assessment, you may get one or two more hands. There is a basic problem that carers have a right of which they cannot avail because they are not being told that they have that right. The only way to ensure that carers have a right to a separate assessment is to change the law and put the onus on social services to offer an assessment. Not every carer will want an assessment, but those who want one will know that they have the right, and they can take up that opportunity if they feel that it would be helpful.

There are parallels for that in other provisions in the Bill — for example, changing the provisions from a power to provide direct payments to a duty to provide direct payments where someone fits the criteria. That will not make much difference in real terms because trusts still retain the right to make a decision about whether someone meets the criteria and whether that person is eligible to have direct payment. However, it changes the expectations, the ethos and the approach. We argue that putting the onus on social services to offer an assessment, rather than waiting to be asked, does the same thing in the context of carers' assessments that these provisions propose to do with direct payments. That will ensure that all carers, wherever they live in Northern Ireland, will have the chance to avail of the best practice in some areas.

If that does not become the position, and if the onus is not put on social services to offer an assessment, then any regulations would need to be explicit about how carers will be informed of this right. In theory, they currently have the right but it is not being followed through. The regulations need to tie that down very tightly to change the current position.

We would like to see a duty to provide services to carers where those are identified through carers' assessments. I accept that it creates difficulties if it means that carers are in a more advantageous position with regard to the law than are users of services, and there are many difficulties around that. However, eligibility criteria would apply, and it would by no means create a free-for-all, particularly as there are few services that

could be defined as services directly to the carers rather than services to the person with the disability. That will have the effect of helping the carer.

The question of resources has dominated much of the earlier discussion, and this is an area where we want additional resources allocated. Although the possibility of providing services direct to carers is to be welcomed, it would make the most difference to carers if it encourages more creative thinking, more responsive services, and better and more widely available services for the person that they are caring for, particularly in the area of respite services. Services direct to carers are more likely to be confined to training or to providing a mobile phone so a carer can get out and still be in touch. Important as it is, I do not envisage a huge range of services being provided directly to the carer.

I will hand over to Mr McGurk to talk about young carers.

Mr McGurk: Barnardo's has been providing a service in the Homefirst Community Trust for young carers for almost six years, and in that time we have supported 150 to 200 young people. We are currently working with over 90 young carers who are children aged from 10 to 18. These young people provide care for a parent, or in many cases, where both parents have an illness or disability. We also have children who provide care for grandparents, or help the main carer, generally the mother, to care for a sibling with a disability.

We provide support to children who care for parents who have physical or sensory disabilities, who have maybe misused drugs and alcohol, or who have mental health problems. These young people undertake all the tasks that an adult carer undertakes. Added to that is the fact that they are children, physically and emotionally, and in the eyes of the law do not have any rights. They cannot vote, nor are they entitled to any benefits, and many lose out on their education through no fault of their own. They may have to stay at home, or visit a doctor or the Social Security Agency to interpret for a mother who has no hearing or no speech. These are just some of the cases we work with.

Many undertake practical caring tasks such as the household duties of shopping and cooking, or personal tasks like dressing, bathing and feeding. Thankfully we do not have anyone undertaking intimate tasks. We did have one young boy who had to bathe his mother for a couple of weeks until we got a home help for him. He was told he was very lucky to be getting home help for a week to dress and bathe his mother.

How can we measure emotional care? We can calculate how many times a young person does the shopping or the cooking, but how can you measure young people crying themselves to sleep at night? How can you measure a young person worried in school every day about his mother — where is she, is she in a pub, could

she have been knocked down, will she be at home when I go home? These are all the emotional things that these young people go through. Perhaps they are lying awake at night waiting for a father to come in from a pub. What will he do, will he do the same as he did last night — take us all out of bed and kick us around the house?

Barnardos treat the young people as children and carers, and we offer them a break from caring because all carers are entitled to a break. We offer them a chance to experience some of the usual childhood activities that they have missed due to lack of money. Most of these families are living on benefits. Many spend extra money on diet and heating, and yet they are expected to live on whatever figure the Government decides. They are well below the national average and have to spend a lot more money. There is nothing for luxuries for themselves or for the young people. The service we offer is minimal. We offer these young people a break of two hours a month from caring. At present we have a waiting list, as there is no service in the Larne or Carrickfergus area. A few months ago a needs assessment was conducted there with the help of social workers, occupational therapists and general practitioners, and more than 50 young people were identified. A needs assessment was also conducted in the Causeway Health and Social Services Trust area, and again there are 60 to 70 young carers with no service being provided for them. At present we have two members of staff — a project worker and myself — and we cover an area stretching from Cookstown to Newtownabbey.

I welcome certain parts of the legislation. If it provides cash to the young carers and their families it would help them to buy in a service, provide them with a break, or at least give them the freedom to choose the service or who provides the care. In this sense independence is not about doing things for yourself, it is about the choice of who provides the service for you.

As a childcare organisation Barnardo's has concerns about who conducts the assessment. Will the young people have an advocate, and why do they need an advocate? A young person may have a wish, but that might not be their need. I hope you can see that distinction — a wish-list may not necessarily be what they need. An adult has to advocate on their behalf and the assessments should be conducted in child-friendly language. Young people need to be aware of what the assessment is, and what the result of that will be. Finally, there are child protection issues in conducting assessments, and Barnardo's is concerned about that because we are a childcare organisation. I welcome the legislation and hope that it alleviates some of the burden of responsibility on the young people that I work with.

Mr McNeill: I will be brief, which maybe just as well because you will not like what I have to say about care in the community at this point — it is disgraceful. I have been caring all my life and the problem I have

with care is that no one tells you anything — you have to find everything out for yourself. A care assessment for my wife or son is all very well, but if no one tells you about it, how are you supposed to use it?

Direct payments would be helpful for some people, but for me the responsibility would be too much. The trusts are telling us that they do not have the resources to provide the services at present, so where is the funding coming from for direct payments? The voucher scheme is a good idea, as it will give carers a better choice for respite. However, the trusts are constantly telling us that there is not enough accommodation or resources. I am caring in the community, and if I become sick I have to keep caring — I do not get respite. Someone in full-time employment will get sick leave and holidays. Why should I or another carer be treated differently? Why should I have to carry on caring without any respite? This makes me angry.

I am going to say something now that I feel the Committee should know. My wife is incontinent and it is disgraceful that it has got to the stage where I can no longer have incontinence supplies delivered to me. I phoned the store and was told that they do not stock them anymore, as they do not have the funds. I asked them what I was supposed to do in the meantime and they told me to use my initiative. I want to know how my initiative is going to keep my wife dry all night. This is disgraceful and something has to be done. Direct payments and the voucher system are good. However, unless funding is available a lot of carers in the community are going to become so stressed out that they will have to give up. Their health will deteriorate, and what will that cost the health service?

The Chairperson: Thank you very much. That was helpful. I have some points that would maybe be more for the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety, but perhaps Ms Ferguson could clear these up if she can? The Committee will go over this Bill clause by clause next week. However, are carers' assessments limited to those aged 16 years or over, as the wording of clause 2.1 seems to suggest? If so, young carers in Northern Ireland are being disadvantaged in comparison to their peers in Great Britain who may have an assessment under the Carers (Recognition and Services) Act 1995.

Ms Ferguson: My understanding is that young carers can be assessed. However, a more appropriate assessment tool for a young carer would be assessment as a child in need under the Children (Northern Ireland) Order 1995. A carer's assessment may not necessarily be the most appropriate tool.

Mr J Kelly: If extra funding were made available to Carers Northern Ireland, would a higher percentage of that go on servicing rather than administration?

Ms Ferguson: Carers Northern Ireland is not a service provision agency. It is not seeking extra funds for itself, and is arguing for extra funds — from funds held by Trusts — for community care to provide respite services, either directly or through the independent sector. The need is for respite and other services to be provided, not for additional administration. However, you cannot deny that if you are introducing a completely new service there will be costs associated with setting it up, for example, training social workers. The bulk of that money needs to go into community services, particularly respite services.

With regard to Mr McNeill's last point, resources and additional resources are very important. Without them carers will feel that yet again there has been lip service but no practical help. Carers are fed up hearing of initiatives that do not deliver anything practical. When talking to carers a couple of themes regularly emerge. One is information and another is respite, which Mr McNeill has also talked about eloquently. Another theme is the communication and attitude of staff. It would not cost a lot for the attitude of staff and their communication with carers to be much improved. The example that Mr McNeill gave about being told that there are no incontinence pads, and to use some initiative — no staff member should talk to a carer like that. No one would talk to a customer like that in the private sector. A lot of work needs to be done regarding attitude and communication. Carers Northern Ireland recently published some research on hospital discharge. There were 12 recommendations, and of those seven were about communication, information and attitude. They would cost nothing to be put into practice.

Ms McWilliams: I am aware that few formal assessments have taken place, and I recently obtained information from the Eastern Board stating that only 26 have taken place.

Ms Ferguson: That sounds about right.

Ms McWilliams: Clearly if this were to be introduced, there would be a real resource initiative since one of the reasons why assessments are not being carried out is because there are resource implications. The Department has predicted that this should be cost neutral. What is your response to that?

Ms Ferguson: In global terms it could be argued that it is resource neutral. Providing proper support to carers should prevent carer breakdown, people going into residential care, people needing acute service care, and should prevent carers developing health problems that require treatment and support. A question was raised earlier about who holds the budgets. Although Northern Ireland has one integrated health and social services system problems are still caused by budgets, and by money held in different budgets that is not being transferred. To enable health and social services trusts to

respond properly to this piece of legislation additional resources must be transferred to them.

Ms McWilliams: Are you confident that if the duty to undertake formal assessment becomes a statutory duty it could have cost implications for the individuals who undertake the assessment?

Ms Ferguson: Whether it is a duty or not, there will be cost implications. The legislation will increase the number of people who will have access to carer's assessment anyway. Whether it becomes a duty or not, social services should be informing people about their right to take up assessments. If it becomes a duty to offer carers' assessment, more carers will become aware of it, and it will be a more effective tool. However, there will be an increase in the number of people who come forward for carer's assessments. If you are going to do it, you might as well do it properly.

Ms McWilliams: My last question concerns your contact with similar organisations across the water. What has their experience of this system been to date, as it has been in operation there for some time?

Ms Ferguson: It has been there for some time. There were problems with carers not knowing their rights. Our organisation instituted a take-up campaign in Great Britain to let people know about the changes, because it was our experience that local authorities in England and Wales were not telling carers that they had the new rights. We took the initiative to tell them. Initial results from some of the pilot voucher schemes seem to suggest that there is great potential for more flexibility. However, the schemes must be carefully designed, and the provider agencies must be given strict instructions that the scheme must be flexible, because problems occur when some providers say, "You can use your voucher here, but only if you want one week's residential respite." That is not what the scheme is supposed to be about. People can get that service under the current system. Therefore, the regulations will be important for ensuring that people get what is intended by the scheme, not what suits the provider organisations.

Mr McFarland: You kindly provided a brief for us, and I want to continue the questions on the same lines as those asked by Ms McWilliams. Your submission says

"Our feeling, therefore, is that imposing a duty to provide carer services on the basis of identified need would not have excessive cost implications. We feel that the evidence from Britain should be examined thoroughly before making this decision."

As I understand it, the legislation was brought in 1995 in England?

Ms Ferguson: No. In England, the Carers (Recognition and Services) Act 1995 brought in the right to a separate assessment. Northern Ireland has had that right since 1996 through guidance from the Department, rather than through legislation. The Bill will put carers

assessment in Northern Ireland legally on the same footing as it is in Great Britain. However, there are new elements to the Bill that were only brought in to Great Britain in 1998 so it has not had the same time.

Mr McFarland: Yes, but it has been around for a few years and, technically, there has been some background information. What sort of evidence and studies do you have to show that there might be no excessive cost implications, and what evidence is your costing based upon? We get twitchy because there are lots of things that would be good to bring in, and often those proposing them will indicate that they will easy to do and without any great implications. However, when one starts to examine them closely, it emerges that someone has not given a lot of thought to certain aspects, and there are massive implications. What empirical evidence is there to indicate how much this will cost?

Ms Ferguson: As far as I am aware, there has been no empirical research yet on the Bill's provisions that apply to services that will be directed towards carers. However, as I said, we are discovering that there are few services that will be provided directly to carers. Most of the services, for example respite and day centres, are services for the person with the disability, and they already have access to those services. By doing better assessment of carers, you may uncover needs that you had not been aware of, and which you may, or may not, be able to meet with you existing resources and eligibility criteria. These are carers' needs, but most are met by services to the person being cared for. There are few services that you can envisage that would actually be services to the carer. Most of them would have to be provided to the person with the disability. The only things that I can think of or have heard of so far being provided directly to carers under this legislation in England are the types of things that I have mentioned — mobile phones, training and counselling. As far as I can work out they have not been provided extensively. Just about any other service that you can think of is not a service to the carer.

Mr McFarland: It is probably easy for us to be confused here. The problem that Mr McNeill raised is not a carer's problem in theory. It is the fact that social services are not meeting their statutory duty to provide for his wife. As a Committee we must separate out in our own minds that we should not actually be looking strictly at whether this Bill ensures that the system is

providing for the person who is cared for, though we should obviously be looking at that elsewhere in considering the community care that we are giving. This is about what carers need. You mentioned mobile phones, training, counselling and respite care.

Ms Ferguson: No. Respite care is still a service provided to the person who receives the care — to the disabled or elderly person — not to the carer.

Mr McFarland: I understood that in England the Carer's National Association was trying to bring that in. One of the issues was that although the patient requires respite, equally the carer also requires respite. For example, a patient's respite may involve taking the patient into a home where they are looked after — that is respite from a clinic, which also gives the carer respite. However, it could be that respite for the carer would involve a nurse coming into the home to look after the patient while the carer goes off somewhere.

Ms Ferguson: There are a couple of separate initiatives in England, and one is this Bill. As well as that, slightly preceding it, but really running alongside, is the special grants for carers that were developed as part of the carers strategy in England and Wales, which were mainly designed to be used for respite. There was an expectation on local authorities in England and Wales that they would consult with local carers and try to develop creative forms of respite. Some of those special grants may well have been used to provide breaks away for carers. That is certainly one possibility, but that is separate from the provisions of the Bill. That was a separate grant that was tied to the carers strategy, and when the carers strategy is announced in Northern Ireland we would love to see additional resources attached to that to provide additional, creative and flexible respite. That is why it is important that we see the two things — the carers' strategy and Bill — going along side by side.

The Chairperson: Thank you very much for your presentation and your documentation. Again we are sorry for having kept you at the beginning. Mr McNeill, you spoke about your wife and multiple sclerosis (MS). While I have never had direct experience of it personally, as a GP of many years, I have seen this not only with MS but also with other illnesses. Our hearts go out to you, and to Mr McGurk in his work with the young people for Barnardo's.

**NORTHERN IRELAND
ASSEMBLY**

**COMMITTEE FOR HEALTH, SOCIAL
SERVICES AND PUBLIC SAFETY**

Wednesday 9 January 2002

**PERSONAL SOCIAL SERVICES
(AMENDMENT) BILL
(NIA 1/01)**

Members present:

Dr Hendron (Chairperson)
Mr Gallagher (Deputy Chairperson)
Mr Berry
Rev Robert Coulter
Mr McFarland
Ms McWilliams
Ms Ramsey

Witnesses:

Mr R MacRory)	
Mr P Deazley)	Department of Health, Social
Ms M Sisk)	Services and Public Safety
Mr J Clarke)	

The Chairperson: I welcome Mr Robin MacRory, Mr Peter Deazley, Ms Margaret Sisk and Mr John Clarke from the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety.

Once you have made your opening statement, Committee members may wish to ask you some questions.

Mr Deazley: Thank you. The key policies are the statutory right to an assessment for carers in their own right to enable them to continue to provide help and assistance; the power to make direct payments to carers, to people with parental responsibility for disabled children and to 16- and 17-year-old disabled children; and the legal authority to introduce short-term break voucher schemes to provide flexibility and respite.

Rev Robert Coulter: Welcome to the Committee. Being from Ballymena, I have a question on the monetary aspect. What audit mechanisms will be put in place to ensure that payments are spent on appropriate services? How will that be covered in the regulations?

Mr Deazley: Our normal monitoring and performance mechanisms are in place for all money spent in community care, but we are not planning to put anything specific relating to payments to carers into the regulations.

Ms Sisk: Are you talking about direct payments to carers?

Rev Robert Coulter: Any moneys going to carers.

Ms Sisk: The trusts will be responsible for ensuring that mechanisms are in place. Direct payments are already made to users for the purchase of services. Any trust with a direct payments scheme will also have a monitoring mechanism in place to ensure that payments are properly accounted for. Taxpayers' money is involved, so proper controls need to be in place.

Rev Robert Coulter: I have been doing some research on prescription fraud. Such fraud means that £9.5 million — that we know about — is taken out of the system annually. What kind of audit mechanisms will be in place to prevent such fraud in the scheme that is to be introduced?

Mr Deazley: On direct payments?

Rev Robert Coulter: On all payments.

Mr Deazley: The trusts' internal audit processes will track all spending — whether on carers or other client groups. The Department also has mechanisms to receive monitoring reports from the boards.

Rev Robert Coulter: But you have not taken the issue on board specifically?

Mr Deazley: No, not specifically in relation to carers.

Ms McWilliams: Why was the Bill — one of various personal social services Bills here — entitled the 'Personal Social Services (Amendment) Bill'? In England and Wales the titles seem to be more relevant.

Mr MacRory: The decision was made by the parliamentary draftsman. That is the normal process.

Ms McWilliams: Had the Department no input into that?

Mr MacRory: No.

Ms McWilliams: It was simply returned to you with that title. We, in turn, could amend the title. Have you any views on it?

Mr MacRory: Not particularly.

Ms McWilliams: If we continue with such practice, the rationale for each Bill will be lost. We will simply end up with a list of personal health and social services Bills. It will be harder for you, as departmental officials, to explain matters later on. One issue that has arisen is about how you intend to let carers know about the changes and what will be happening on a statutory basis.

Ms Sisk: Detailed guidance will be drawn up, and it will be discussed with the Committee and others. That will draw carers' attention to the changes. We are not particularly concerned about the title of the Bill.

Mr MacRory: A Bill is looming on changes to preserved rights, and the draftsman is entitling it the 'Personal Social Services (Preserved Rights) Bill', which makes its purpose pretty clear. It is the draftsman's responsibility to ensure that no confusion arises over the titles of Bills.

The Chairperson: If the Department or the Minister feels that the wording of the proposal is unsatisfactory — and I appreciate and understand the legal implications — I assume that you can approach the draftsman? You implied that you are stuck with the words that he has used.

Mr MacRory: I am not absolutely certain of the bottom line on that, but if you feel that a different title would be more appropriate, I can take that up with the draftsman. The wording of the title has not been raised by officials or the Minister.

Mr Clarke: The point is worth raising in regard to the perception of the legislation. The title could be a little more descriptive. We have to defer to counsel in such things, but it does not strike me as being a major legal issue.

Mr MacRory: We will take that up with the draftsman.

Ms McWilliams: Thank you very much. My reason for raising the issue is that we are trying to explain the legislation to carers as well as to the public. A good descriptive title would help, rather than simply calling it the 'Personal Social Services (Amendment) Bill'.

I return to the question that I asked Carers Northern Ireland about the fact that the Department considers the provisions of the Bill to be broadly cost neutral. We need to examine that and to ask whether that will be the case. Why has the Department made that judgement? If the legislation does have cost implications, bids will need to be made to cover those. There will obviously be numerous formal assessments, and I suggest that even carrying those out will have cost implications. People will be asking for extra resources to carry out the assessments.

Mr Deazley: Since 1996 the trusts, under direction, have had to carry out carers' assessments. There is nothing additional, other than that the carer now has a statutory right to seek assessment. However, the directive from the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety has always been that, where asked, the trusts should carry out an assessment.

Ms McWilliams: I am aware of that, but I mentioned earlier the minimalist approach to the undertaking of those assessments. Perhaps one reason was that the trusts did not have the resources. Should resources be needed, it would not help if the Department were to judge that the assessment was cost neutral. That laissez-faire approach might not be proactive.

Mr Deazley: Our view — as also outlined by Helen Ferguson — is based on the fact that the directive was already in place. We feel that it will be broadly cost neutral in the sense that the services and support provided for carers will, over time, prevent other charges and costs on the boards and trusts. We also arrived at that conclusion from looking at the broader funding of community care services.

Ms McWilliams: Under the guidelines, how many assessments have been carried out to date across Northern Ireland?

Ms Sisk: We do not monitor assessments separately. The Department has not collected information on assessments. I would not argue with your figures — there probably have not been many carried out. When asked that question, trusts cannot tell us because they do not record the fact that a separate carer's assessment has been carried out. It is recorded as part of the user assessment. If you have been given separate carers' assessment figures, they may well be an underestimate.

Ms McWilliams: The judgement is that the figures are very small.

Ms Sisk: I suspect that not all carers are assessed, but we do not have evidence one way or the other.

Ms McWilliams: Those were my major issues. Another point addressed by Helen Ferguson was the issue of the 16-and-over age limit. From my understanding of the background papers that we received, that is different from what happens in GB.

Ms Sisk: Children under 16 can be carers, but they should not be assessed under the proposed legislation. They are considered to be children in need and should be assessed under the Children (Northern Ireland) Order 1995. Children aged between 16 and 18 can be assessed under the proposed legislation or under the Children (Northern Ireland) Order 1995. Anyone over the age of 18 should be assessed under this legislation. Children are entitled to an assessment.

Ms McWilliams: What is the case in England and Wales?

Ms Sisk: It is the same in England and Wales.

Mr McFarland: Carers Northern Ireland told us that the services that carers require are mobile phones, training and counselling, and that the other issues are really community care issues. So, if I am a carer, I currently do not have the right to an assessment of my needs as a carer —

Ms Sisk: You do have the right to an assessment. It is not a statutory right, but it is a right under the guidance.

Mr McFarland: OK. I do not have a statutory right to an assessment. Under the new legislation, I will now have a right to an assessment as to whether I need a mobile phone, some training or counselling. Is that correct?

Ms Sisk: You will have the right to an assessment of your needs. Helen Ferguson pointed out that in England and Wales, where the legislation has been in place much longer, the services that tend to be provided directly to carers are mobile phones, training or counselling. Normally, a carer finds it helpful for a service to be provided to the user or disabled person that will relieve the carer from having to provide that service himself or herself.

Mr McFarland: We need to be clear about this matter. That assessment should have been carried out under separate legislation and not under the proposed legislation. Are you suggesting that matters for which a carer has responsibility that should have been dealt with in the assessment of the person that the carer looks after, but which have not been, might be caught under the new legislation?

Ms Sisk: In a way, yes. However, under the new legislation, if a disabled person refuses to undergo an assessment or to accept a community care service, it does not mean that the carer cannot have an assessment or a community care service provided directly to help the carer.

Mr McFarland: I understand that the new legislation would give the carer the statutory right to demand an assessment, even if the disabled person does not want it.

Ms Sisk: The carer can have that for his or her own benefit.

Mr McFarland: It is not for the carer's benefit because it is an assessment of what the disabled person needs.

Ms Sisk: No. In the event of a disabled person refusing an assessment or refusing to accept a service —

Mr McFarland: Are you referring to an assessment of the disabled person's needs?

Ms Sisk: Yes, in that case the service would have to be provided directly to the carer because it is not possible to force a service on anyone.

Mr McFarland: Absolutely, but that does not address the carer's needs — it addresses the disabled person's needs, although the service is provided to the carer.

If the issue confuses me, then it will not be clear to others. I do not know whether you have appeared before the Committee when we considered legislation in the past, but we had great fun with the last Bill. We discovered that several areas of that Bill were unclear to the public, or anyone outside the Department who read them. I am concerned that we might have a similar problem with this Bill. If we are dealing with a carer's being able to demand an assessment on behalf of a disabled person if that person has refused an assessment, then the issue is clear. If the legislation gives carers the right to have their own needs assessed, then that issue would also be clear. However, from the evidence that we have heard,

the needs of carers are not complicated — the package that they need is a mobile phone and some training or counselling.

Mr MacRory: The definition of a service that may be provided to a carer is deliberately broad — it is not restricted to those things. I think that Helen Ferguson said that that, in practice, is what has happened across the water, but there is no bar on any service being provided to a carer.

Mr McFarland: If you are not providing a service to the carer, but to the disabled person —

Mr MacRory: No. The service must be provided to the carer.

Mr McFarland: What service are we talking about?

Mr Deazley: Perhaps a home help — any service that the carer needs to continue in their role.

Mr McFarland: The home help should be provided to the disabled person.

Mr Deazley: The disabled person may have refused an assessment.

Mr McFarland: Is it correct to say that the carer can demand an assessment, but the home help would be provided to the disabled person, not the carer?

Mr MacRory: No, the home help would be provided to the carer.

Mr McFarland: We are getting into semantics, which worries me.

Mr Deazley: The definition is clear.

Mr McFarland: The definition is not clear. The next issue will really complicate matters. You cannot even provide pads at the moment. Community care is already in total chaos, as we hear from our constituents every week. Where is the money going to come from? The amount of money required for mobile phones, training and counselling is quite small, and, at a push, you could argue that that is cost neutral. However, it costs money to produce entire community care packages, whether those are for the carer or the person being cared for. If you do not have the money at the moment, where will the money for those services flowing from the assessments come from? I am being obtuse, but, as we have found on previous occasions, the problem is that the cost implications of some of these plans have not been fully thought out. We are a bit awkward when it comes to giving support to ideas that have not been fully thought out and costed.

Mr MacRory: The number of cases where that scenario would come about would be small — there are very few cases of people being cared for, refusing assessments and care packages. It would be rare for a complete community care package to be given to a carer.

The Chairperson: Is that OK? We will be dealing with the Bill clause by clause next week.

Mr McFarland: We will not continue with the matter today. I am not comfortable that everything has been thought through, but we will tease the issues out over the next few weeks and months.

The Chairperson: The provision of breaks for carers of disabled children is likely to be complex. Will appropriate resources be made equally available across all health boards and trusts to facilitate services to enable carers to take breaks? Is the Department satisfied that there will be sufficient high quality respite care places available?

Mr Deazley: It is difficult to talk about resources and the resource implications of the Bill, without mentioning the proposals for a carer strategy, which are being introduced. We were heavily involved in putting together the recommendations for the carer strategy, which were sent to the Minister at Christmas. Resources need to be attached to the strategy. The strategy does make recommendations for respite provisions. There will be a resource attachment to the carer strategy from April 2002.

Mr Berry: I am in danger of getting confused here — sorry Alan. Perhaps I need to phone a friend or go fifty-fifty. You heard what Carers Northern Ireland had to say. Mr McNeill explained some of the problems that he has faced as a carer. Rev Robert Coulter may have addressed some of those — I am sorry if I missed that. The lack of information that is made available to carers seems to be a big problem, and it has always been a problem. My mother is a carer, and in the past she has mentioned times when there was no information at all for carers, so at a home level I am aware of the problem.

There is also the issue of the attitude shown to carers by professional staff, or supposedly professional staff. Those are the two main issues that I have noticed, and Mr McNeill has underlined those in his presentation. We need practical measures that help. Our main concern is for the carers themselves, as it is the carers, and the people affected, that we are dealing with. What is happening on that?

Questions were also asked about who would conduct the assessments. Will an adult advocate be present? Will child-friendly language be used in relation to the assessments?

Ms Sisk: Mr Deazley has mentioned the care strategy. Mr Tom McNeill was a member of the working group that we worked with in drawing up the strategy. We are aware of the points that you make about information — that was one thing that came across clearly when we were drawing up the strategy — and the attitude to carers. Those are two of the issues that the strategy will address. They are not issues that could be readily addressed in the Bill.

Guidance will be issued to all trusts on how to carry out carers' assessments. Advocates can be available to carers to help them address their needs and make those clear. The guidance will address issues such as the assessment being carried out in such a way that the carer knows exactly what is happening; the assessment not being intimidatory in any way; and the assessment not appearing to be a test of a carer's ability to look after a person. The assessment is there to help carers. The guidance will make all of those points.

Mr Gallagher: The statutory rights are important. However, from what we heard earlier, and from our discussion, two issues that stand out are the lack of resources and information. We are all too aware of the Department of Health's resource problems. Surely it is possible, even with limited resources, to improve the dissemination of information. The trusts have that responsibility, but perhaps they need some direction. That could be looked at.

Ms Sisk: You are right, and that is one of the points that the care strategy will make. You are also right to say that it does not cost money to provide information, and it does not cost money for staff to deal professionally with clients.

The Chairperson: Thank you all very much. You have agreed to look further at some matters. We will shortly be going through the Bill clause by clause.

**NORTHERN IRELAND
ASSEMBLY**

**COMMITTEE FOR HEALTH, SOCIAL
SERVICES AND PUBLIC SAFETY**

Wednesday 16 January 2002

**PERSONAL SOCIAL SERVICES
(AMENDMENT) BILL
(NIA 1/01)**

Members Present

Dr Hendron (Chairperson)

Ms Armitage

Mr Berry

Rev Robert Coulter

Mr J Kelly

Mr McFarland

Ms McWilliams

Ms Ramsey

Witnesses

Mr R MacRory)

Mr P Deazley) Department of Health, Social

Ms M Sisk) Services and Public Safety

Mr J Clarke)

The Chairperson: I welcome back again Mr Deazley and Mr Clarke from the child and community care unit and to Mr MacRory and Ms Sisk from the elderly and community care unit.

Mr MacRory: I am from the legislation unit.

The Chairperson: I beg your pardon. You are very welcome nevertheless. We want to go through the Bill clause by clause. Concern was raised last week about the long title. Have we any information on that?

Mr MacRory: I wrote to the Committee Clerk.

The Committee Clerk: Mr MacRory wrote to me recently, and we are copying the paper to Members.

The Chairperson: I will read that out.

“The main rule is that the titles (both long and short) of a Bill should give an accurate description of the content. In a number of fields with large legislative codes such as health, education and social services, the Bills are usually “rag bag” bills covering more than one particular topic within that field. It would in general be wrong and misleading to pick out one or more of these topic[s] for inclusion in the title at the expense of others.”

An example was given of the forthcoming Personal and Social Services (Preserved Rights) Bill that will deal with only one issue, which gives a clear signal of its intent, and that is what we are asking for — a title that identifies the key intent of the Bill. Will we just leave that for now?

Mr MacRory: The long title of the Bill highlights the difficulty. This is a Bill to

“make provision about the assessment of carers’ needs; to provide for services to help carers; to provide for the making of direct payments to persons in lieu of the provision of personal social services or carers’ services”

The difficulty lies in the last part because the provisions for direct payments are intended to cover all services to adults, not just carer services. The existing legislation on direct payments, the Personal Social Services (Direct Payments) (Northern Ireland) Order 1996, is being repealed entirely by this Bill, so it is extremely difficult to know what title would be appropriate.

The Chairperson: I understand.

Ms McWilliams: I am concerned that there will be a series of personal social services Bills, of which this is one. If we want to keep people abreast of the legislation and let them know that there is a Bill that addresses their needs, would it be possible, instead of the word “(Amendment)”, to put something else in brackets, as was done with “Preserved Rights”?

Mr MacRory: As will be done, yes. That highlights the difficulty: preserved rights is a discreet item, so it was easy for us to put it in the title and thus describe exactly what is in the Bill. Here it is much more difficult because the Bill relates to carers, services, assessments, direct payments for carers’ services and direct payments for adult services under the Health and Personal Social Services (Northern Ireland) Order 1972 — it covers the whole gamut of services.

Ms McWilliams: So you are saying that if you put something like “Carers’ Services” inside brackets, you will be leaving something out?

Mr MacRory: We would be leaving something important out; the Bill deals with much more than just carers’ services. You are talking about direct payments for all personal social services to adults.

Ms McWilliams: So even “Carers’ and Adults’ Services” would not be inclusive?

Mr MacRory: Somehow, direct payments would also need to be mentioned. We could have “Carers and Direct Payments”, but then it is easy to confuse the direct payments as part of the carers’ services. It goes much further than that.

The Chairperson: I assume that you have looked at this since last week and feel that the long title should stand.

Mr MacRory: I am happy that the draftsman has said that where in future it is possible to put in a specific range of services, he will do so.

Mr McFarland: You must set out what the Bill is about in the long title, and that is fine. The problem is with the short title. I, like others here, have a problem with not having a clue about what the Bill is about. There is no point in having a title that does not explain that because we are trying to simplify things that we have discussed before and make them clear for the general public. The days of obfuscation are gone; we are trying to be clear about these matters. Your letter says that it started out as the Carers and Disabled Children Bill, which mirrored a GB title, and we have added to it a chunk from the Health and Social Care Act 2001 to do with direct payments —

Mr MacRory: More than that —

Mr McFarland: Go with me for the moment. Those are the three key areas that are reflected in the long title.

Mr MacRory: I must correct you because it goes beyond that. It entirely replaces the primary legislation that was enacted in 1996 on direct payments.

Mr McFarland: I understand that, but I want you to follow my logic here. The long title says that the Bill makes provision about the assessment of carers' needs, provides for services to help carers and provides for direct payments to persons in lieu of the provision of personal social services or carers' services. I am not dealing with what it removes. What we want is something that can be recognised by the 108 Members of the Assembly. There is confusion here. It arose last week, and people were asking "What is all this about?" Every Member needs to understand the Bill in the same way as the public and the medical world. All must be able to identify what this is about.

This is a pain for you because you started the process, but if we are to get the legislation right, we must start somewhere. We had a similar argument on a previous Bill on this very issue of clarity. Can we not call it "The Carers, Disabled Children and Direct Payments Bill", which would cover the three aspects of the long title? That would show immediately what the Bill is about, and, although it does not detail what it is replacing, it is clear to lay people outside that we are talking about carers, disabled children and direct payments.

The Chairperson: We have 10 clauses to get through, and we are not going to get complete agreement on the titles. Can you take it back and look at it again? Perhaps we can take it on board next week?

Mr MacRory: Yes.

Mr J Kelly: Are there any objections to what Mr McFarland had to say?

Mr MacRory: I was going to point out that that short title might make it appear that the direct payments relate only to the carers and disabled children, which they do not.

The Chairperson: I am not necessarily agreeing with Mr McFarland's proposal. I am not sure, but were it put to a vote, we will not get complete agreement on it. There is some dissatisfaction about it.

Mr MacRory: I will write again to the draftsman, suggest that as a title and write to the Clerk.

The Chairperson: There is merit in what Mr McFarland is saying.

Mr McFarland: We must start off well in the legal world here in the Assembly by making the short title fairly clear. Anything can be put into the long title. The Assembly and the public should be able to understand what it is about. A Personal Social Services (Amendment) Bill could be about anything.

Clause 1 (Right of carers to assessment)

The Chairperson: There are six subsections to the clause and I will ask Mr Deazley to comment on them.

Mr Deazley: Subsection (1) deals with the statutory right of a carer to an assessment in his or her own right. The key objective of the policy is to recognise the role of carers in the delivery of personal social services.

Ms McWilliams: I do not want to go through last week's debate about the Department's explanatory note's assuming that this should be cost-neutral. When this becomes legislation, is there a possibility that the trusts could find themselves defending legal challenges if they did not have the resources to finance those services? Are they not entitled to informal assessments or can they not ask for assessments if they know they are available? Once the legislation is in statute, those assessments will have to be carried out, and if they are not — and this is similar to the Children (Northern Ireland) Order 1995 — could the trusts face a legal challenge?

Mr Deazley: Absolutely. A carer has a legal right to an assessment, but that has been so since 1996. We have no reason to think that the situation will be different because other legislation has been made.

Ms Sisk: Trusts are required to give this type of service as they would any other. They are no more likely to be legally challenged under this legislation than under the Health and Personal Social Services (Northern Ireland) Order 1972 — the potential is already there for a trust to be legally challenged.

Mr Deazley: There are two entirely different issues. The first is the legal right to the assessment, and the other

is the legal right to the service that the assessment says is needed.

Ms McWilliams: A trust may have to decide — and this is likely, as it is happening already — where its priorities lie, and it may be unable to carry out those assessments for financial reasons. What happens if the Department decides that resource implications should not arise from the trust's decision?

Mr Deazley: Do you mean what happens if there are no resources to carry out assessments or deliver the services?

Ms McWilliams: Both. First, what happens if there are no resources to carry out the assessments?

Mr Deazley: They have a legal right to appeal under the legislation for the actual assessments. The Programme for Government and its priorities would decide on the delivery of the services.

The Chairperson: Is the Committee content with subsection (5)?

Ms McWilliams: Can the witnesses explain further what that subsection means?

Ms Sisk: I reiterate what I said last week about how we envisage the situation working with regard to children. We accept that there are situations in which a child — and we will talk about somebody under the age of 16 — acts as a carer. We do not expect that to happen normally, because children should not be acting as carers, but there could be times when they choose to care for a parent. We allow a child to be assessed as a carer, but any services that are provided to him are not provided in the same way that they are to an adult. They are provided under the 1995 Order as children's services because the carer is a child. A 16- or 17-year-old carer could be assessed under either legislation. The service could be provided under this legislation or under the 1995 Order because the carer is also regarded as a child.

Adults are people aged over 18, and services will be provided to them under this legislation.

Ms McWilliams: Who decides which legislation the 16- to 18-year-olds are dealt with under?

Ms Sisk: There will be detailed guidance on that. The professional carrying out the assessment will make that decision — obviously, he will be a member of the trust's staff. We expect that 16- and 17-year-olds will be treated as children, but in exceptional circumstances — and the assessor will decide if the circumstances are exceptional — the service will be provided under this legislation.

The Chairperson: My Colleagues seem happy with subsection (5). Subsection (6) says that the Disabled Persons (Northern Ireland) Act 1989 does not apply to assessments under subsection (2).

Ms Sisk: That means that where an assessment is carried out under subsection (2) of the Personal Social Services (Amendment) Bill, there is no requirement to carry out an assessment under section 6 of the Disabled Persons (Northern Ireland) Act 1989.

Question, That the Committee is content with the clause, *put and agreed to.*

Clause 2 (Services for carers)

Mr Deazley: The clause simply says that the assessment must be taken into account when a decision is taken on what services are to be provided for a carer.

The Chairperson: It aims to provide a genuine service directly to a carer. Is the Committee happy?

Mr McFarland: When we dealt with legislation before, we had an agreement without prejudice that if we came across something later in the legislation that seemed to challenge, for example, clause 1, we could review that. That system seems to be being contradicted by our dealings with clause 1.

The Committee Clerk: If a matter arises subsequently that affects the Committee's decision on a clause, we need to revisit it.

Mr McFarland: So there is nothing that prevents us from revisiting it?

The Chairperson: Subsection (2) gives the authority the right to determine those services.

Mr Deazley: Subsection (2) is fairly self-explanatory.

Ms McWilliams: A concern has been raised that that might give trusts the power, but not the duty, to supply services under the legislation. For example, the Southern Health and Social Services Board examined the equality impact assessment and considered that the proposals in the Bill ran counter to section 75 of the Northern Ireland Act 1998 on the grounds of age.

Ms Sisk: I cannot understand why the board would say that or why it thinks there is any age discrimination.

The Committee Clerk: The comment from the Southern Health and Social Services Board refers to the equality impact assessment and the fact that proposals in the assessment as it stands have a differential impact on the grounds of age. They will increase the likelihood of older carers' needs being met without addressing the needs of young carers, apart from the direct payments to 16- and 17-year-olds. As mentioned earlier, there is a substantial body of research evidence that details the needs of young carers that has not been mentioned in the equality impact assessment. It is clear that the proposals run counter to section 75 of the Northern Ireland Act 1998 on the grounds of age.

Ms Sisk: Correct me if I am wrong, but, as I understand it, that concern refers to young carers. As I said

to Ms McWilliams, we see carers under the age of 16 as children in need who should be treated as such under the children's legislation and not this Bill. This Bill is meant to deal with older carers. That should deal with the point that the Southern Board made.

Mr MacRory: It seems odd to suggest making services available to children. That does not happen in any other personal social services area. If a child needs help, he and his family should get it under the Children Order.

Mr McFarland: Is there not a contradiction with the Carers (Recognition and Services) Act 1995, which applies to GB? Are they disadvantaged, even under the Children Order, compared with their peers in GB?

Ms Sisk: No. Clause 1(1) refers to the carer of an adult. That allows for an assessment to be carried out even if the carer is a child. There is no bar on assessing a child under this legislation. However, if a service were required, it would be provided under the children's legislation, because the carer was a child in need. We do not envisage services being provided to children under this legislation, and the situation in England is exactly the same. Services there are provided, not under the carers and disabled children legislation, but under the Children Act 1989.

Mr McFarland: What does the Carers (Recognition and Services) Act do?

Ms Sisk: It allows for an assessment but not for the provision of a service. It is the equivalent of clause 1(1).

The Chairperson: Subsection (3) qualifies the nature of the service and excludes services of an intimate nature. Subsection (4) allows the Department to make Regulations on what constitutes a service of an intimate nature, as referred to in subsection (3). Perhaps the officials will comment on that.

Ms Sisk: The legislation allows for a service to be provided to the person who is being cared for — the user. It will not allow for anything that requires touching the user, so the service will not include help with toileting, washing or anything of that nature, unless the user specifically wants that. Under this legislation, a carer cannot provide a service for the person for whom he cares without that person's consent.

Ms McWilliams: The clause says "except in prescribed circumstances". Who prescribes the circumstances?

Ms Sisk: That will be defined in the Regulations. It will take into account situations in which the disabled or ill person is in danger; for example, were he to fall when there was no one else available to help. The person who is there, ostensibly the carer, could help the disabled user in certain circumstances, but there would normally be no physical contact unless the disabled person consented. We want to strike a balance between helping the carer without undermining the independence of the user.

Ms McWilliams: Will the guidelines specify that?

Ms Sisk: Yes. The detailed guidelines will specify that. The Regulations will set out those things also.

Mr McFarland: Subsection (1) is clearly to do with services to the carer. Subsections (3) and (4) are about services to the person being cared for. If the system were doing its job correctly, any services that that person might need would be identified and dealt with under normal health and social services legislation. I cannot work out what services are technically for the carer in this Bill, but are provided to the person cared for, that would not have been picked up by the assessment of the needs of the person cared for. This seems to run against the Bill, which is about providing services for the carer.

Ms Sisk: You are right to say that normally under the existing legislation, the Health and Personal Social Services (Northern Ireland) Order 1972, services should be and are provided to users. This Bill is to allow for a carer's needs to be looked at when a service is being provided to a user.

Last week Helen Ferguson was talking about what help a carer could be provided with, such as mobile phones, counselling and training. However, other help could be provided that would help both a carer and a cared-for person. Some people have said that a carer could get help with gardening, which would leave him more time to help the cared-for person. The trusts will be carrying out the assessments, and we want to allow them a great deal of latitude to put in place whatever services they think will best help the carers.

Mr MacRory: There are also occasions when a cared-for person refuses services, particularly if the service or attention and care that he is getting from a relative is adequate to meet his needs and he does not want to be involved with the social services. That will allow a carer to call in help, even though the cared-for person has said, "No, I do not want it." Carers do get to the end of their tether at times, and this is a possible let-out.

Mr McFarland: It is a catch-all in unusual circumstances in which a cared-for person may benefit from something to which he objects.

Ms Sisk: That is a good way to put it. It is closing a loophole to ensure that a carer's needs are not overlooked.

The Chairperson: Subsection (5) enables the authority to determine and make any charges for services that are deemed necessary and to recover unpaid charges. That seems straightforward.

Mr Deazley: We have to make the provision even though, in general, we do not charge in Northern Ireland for domiciliary care, especially when we will be looking at personal care, free nursing care, et cetera.

The Chairperson: Subsection (6) prevents services from being provided solely because of need. That requires explanation.

Ms Sisk: A carer will not have “personal social services”, which are what Mr McFarland was talking about and which is already available under the Health and Personal Social Services (Northern Ireland) Order 1972. A carer cannot have those services because he is a carer and will receive a carer’s service under the legislation to ensure that there is no double provision.

Mr MacRory: It goes beyond that. There are situations in which a carer gives an unduly high amount of care to a person. That does not mean that the trust should take on that liability simply because the carer is already doing it. Any services provided to the carer should be based on an assessment; a trust should not just pick up what he is already doing.

The Chairperson: Subsections (7) to (10) cover situations in which there is a need for services that could be provided by way of carers’ services to the carer or by social services to the person being cared for. Subsections (7) and (8) qualify the application of subsection (9) and determine to whom the service is provided. Subsection (10) ensures that a decisions will be made without regard to the means of the carer or the person being cared for.

Ms Sisk: A clear, recorded decision must be made by the trusts on whom they are providing the services to. Are they providing them to the carers as a carers’ service, or are they providing them to the users under the Health and Personal Social Services (Northern Ireland) Order 1972? The reason is that that will determine who is entitled to make a complaint to a trust if someone is not happy with the service. Moreover, should charges be applied, would the carers or the users be assessed? Finally, a trust cannot make that decision on the basis of who has the more money. It must make that decision regardless of the means of the users or of the carers.

Ms McWilliams: Does it say that?

Ms Sisk: Subsection (10) says that.

Ms McWilliams: It says:

“The authority’s decision under subsection (9) is to be made without regard to the means of the carer or of the person cared for.”

Does that refer to the financial means?

Ms Sisk: Yes.

Ms McWilliams: Does “means”, in legislative terms, always mean “financial means”?

Mr MacRory: I believe so. I cannot think of any other way in which “means” could be interpreted in legislation.

Ms McWilliams: I am putting that question to you because it is important that it is clear. Means-testing includes capital assets, not just having the financial ability to pay

someone to help out about the house. Someone may be asset rich but financially poor.

The Chairperson: I appreciate that it is a complex issue. Perhaps next week the Department could provide the Committee with the exact definition of “means” in legislative terms.

Ms McWilliams: Otherwise the Committee will want to insert the word “financial”.

The Chairperson: That would allow the Committee to proceed.

Clause 2 referred for further consideration.

Clause 3 (Vouchers)

Mr Deazley: The clause makes provision for the introduction of a voucher scheme for respite care. Consultation has shown that that should not go ahead until it is clear what respite services are available and are in place. That clause, therefore, is subject to a further consultation process and more work.

Ms McWilliams: I am both heartened and disheartened to hear that. We have the legislation here. My Colleagues and I spend a great deal of time responding to constituents who seek respite care, particularly in cases of autism or disability.

Carers do not want to hand over care entirely, but they do want respite care. I anticipate that a voucher scheme may be introduced, but it will leave carers no better off. It will be like the current situation in Argentina, where the peso is of no value. You say that the legislation will be passed subject to further consultation. That means that you either audit or monitor respite care to gauge the shortfall with the legislative proposals.

Mr Deazley: It does not say that the current respite care will still be available. The voucher scheme will only make access to respite care more flexible for the carer. The only respite care that appears to be available is residential nursing home care. During the consultation, carers said, as you did, that respite care could be two hours on a Saturday afternoon to allow a carer to do his or her shopping. Flexibility in the system is what makes a voucher worthwhile.

Ms McWilliams: I am still concerned. We are suggesting that the legislation be passed with that aspect left completely discretionary. You will decide the value of the voucher and how it is obtained later. You mentioned gardening as an example. Can I take my voucher to the gardener and pass the receipt on to the Department?

Ms Sisk: A voucher would not be used for gardening services.

Ms McWilliams: Yes, that is not respite care. However, direct payments will be discussed soon. It is exactly the same point.

Ms Sisk: None of us disagrees that there is a problem with the availability of respite care. Last week, Mr Deazley mentioned the work that we have been doing on the carers' strategy. That issue has come up in the carers' strategy. He also said, in the press release that was issued in December, that the Minister intended to make money available for carers' breaks when the revised budget was issued. We know that we must put more respite care in place. We must also give carers a broader choice. Currently, the only respite available to them is when the person for whom they are caring goes to a residential home for two weeks in the summer.

When we compiled the carers' strategy, they told us that they wanted breaks to go to church or to do their shopping. Before the voucher scheme is introduced, we want to ensure that trusts have a range of respite services in place. Mr Deazley spoke of that type of consultation: carers are asked what respite they want and we do our best, with the available money, to improve respite provision.

Mr McFarland: The voucher may be expressed as money or the delivery of service. When the Assembly discusses the voucher scheme, a substantial number of people will expect it to be introduced shortly after. It must be made known that it is not about when the scheme will be introduced, but about how it can be established.

Ms Sisk: It is about putting the power in place.

Mr McFarland: We must at least make clear that people will not be able to queue up for vouchers and say, "Thank goodness. We have waited years for that." It will not happen if the money is not there.

Ms Sisk: I appreciate your point. I agree that we must make that clear before vouchers are issued. It is not just about the money; we want to ensure that trusts have a range of respite care in place — most do not.

The Chairperson: The carers' strategy document will come before the Committee in April.

Ms Sisk: The strategy is currently with the Minister.

Ms McWilliams: Why are the two not walking hand in hand?

Mr Deazley: The Bill is in advance of the carers' strategy and attempts to catch up with the legislative position in the rest of the United Kingdom. We were then asked to devise a care strategy for Northern Ireland. The two simply got out of sync; we would have preferred that the two ran together.

Ms Sisk: In England the legislation arose from their carers' strategy that was issued in February 1999. Here we were so far behind that the Minister was keen to have some work done on a carers' strategy, which she commissioned in October 2000. It was agreed that the

legislation would be brought forward to have it on the statute book and have the framework in place.

Ms McMilliams: At the time, I was asked in the House about the carers' strategy. I had assumed that if the legislation were being introduced it would be a strategy. My concern is that if the legislation is passed, money expectations will be raised. The situation is that no action is being taken — it is all on paper.

Ms Sisk: I cannot say too much about the strategy, but it will address issues such as providing information and employment for carers — it relates to more than the health needs. I take your point and it would have been preferable to have published the strategy first and have the legislation flow from that.

Mr Deazley: In our discussions and work on the carers' strategy, the Bill was discussed with carers, who were positive and content that the legislation should go ahead.

The Chairperson: A resources statement is to be linked to the carers' strategy. Have you any comment on that?

Mr Deazley: The Minister's press statement of 4 December mentioned the carers' strategy. She stated:

"I am determined too that we shall make a reality of the carers' strategy so I will make available funding to provide breaks for carers."

We do not have figures at the moment.

The Chairperson: The press release goes on to state:

"The strategy does make provisions for respite provisions. There will be a resource attachment to the carers' strategy from April 2002."

Ms McWilliams: Will you explain why the voucher can be expressed in monetary terms if there is a system for direct payments?

Ms Sisk: The voucher is for the user and the direct payment will be for the carer. Vouchers will be issued in the normal course of events to the disabled or ill person. They will be making use of the respite provision. The carer will not be able to decide what type of respite the user has — that will preserve the user's independence and freedom of choice. Direct payments will be for the carers.

Question, That the Committee is content with the clause, put and agreed to.

Clause 4 (Assessments: persons with parental responsibility for disabled children)

The Chairperson: Do you wish to comment on that?

Ms Sisk: This clause is basically the same as clause 1 but relates specifically to an adult carer looking after a disabled child. An amendment is being inserted into the Children Order after article 18 because that service should be provided to the family under the legislation for children.

The Chairperson: Are Colleagues happy with that?

Ms McWilliams: Is this is where we are putting the amendment into the Children Order? It is in our paper under clause 5 to insert new article 18B into the Children Order.

Mr MacRory: There are 3 new articles — 18A, 18B and 18C.

Mr McFarland: This is article 18A.

The Chairperson: Although I have said that paragraphs (1) to (6) are similar to clause 1, I want to take each in turn.

Ms McWilliams: You are familiar with the huge difficulties we have had under the Children Order. Will this amendment make our job easier?

Mr Clarke: Those are specific assessment provisions. Article 18 of the Children Order stated that it is a strategic provision because it is really talking about the assessment of need generally. They are particular assessment functions so I would say that they are complementary. Under the Children Order, it was always possible to assess the needs of a family member and to provide services to a family member if that was needed to promote the welfare of the child. Those are declaratory statements.

Ms McWilliams: We are dealing here with assessments and vouchers that are currently not available. We are about to create something new and innovative, which is the provision of vouchers. We are having enormous difficulties, yet we are inserting new articles into the Children Order. I hope that we are not going to raise more expectations about services that still may not be available.

Mr Clarke: There is always a danger in these statements. As law, if one was very harsh about the current provision, one could say that we can already do all of that. Article 18(3) of the Children Order states:

“any service provided by an authority in the exercise of functions conferred on it by this Article may be provided for the family of a particular child in need or for any member of his family”.

A child in need links in with disabled children in the Children Order. I take your point about raising expectations. In the purist strict legal sense it is already contained in the Children Order. These are declaratory statements about assessments. The provision exists for services to be provided to other members of the family.

Mr McFarland: It must be made clear that when we include vouchers in the Children Order we will not get lots of people terribly excited about the fact that they will get something that will not be available. It is the same issue that we previously discussed about getting parents of disabled children excited because they thought that they would get vouchers for breaks.

Mr Clarke: My understanding is that this legislation creates flexibility for how things would be done.

Mr McFarland: As the legislation passes through the House, Members will jump up to welcome the vouchers, or else the legislation will be sold by the Minister. However, we must make it clear that, although the legislation makes it possible to grant those measures, it is unlikely that anything will happen immediately unless the Minister provides extra money.

Ms McWilliams: We had a previous submission from a private organisation that wished to open a private residential home for children.

I understand that, at that time, there was an issue in County Fermanagh. It may be that more private providers will move in. An issue surrounds statutory provision in that area. Should vouchers be introduced? Can you anticipate that a market will open for private providers in the same way that daycare for children is opening up through vouchers and direct payments?

Mr Clarke: My personal view is that the number of vouchers and the difference that this would make to a private market would be fairly minimal. The market would have to be there.

Ms McWilliams: You have just told us that very few respite places are available in the statutory sector. If we introduce legislation to make provision based on assessments that would entitle people to vouchers, could a private provider not start a market that would meet that need through the voucher system? Then I would sue you, because there is legislation in place that allows me to have a voucher and a private provider that can give me a place. You have introduced legislation that gives me the right, and I will take you to court. How do you respond to that?

Mr Clarke: I am not entirely clear what your point is.

Mr J Kelly: If you give me a voucher, can I spend it where I want to spend it?

Mr McFarland: It is not a right. It is a provision.

Mr MacRory: The initial assessment is for a service. Vouchers and direct payments are methods of delivery.

Mr J Kelly: What do you mean by a voucher?

Ms Sisk: When the service is set up and the voucher is provided, you can spend it wherever you like.

Mr McFarland: This legislation says nothing about provision. It says that the Department may regulate for it. One could sue when the Department begins to regulate, because it has promised a service that is not happening. This is enabling legislation, which allows you to rustle up Regulations.

Mr MacRory: Essentially, that is correct.

Mr McFarland: This is not about providing vouchers. It is saying that, in future, the Department is allowed to make Regulations. That is all that it says. It is confusing.

Ms Sisk: That is right. When the equivalent legislation for England and Wales was created, the voucher provision only commenced six months after the other provisions were put in place. As far as I understand, the Regulations regarding voucher schemes have only just been made in England, although the Act came into effect in July 2000.

Ms McWilliams: They followed the Act and were eventually put in place. However, the point is that, if the provision is not available in 6 or 12 months' time, I can guarantee that Members will be asking where it is.

The Chairperson: Absolutely.

Ms Sisk: There is no point in making the legislation if we do not intend to make the scheme available.

Mr Clarke: I was looking at this in a different way. The threat of litigation arises out of your assessment, not because of the voucher. The voucher is merely the means of delivery. All case law that I am aware of demonstrates that the danger arises, where an authority assesses a person's need, when the need is not provided for. That is where the litigation begins. The voucher issue distracted me. It is a mechanism.

Ms McWilliams: Yes, but I was bringing you down that line.

Question. That the Committee is content with the clause, *put and agreed to.*

Clause 5 agreed to.

Clause 6 (Direct payments)

Mr Deazley: Direct payments are very similar to the voucher system. They provide a much more flexible way of allowing the service user to secure the service. They cover not only carers, but the whole range of service users.

Ms McWilliams: Does clause 6 repeal the Health and Personal Social Services (Northern Ireland) Order 1972?

Mr MacRory: It repeals the Personal Social Services (Direct Payments) (Northern Ireland) Order 1996.

The Chairperson: Subsection (3) details how the scheme will work and subsections (4) and (5) define gross payments and net payments. Subsection (6) provides for payments to be made for a prescribed period. Subsection (7) repeals the provisions in the 1996 Order.

Ms McWilliams: Could you define gross payments and net payments?

Mr MacRory: All social services may be subject to the recovery of charges. A gross payment is one that covers the full cost of the service being provided. A net payment arises where, because of a person's means, a recovery is assessed as being due from the service user. That sum equates to gross cost less the assessed charge.

The Chairperson: Gross payments and net payments are defined on page 6 of the Bill.

Mr McFarland: What arrangements are there for collection? Do they require an extra departmental mechanism? This is a different system, and cost implications are usual when a new system is being set up.

Mr Deazley: A number of direct payments are in place in trusts. The most recent figures that I saw showed approximately 40, and there is a range of mechanisms by which direct payments can be made.

Ms Sisk: The direct payment scheme has been in operation here since 1996. This legislation extends the existing scheme that is available to users and carers, and trusts should have mechanisms for making direct payments.

Mr McFarland: If we change all aspects of the system into direct payments, I presume that there will be a quantum leap in the number of people who use the current system. What assessment has been made of the impact that that increase may have on the system?

Ms Sisk: The system for allowing direct payments to someone who was assessed as needing a service under the Health and Personal Social Services (Northern Ireland) Order 1972 has been in place since 1996. Under this legislation, we are extending the provisions to carers, but we are also taking the opportunity to put everything to do with direct payments into one piece of legislation so that it is easier to administer. We do not expect a significant increase in the number of people using direct payments.

As Mr Deazley said, fewer than 40 people in Northern Ireland use the direct payments system. Some people are unhappy about it because it means that they become employers with responsibility for paying someone's tax, National Insurance, and so forth. We want a provision that allows people — users and carers — to take up direct payment if they want to instead of having a trust deliver a service to them. The trust would give them the money and they could buy the service for themselves. That would promote independence.

Mr MacRory: The system for recovering charges has been in place since 1972. Anybody who, from 1996, received a direct payment was in exactly the same position as someone who got the service directly provided by the trust through social help, social worker help or a home help.

Ms McWilliams: You can understand why no more than 40 people have taken up direct payments. However, anticipating that this relates to carers, and given what we heard earlier, the trusts may have to set up a strong advisory service to let people know that this service will be available.

Ms Sisk: The trusts should already have mechanisms to advise people about direct payments — they have

been required to do so since 1996. We have asked them about that several times. We have been assured that mechanisms are in place and that the staff are trained to advise people about direct payments. We have no reason to doubt that.

Ms McWilliams: So the introduction of carers will not overwhelm them?

Ms Sisk: No. We do not expect huge numbers of carers to take up the offer. We want to make the system flexible if they choose to avail themselves of it. We do not expect it to be a significant burden on trusts.

Question, That the Committee is content with the clause, *put and agreed to.*

Clause 7 (Direct payments in respect of children)

Ms Sisk: This clause allows for direct payments to be used to pay for children's as well as adults' services. The Children Order needs to be amended to allow that to happen. The provisions of this clause are the same as those of the previous clause.

Ms McWilliams: Can I ask about the definition of "means"?

Ms Sisk: We must check that.

Mr MacRory: I have taken note of that.

Question, That the Committee is content with the clause, *put and agreed to.*

Clause 8 (Interpretation and regulations)

Mr MacRory: This is a standard clause, but the definitions may be different.

Mr McFarland: Can we check the definitions to make sure that everybody understands them?

Question, That the Committee is content with the clause, *put and agreed to.*

Clause 9 agreed to.

Short title

The Chairperson: We will return to the short title next week.

Mr McFarland: Can I seek clarification about carers of 16 years of age and older? In the definition, they are called "adults". However, there was some confusion over the Children Order. How does the age dovetail with

that? What does and what does not constitute a child? In last year's discussions on criminal justice, different ages were mentioned for people considered able to do various things.

Ms Sisk: I explained earlier how we see the situation. A child under the age of 16 may be assessed as a carer under this legislation, but any services will be provided under the Children Order as a children's service. A 16- or 17-year-old carer can be assessed in the usual way and the services provided under children's legislation, but services can be provided in exceptional circumstances under this legislation. It is a professional decision that is taken by trusts and social work staff.

Mr McFarland: The gap is covered by two sets of legislation?

Ms Sisk: Yes, and people aged over the age of 18 are adults.

Short title referred for further consideration.

Ms McWilliams: When drafting legislation, people are referred to as "he". Does that include carers?

Mr MacRory: That is standard in all legislation.

Ms McWilliams: It is rather unfortunate, given that the vast majority of carers are female.

Ms Sisk: That is because of the Interpretation Act (Northern Ireland) 1954.

Ms McWilliams: In the explanatory note, the draft refers to "he" or "she".

Ms Sisk: That is because we wrote it. It is not so in the legislation.

Mr McFarland: Without prejudicing the discussion on the short title next week — and I can probably also speak for the Regional Development Committee, of which I am Deputy Chairperson — it would be good if legislation could show in its title what it is about. For instance, it would be helpful to identify each of the three personal social services Bills in the form of "Personal Social Services (Amendment No 1) Bill" et cetera. Can we talk about that next week?

Ms Sisk: I agree.

Schedule agreed to.

The Chairperson: Thank you.

Written Answers

NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

Friday 16 November 2001

Written Answers to Questions

OFFICE OF THE FIRST MINISTER AND DEPUTY FIRST MINISTER

Civic Forum: Attendance Records

Mrs I Robinson asked the Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister to detail (a) the attendance record of members at meetings of the Civic Forum, (b) the number of times it has met and (c) the achievements made to date. (AQW 523/01)

Reply: The attendance record of Civic Forum members at plenary meetings is detailed in the attached schedule. The Civic Forum has met in plenary session on seven occasions at locations throughout Northern Ireland.

In July, the Forum made a positive and constructive response to the Executive's Position Report on developing a Programme for Government and the Budget for 2002-03. Dermot Nesbitt and Denis Haughey have now written to the Civic Forum to seek its views on the recently published draft Programme for Government and the Executive's budget proposals.

The Forum has responded to a number of consultation papers including the Department of Education's Review of post-primary education arrangements, the Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister's Role of the Commissioner for Children, and the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety's Investing in Health.

The Forum is currently considering three consultation documents. These are the Department for Employment and Learning's consultation paper, Employability and Longterm Unemployment, the Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister's Review of Community Relations Policy and the draft Bill of Rights that was published recently by the Human Rights Commission. In addition to this work, the Forum has five other major projects at different stages of development. These are Life Long Learning, Combating Poverty, Towards a Plural Society, Entrepreneurship and Creativity, and Creating a Sustainable Northern Ireland.

Surname	Known As	No of meetings attended
Bicker	Elizabeth	6
Bowser	Avery	6
Bryan	Frank	7
Buchanan	Pauline ⁽¹⁾	0
Bustard	Susan	4
Carvill	Lynn	6
Chapman	Jeannette	6
Cooper	Kevin	7
Cradden	Keith	7
Daly	Kevin	5
Donaldson	Peter	6
Dougherty	Brian	6
Elliott	Doug	7
Farrell	Duane	6
Frazer	Hugh ⁽²⁾	3
Gallagher	Eileen	6
Gibson	Clare	6
Gibson	Chris	7
Gilmour	Daphne	7
Glenn	George	6
Gregg	Margaret ⁽³⁾	1
Haughey	Sharon	7
Jay	Richard	5
Johnston	Bryan	6
Keenan	Eamonn	5
Lucy	Gordon	7
MacBride	Patricia	3
MacNiallais	Donncha	6
Mahony	Patrick	7
McBride	Alan	5
McClellan	P.J	7
McClurg	Betty	6
McConaghie	David	6
McCormack	Inez	0
McCulla	Alan	3
McDowell	Emma	7
McGlone	Roisin	6
McKeever	Jim	7
McKinney	Carmel	4
McLaughlin	Kevin	4
McMichael	Gary	3
McNamee	Aidan	4
McNulty	Eithne	6
Monteith	Richard	2
Muller	Janet	4
O'Reilly	Mick	2
O'Reilly	Brian	6
Orr	James	6
Porter	David	7
Savage	Gwen	5

Surname	Known As	No of meetings attended
Shillington	Colin	7
Stelfox	Dawson	6
Symington	Brian	6
Warde Hunter	Louise	6
Watson	Avril	7
Weldon	Annabel	6
Whatmough	Jo	5
White	David	6
Williams	Ryan	6
Woods	Gordon	7
Yu	Patrick	1

⁽¹⁾ Pauline Buchanan resigned November 2000

⁽²⁾ Hugh Frazer resigned June 2001

⁽³⁾ Margaret Gregg appointed as a member of the Civic Forum August 2001

Civic Forum: Running Costs

Mrs I Robinson asked the Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister to detail the running costs of the Civic Forum to date. (AQW 524/01)

Reply: The running costs including one off capital costs for the Civic Forum to date have been as follows:

October 2000 - March 2001	£145,000
April 2001 - October 2001	£178,000

Children's Fund

Mrs E Bell asked the Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister to provide an update on the work currently being undertaken by the Children's Fund, including details of any grants awarded; and to make a statement. (AQO 369/01)

Reply: Work is continuing on the development of the 12 projects that received support in the first allocations from the Children's Fund that were announced on 2 April.

Following the Executive's agreement that the voluntary and community sector should have direct access to support from the Children's Fund, proposals for the management and operation of the fund and the involvement of the sector have recently been published for consultation.

The consultation period lasts until 11 January. We will then need to consider the responses so that we can put in place appropriate arrangements for the administration of the fund with a view to making further allocations to departments and to projects from the voluntary and community sector as soon as possible.

AGRICULTURE AND RURAL DEVELOPMENT

Database for Distribution of CAP Support

Mrs I Robinson asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to outline the selection criteria for farms which will be used to create a database in relation to the distribution of CAP support.

(AQW 575/01)

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development (Ms Rodgers): The social survey of farms which will, among other things, assist the Department with carrying out assessments of the distribution of CAP support in the context of Targeting Social Need and the Department's Equality Scheme, has a sample of 3,550 farms, which was selected at random within farm size and type categories. This is normal statistical survey practice. After selection, the sample was checked to ensure that area analyses could be carried out.

Drainage Infrastructure: Glenkeen Avenue/Jordanstown Rd

Mr Hilditch asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development the proposed timetable for the completion of the Rivers Agency scheme at the junction of Glenkeen Avenue/Jordanstown Road in Newtownabbey. (AQW 633/01)

Ms Rodgers: I confirm that the Rivers Agency Scheme to upgrade drainage infrastructure at the Glenkeen Avenue/Jordanstown Road junction is substantially complete except for the reinstatement of two private gardens. The timing of these works was affected by concurrent private development proposals and adverse weather. With the agreement of the property owners concerned, Rivers Agency will complete the reinstatement works in the Spring of 2002.

CULTURE, ARTS AND LEISURE

Sports Lottery Fund: Grants Awarded 2000-01

Mr Hilditch asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to detail any grants that have been awarded by the Sports Lottery fund from April 2000 to October 2001. (AQW 519/01)

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure (Mr McGimpsey): During the period April 2000 to October 2001, 133 grants were awarded by the Sports Council for

Northern Ireland's Lottery Fund totalling £6,009,036. These are as follows:

Recipient	Award Amount £
Albion Star Football Club	1,000
Ardoyne GAC, Belfast	41,645
Ardoyne Ju Jitsu Club	3,935
Ardstraw Football Club	76,670
Atticall Gaelic Athletic & Camogie Club	40,000
Ballinamallard United FC	23,591
Ballyclare Rugby Football Club	60,000
Ballymoney Borough Council	50,000
Belfast City Council with Clarendon Association	100,000
Belfast Sub Aqua Club	9,000
Belfast United Football Team	3,195
Belvoir Park Golf Club, Belfast	60,000
Brantwood Football Social & Recreation Club, Belfast	70,000
Burnfoot Community Development Group, Londonderry	56,885
Cairndhu Rowing Club, Co Antrim	2,608
Carlingford Lough Yacht Club	22,000
Carniny Youth Football Club	3,000
Carnlough Football Club	8,420
Carrickfergus Amateur Boxing Club	3,595
Castlereagh Sports Development Association	1,500
Castlewellan & Annsborough Angling Club	10,700
Cathal Brugha Swimming Club, Belfast	2,149
Christian Brothers Grammar School, Omagh	100,000
City of Armagh Rugby Football Club	46,389
City of Derry Rugby Football Club	50,000
Clogher Cricket Club	2,100
Clogher Eire Og GFC	39,000
Clogher Valley Rugby Football Club	70,000
Clonoe O'Rahilly's GFC, Coalisland	40,000
Coagh Sports Centre	68,188
Coleraine Bowling Club	13,571
Coleraine Football Club	44,448
Comber Rifle Club	70,000
Con Magee's GAC, Glenravel	25,000
Cookstown Swimming Club	750
Craigavon Borough Council	40,000
Craigavon Borough Council for Silverwood Equestrian	50,000
Craigavon (Ladies) Amateur Football Club	863
Creggan Country Park Enterprises Ltd	80,000
Crumlin & District Angling Club	50,000
Dennett Anglers Association, Donemana	10,429
Derrylaughan GFC	60,000

Recipient	Award Amount £
Down Junior Badminton Club	2,014
Downpatrick Cricket Club	10,600
Drumagh Sarsfield GFC, Omagh	70,000
Dundrum GFC	60,000
Dungannon Amateur Boxing Club	560
Dungannon Rifle and Pistol Club	110,000
Dungannon United Youth	17,500
Eire Og GAC, Craigavon	40,000
Enniskillen Rangers Football Club	70,000
Errigal Ciaran GFC, Sixmilecross	40,000
Eskra Emmett's GAC, Co Tyrone	28,645
Fivemiletown United Football Club	57,000
Forthriver Bowling and Tennis Club, Belfast	70,000
Fox Lodge Cricket Club, Strabane	46,900
Garvagh School of Soccer	1,074
Glentoran Football Club	30,000
Golfing Union of Ireland - Ulster Branch	300,000
Grosvenor Ladies Hockey Club	1,760
Holy Family Boxing Club, Belfast	100,000
Islandmagee Football Club	70,000
Iveagh Angling Club	5,000
John Mitchels GAC, Claudy	25,000
Kilclief Ben Dearg GAC	85,000
Killyleagh Youth Football Club	48,000
Kilmore Recreation and Football Club	65,000
Kinawley Killesher GFC	58,000
Larne Football Club	57,400
Latharna Og GAC Brustin Braes, Larne	70,000
Linfield Football and Athletic Club	60,000
Lisbellaw Hurling Club	70,000
Lisburn Amateur Boxing Club	60,000
Lisburn Cricket Club	25,000
Lisnaskea Emmetts GFC	60,000
Lisnaskea Tennis Club	21,000
Loughgiel Community Association	31,375
Loughry College/Cookstown District Council	220,000
Mark Heagney Amateur Boxing Club, Kildress	5,000
Michael Davitt's GAC, Belfast	50,000
Michael Davitt GAC, Swatragh	22,746
Motor Cycle Union of Ireland (Ulster Centre)	37,039
Newcastle Yacht Club Limited	2,999
Newry and Mourne Cricket Club	2,051
Newry Town Football Club	61,600
Newtownabbey Borough Council	90,000
Newtownabbey Strikers Football Club	1,968

Recipient	Award Amount £
Northern Ireland Athletic Association	12,700
Northern Ireland Civil Service Sports Association	200,000
Northern Ireland Orienteering Association	13,467
Oak Leaf Amateur Boxing Club, Londonderry	2,820
O'Connors Glack GFC/St Finloughs Camogie Club, Ballykelly	61,000
Ophir Rugby Football Club, Newtownabbey	69,000
Patrician Youth Centre, Downpatrick	45,500
Pedal Power	1,500
Portadown Golf Club	50,000
Provincial Towns Bowling Club, Ballymoney	24,000
Rainey Old Boys' Rugby Club, Magherafelt	16,664
Randalstown United Football Club	600
Redmond O'Hanlon GAC, Poyntzpass	68,524
Riverdale Football Club, Benburb	70,000
Robert Emmetts GAC/Slaughtneil Camogie Club, Maghera	60,000
Roger Casement GAC, Portglenone	75,000
Saint Agnes Amateur Boxing Club, Belfast	84,000
Saint Colm's GAC, Ballinascreen	60,000
Saint Eugene's GAC, Castlederg	60,000
Saint John's Bowling Club, Moneymore	15,000
Saint Joseph's Amateur Boxing Club, Londonderry	2,035
Saint Josephs Bowling Club, Antrim	2,400
Saint Joseph's GAC, Craigbane	40,000
Saint Malachy's GFC, Edendork	26,357
Saint Mary's GAC, Aghagallon	40,000
Saint Mary's GAC, Ahoghill	70,000
Saint. Mary's GAC, Banagher	60,000
Saint Oliver Plunkett's GAC, Greenlough	40,000
Saint Patrick's GFC, Cullyhanna	70,000
Saint Patrick's GFC, Greencastle	60,000
Saint Teresa's GFC, Loughmacrory	80,000
Saintfield United Football Club	1,136
Salto Gymnastic Centre Limited, Belfast	14,817
South Eastern Education and Library Board	280,000
Spamount & District Cross Community Association	75,000
Sport & Leisure Football Club & Celtic Boys Club, Belfast	70,000
Tai Chi (NI)	3,066
Teemore GFC, Enniskillen	30,934
Templepatrick Alexandra Football Club	2,449
Templepatrick Cricket Club	1,755
The Nedd Cricket Club, Mulkeeragh	20,000
Tir Na Nog Camogie Club, Antrim	2,700

Recipient	Award Amount £
Trillick St Macartans GAC	50,000
Ulster Hang Gliding & Paragliding Club	5,750
Warrenpoint Golf Club	70,000
Wellington Recreation Football Club, Larne	30,000

Details of all lottery awards made by all National Lottery Distributing Bodies across the UK can be accessed through the awards search on the web site of the Department of Culture, Media and Sport: www.culture.gov.uk/lottery/index.html.

Rugby Union: Ulster Branch Strategic Plan

Mr Hilditch asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to give his assessment of the Ulster Branch Strategic Plan for Rugby Union, and to make a statement. (AQW 591/01)

Mr McGimpsey: The Ulster Branch are to be congratulated for taking a bold and imaginative step within Irish rugby by producing a strategic plan for their sport that is founded on a realistic and positive approach towards future development.

The Ulster Branch have produced a plan that clearly links aims with objectives and actions and is designed to strengthen human, financial and physical resources within the game. Many of the proposed actions within the plan mirror those identified in the Strategy for the Development of Sport in Northern Ireland, which I roundly recommend as the appropriate template for all sporting bodies involved in managing change.

I welcome the Ulster Branch's strategic plan and hope that its full implementation will lead to a prosperous and secure future for the sport.

EDUCATION

Official Engagements: 7 November 2001

Mr Hilditch asked the Minister of Education to list his official engagements for Wednesday 7 November 2001. (AQW 539/01)

The Minister of Education (Mr McGuinness): On Wednesday 7 November 2001 I was on official business in the Republic of Ireland.

Human Rights in Education Conference

Mr Dalton asked the Minister of Education, pursuant to AQO 291/01, to detail (a) the date and location of

the conference on human rights in education; (b) the list of speakers at the conference; (c) the list of invitees; (d) the cost of the conference; and (e) if the departmental accounting officer has approved the expenditure.

(AQW 605/01)

Mr M McGuinness: The details requested are as follows:

- (a) The Human Rights in Education Conference was held on Wednesday 26 September in the Stormont Hotel, Belfast.
- (b) The following were speakers at the Conference:
Francesca Klug
Dr Ursula Kilkelly
- (c) Those attending the conference were a broad representative sample of those involved in education provision together with a range of voluntary/community organisations. All had either a working knowledge and/or interest in human rights in education issues.
- (d) Final costs are not yet available. However it is expected that the costs will be in the region of £12,000.
- (e) The Department was fully satisfied of the regularity and propriety of this expenditure.

Human Rights in Education

Mr Dalton asked the Minister of Education, pursuant to AQO 291/01, whether the proposal to hold a conference on human rights in education had the support of the Executive Committee.

(AQW 606/01)

Mr M McGuinness: The conference specifically focused on human rights in education. The aim of the conference was to raise the awareness of human rights in education and to identify key strategic actions from the education sector. These areas fall fully within my responsibility as Minister of Education.

Advisory Teacher: Children's Law Centre

Mr Dalton asked the Minister of Education, pursuant to AQO 291/01, to detail (a) the process for the appointment of an advisory teacher who will be based in the Children's Law Centre; (b) the cost of this appointment; and (c) if the departmental accounting officer approved this expenditure.

(AQW 607/01)

Mr M McGuinness: The details are as follows:

In line with agreed appointment procedures

- (a) The Belfast Education and Library Board in association with the other four Boards and in partnership with the Children's Law Centre placed an advertisement in the local press on 11 Sept-

ember 2001 for applicants for this post. Interviews took place on 9 October 2001. Related recruitment processes are therefore ongoing.

- (b) The funding for this two year appointment is £60,000.
- (c) The Department was fully involved in the discussion leading to the decision to fund this post and is satisfied that it raised no issues in relation to the propriety and regularity of the expenditure.

Appointment of Advisory Teacher

Mr Dalton asked the Minister of Education, pursuant to AQO 291/01, whether the proposal for the appointment of an advisory teacher had the support of the Executive Committee.

(AQW 608/01)

Mr M McGuinness: This matter fell entirely within my responsibility as Minister for Education.

Advisory Teacher: Children's Law Centre

Mr Dalton asked the Minister of Education, pursuant to AQO 291/01, what use he intends to make of the human rights information and learning materials produced by the advisory teacher working in the Children's Law Centre.

(AQW 609/01)

Mr M McGuinness: The main duties of the advisory teacher working in the Children's Law Centre will be to develop human rights information and training materials. These will be used to provide training for adults in the education system in respect of education law, policy and practice.

Appointment of Teachers: Human Rights Awareness

Mr Dalton asked the Minister of Education, pursuant to AQO 291/01, to identify the five teachers, including their normal place of employment, who are to assist in raising awareness of human rights issues in post-primary schools.

(AQW 610/01)

Mr M McGuinness: As the recruitment process has just commenced — an advertisement was in the local press on 23 October — I am unable to provide the information requested.

Appointment of Advisory Teachers

Mr Dalton asked the Minister of Education, pursuant to AQO 291/01, whether the appointment of five teachers to assist in raising awareness of human rights issues in post-primary schools had the support of the Executive Committee.

(AQW 611/01)

Mr M McGuinness: The decision to support the appointment of these teachers was one that fell entirely within my responsibilities as Minister for Education.

Conditions of Pay & Service for Teachers

Mr Kennedy asked the Minister of Education what progress has been made regarding an independent enquiry into pay levels, salary structure and conditions of service of teachers, principals and vice-principals. (AQW 653/01)

Mr M McGuinness: Although agreement was reached between both sides of the negotiating committee on a general 3.7% pay increase from 1 April, with higher increases for teachers beginning their careers, a settlement has not been reached on teachers' claim for an independent inquiry into pay and conditions of service. I agreed, therefore, to meet separately with both sides of the negotiating committee to discuss teachers' claim and management's option of a joint review. Unfortunately, I have had to reschedule the meetings due to other unavoidable commitments. The meetings have been rearranged for 13 December.

ICT Funding

Mr M Murphy asked the Minister of Education to detail the level of funding provided to schools to further his information communication technology (ICT) strategy. (AQW 654/01)

Mr M McGuinness: Funding of £13.81 million has been made available for the ICT training of teachers, of which £10.81 million is from the New Opportunities Fund. Schools have also been provided with £20 million worth of laptop computers and digital projectors to support the training. A further £15.8 million has been made available to enhance the electrical and data cabling circuits in schools, and £16 million to implement the Classroom 2000 – managed services in small primary schools over the next eight months.

Further investments will be made over the next year on completion of the negotiations of the contracts for the remaining primary schools and for special and secondary schools. This significant investment is additional to the schools' computer-based administration systems and the NINE Connect Internet services, which are already in place. This expenditure has been managed centrally in order to minimise the bureaucratic burden on schools so that they can concentrate on the educational use of ICT.

EMPLOYMENT AND LEARNING

Official Engagements: 7 November 2001

Mr Hilditch asked the Minister for Employment and Learning to list his official engagements for Wednesday 7 November 2001. (AQW 536/01)

The Minister for Employment and Learning (Dr Farren): On 7 November 2001, I undertook the following official engagements:

- attended tourism sectoral meeting of the North/ South Ministerial Council, which included the launch of Tourism Ireland's marketing plans;
- meeting with school and further education principals from the north-west to discuss various issues concerning the relationship between secondary schools and the further and higher education sectors; and
- undertook four media interviews regarding the Programme for Building Sustainable Prosperity.

ENTERPRISE, TRADE AND INVESTMENT

Provision of ADSL: West Tyrone

Mr McMenamin asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment what action he has taken to encourage British Telecom to extend Asymmetrical Digital Subscriber Line (ADSL) to the west of the province and, in particular, to West Tyrone.

(AQW 581/01)

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment (Sir Reg Empey): The provision of ADSL is a commercial decision for all telecommunications providers, including BT. The Executive are committed to working with all telecommunication operators to encourage them to extend broadband services across Northern Ireland. My Department is currently working with a number of telecommunication providers to identify appropriate and affordable technology opportunities, in particular broadband satellite services, with emphasis on meeting the needs of rural areas.

Financial Support for Businesses in Border Areas

Mr McMenamin asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment if he has any plans to introduce financial support for businesses in border areas to assist with the necessary adjustments following the introduction of the euro in the Republic of Ireland in January 2002. (AQW 585/01)

Sir Reg Empey: My Department has no plans to introduce financial support for businesses in border areas to assist them with their preparations for the euro. However, DETI financially supports and services the NI Euro Preparations Forum, whose remit is to help all local businesses, including those in border areas, prepare for the euro. Activities of the forum include

euro workshops, factsheets, seminars, case studies and newsletters, and information about the euro can be obtained through the Forum's website, www.euroforum-ni.org.uk.

Tax-Free Industrial Zone: Strabane Area

Mr McMenamin asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to consider setting up a tax-free industrial zone to encourage investment in the Strabane area. (AQW 586/01)

Sir Reg Empey: Responsibility for fiscal policy arrangements in Northern Ireland is a matter for the Chancellor of the Exchequer.

Textile Industry: West Tyrone

Mr McMenamin asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment, following the report from Kurt Salmon on the textile industry in Northern Ireland, what plans he has to support the textile industry in West Tyrone and, in particular, Strabane. (AQW 588/01)

Sir Reg Empey: The Kurt Salmon Associates (KSA) Action Plan for the Textiles and Clothing Industry was commissioned by IDB to stimulate and grow the entire Northern Ireland textiles and clothing sector. It was presented to senior industry managers, support organisations and academia on 26 January 2001. The launch of the action plan followed a series of workshops and consultation meetings with industry representatives.

The action plan identifies five key themes to be addressed by companies and industry bodies, with support from Government agencies where appropriate. A team of industrialists and legal and banking representatives was brought together to oversee the formation of a new company to drive change in the industry. This company has been formed. An operating plan is presently being prepared.

While the emphasis is on the recovery programme being industry-led, IDB continues to work closely with textile and clothing companies and the industry bodies to implement the recommendations of the KSA report. IDB already has a number of initiatives in place to develop the 5 key themes outlined in the KSA report.

The measures being taken are industry-wide and not specific to any geographic area of Northern Ireland. Their ultimate aim is to ensure the sustainable growth of the sector. Additionally, IDB continues to offer financial support to individual company activity. Companies in all parts of the province are being encouraged to bring forward investment projects that address the KSA action themes.

Advance Factory in Strabane

Mr McMenamin asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment if he has any plans to construct an advance factory in Strabane to attract further investment. (AQW 589/01)

Sir Reg Empey: IDB is currently evaluating proposals received from developers in response to a development brief for the provision of 30,000 sq ft of new business space at Orchard Road, Strabane.

Carbon Trust

Mr Neeson asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment if he will make a statement on progress towards introducing the work and resources of the Carbon Trust to Northern Ireland. (AQW 601/01)

Sir Reg Empey: The Carbon Trust, a UK-wide body, was launched in April 2001 with the support and involvement of the devolved Administrations. My Department represents Northern Ireland's interests in this area and the director of scientific services from the Industrial Research and Technology Unit sits as a non-executive director on the Carbon Trust Board.

As a result of the establishment of the Carbon Trust and the introduction of the Climate Change Levy, Northern Ireland has access to financial resources of approximately £1.4million per annum.

The work of the Carbon Trust in Northern Ireland is being taken forward in conjunction with the Industrial Research and Technology Unit. Officials in the Industrial Research and Technology Unit have prepared a strategic action plan, which was approved by the Board of the Carbon Trust in July 2001, for utilising this funding.

Vehicle Hire Companies

Mrs I Robinson asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to list the names of Northern Ireland private vehicle hire companies that have gone out of business since January 2000. (AQW 603/01)

Sir Reg Empey: The names of Northern Ireland private vehicle hire companies that have gone out of business since January 2000 are as follows:

- County Car Hire (N.I.) Limited

(Date of winding-up 22/6/00)

Hiring of Private Vehicles

Mrs I Robinson asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to list the names of Northern

Ireland companies whose business includes the hiring of private vehicles to members of the public.

(AQW 604/01)

Sir Reg Empey: It is not possible to provide the names of businesses involved in the hiring of private vehicles, as any information pertaining to individual undertakings collected by the Department under the Statistics of Trade and Employment (NI) Order 1988 must remain confidential.

For information, the latest figures from the September 1999 Census of Employment showed that there were 108 businesses and 730 employee jobs involved in the hiring of private vehicles.

In this answer the hire of private vehicles includes 'Renting of automobiles', 'Renting of buses and coaches' and 'Renting of other land transport equipment'.

Gas Pipeline: West Tyrone

Mr McMenamin asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment if he has any plans to extend the gas pipeline from Derry City Council area to West Tyrone.

(AQW 612/01)

Sir Reg Empey: At present there are no plans to extend the gas pipeline to West Tyrone. Any further expansion of the gas network will be dependent on the private sector initiating projects.

Promotion of Tourism: West Tyrone Area

Mr McMenamin asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment what plans he has for the promotion of tourism in West Tyrone, the Sperrins and the Strabane area.

(AQW 615/01)

Sir Reg Empey: The Northern Ireland Tourist Board (NITB) supports walking, cycling and angling promotions for the area and markets the Sperrins banner on its website and in its Northern Ireland regional guide.

With NITB support a public/private partnership covering the council areas of Strabane, Omagh, Magherafelt and Cookstown has been set up. This body will play a major role in the future development and promotion of tourism in the area and is also working with the neighbouring Derry Visitor and Convention Bureau producing a regional angling guide for the whole Foyle system. It is anticipated that funding bids to support these activities will be submitted to the relevant EU Peace and Reconciliation Programmes.

Car Hire Firms

Mr Shannon asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment how many car hire firms are

operating in Northern Ireland in each of the last three years.

(AQW 619/01)

Sir Reg Empey: The latest available figures on the number of car hire firms operating in Northern Ireland comes from the September 1999 Census of Employment. At that date there were 41 businesses involved in car hire. It is not possible to extend this analysis to each of the last three years.

Quality of Car Hire Services: County Down

Mr Shannon asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment what steps are the Northern Ireland Tourist Board taking to ensure that a quality car hire service is available for tourists in the County Down area.

(AQW 621/01)

Sir Reg Empey: While NITB retains a list of car hire firms in Northern Ireland, it has no mandate to certify or regulate the car hire industry, nor does it have any influence on the commercial operations of individual companies or on the rates that they set for individual customers. It has, however, met with representatives of the sector to suggest setting up a representative body for the industry in Northern Ireland and will work with this body to ensure high standards of service and competitiveness within the industry.

Petrol Retail Industry: Strabane Area

Mr McMenamin asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to outline his plans to help alleviate the crisis faced by the petrol retail industry in the north west and particularly the Strabane area.

(AQW 622/01)

Sir Reg Empey: Fuel excise duty is a reserved matter and therefore not the responsibility of my Department. However, I have made various representations to HM Treasury and HM Customs & Excise on that issue and also on the matter of illicit fuel, highlighting their impact on petrol retailers in Northern Ireland, particularly in border areas like Strabane.

Customs & Excise officials point out that, since September 2000, there has been a four fold increase in resources in Northern Ireland devoted to tackling oil frauds. Their initial analysis suggested that progress is being made with a doubling of fuel and tripling of vehicles seized in 2000/01 compared with the previous year.

Payments Due to Repairs to the Electricity Network

Mr Hilditch asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment what compensation is available

for the business community as a result of lost trade due to NIE repairs. (AQW 631/01)

Sir Reg Empey: NIE is legally required to make the following payments to non-domestic customers for breaches of specified performance standards related to repairs to the electricity network:

- (a) £50, on receipt of a claim, if it fails to give a customer at least 3 days notice of a planned interruption of supply for purposes of essential maintenance to the network;
- (b) £25 if it fails to replace, within 3 hours on any working day (or 4 hours on any other day), a main fuse which has operated so as to disconnect a customer's supply; and
- (c) £125 if it fails to reconnect a customer's supply within 24 hours following a failure or fault, and further payments of £25 for each 12 hour period thereafter.

The company is exempted from making payment where failure to meet a performance standard is due to circumstances outside its control.

Redundancies: East Antrim

Mr Hilditch asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to detail the number of job losses in the current financial year in the constituency of East Antrim. (AQW 632/01)

Sir Reg Empey: It is not currently possible to provide information on redundancies for parliamentary constituencies. However, between 1 April 2001 to 9 November 2001, there were 3,279 redundancies in Northern Ireland confirmed to the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment. Of these 1,218 were in the Carrickfergus, Islandmagee, Larne and Newtownabbey Job Centre Areas, which are within the East Antrim Parliamentary Constituency Area.

Redundancies at Shorts Bombardier

Mr Shannon asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to detail (a) the number of composite and fuselage employees at Shorts Bombardier in comparison to those employed at Bombardier Montreal and (b) the likely impact that recent redundancies will have on both workforces. (AQW 641/01)

Sir Reg Empey:

(a) It is not possible to make a proper comparison as the roles of the two facilities are different. Bombardier in Belfast is the centre of excellence within the group for the design and manufacture of airline fuselages, engine nacelles and composite structures. Bombardier's Montreal facilities specialise in the final integration

and completion of the regional jet family and the Challenger business aircraft

(b) Bombardier has stated that 2,005 employees in Montreal and 480 in Belfast will be laid off before the end of the year. A further 2,700 in the aerospace division will be notified as market conditions dictate in the new fiscal year. It is expected that over half of the 2,700 job losses would be in Belfast.

Workforce at Shorts Bombardier

Mr Shannon asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to detail the breakdown of the workforce at Shorts Bombardier in terms of (a) age and (b) experience. (AQW 643/01)

Sir Reg Empey: This information is confidential to the company and it would be inappropriate for me to disclose it.

Government Assistance: Shorts Bombardier

Mr Shannon asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to detail the level of assistance given to Shorts Bombardier in each year from 1989-2001. (AQW 644/01)

Sir Reg Empey: Direct Government assistance to Bombardier from 1989/90 to 2000/01 is detailed below:

Financial Year	Assistance
1989/90	£5.7m
1990/91	£23.0m
1991/92	£21.8m
1992/93	£32.5m
1993/94	£24.3m
1994/95	£15.0m
1995/96	£11.7m
1996/97	£6.1m
1997/98	£6.2m
1998/99	£4.1m
1999/00	£7.5m
2000/01	£8.4m
Total	£166.3m

Shorts Bombardier

Mr Shannon asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment if he has any agreement with Shorts Bombardier to retain the composite and fuselage technical section in Belfast. (AQW 645/01)

Sir Reg Empey: The terms and conditions of assistance to Bombardier and any other client company are a matter of commercial confidentiality between the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment and

the company. Bombardier has, however, made it clear that it will continue to retain a strong design and manufacturing capability in Belfast.

ENVIRONMENT

British Midlands Move to Belfast City Airport

Mrs E Bell asked the Minister of the Environment what assessment he has made of the consequences of British Midlands moving its flights from Belfast International to Belfast City in terms of noise levels and disturbance to local residents; and to make a statement.

(AQO 367/01)

The Minister of the Environment (Mr Foster): It will help to answer this question if I explain the background to development at the Belfast City Airport.

Belfast City Airport was established at this location in 1938, but did not begin commercial transport operations until 1983. The extent of growth of the airport after 1983 and its implications for the environment formed part of the considerations during the preparation of the Belfast Harbour Local Plan 1990–2005 prepared under the auspices of the Belfast Urban Area Plan.

The public inquiry into the objections to the Harbour Plan examined a number of concerns relating to the airport resulting in amendments to policies, a commitment to monitoring and proposed operational constraints to maintain the character of the airport as a regional facility. A planning agreement was attached to an approval for an extension to the arrivals lounge and arrivals waiting room (Ref: Z/96/0550) in 1997. It is this agreement that still governs operations at Belfast City Airport.

The main purpose of the agreement was to ensure that the operations at the airport would be controlled in line with the concerns addressed at the Harbour Plan public inquiry. Its main elements included limits on the number of air transport movements in any 12 month period, limits on the number of seats on offer on scheduled flights, monitoring of noise, restrictions on the type of aircraft to be used, restrictions on night time scheduled flights and a bias in favour of approaches and take-offs over Belfast Lough.

Officials from my Department met with the Belfast City Airport authorities and were provided with an assurance that the arrival of British Midland will be accommodated, and their operations conducted, within the terms of the agreement.

Planning Applications for Single Dwellings-Co Fermanagh

Mr McHugh asked the Minister of the Environment, in respect of planning applications submitted for single dwellings in rural areas of Co Fermanagh between 1997 to date, to detail the number of applications (a) refused after initial opinion (b) granted following site meetings (c) granted after management board referrals (d) granted after appeal and (e) that were withdrawn.

(AQW 577/01)

Mr Foster: The information requested is not readily available, and could only be obtained at disproportionate cost to my Department.

Areas of Special Scientific Interest and Special Protection Areas - Outer Newtownards Area

Mr Shannon asked the Minister of the Environment what plans he has to consult local people, landowners, farmers and elected representatives regarding the designation of areas of special scientific interest (ASSI) and special protection areas (SPA) for the outer Newtownards area.

(AQW 617/01)

Mr Foster: My Department is currently consulting owners and occupiers about the designation of an area of special scientific interest (ASSI) on the outer Ards coast. Officials in Environment and Heritage Service are trying to visit every landowner that will be affected by the ASSI in order to explain the implications of the designation. These landowners will also be informed about the proposal to classify the outer Ards coast as a special protection area (SPA) under the EC Birds Directive. It qualifies for this status on account of several overwintering bird species.

My officials have also made contact with both Ards and North Down Borough Councils and have offered presentations to elected members in advance of the designations being made. A presentation was recently made to councillors from the outer Ards area.

I expect the ASSI to be declared within a few weeks. All owners, occupiers and other interested parties will be notified about the ASSI and the proposal to further designate the site as an SPA. A period of three months will be allowed for representations to be made on the scientific justifications.

Depending on whether there are any substantial and valid objections, I hope to be able to announce the classification of the SPA before the end of March 2002, to coincide with the confirmation of the ASSI.

Areas of Special Scientific Interest and Special Protection Areas - Outer Newtownards Area

Mr Shannon asked the Minister of the Environment when decisions will be made regarding the designation of areas of special scientific interest (ASSI) and special protection areas (SPA) for the Irish Sea side of Strangford Lough and outer Newtownards area. (AQW 625/01)

Mr Foster: My Department is currently consulting owners and occupiers about the designation of an area of special scientific interest (ASSI) on the outer Ards coast. Officials in Environment and Heritage Service are trying to visit every landowner that will be affected by the ASSI in order to explain the implications of the designation. These landowners will also be informed about the proposal to classify the outer Ards coast as a special protection area (SPA) under the EC Birds Directive. It qualifies for this status on account of several overwintering bird species.

My officials have also made contact with both Ards and North Down Borough Councils and have offered presentations to elected members in advance of the designations being made. A presentation was recently made to councillors from the outer Ards area.

I expect the ASSI to be declared within a few weeks. All owners, occupiers and other interested parties will be notified about the ASSI and the proposal to further designate the site as an SPA. A period of three months will be allowed for representations to be made on the scientific justifications.

Depending on whether there are any substantial and valid objections, I hope to be able to announce the classification of the SPA before the end of March 2002, to coincide with the confirmation of the ASSI.

Planning Legislation

Mrs E Bell asked the Minister of the Environment what steps are being taken to introduce legislation to empower individuals or businesses who object to planning applications; and to make a statement.

(AQO 368/01)

Mr Foster: I have no plans to change existing legislation in this particular respect. Procedures and arrangements are already in place within the planning system to assist third parties to make representations, lodge objections and challenge decisions. These include the neighbour notification scheme, public advertisement of applications, district council consultation, Article 31 public inquiries for major applications, the availability of judicial review and the ability to refer matters to the Parliamentary Commissioner for Administration. There are also opportunities for third parties

to contribute to the preparation of development plans and the development of planning policies.

On 1 November 2001 my Department announced a number of administrative measures aimed at improving overall accessibility to the planning process and enhancing an open and transparent process. These include enhanced access to the planning application file; the public availability of all representations including objections and consultation responses; provision of additional information on disputed facts; public availability of council planning application schedules; additional information on applications deferred by council; and the provision of reasons relating to planning application decision notices.

I have examined the case for introducing third party appeals and considered carefully the benefits and costs of such a change in planning policy.

The results of this examination suggest that the introduction of third party appeals would add delay and uncertainty to the planning process and would have significant resource implications for both the Planning Service and the Planning Appeals Commission.

I will, however, be keeping policy on this matter under review.

Mixed Oxide Plant at Sellafield

Mr McGrady asked the Minister of the Environment what discussions he has had with his ministerial counterparts in Great Britain concerning the commissioning of the Mixed Oxide Plant at Sellafield, and to make a statement. (AQO 353/01)

Mr Foster: I have as yet had no discussions with my Ministerial counterparts in Great Britain on the commissioning of the Mixed Oxide (MOX) Plant at Sellafield.

I acknowledge the concerns that have been expressed about a range of potential safety risks from the operation of the MOX Plant. As I said in my 30 October letter to the member, my officials had written to their counterparts in the Department of the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (DEFRA) to seek confirmation that all relevant risks were fully taken into account in the MOX decision. DEFRA's reply has just been received this morning and I have asked officials to consider its terms and to provide advice. I will, of course, wish to be fully satisfied that Northern Ireland's interests are sufficiently protected. As you know, neither I nor my Department have any jurisdiction over the operation of the Sellafield Plant. The decision to approve the MOX Plant was taken jointly by the Secretary of State for the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs and the Secretary of State for Health.

However, before British Nuclear Fuels Limited (BNFL) can begin operations at the MOX Plant, it is required by the terms of the nuclear site licence for Sellafield to obtain the consent of the Health and Safety Executive's Nuclear Installations Inspectorate to the introduction of plutonium into the plant.

I will write to the Member when I have had an opportunity to consider the DEFRA reply and the advice of officials.

Dumping in the Irish Sea

The Lord Kilclooney asked the Minister of the Environment if he has received an application from Laganside Development Corporation to allow dumping in the Irish Sea and, if so, to detail the tonnage and description of material and to give his assessment of the likely impact it will have on navigation and the fishing industry; and to make a statement.

(AQO 351/01)

Mr Foster: My Department's Environment and Heritage Service (EHS) has received an application from the Laganside Corporation for the sea disposal of 30,000 cubic metres of dredged material from the impounded tidal stretch of the River Lagan. This application is being determined under Part II of the Food and Environment Protection Act 1985. In arriving at its determination of this application, EHS must be satisfied that sea disposal is the best practicable environmental option.

I understand that the proposed disposal site for this material is at a designated disposal site in the North Channel, which was recently used by Belfast Harbour Commissioners for the disposal, under licence, of dredged material.

As is the case for all applications under this Act, EHS has consulted several bodies including the Fisheries Division of the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development and the Maritime and Coastguard Agency. My Department is currently considering the responses received to date. However, not all responses have yet been received. Accordingly, no decision has been taken as to whether a sea disposal licence will be granted.

Best Value: District Council Services

Mr Ford asked the Minister of the Environment if he has any plans to change the proposed best value framework for improving transparency and accountability of district council services. (AQO 355/01)

Mr Foster: As the Member recognises, this Bill is designed to promote transparency, accountability and consistency in the use of council resources and in the provision of local services to council residents and ratepayers.

I have already amended my original legislative proposals in response to representations made during consultation. As a result, the Bill has been reduced from 19 clauses to 11. The truncated Bill has now passed to Committee Stage. My objectives throughout have been to create arrangements that will deliver transparency and accountability for council residents and ratepayers and which are proportionate in not imposing excessive workload on district councils. The Bill establishes a framework that would engage local people in consultation and would afford district councils adequate flexibility of approach. Crucially, it makes provisions that would give ratepayers and residents assurance that the best value process is transparent and subject to independent audit. I believe that the Bill strikes the necessary balance. I would be disappointed if it were to be amended in ways that deprived council residents and ratepayers of the information and independent assurance to which I believe they are entitled.

Wind Farm: Limavady

Mr Douglas asked the Minister of the Environment, with reference to planning application B/2000/0118/F, what assessment he has made of the environmental statement submitted in respect of the proposed wind farm at Altahullion Hill, Drum, Limavady.

(AQO 371/01)

Mr Foster: An Environmental Statement was received for an application for a wind farm development at Altahullion Hill, Drum, Limavady on 22 May 2000, and advertised on 6 June 2000. It was assessed against all prevailing planning policies and guidelines, including those laid down in the Planning Environmental Impact Assessment Regulations Northern Ireland 1999. My officials also consulted widely on the Statement.

Following the initial round of consultations, my officials sought clarification on a number of points from the applicant, and reconsulted with the appropriate agencies. Consultation responses indicated that the proposal could be approved with conditions and informatics. My Department's consideration also took into account representations made by objectors.

Both the planning application and the Environmental Statement were discussed by Limavady Borough Council on 2 November 2000. Comments received from the Council on 7 November were generally in support of the proposal. On 25 June 2001, an opinion to approve this application and an associated application for an overhead power line to connect the wind farm to the National Grid, was presented to the council.

I understand that at a special meeting of the council's planning committee on 13 August 2001, chaired by

the Member, the committee resolved by 9 votes to 2 to approve both applications.

I am satisfied that this proposal and accompanying Environmental Statement have been very comprehensively assessed by my Department. They have also been the subject of extensive discussion and consultation with various bodies, including Limavady Borough Council. A decision notice to approve has issued, dated 5 November 2001.

FINANCE AND PERSONNEL

Official Engagements: 7 November 2001

Mr Hilditch asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel to list his official engagements for Wednesday 7 November 2001. (AQW 537/01)

The Minister of Finance and Personnel (Mr Durkan): I met with Departmental officials to discuss:

- Review of Office Accommodation and the policy on Dispersal of Civil Service Jobs
- Review of Rating Policy.

Noble Indicators

Mrs I Robinson asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel what assessment he has made of the Noble indicators, in terms of levels of accuracy and fairness, particularly towards disadvantaged rural groups, and if he has any plans to change the indicators.

(AQW 568/01)

Mr Durkan: The Multiple Deprivation Measures for Northern Ireland were developed by Mike Noble following an inclusive consultation process. The underlying indicators were chosen to provide a comprehensive and consistent assessment of deprivation across both urban and rural areas. They are considered to provide more direct and therefore more reliable measures of deprivation and are based on the most up-to-date information available at the time. The measures are designed to respond flexibly to the range of need in both urban and rural areas. They are acknowledged widely as an improvement on previous approaches and there are no plans to change them.

Ground Rents Act 2001

Mr Beggs asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel when he intends to bring the Ground Rents Act 2001 into operation. (AQW 569/01)

Mr Durkan: The Consultation process has now been completed and the Ground Rents Scheme should be operational by March 2002.

GAP Funding re Peace II

Dr Birnie asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel if the recent arrangements to extend the gap funding allocated by the EU Special Support Programme for Peace & Reconciliation makes provision for those groups who did not apply for gap funding when it first became available. (AQW 570/01)

Mr Durkan: On 5 October I announced that the existing arrangements for funding provided to projects under the PEACE II Programme from last April to the end of October would be extended for a further three months to the end of January next year to assist projects in the community and voluntary sector which are already in receipt of gap funding. These arrangements were extended in recognition of the fact that it will be some weeks before applications are processed and funds are allocated to projects on the ground. These new arrangements do not make provision for those groups who did not apply for the gap funding when it first became available.

Full applications under the Peace II Programme will be open to any project or group whether in receipt of gap funding or not. Some Departments and intermediary funding bodies have already issued calls for projects and others plan to do so over the coming weeks. Funds should be awarded to projects from December/January onwards.

Aggregates Tax

Mrs I Robinson asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel to outline (a) any discussions with Rt Hon Paul Boateng MP, Financial Secretary HM Treasury, in respect of the impact that aggregates tax could have on quarry producers in Northern Ireland and (b) what assessment he has made on the economic consequences on the introduction of this tax. (AQW 578/01)

Mr Durkan: On the 23 October 2001, I met with the Rt Hon Paul Boateng MP, Financial Secretary HM Treasury to outline the adverse impact of the tax in Northern Ireland and discuss how the problem could be addressed. I am continuing to correspond with the Financial Secretary with the aim that some amelioration of the tax will be granted.

I believe that the introduction of the tax will not achieve the desired environmental benefits and will result in local quarrying and related industries becoming less competitive relative to their Republic of Ireland counterparts and this would result in substantial job losses.

HEALTH, SOCIAL SERVICES AND PUBLIC SAFETY

Budget Allocations: Tyrone County and Erne Hospitals

Mr Hussey asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the internal budget allocations for each year from 1991-01 at (a) Tyrone County Hospital and (b) the Erne Hospital.

(AQW 340/01)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety (Ms de Brún): The Department does not set budgets for individual hospitals or trusts. Rather it allocates resources to boards who in turn agree the level and quality of care to be delivered by local trusts and the consequent resources required. The systematic production of budgets for individual hospitals is a matter for the trusts concerned.

Sperrin Lakeland Trust has advised me that the budgets for the Tyrone County and Erne Hospitals since the trust's establishment in 1996 were as follows:

Year	Salaries & Wages		Goods & Services		Total
	Erne	TCH	Erne	TCH	
2000/01	11,608,187	10,048,879	4,017,684	3,510,120	29,184,870
1999/00	10,489,783	9,080,707	3,624,095	3,343,183	26,537,768
1998/99	9,625,595	8,332,604	2,838,959	2,493,439	23,290,597
1997/98	8,829,641	7,643,570	2,756,557	2,460,919	21,690,687
1996/97	8,118,281	7,027,765	2,681,038	2,402,627	20,229,711

Notes

The budget allocations for the Tyrone County and Erne Hospitals are based on reported management information and uses the specialty % analysis for each of the hospital sites in the financial years concerned.

The figures are inclusive of both recurring and non-recurring allocations, and include the budgets for the laboratory and other contracts which are attributable to both hospitals.

Ní shocraíonn an Roinn buiséid d'otharlanna nó d'Iontaobhais aonair. Is é an rud a dhéanann sí go ndáileann sí acmhainní ar Bhoird a chomhaontaíonn leibhéal agus cáilíocht an chúraim a sholáthróidh Iontaobhais áitiúla agus na hacmhainní iarmhartacha a bheidh de dhíth. Is ceist do na hIontaobhais dá bhfuil i gceist í socrú córasach a dhéanamh ar bhuiséid d'otharlanna aonair.

Chuir Iontaobhas Shliabh Speirín agus Thír na Lochanna in iúl dom gurbh iad seo a leanas buiséid Otharlann Chontae Thír Eoghain agus Otharlann na hÉirne ó bhunú an Iontaobhais i 1996:

Bliain	Tuarastail		Earraí & Seirbhísí		Iomlán
	An Éirne	OCTE	An Éirne	OCTE	
2000/01	11,608,187	10,048,879	4,017,684	3,510,120	29,184,870

1999/00	10,489,783	9,080,707	3,624,095	3,343,183	26,537,768
1998/99	9,625,595	8,332,604	2,838,959	2,493,439	23,290,597
1997/98	8,829,641	7,643,570	2,756,557	2,460,919	21,690,687
1996/97	8,118,281	7,027,765	2,681,038	2,402,627	20,229,711

Nótaí

Bunaítear na buiséid dáilte ar Otharlann Chontae Thír Eoghain agus ar Otharlann na hÉirne ar eolas tuairiscithe bainistíochta agus úsáideann siad an anailís speisialtachta chéatadán do gach suíomh otharlainne sna blianta airgeadais lena mbaineann siad.

Cuireann na figiúirí dálaí timthriallacha agus neamhthimthriallacha araon san áireamh, agus cuimsíonn siad na buiséid don chonradh saotharlainne agus do chonarthaí eile atá ag an dá otharlann araon.

Vacant Posts: Tyrone County and Erne Hospitals

Mr Hussey asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail all current staff shortages at (a) Tyrone County Hospital and (b) the Erne Hospital.

(AQW 348/01)

Ms de Brún: Details of the number of vacant posts in Tyrone County and Erne Hospitals at 12 October 2001 is set out below:

Staff Group	Number of Vacant Posts (Whole Time Equivalent shown in brackets)	
	Tyrone County Hospital	Erne Hospital
Medical	1 (0.50)	2 (2.00)
Nursing & Midwifery	5 (4.75)	5 (4.75)
Administrative & Clerical	1 (1.00)	1 (1.00)
Professional & Technical	1 (1.00)	1 (1.00)
Total	8 (7.25)	9 (8.75)

The Sperrin Lakeland HSS Trust has stated that they are actively seeking to fill the vacant posts, which are at various stages of the recruitment process.

Tá mionsonraí fán líon folúntas postanna in Ospidéal Contae Thír Eoghain agus in Ospidéal na hÉirne amhail an 12 Deireadh Fómhair 2001 leagtha amach thíos:

Grúpa Foirne	An Líon Folúntas Postanna A (Comhionann lánama léirithe i lúibíní)	
	Ospidéal Contae Thír Eoghain	Ospidéal na hÉirne
Míochaine	1 (0.50)	2 (2.00)
Altranais & Cnáimhseacht	5 (4.75)	5 (4.75)
Riarachán & Cléireach	1 (1.00)	1 (1.00)
Gairmiúil & Teicniúil	1 (1.00)	1 (1.00)
Iomlán	8 (7.25)	9 (8.75)

Tá sé ráite ag Iontaobhas Speirín, Tír na Lochanna go bhfuil siad gníomhach ag iarraidh na postanna folamha a líonadh, táthar ag staideanna éagsúla den phróiseas earcaíochta.

Official Engagements: 7 November 2001

Mr Hilditch asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to list her official engagements for Wednesday 7 November 2001. (AQW 538/01)

Ms de Brún: On the morning of 7 November I opened "Having Your Say", a conference organised by Praxis held in the Balmoral Conference Centre, Belfast.

In the afternoon I visited a Healthy Living Partnership.

Ar mhaidin an 7 Samhain, d'oscail mé comhdháil "Ag Fáil Do Chead Cainte" a eagraíodh ag Praxis agus a tionóladh in Ionad Comhdhála Balmoral, Béal Feirste.

Sa tráthnóna, thug mé cuairt ar Pháirtíocht Mhaireachtaíil Shláintiúil.

Fire Authority Appointments

Mr Berry asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety was her equality impact assessment met when appointing the chairman and vice-chairman of the Fire Authority. (AQW 541/01)

Ms de Brún: Equality impact assessments are not carried out on specific public appointments, but I am satisfied that the public appointments process used by my Department both generally and in the specific case of the appointment of the chair and vice-chair of the Fire Authority complies fully with the guidance of the Office of the Commissioner for Public Appointments.

Ní dhéantar measúnú tionchair ar chomhionannas ar cheapacháin phoiblí ar leith, ach tá mé sásta go ndéantar próiseas na gceapachán poiblí úsáidte ag an Roinn go ginearálta agus i gcás cheapadh Chathaoirleach agus Leas-Chathaoirleach an Údaráis Dóiteáin, go ndéantar go hiomlán de réir treoir Oifig an Choimisinéara um Cheapacháin Phoiblí é.

Fire Authority Appointments

Mr Berry asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety if the procedure to appoint public representatives to the Fire Authority has changed to include an interview as part of the selection process. (AQW 542/01)

Ms de Brún: The Fire Services (Amendment) Order 1998, which came in to force from 1 October 2001, provides all district councils with an equal opportunity to nominate for membership of the board. Accordingly, each district council was asked for nominations resulting in 26 nominations for 8 places. The Commissioner for Public Appointments' advice was that interviews of the 26 nominees would be the fairest and most appropriate way of assessing the suitability of these nominees for appointment.

Interviews for the eight district council members have now concluded and I will make an announcement on who they will be as soon as possible.

District council appointees by the previous sponsoring Department of the Fire Authority, the then Department of the Environment, were not interviewed as part of the selection process.

Níor chuir an roinn roimh ré a rinne urraíocht ar an Údarás Dóiteáin (An iarRoinn Comhshaoil) iarrthóirí faoi agallamh do Bhord an Údaráis ceaptha ó Mheán Fómhair 1997. Is gnáthchleachtas sa Roinn Sláinte, Seirbhísí Sóisialta agus Sábháilteachta Poiblí é áfach iarrthóirí le ceapadh d'fhorais phoiblí a chur faoi agallamh. Úsáideadh an prionsabal seo, atá ar aon dul leis an Chód Cleachtais eisithe ag an Choimisinéir um Cheapacháin Phoiblí, i gceapadh na mball nua go léir do Bhord an Údaráis Dóiteáin ó 1 Deireadh Fómhair 2001.

Maidir le hionadaithe na Comhairle Ceantair ar an Bhord, den 8 ionadaí roimhe sin, d'ainmnigh Comhairle Chathair Bhéal Feirste 4 ionadaí, agus d'ainmnigh Cumann na nÚdarás Áitiúil na 4 ionadaí eile. D'athraigh Ord (Leasú) na Seirbhísí Dóiteáin 1998, a thosaigh ag feidhmiú roimh na ceapacháin ó 1 Deireadh Fómhair, é seo chun comhdheis a thabhairt do na Comhairlí Ceantair uile ionadaithe a ainmniú do bhallraíocht an Bhoird. Mar sin de, iarradh ar gach Comhairle Ceantair ionadaithe a ainmniú agus tháinig 26 ainmniú do 8 áit as. Ba í comhairle an Choimisinéara um Cheapacháin Phoiblí go gcuirfí agallamh ar na 26 ionadaí ainmnithe mar gurbh í seo an dóigh ba chothroime agus ba chuí le hoiriúnacht na n-ainmnitheach seo do na ceapacháin a mheasúnú.

Tá na hagallaimh do na 8 Comhairleoir críochnaithe anois agus déanfaidh mé fógairt, a luaithe agus is féidir, ar na hionadaithe ceaptha.

Members of Fire Authority

Mr Berry asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the membership of the current Fire Authority. (AQW 543/01)

Ms de Brún: The board of the Fire Authority comprises of a chair, a vice-chair and 15 other members. Of the 15 other members, eight are elected representatives (councillors) appointed from nominations made by district councils. The remaining seven members are appointed from those members of the general public who have expressed an interest in being considered for public appointment, who meet the person specification for the posts and who have undergone an interview in connection with appointment to the posts.

The current membership of the Fire Authority is:

Miss Ann McLaughlin (Chair)- appointed 1 October 2001 for 4 years

Mr Patrick Bradley (Vice Chair)- appointed 1 October 2001 for 4 years

Mrs Rosemary Craig- re-appointed 1 October 2001 for 2 years

Mrs Pamela Kane- re-appointed 1 October 2001 for 2 years

Dr Sheelagh McRandal- reappointed 1 October 2001 for 2 years

Professor Jim Shields- reappointed 1 October 2001 for 2 years

Mr John Ross- reappointed 1 October 2001 for 2 years

Mr John McCosker- appointment extended for 3 months to 31 December 2001

Interviews for eight district council members have now concluded and I will make an announcement on who they will be as soon as possible.

Ar Bhord an Údaráis Dóiteáin tá Cathaoirleach, Leas-Chathaoirleach agus 15 ball eile. De na 15 ball eile, is ionadaithe tofa (comhairleoirí) iad 8 díobh ceaptha arna n-ainmniú ag Comhairlí Ceantair. Tá na 7 ball eile ceaptha ó na daoine sin sa phobal a chuir a suim in iúl sna ceapacháin phoiblí, a chomhlíon na bunriachtanais leagtha amach do na poist agus a raibh agallamh acu bainteach leis na ceapacháin do na poist.

Seo a leanas ballraíocht an Údaráis Dóiteáin i láthair na huaire:

An Iníon Ann McLaughlin (Cathaoirleach) ceaptha ar 1 Deireadh Fómhair 2001 do 4 bliain

An tUasal Patrick Bradley (Leas-Chathaoirleach) ceaptha ar 1 Deireadh Fómhair 2001 do 4 bliain

Rosemary Bean Craig athcheaptha ar 1 Deireadh Fómhair 2001 do 2 bliain

Pamela Bean Kaneathcheaptha ar 1 Deireadh Fómhair 2001 do 2 bliain

Dr Sheelagh McRandal - athcheaptha ar 1 Deireadh Fómhair 2001 do 2 bliain

An tOllamh Jim Shields - athcheaptha ar 1 Deireadh Fómhair 2001 do 2 bliain

An tUasal John Ross - athcheaptha ar 1 Deireadh Fómhair 2001 do 2 bliain

An tUasal John McCosker - a bhfuil a cheapachán sínte le 3 mí go dtí 31 Nollaig 2001.

Tá na hagallaimh don ochtar ball ó na Comhairlí Ceantair críochnaithe anois agus déanfaidh mé fógairt, a luaithe agus is féidir, ar na hionadaithe ceaptha.

Fire Authority Appointments: Interview Panel Membership

Mr Berry asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the members of the interview panel for the appointment of the chairman and vice-chairman of the Fire Authority.

(AQW 544/01)

Ms de Brún: Interviews for the posts of chair and vice-chair of the Fire Authority took place on 28, 29 and 31 August 2001. The interview panel, constituted in accordance with the Department's Public Appointment Procedures, was made up as follows:

Mr Don Hill – Deputy Secretary, DHSSPS, Panel Chair

Mr Jeremy Beech – former Chief Fire Officer for Kent

Dr Christine Kennedy – Independent Panel Member

Bhí agallaimh ann do na poist mar Chathaoirleach agus Leas-Chathaoirleach ar 28, 29 agus ar 31 Lúnasa 2001. Ar an phainéal agallaimh, tionólta de réir Ghnáthaimh Cheapacháin Phoiblí na Roinne:

An tUasal Don Hill – Leas-Rúnaí, RSSSSP, Cathaoirleach

An tUasal Jeremy Beech – iarPhríomh-Oifigeach Dóiteáin do Kent

Dr Christine Kennedy – Ball Neamhspleách den Phainéal

Members of Fire Authority: Attendance

Mr Berry asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail (a) the names and (b) the attendance records of all members who attended meetings of the Fire Authority over the past four years.

(AQW 545/01)

Ms de Brún: There were 73 ordinary and special meetings of the Fire Authority over the past 4 years.

Attached are the names of the authority members over that period and details of the number of meetings attended by each.

	Number of possible Authority Meetings	Actual Attendance at Meetings
Mrs J Baird	73	70
Mrs R Craig	73	56
Mr J Dillon	73	44
Mr W E Gaynor	73	66
Mr M Jones	73	27
Mr A Kane	73	39
Mrs P Kane	73	55
Mr J A Kell	73	60

	Number of possible Authority Meetings	Actual Attendance at Meetings
Mr W Keys	73	62
Mr D Lavery	38	13
Mr J McCosker	73	71
Miss A McLaughlin	73	37
Dr S McRandal	73	45
Mr F Proctor	73	51
Mr J Ross	73	64
Prof J T Shields	73	39
Mr E Smyth	28	19
Mr H Smyth*	25	5
Mr M Morgan**	7	Nil
Dr A McDonnell***	13	Nil
Mr R Cleland ****	9	Nil

* Resigned from Fire Authority 25 January 1999

** Ceased to serve on Fire Authority 31 March 1999

*** Resigned from Fire Authority 24 March 1998

**** Ceased to serve on Fire Authority 1999

Bhí 73 gnáthchruinniú agus cruinniú speisialta den Údarás Dóiteáin ann thar na 4 bliain seo a chuaigh thart.

Faoi iamh tá ainmneacha bhaill an Údaráis Dóiteáin le linn na tréimhse sin agus sonraí ar líon na gcruinnithe ar fhreastail gach ball orthu.

	Líon Chruinnithe Féideartha an Údaráis	Fíorthinreamh ar Chruinnithe
J Bean Baird	73	70
R Bean Craig	73	56
An tUasal J Dillon	73	44
An tUasal W E Gaynor	73	66
An tUasal M Jones	73	27
An tUasal A Kane	73	39
P Bean Kane	73	55
An tUasal J A Kell	73	60
An tUasal W Keys	73	62
An tUasal D Lavery	38	13
An tUasal J McCosker	73	71
An Iníon A McLaughlin	73	37
Dr S McRandal	73	45
An tUasal F Proctor	73	51
An tUasal J Ross	73	64
An tOllamh J T Shields	73	39
An tUasal E Smyth	28	19

An tUasal H Smyth*	25	5
An tUasal M Morgan**	7	Nil
Dr A McDonnell***	13	Nil
An tUasal R Cleland ****	9	Nil

* D'éirigh sé as an Údarás Dóiteáin ar 25 Eanáir 1999

** D'éirigh sé as seirbhís ar an Údarás Dóiteáin ar 31 Márta 1999

*** D'éirigh sé as an Údarás Dóiteáin ar 24 Márta 1998

**** D'éirigh sé as seirbhís ar an Údarás Dóiteáin sa bhliain 1999

Number of Fire Fighters

Mr Berry asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail, by gender and religious affiliation, the number of full time fire fighters recruited by the Fire Authority over the past three years. (AQW 549/01)

Ms de Brún: Since 1 January 1999, a total of 113 full time fire fighters were recruited by the Fire Authority. The gender and perceived religious affiliation of the recruits were Male 109; Female 4; Protestant 55; Roman Catholic 47; Other 11.

Ó 1 Eanáir 1999, d'earcaigh an tÚdarás Dóiteáin 113 comhraiceoir lánaimseartha dóiteáin san iomlán. Seo a leanas miondealú ar chineál agus ar reiligiún na n-earcach: Fir: 109; Mná: 4; Protastúnaigh: 55; Caitlicigh Rómhánacha: 47; Eile: 11.

Caesarean Births

Mr Shannon asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the number of caesarean births carried out in each health board in each of the past five years and, of these, the number carried out at the (i) mothers request and (ii) the doctor or consultant's request. (AQW 551/01)

Ms de Brún: Information on numbers of live births by Caesarean Section in each Board is detailed in the table below.

LIVE BIRTHS CARRIED OUT BY CAESAREAN SECTION BY BOARD,

1996/97 - 2000/01	EHSSB	NHSSB	WHSSB	SHSSB	Total
1996/97	1,775	981	634	848	4,238
1997/98	1,890	1,153	690	918	4,651
1998/99	2,020	1,229	724	1,081	5,054
1999/00	2,115	1,310	779	1,058	5,262
2000/01	2,040	1,265	779	1,119	5,203

Information on whether these operations were carried out at the request of the mother or doctor is not collected.

Mionléirítear eolas sa tábla thíos ar líon na mbreitheanna beo déanta le Gearradh Caesarach i ngach Bord.

BREITHEANNA BEO DÉANTA LE GEARRADH CAESARACH I NGACH BORD,

1996/97 - 2000/01	BSSSO	BSSST	BSSSI	BSSSD	Iomlán
1996/97	1,775	981	634	848	4,238
1997/98	1,890	1,153	690	918	4,651
1998/99	2,020	1,229	724	1,081	5,054
1999/00	2,115	1,310	779	1,058	5,262
2000/01	2,040	1,265	779	1,119	5,203

Ní bhailítear eolas ar cé acu a rinneadh na hobráidí seo ar iarratas na máthar nó an dochtúra nó nach ndearnadh.

Requests for Wheelchairs: EHSSB

Mr Shannon asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail (a) the number of requests for wheelchairs in the Eastern Health and Social Services Board area over the past five years and (b) the number that have been allocated.

(AQW 552/01)

Ms de Brún: Wheelchairs are ordered by Community Health and Social Services Trusts from the Regional Wheelchair Service to meet the assessed needs of individual users. The numbers of wheelchairs ordered and supplied in the relevant years are as follows:

1996/97	1997/98	1998/99	1999/2000	2000/01
3,108	2,582	1,744	1,407	1,530

Ordaíonn Iontaobhais Shláinte Pobail agus Sheirbhísí Sóisialta cathaoireacha rothaí ón tSeirbhís Réigiúnach Chathaoireacha Rotaí le riar ar riachtanais mheasúnaithe úsáideoirí aonair. Seo a leanas líon na gcathaoireacha rothaí ordaithe agus soláthraithe bainteach leis blianta thíos:

1996/97	1997/98	1998/99	1999/2000	2000/01
3,108	2,582	1,744	1,407	1,530

Wheelchair Allocations

Mr Shannon asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what action has been taken by the Eastern Health and Social Services Board area to ensure persons not allocated a wheelchair were provided with other options.

(AQW 553/01)

Ms de Brún: The mobility needs of people who do not meet the criteria for the provision of a wheelchair are assessed and individual solutions, including the provision of a wheelchair on a temporary basis, are explored.

Measúnaítear riachtanais shoghluaisteachta na ndaoine nach gcomhlíonann na critéir do sholáthar cathaoireach

rothaí agus scrúdaítear réitigh aonair, soláthar cathaoireach rothaí ar bhonn sealadach san áireamh.

Wheelchair Allocation Over Past Five Years

Mr Shannon asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the number of wheelchairs available for allocation within the Eastern Health and Social Services Board area in each of the past five years.

(AQW 554/01)

Ms de Brún: While Community Health and Social Services Trusts hold small stocks of basic wheelchairs for urgent temporary issue, wheelchairs are otherwise ordered and supplied to meet the assessed needs of individuals. The numbers ordered and supplied in the relevant years are set out in the response to AQW 552/01.

Cé go bhfuil stórtha beaga cathaoireacha bunaidh rothaí ag Iontaobhais Shláinte Pobail agus Sheirbhísí Sóisialta d'eisiúint phráinneach shealadach, ordáítear agus soláthraítear cathaoireacha rothaí le riar ar riachtanais mheasúnaithe dhaoine aonair de ghnáth. Tugtar an líon ordaithe agus soláthraithe i rith na mblianta lena mbaineann siad sa fhreagra ar AQW 552/01.

Criteria for Allocation of Wheelchairs

Mr Shannon asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the criteria used for the allocation of wheelchairs in the Eastern Health and Social Services Board area.

(AQW 555/01)

Ms de Brún: Wheelchairs are provided to people who are permanently disabled and require the use of a wheelchair on a regular basis and are assessed by an occupational therapist as meeting the agreed criteria. The agreed criteria are set out in regional eligibility criteria, issued in April 1999, and used by all health and social services boards and trusts. A copy has been placed in the Assembly Library.

Soláthraítear cathaoireacha rothaí do dhaoine atá míchumasach go buan agus a bhfuil úsáid chathaoireach rothaí ar bhonn rialta de dhíth orthu, agus a raibh measúnú déanta ag teiripe saothair orthu a dheimhnigh gur comhlíon siad na critéir aontaithe. Leagtar na critéir aontaithe amach sna Critéir Bhailíochta Réigiúnaí, eisithe in Aibreán 1999, agus úsáidte ag na Boird agus ag na hIontaobhais Shláinte agus Sheirbhísí Sóisialta uile. Cuireadh cóip díobh i Leabharlann an Tionóil.

Home Helps: Ulster Community & HSS Trust

Mr Shannon asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the number of

home helps employed by the Ulster Community & Hospital HSS Trust in each of the last three years.

(AQW 557/01)

Ms de Brún: The information is detailed in the table below.

1 March	Number Employed	Whole Time Equivalent ¹
1999	372	168
2000	339	174.3
2001	331	179.6

¹ Annual average weekly Whole Time Equivalent

Mionléirítear an t-eolas sa tábla thíos.

31 Márta	Líon Fostaithe	Coibhéis Ama Iomláin ¹
1999	372	168
2000	339	174.3
2001	331	179.6

¹ Meánchoibhéis sheachtainiúil Ama Iomláin in aghaidh na bliana.

Home Helps: Ulster Community HSS Trust

Mr Shannon asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the expenditure that has been allocated for home helps in the Ulster Community & Hospitals HSS Trust in each of the last three years.

(AQW 558/01)

Ms de Brún: Decisions on the actual amounts of expenditure necessary are made by individual trusts in line with levels of need and the resources available to them. The table below contains actual direct expenditure on home helps incurred by the Ulster Community & Hospitals HSS Trust over the last three financial years.

Financial year	Expenditure
1998/1999	£1,953,851
1999/2000	£2,100,564
2000/2001	£2,134,608

Déanann Iontaobhais aonair cinneadh ar na suimeanna caiteachais atá de dhíth de réir leibhéal an riachtanais agus na n-acmhainní atá ar fáil acu. Sa tábla thíos tá miondealú ar fhíorchaiteachas dhíreach ar Chuiditheoirí Baile tarraingthe ar Iontaobhas SSS Phobal Uladh & Otharlanna thar na trí bliana airgeadais anuas.

Bliain Airgeadais	Caiteachas
1998/1999	£1,953,851
1999/2000	£2,100,564
2000/2001	£2,134,608

Home Help: Ulster Community HSS Trust

Mr Shannon asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the number of people in the Ulster Community & Hospitals HSS

Trust who, in the current year, have had their hours of home help reduced for (a) cleaning duties and (b) food preparation.

(AQW 559/01)

Ms de Brún: For the current financial year, i.e. 1 April 2001 to 26 October 2001, the information is as follows:

- (a) 28 people have had their Home Help input in respect of cleaning duties reduced, and;
- (b) 24 people have had their Home Help input in respect of meals reduced.

Sa bhliain airgeadais seo, is í sin, 1 Aibreán 2001 go 26 Deireadh Fómhair 2001, is é seo a leanas an t-eolas uirthi:

- (a) Laghdaíodh ionchur Chuidiú Baile 28 duine maidir le dualgais ghlantóireachta, agus;
- (b) Laghdaíodh ionchur Chuidiú Baile 24 duine maidir le béilí.

Home Help: Ulster Community HSS Trust

Mr Shannon asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail her plans to ensure that the home help service provided by the Ulster Community & Hospitals HSS Trust is maintained at its current level.

(AQW 560/01)

Ms de Brún: It is a matter for the trust to determine the need for home help services in its area and to provide the appropriate level of service it can within the resources available to it. It is hoped that services can be maintained at their current level but the historic underfunding of health and social services has left health and personal social services (HPSS) in a very difficult resource position and trusts are having to manage very tightly to live within their budget.

Is ceist don Iontaobhas í cinneadh a dhéanamh ar an ghá le seirbhísí cuidiú baile ina cheantar agus leis an leibhéal cuí seirbhísí is féidir leis a sholáthar laistigh de na hacmhainní atá ar fáil aige. Táthar ag súil gur féidir seirbhísí a choinneáil ar an leibhéal atá acu faoi láthair ach d'fhág fomhaoiniú stairiúil na seirbhísí sláinte agus sóisialta na SSSP in abar iontach ó thaobh acmhainní de agus tá ar Iontaobhais stiúradh go han-dian gan a mála bheith níos mó a mbuiséid.

Ambulance Substation: Carrickfergus Borough Council Area

Mr Beggs asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail (a) the date that Northern Health and Social Services Board approved the creation of an ambulance sub-station within the Carrickfergus Borough Council area, (b) the reasons

for any delay in its establishment and (c) when it will become operational. (AQW 562/01)

Ms de Brún: The Northern Health and Social Services Board approved funding for the establishment of an ambulance sub station in the Carrickfergus area in August 2000. The delay in the sub-station becoming operational is due to difficulties in agreeing the terms of the lease for the identified site. However, the Ambulance Service is in discussion with the landlord to expedite the resolution of the outstanding issues relating to the terms of the lease.

D'fhormheas Bord Sláinte agus Seirbhísí Sóisialta an Tuaiscirt maoiniú do bhunú fostáisiúin otharcharr i gCarraig Fhearghais i mí Lúnasa 2000. Tá an mhoill ar fheidhm an fhostáisiúin de dheasca deacrachtaí i gcomhaontú téarmaí an léasa don suíomh roghnaithe. Tá an tSeirbhís Otharcharr i mbun caibidlí leis an tiarna talún áfach leis na ceistanna gan réiteach a bhaineann le téarmaí an léasa a réiteach a ghaiste agus is féidir.

Ambulance Substations

Mr Beggs asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail (a) the local district councils that have ambulance sub stations located within their area and (b) those that do not. (AQW 563/01)

Ms de Brún: There are ambulance sub-stations in Belfast City Council, Down District Council and Dungannon and South Tyrone Borough Council.

There are currently no ambulance sub-stations in the other twenty three district council areas.

Tá fostáisiúin otharcharr ann i gComhairle Chathair Bhéal Feirste, i gComhairle Ceantair an Dúin agus i gComhairle Buirge Dhún Geanainn agus Thír Eoghain Theas.

Níl fostáisiún otharcharr ar bith eile ann sna 23 comhairle ceantair eile i láthair na huaire.

Health Professionals: Encouraging Their Return to NI

Mr Beggs asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what incentives are available to encourage health professionals to return to Northern Ireland. (AQW 564/01)

Ms de Brún: Health and personal social services (HPSS) employers may at their discretion, pay supplements to current salaries if they consider that proven problems in the recruitment of certain professional staff could be addressed by the enhancement of pay. Employers may also assist with any removal and associated expenses incurred by employees as a result of taking up employment in the HPSS.

Féadann fostóirí SSSP de réir a mbreithiúnais féin airgead breise a chur leis na tuarastail a íocann siad i láthair na huaire má shíleann siad go dtiocfadh leo tabhairt faoi fhadhbanna cruthaithe in earcaíocht foirne gairmiúla ar leith le hardú pá. Féadann fostóirí cuidiú le costas aistrithe agus bainteach ar bith a fhéadann fostaithe tarraingt orthu féin de thoradh a gcuid oibre sna SSSP a íoc.

Average Expenditure Per Person

Mr Beggs asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety, pursuant to AQO 275/01 and AQW 269/01, to detail (a) the average expenditure per person in each Community Health Trust during 2000-01 and (b) the action being taken to address equity of expenditure for each Community Health Trust in 2001-02. (AQW 566/01)

Ms de Brún:

- (a) The average expenditure per person in each Community Health Trust, (including the average community expenditure in those integrated trusts providing both community and acute services), during 2000/01 is outlined in the table below.
- (b) The Department allocates funding to the health and social services boards using a capitation formula, which is designed to allocate resources fairly between boards taking account of differential need. Boards are then responsible for funding trusts to meet the costs of the services they provide. In fulfilling that responsibility they endeavour to ensure, as far as possible, that their resources are deployed equitably across their populations.

AVERAGE EXPENDITURE PER PERSON IN EACH TRUST PROVIDING COMMUNITY SERVICES –2000/01

Trust	Total Community Expenditure (£000)	Total population (estimated)	Average expenditure per person (£)
Armagh and Dungannon	36,924	102,600	360
Causeway	35,125	96,400	364
Craigavon and Banbridge	45,522	118,300	385
Down Lisburn	57,418	174,500	329
Foyle	76,528	161,718	473
Homefirst	121,573	329,400	369
Newry and Mourne	32,172	86,800	371
North and West Belfast	100,379	154,746 ⁽ⁱ⁾	649 ⁽ⁱ⁾
South and East Belfast	107,501	198,939	540
Sperrin Lakeland	47,654	118,419	402
Ulster Community and Hospitals	55,684	146,500	380

⁽ⁱ⁾ Includes expenditure for Muckamore Abbey Hospital

- (a) Léirítear meánchaiteachas an duine i ngach Iontaobhas Sláinte Pobail le linn 2000/01 sa tábla thíos, (an meánchaiteachas pobail sna hIontaobhais imeasctha a sholáthraíonn idir sheirbhísí pobail agus ghéarsheirbhísí san áireamh).
- (b) Tugann an Roinn maoiniú do na Boird Shláinte agus Sheirbhísí Sóisialta ag úsáid foirmle ceannsráithe atá leagtha amach le hacmhainní a thabhairt go cothrom do Bhoird, ag cur riachtanais éagsúil san áireamh. Tá Boird ansin freagrach as Iontaobhais a mhaoiniú le costais na seirbhísí a sholáthraíonn siad a sheasamh. Nuair a chomhlíonann siad an fhreagracht sin déanann siad iarracht le cinntiú, a mhéad agus is féidir, go dtugtar a gcuid acmhainní go cothrom dá bpobail.

MEÁNCHAITEACHAS AN DUINE I NGACH IONTAOBHAS A SHOLÁTHRAÍONN SEIRBHÍSÍ POBAIL – 2000/01

Iontaobhas	Caiteachas Iomlán Pobail (£000)	Daonra Iomlán (measta)	Meánchaiteachas an duine (£)
Ard Mhacha agus Dún Geanaínn	36,924	102,600	360
An Clochán	35,125	96,400	364
Creag na hAbhann agus Droichead na Banna	45,522	118,300	385
An Dún/Lios na gCearrbhach	57,418	174,500	329
An Feabhal	76,528	161,718	473
Homefirst	121,573	329,400	369
An tÍúr agus An Mhúrn	32,172	86,800	371
Béal Feirste Thuaidh agus Thiar	100,379	154,746 (i)	649 (i)
Béal Feirste Theas agus Thoir	107,501	198,939	540
Sliabh Speirín agus Tír na Lochanna	47,654	118,419	402
Pobal Uladh agus Otharlanna	55,684	146,500	380

(i) Caiteachas d'Otharlann Mhainistir Mhaigh Chomair san áireamh Available Beds in Acute Specialties

Dr Birnie asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what assessment has she made in relation to the average number of acute beds per 1,000 of the population in comparison with (a) the UK average and (b) the EU average. (AQW 573/01)

Ms de Brún: Meaningful comparisons are difficult to make because of differences in definition. Details of the average number of available beds in the acute specialties per 1,000 of the population, in local hospitals and those in England, Scotland and Wales, are set out in Table 1. The data relates to the 1999/00 financial year.

TABLE 1. AVERAGE AVAILABLE ACUTE BEDS PER 1000 OF THE POPULATION, 1999/00

NI	2.5
England	2.2
Scotland	2.9
Wales	3.1

The latest available information for EU countries indicates that in the 1998 calendar year, there were an average of 4.7 beds in acute care hospitals per 1,000 of the population.

Tá sé deacair comparáidí fiúntacha a dhéanamh mar gheall ar na difríochtaí sna sainmhínithe. Tá sonraí ar mheánlíon na leapacha ar fáil sna géarspeisialtachtaí an 1,000 duine den daonra, in otharlanna áitiúla agus sna hotharlanna sin i Sasana, in Albain agus sa Bhreatain Bheag, leagtha amach i dTábla 1. Baineann na sonraí leis an bhliain airgeadais 1999/00.

TÁBLA 1. MEÁNLIÓN NA NGÉARLEAPACHA AN 1000 DUINE DEN DAONRA

TÉ	2.5
Sasana	2.2
Albain	2.9
An Bhreatain Bheag	3.1

Léiríonn an t-eolas is déanaí atá ar fáil ar thíortha an AE go raibh 4.7 leaba ar an mheán in otharlanna géarchúraim an 1,000 duine den daonra sa bhliain 1998.

Number of GPs

Dr Birnie asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what assessment has she made in relation to the number of general practitioners per 1,000 of the population in comparison with (a) the UK average and (b) the EU average. (AQW 574/01)

Ms de Brún: Figures relating to 1999 show that locally we have 0.62 GPs per 1000 population, compared to an average figure for GB and here of 0.61. Data relating to the EU average are not available centrally.

Léiríonn figiúirí a bhaineann leis an bhliain 1999 go bhfuil 0.62 Gnáthdhochtúir againn go háitiúil de réir 1,000 an duine den daonra, i gcomparáid leis an mheánfhigiúr de 0.61 sa BM agus anseo. Níl sonraí a bhaineann leis an mheánfhigiúr san AE ar fáil go lárnach.

Number of Registered Drug Addicts

Mr M Robinson asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the number of people who are officially registered as drug addicts and how does this compare with the previous five years. (AQW 597/01)

Ms de Brún: The table below shows the number of registered drug addicts here each year since 1995:

Year Ending	Total number registered
31/12/2000	304
31/12/1999	306
31/12/1998	229
31/12/1997	162
31/12/1996	120
31/12/1995	96

Léiríonn an tábla thíos líon na n-andúileach cláraithe drugaí anseo gach bliain ó 1995:

Bliain ag Críochnú	Líon Iomlán Cláraithe
31/12/2000	304
31/12/1999	306
31/12/1998	229
31/12/1997	162
31/12/1996	120
31/12/1995	96

Nursing Vacancies

Mr M Robinson asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail (a) the number of nursing vacancies in each of the last three years (b) the number of current vacancies and (c) the number of current vacancies as a percentage of the total number of nursing posts available. (AQW 636/01)

Ms de Brún: Information on the number of vacancies for previous years is not held centrally.

At 31 March 2001, the latest date for which information is available, there were 506 nursing vacancies throughout the health and personal social services. This represents 3.16% of the total number of nursing posts available.

Níl eolas ar líon na bhfolúntas poist do na blianta roimh ré ar fáil go lárnach.

Ar 31 Márta 2001, an dáta is déanaí atá eolas ar fáil, bhí 506 folúntas altrachta ann ar fud na seirbhísí sláinte agus sóisialta pearsanta. Is ionann sin agus 3.16% de líon iomlán na bpost altrachta atá ar fáil.

REGIONAL DEVELOPMENT

Translink: Employees Numbers

Mr Hussey asked the Minister for Regional Development to explain the rise in numbers of Northern Ireland Railways employees against the fall in passenger

carrying over the period 1997-2001 as reported in the Translink Group Annual Review 2000-01.

(AQW 205/01)

The Minister for Regional Development (Mr P Robinson): Translink has advised that after the company was formed in 1995 essential economies resulted in the reduction of staffing levels from 784 in 1995/96 to 668 in 1998/99, and that the increase to 711 members of staff for 2000/01 is the result of a number of the recommendations of the A D Little Strategic Safety Review and Translink's subsequent need to plan essential safety work, train staff as appropriate and monitor progress against the railway safety plan.

Translink: Employees Numbers

Mr Hussey asked the Minister for Regional Development to explain the rise in numbers of Ulsterbus employees against the fall in passenger carrying over the period 1997-2001 as reported in the Translink Group Annual Review 2000-01. (AQW 206/01)

Mr P Robinson: Translink has advised that after the company was formed in 1995 essential economies resulted in the reduction of staffing levels from 2,263 in 1995/96 to 2,138 in 1998/99. Translink has further advised that the increase to 2,233 members of staff for 2000/01 is the result of a number of factors, including the establishment of a call centre, the development and maintenance of a website, the creation of units dedicated to promoting rural transport and disability issues and the introduction of quality bus corridors.

Buses: Carrickfergus Depot

Mr Hilditch asked the Minister for Regional Development how many buses currently operate out of the Carrickfergus depot and how many of these vehicles are over five years of age. (AQW 284/01)

Mr P Robinson: Translink has advised that a total of 14 buses operate out of Carrickfergus depot. Ten are 53-seaters and four are 25-seaters. All of these vehicles are over five years old.

Regional Development Equality Scheme

Mr Hilditch asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail progress with the implementation of his Departments Equality Agenda. (AQW 502/01)

Mr P Robinson: My Department's equality scheme, setting out how it intends to fulfil its obligations under Section 75 of the Northern Ireland Act 1998 was approved by the Equality Commission on 15 February 2001.

An action plan has been drawn up to help implement the commitments in the scheme. An extensive training

programme for staff is ongoing, and work is progressing on the equality impact assessment programme set out in the scheme.

My Department has also completed an audit to establish the current provision of information on services accessible to Section 75 groups. We are now building on the evidence gained to produce good practice guidelines for making information more accessible.

Street Lighting: Balloo & Killinchy Village

The Lord Kilclooney asked the Minister for Regional Development if he will undertake to provide new street lighting between Balloo crossroads and Killinchy village as a result of additional residential development and the construction of the new community hall; and to make a statement. (AQW 503/01)

Mr P Robinson: I understand that the existing street lighting at Balloo crossroads extends to the entrance of the Balloo Cottages development on Beechvale Road. At the other end of this road, the street lighting in Killinchy extends beyond the new community hall. The unlit section of road between these locations is about 500 metres in length and is outside the 30mph speed limits. As such, that section of road is designated as 'rural' for the purposes of assessing the need for street lighting.

The Roads Service criteria for the provision of street lighting in rural areas require that:

- there must be a minimum development density of 10 dwellings or public buildings, which are used extensively after dark, in 200 metres of road; or alternatively
- the accident and traffic data for the location must indicate that street lighting is required to reduce the number of after dark personal injury accidents on the road.

The unlit section of Beechvale Road does not meet either of the above criteria. In addition, there is a footway along the entire length of Beechvale Road which acts as a pedestrian refuge. In the circumstances, my Department's Roads Service has no plans at present to provide street lighting on this stretch of road.

Free Public Transport

Mr K Robinson asked the Minister for Regional Development to outline (a) the estimated total cost of providing free public transport for both men and women aged sixty and over and (b) if such a scheme could be introduced under the New TSN objectives of the Programme for Government. (AQW 517/01)

Mr P Robinson: The annual cost of extending free travel to include men and women between the ages of 60 to 64 is currently estimated at £2.3m. More robust estimates of the likely cost will be available following the implementation of electronic ticketing in April 2002.

The aims for New TSN as outlined in the Programme for Government are to use existing resources to benefit people and areas of greatest objective social need. New TSN has a particular focus on tackling the problems of unemployment and increasing employability. The extension of free travel to both men and women aged between 60 and 64 is not seen as a priority under these New TSN guidelines.

Railway Line Between Larne Harbour and Whitehead Station

Mr Hilditch asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail the cost of the maintenance works on the railway line between Larne Harbour and Whitehead station. (AQW 520/01)

Mr P Robinson: Translink has advised that in the year ended 31 March 2001, £196,127 was spent on maintenance of the railway line between Larne Harbour and Whitehead station. Translink further advise that for this financial year to date £201,600 has been spent maintaining this section of the line.

Sea Defence System on Larne to Whitehead Railway Track

Mr Hilditch asked the Minister for Regional Development what assessment he has made of the sea defences along the railway line between Larne and Whitehead; and to make a statement. (AQW 521/01)

Mr P Robinson: Translink has advised that its entire sea defence system on track alongside tidal waters, including the track between Larne and Whitehead, was assessed by external consultants in a report prepared for Translink in December 1999 and was also assessed in the A D Little Strategic Safety Review of Northern Ireland Railways produced in March 2000. Translink consider that the sea defences between Larne and Whitehead are of a standard that allows safe use of this section of the line. The maintenance of the entire system including this section, is a major priority for Translink and is closely monitored on an ongoing basis by Translink's infrastructure department. Translink has advised that in the last 18 months it has carried out rock arming, repairs to crevices and re-pointing of masonry on this section. Rock arming entails the placing large boulders, 1-1½ ton in weight, on the sea side of the line.

Transport Strategy

Mr McGrady asked the Minister for Regional Development to make a statement on the transportation strategy in Northern Ireland. (AQO 354/01)

Mr P Robinson: My Department is currently preparing a 10-year draft regional transportation strategy which will identify strategic transportation priorities for Northern Ireland over the next decade.

The regional transportation strategy is an integral feature of the Regional Development Strategy that was formulated by the Assembly in September. The transportation vision is 'to have a modern, sustainable, safe transportation system which benefits society, the economy and the environment and which actively contributes to social inclusion and everyone's quality of life'.

During the development of the strategy there has been extensive consultation on the priority that should be attributed to different strategic transportation initiatives. My officials have assessed the relative contributions of different initiatives towards our objectives of improving the economy, accessibility, safety, environment and integration within transport and with other Government policies.

This resulted in emerging strategies being presented to a major working conference on 28 September.

My officials are currently considering the feedback from this conference and aim to publish the draft regional transportation strategy in January 2002.

SOCIAL DEVELOPMENT

Improvement Scheme: Monkstown Estate

Mr Hilditch asked the Minister for Social Development to give his assessment of the Housing Executive renovation scheme currently taking place in Monkstown Estate, Newtownabbey, and to make a statement. (AQW 583/01)

The Minister for Social Development (Mr Dodds): A multi-element improvement scheme to upgrade among other things, heating, bathrooms and kitchens, is being carried out in the area. However, the scheme has been delayed because the contractor withdrew from the site, following the fatal shooting of one of his employees. This has necessitated a retendering process for the scheme. New tenders have now been received and it is anticipated that the scheme will restart in January 2002.

Housing Executive Improvement Scheme: Carrickfergus

Mr Hilditch asked the Minister for Social Development to give his assessment of the current renovation scheme affecting Housing Executive properties in the Northlands, Salia Avenue, Drumhoy Drive and Ederny Walk areas of Carrickfergus. (AQW 584/01)

Mr Dodds: A multi-element improvement scheme to upgrade among other things, heating, bathrooms and kitchens, is being carried out in the areas concerned. However, the scheme has been delayed, due to the contractor's poor standards and slow progress. The contractor has now withdrawn from the scheme and a new contractor has been appointed. It is anticipated that the scheme will be completed by February 2002.

Housing Executive Plans: Glenfield Estate, Carrickfergus

Mr Hilditch asked the Minister for Social Development to give his assessment of the Housing Executive's future plans for Glenfield Estate, Carrickfergus; and to make a statement. (AQW 590/01)

Mr Dodds: The purpose of the Housing Executive's plans for the Glenfield Estate, which were approved by my Department in August 2000, is to remove the blight of vacant dwellings and create lettable stock within the estate. The proposals involve a mixture of demolition and environmental improvements which will help to enhance its physical appearance and consolidate the good housing thus contributing to the development of a more sustainable community.

It is anticipated that work will start within the next few months.

Child Maintenance Calculations

Mr Shannon asked the Minister for Social Development what action is he taking to ensure claims through the Child Support Agency include all travelling distances in the calculation of maintenance assessments for non-resident fathers. (AQW 618/01)

Mr Dodds: The current system for calculating child maintenance is based on a formula, laid down in legislation, which takes into account each parent's income and essential outgoings. Current child support regulations include a broad based allowance in respect of travel to work costs where parents who work for an employer travel long distances for which they do not receive help. Where the straight line distance between a parent's home and place of work, multiplied by the number of journeys normally made, is in excess of 150 miles a week, a flat rate allowance of ten pence is made for each additional mile. The allowance is intended to

be understandable, simple to administer and to represent a useful contribution to expenses in cases where long distance travel is involved. It is not intended to apply in all cases, but rather to provide additional help for parents who are likely to have high travel costs.

Housing Association: Construction of Homes

Mr Shannon asked the Minister for Social Development to detail the number of houses that housing associations have built in each borough council area in each of the last three years. (AQW 620/01)

Mr Dodds: My Department collects information from registered housing associations on a financial year basis. I have listed on the chart below the number of self-contained units provided by housing associations including the Northern Ireland Co-ownership Housing Association in each of the last three financial years by district council area.

SELF CONTAINED UNITS PROVIDED BY HOUSING ASSOCIATIONS (INC NICHA)

District Council Area	1998/1999	1999/2000	2000/2001	Total
Derry	161(23)	176 (15)	181 (18)	518 (56)
Limavady	39 (14)	68 (11)	40 (4)	147 (29)
Coleraine	73 (59)	49 (49)	130 (41)	252 (149)
Ballymoney	31 (9)	30 (10)	26 (10)	87 (29)
Moyle	28 (4)	55 (1)	5 (5)	88 (10)
Larne	66 (17)	8 (8)	11 (11)	85 (36)
Ballymena	37 (15)	71 (35)	70 (21)	178 (71)
Magherafelt	18 (18)	36 (7)	10 (10)	64 (35)
Cookstown	13 (13)	18 (8)	16 (16)	47 (37)
Strabane	20 (5)	16 (5)	64 (2)	100 (12)
Omagh	45 (1)	79(0)	17 (2)	141 (3)
Fermanagh	27 (9)	61(6)	56 (9)	144 (24)
Dungannon	1(0)	46 (1)	1(1)	48 (2)
Craigavon	19 (19)	126 (30)	44 (16)	189 (65)
Armagh	26 (4)	47 (4)	16 (5)	89 (13)
Newry & Mourne	47 (5)	124 (3)	3 (3)	174 (11)
Banbridge	53 (8)	3 (3)	7 (5)	63 (16)
Down	13 (13)	41 (10)	122 (12)	176 (35)
Lisburn	118 (33)	44 (44)	326 (29)	488 (106)
Antrim	54 (27)	31 (31)	15 (14)	100 (72)
Newtownabbey	113 (35)	72 (43)	81 (36)	266 (114)
Carrickfergus	69 (36)	75 (44)	97 (38)	241 (118)
North Down	135 (84)	84 (84)	131 (74)	350 (242)
Newtownards	84 (43)	69 (60)	31 (31)	184 (134)
Castlereagh	9 (9)	73 (15)	24 (24)	106 (48)

Belfast	380 (75)	400 (60)	73 (73)	853 (208)
Total	1679 (578)	1902 (587)	1597 (510)	5178 (1675)

Tenancy Agreements

Mr Shannon asked the Minister for Social Development if tenancy agreements carried over from Housing Associations to the Housing Executive, and vice versa, receive full discount for the period of tenancy. (AQW 626/01)

Mr Dodds: The house sales schemes operated by the Housing Executive and the housing association movement allow for periods of tenancy in either to count towards the discount and this period can help the tenant in reaching the required maximum for full discount, which is 60% for houses and 70% for flats.

Calculating Child Maintenance

Mr Shannon asked the Minister for Social Development what steps are being taken to ensure that housing costs are included in the calculation of maintenance assessments by the Child Support Agency. (AQW 627/01)

Mr Dodds: The current system for calculating child maintenance is based on a formula, laid down in legislation, which takes into account each parent's income and essential outgoings. In calculating these outgoings, legislation provides for the inclusion of reasonable housing costs, most commonly rent or mortgage costs, on the dwelling a parent normally occupies as his or her home. The agency normally allows housing costs up to a maximum of £80 per week or half of a parent's net income, whichever is the greater. There are several exceptions to this, most commonly when either parent has care of a dependent child. For every parent who cares for a dependent child, housing costs are never restricted. Similarly, non-resident parents who share their children's care or have second families face no restriction in allowable housing costs. This in practice means that the vast majority of parents have their housing costs allowed in full.

Rosebrook Grove Flats, Carrickfergus

Mr Hilditch asked the Minister for Social Development what services have been carried out to benefit owner/occupiers at the Housing Executive Rosebrook Grove complex in Carrickfergus, in each of the last five years. (AQW 629/01)

Mr Dodds: Owner-occupiers in the Rosebrook Grove flats benefit from daily maintenance and up-keep of

the property by Housing Executive staff. This includes the servicing of communal facilities as required.

In addition, the Housing Executive also carries out major schemes to the property, usually as part of a five-year maintenance programme. For example, in the 1997/98, an external cyclical maintenance scheme was carried out to repair and maintain the external fabric of the building. A further cyclical maintenance scheme is programmed for 2002.

Rosebrook Grove Flats: Carrickfergus

Mr Hilditch asked the Minister for Social Development to detail (a) the breakdown of the service charges for owner/occupiers of the Housing Executive flats at Rosebrook Grove, Carrickfergus and (b) how the charge was decided. (AQW 630/01)

Mr Dodds: The average weekly service charge for owner/occupiers in the Rosebrook Grove flats is £3.05. The services provided typically would include:

- the provision, maintenance, repair and replacement of communal lighting; maintenance and repair of all communal services, ground, hallways;
- maintenance of the external fabric of the building including doors, window frames, roofs; and
- building insurance.
- There would also be a 10% administrative fee.

The service charge was calculated on the basis of:

- maintenance and repair costs to the building;
- provision, servicing and maintenance of communal facilities and services;
- building Insurance costs;
- any scheme improvement works; and
- a 10% administration fee.

Housing Executive Tendering Procedures

Mr M Robinson asked the Minister for Social Development to detail (a) the Housing Executive's tendering process for the installation of central heating systems (b) the period of time the contracts cover (c) the names of the successful contractors and (d) the total value of the contracts awarded. (AQW 638/01)

Mr Dodds: The position is:

- a. Tendering was carried out using the European Union procedures. Tenderers submitted detailed information on quality together with tendered prices against a number of schedules, and were interviewed.
- b. It is intended that the contracts cover a minimum period of five years.
- c. The successful tenderers were The Northern Ireland Heating Company and H&A Mechanical Services.
- d. The total contract value is approximately £75 million.

NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

Friday 23 November 2001

Written Answers to Questions

AGRICULTURE AND RURAL DEVELOPMENT

Measurement of Fishing Vessels

Mrs I Robinson asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development under what authority does the Northern Ireland Fishery Harbour Authority act in boarding and measuring fishing vessels within the Northern Ireland fleet. (AQW 656/01)

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development (Ms Rodgers): The Northern Ireland Fishery Harbour Authority advise that the Authority's bye-laws permit the Authority to board and measure fishing vessels within the harbour limits for which the Authority is responsible, namely at Kilkeel, Portavogie and Ardglass. The number of recorded measurements of fishing vessels by the Authority in the last 3 years was one, in 2000. No records are available for earlier periods. Measurements are only carried out on the very rare occasion when there is a doubt about the size of the vessel for the purpose of determining harbour dues.

Measurement of Fishing Vessels

Mrs I Robinson asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to detail the number of fishing vessels that were measured by the Northern Ireland Fishery Harbour Authority in each of the past five years. (AQW 657/01)

Ms Rodgers: The Northern Ireland Fishery Harbour Authority advise that the Authority's bye-laws permit the Authority to board and measure fishing vessels within the harbour limits for which the Authority is responsible, namely at Kilkeel, Portavogie and Ardglass. The number of recorded measurements of fishing vessels by the Authority in the last 3 years was one, in 2000. No records are available for earlier periods. Measurements are only carried out on the very rare

occasion when there is a doubt about the size of the vessel for the purpose of determining harbour dues.

Fishing Vessel Licences

Mrs I Robinson asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to detail the number of fishing vessel licences which have been frozen and withdrawn in each of the past five years. (AQW 658/01)

Ms Rodgers: A total of 29 licences have been frozen during each of the past five years as follows: 5 in 1996, 8 in 1997, 5 in 1998, 10 in 1999 and 1 in 2000. No licences were withdrawn in the same period.

Illegal Fishing

Mr Shannon asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to detail the number of court cases pending in respect of illegal fishing incidents and the time scale for the completion of these court proceedings. (AQW 697/01)

Ms Rodgers: As you may be aware, the Loughs Agency of the Foyle, Carlingford and Irish Lights Commission (FCILC) is the body responsible for the conservation and protection of salmon stocks in the Foyle and Carlingford Areas. I understand that your question relates to the Loughs Agency's areas of responsibility.

The Loughs Agency currently has 31 cases pending, involving 36 people, as a result of the detection of illegal fishing during the 2001 season. These cases will come to Court over the next few months. The exact timing of Court appearances is dependent on the service of the summons and on the Courts.

Salmon Fishing: Carlingford and Foyle Loughs

Mr Shannon asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to outline if there are any plans to restrict the bag limit for catching salmon in Carlingford and Foyle Loughs. (AQW 698/01)

Ms Rodgers: As you may be aware, the Loughs Agency of the Foyle, Carlingford and Irish Lights Commission (FCILC) is the body responsible for the conservation and protection of salmon stocks in the Foyle and Carlingford areas.

As part of its conservation and protection policy, the Agency currently limits the number of salmonids retained by an angler in the Foyle and Carlingford areas to four in any one day.

This bag limit was first introduced in the Foyle area in May 1999 by the Agency's predecessor, the Foyle

Fisheries Commission. The Loughs Agency then introduced the Foyle Area and Carlingford Area (Angling) Regulations 2001 in May 2001 to extend this restriction to cover the Carlingford area.

The Loughs Agency currently has no plans to review its bag limit for anglers. However should it consider it necessary to introduce further measures to protect salmon stocks in the Foyle and Carlingford areas in the future, it may do so.

I also wish to advise you that the Agency has no plans to introduce bag limits or quota for commercial salmon fishing in the Foyle and Carlingford areas.

Fishing Licences: Foyle and Carlingford Loughs

The Lord Kilclooney asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to detail the currency in which licence fees for fishing in the Foyle and Carlingford areas will be sold in (a) Northern Ireland and (b) the Republic of Ireland during the financial year 2002 and say if there is a provision for a variation in the licence fee during 2002 if the euro and sterling exchange rates change. (AQW 734/01)

Ms Rodgers: As you may be aware, the Loughs Agency of the Foyle, Carlingford and Irish Lights Commission (FCILC) is the body responsible for the conservation and protection of salmon stocks in the Foyle and Carlingford areas.

It is the Loughs Agency's intention that customers will be able purchase licences in the currency of their choice at the Agency's Headquarters in Prehen and in its Carlingford Office. Licences sold by other distributors will be available in the currency of whichever jurisdiction the distributor is located.

I would also confirm that should there be a substantial variation in the value of sterling against the euro then the Loughs Agency would introduce a further set of regulations to redress any imbalance created. The Loughs Agency is also committed to carrying out a licence review on an annual basis, and exchange rates will form part of that review.

CULTURE, ARTS AND LEISURE

Centre of Excellence for Sports

Mr Hussey asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to detail progress on the establishment of centres of excellence for sports. (AQW 648/01)

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure (Mr McGimpsey): Centres of excellence for sports are

being provided throughout the UK under the United Kingdom Sports Institute. One such centre is currently being established in Northern Ireland at the University of Ulster, Jordanstown. Key personnel have been appointed for the development of the centre and work is expected to commence on the capital elements in 2002.

A centre of excellence for golf is also being developed at the Hilton Hotel, Templepatrick. Work is expected to start on this project next year.

Expenditure on Sport and Leisure

Mr Hussey asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to detail expenditure on sport and leisure facilities by each local district council from 1998 to date.

(AQW 649/01)

Mr McGimpsey: My Department does not have a role in providing funding for district councils and is not therefore in a position to indicate the expenditure that they have allocated to sport and leisure facility provision within their respective areas.

However, my officials have contacted the Department of the Environment, who have responsibility for district council matters, and they have provided the following figures indicating the district council spend on sport and leisure facilities during the periods you have specified.

District	1998/1999	1999/2000	2000/2001*
Antrim	1,114,976	1,401,610	1,492,974
Ards	840,338	1,462,489	1,699,723
Armagh	500,511	807,572	1,047,815
Ballymena	867,916	*1,278,294	1,385,461
Ballymoney	569,712	763,994	755,169
Banbridge	595,077	619,103	780,162
Belfast	9,187,339	10,110,833	11,349,887
Carrickfergus	443,192	827,620	827,489
Castlereagh	1,574,847	2,477,802	2,550,041
Coleraine	564,144	734,045	822,809
Cookstown	480,481	869,400	1,068,377
Craigavon	1,893,018	2,284,194	2,348,149
Derry	1,852,442	2,420,223	2,648,052
Down	861,360	1,430,151	1,407,355
Dungannon	480,785	838,444	904,466
Fermanagh	618,000	1,119,907	1,102,093
Larne	437,947	779,657	785,750
Limavady	498,350	1,103,407	1,185,233
Lisburn	2,247,833	3,323,727	3,409,445
Magherafelt	746,706	995,096	1,069,146
Moyle	96,270	255,439	271,873
Newry & Mourne	1,109,997	1,707,216	1,657,831
Newtownabbey	2,645,633	*3,919,988	3,925,690

District	1998/1999	1999/2000	2000/2001*
North Down	503,626	1,229,393	1,529,393
Omagh	752,502	1,059,784	1,134,026
Strabane	713,598	*696,611	688,944
Totals	32,196,600	44,515,999	47,847,353

* Figures have not yet been certified by Local Government Office.

Regional Centre of Excellence for Sports

Mr Gibson asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure if he will make a statement on the provision of a regional centre of excellence for sports. (AQW 709/01)

Mr McGimpsey: Centres of excellence for sports are being provided throughout the UK under the United Kingdom Sports Institute. One such centre is currently being established in Northern Ireland at the University of Ulster, Jordanstown. Key personnel have been appointed for the development of the centre and work is expected to commence on the capital elements in 2002.

EDUCATION

Resources for People with Learning Disabilities

Mr M Robinson asked the Minister of Education what resources were available for the education of people with learning disabilities in each year since 1995. (AQW 634/01)

The Minister of Education (Mr M McGuinness): Education and library boards do not identify spending on children with statements of special educational needs in nursery, primary, secondary and grammar schools separately in their accounts. Board expenditure on special schools and home tuition in the years requested was as follows:

Year	1995/96	1996/97	1997/98	1998/99	1999/00
£m.	40.6	42.9	44.3	46.6	53.2*

Figures are not yet available for 2000/01.

* unaudited figure

Teacher Training: Special Educational Needs

Mr M Robinson asked the Minister of Education to detail training currently available for teachers in relation to teaching children with special educational needs. (AQW 637/01)

Mr M McGuinness: My Department is currently supporting a two-year pilot project involving teachers undertaking the M Sc in the Teaching of Visually

Impaired Learners course at Queen's University, Belfast. It is also prepared to consider education and library board support for teachers on other mandatory post-graduate courses for teaching the hearing and visually impaired.

I understand that boards run both centrally- and school-based courses in special education and that they are currently supporting teachers undertaking the Diploma in Professional Development for Special Educational Needs Co-ordinators at Queen's University, Belfast.

Re-Employment of Retired Teachers

Mr Kennedy asked the Minister of Education to detail the number of retired teachers who have been employed to address teacher shortages, in the last twelve months, in (a) primary schools and (b) post-primary schools. (AQW 651/01)

Mr M McGuinness: Teachers are appointed and employed by employing authorities which, in the vast majority of cases, are the education and library boards or the Council for Catholic Maintained Schools.

The Department does not receive information from these authorities as to the reasons why retired teachers are employed and it is not possible, therefore, to state how many were employed in the last twelve months to address teacher shortages.

Information about the number of occasions, in the 2000/2001 school year, on which retired teachers were employed in our schools, is shown in the table below

Number of Retired Teachers Employed in Primary Schools	764
Number of Retired Teachers Employed in Post-Primary Schools	570

Enniskillen Nursery School

Mr Gallagher asked the Minister of Education to detail the total number of children enrolled at Enniskillen Nursery School and, of these, the number who are in their final pre-school year. (AQW 652/01)

Mr M McGuinness: At 1 September 2001 there were 78 children enrolled at Enniskillen Nursery School of which 58 were in their final pre-school year.

Former Castle Gardens Primary School

Mrs I Robinson asked the Minister of Education to detail his plans for the former Castle Gardens Primary School building in Newtownards and to give a commitment that it will be retained for educational purposes. (AQW 655/01)

Mr M McGuinness: The future use of the former Castle Gardens Primary School building is a matter for consideration by the South-Eastern Education and Library Board. At present there is uncertainty regarding ownership of the site. The board is now awaiting legal advice on the matter and cannot proceed further until the position is clarified.

Torr Bank Special School: Renovation Work

Mrs I Robinson asked the Minister of Education to detail (a) the commencement date for renovation work at Torr Bank Special School in Dundonald and (b) the timescale for the completion of this work.

(AQW 659/01)

Mr M McGuinness: The South-Eastern Education and Library Board has commenced planning of a new school for Tor Bank Special School on part of the Dundonald High School site. The school will be considered for a place in next year's capital programme in the light of the resources available but I am unable to give any timescale for the project at this stage.

Pupil Enrolment

Mr Beggs asked the Minister of Education to detail the number of pupils enrolled in each sector of the education system.

(AQW 693/01)

Mr M McGuinness: Figures for 2001/02 are not yet available.

The information requested in respect of 2000/01 was as follows:

School Type	
Grant-Aided Schools	
Nursery	5,965
Primary ¹	177,629
Preparatory Departments ²	2,818
Secondary (non-grammar)	92,979
Grammar	62,574
Special	4,674
Hospital	171
Non Grant-Aided Schools	
Independent	1,255
Total	348,065
Management Type	
Grant-Aided Schools	
Controlled	149,639
Controlled Integrated	3,380
Catholic Maintained ³	130,912
Other Maintained	
Irish Medium	1,283

School Type	
Other	564
Grant Maintained Integrated	10,760
Voluntary	
Schools under Catholic Management	27,897
Schools under Other Management	22,374
Non Grant-Aided Schools	
Independent	1,255
Total	348,065

¹ Includes nursery classes and reception classes/groups.

² Includes reception classes/groups.

³ Includes one Irish Medium school, with an enrolment of 208 pupils.

Career in Teaching

Mr Neeson asked the Minister of Education what steps he is taking to encourage graduates from business backgrounds to pursue a career in teaching by undertaking a Post Graduate Certificate in Education.

(AQO 388/01)

Mr M McGuinness: It has not been necessary here to introduce financial incentives similar to those used in England and Wales to attract graduates into teaching, as our PGCE courses were again oversubscribed this year. Most graduates entering initial teacher education did so on completion of their first degree.

Implementing Special Needs Statements

Ms Lewsley asked the Minister of Education what safeguards are in place to ensure the implementation of all aspects of a Statement of Special Needs. (AQO 376/01)

Mr M McGuinness: Under special education legislation education and library boards have a duty to arrange that the special educational provision indicated in a statement of special educational needs is made for the child. Where a grant-aided school is specified in a statement, the Board of Governors must admit the child to the school. Where the child attends an ordinary school the Board of Governors must use its best endeavours to ensure that the special educational provision he requires is made. Annual reviews of statements provide parents with an opportunity for expressing concerns about current provision.

Holy Cross Primary School

Mr G Kelly asked the Minister of Education what measures have been put in place to deal with the trauma suffered by the pupils of Holy Cross Primary School.

(AQO 406/01)

Mr M McGuinness: I have on many occasions expressed my deep concern about the situation surrounding

Holy Cross Girls' Primary School and the disruption and anxiety caused to teachers, pupils and parents in both Holy Cross and Wheatfield Primary Schools. Every pupil has the right to travel to school unhindered and to be educated in a safe and secure environment that is conducive to learning.

Following extensive discussions between my Department, the Belfast Education and Library Board and the Council for Catholic Maintained Schools I announced on 25 October a support programme for Holy Cross and the nearby Wheatfield Primary School. The funding, which totals £154,000, will be used to support the measures which the schools themselves have identified as necessary to meet the needs of pupils and staff. These include additional substitute teachers, classroom assistants, curriculum support for P7 pupils, including those taking the transfer test, and respite activities for pupils and staff. In addition the Belfast Board will continue to provide ongoing support services for Holy Cross and any other school in its area that requires assistance.

My Department, along with the Belfast Board and CCMS, will continue to support the schools, but the protest at Holy Cross should end immediately. Once again I would urge local representatives to come together to resolve any community issues that exist, through dialogue.

Asperger's Syndrome

Mr C Murphy asked the Minister of Education to outline (a) measures currently being taken to ascertain the incidences of Asperger's Syndrome in the school population and (b) the nature and scope of resources currently available to meet the needs of children with Asperger's Syndrome. (AQO 404/01)

Mr M McGuinness: In the October 2000 school census my Department sought information for the first time on the number of children affected by autism according to their statements of special educational needs. The 2001 census has asked schools to record separately those affected by Asperger's Syndrome.

Most children with Asperger's Syndrome attend mainstream schools where some receive classroom assistance and additional teaching, as appropriate. Those with additional learning difficulties attend special schools or units.

New Starts Programme

Mr McGrady asked the Minister of Education to detail his method for implementing the policies of rural proofing, social inclusion and equality in terms of capital allocations in the New Starts Programme; and to make a statement. (AQO 373/01)

Mr M McGuinness: Under the new starts programme available resources are directed to the highest priorities based on educational need. This encompasses the areas of social inclusion and equality and ensures that rural communities have access to a network of strong rural schools. My Department's Equality Scheme provides for the school building programme to be the subject to an Equality Impact Assessment in the next financial year.

New Viability Criteria for Post Primary Schools

Mr Ford asked the Minister of Education, following his announcement of the new viability criteria for post-primary schools, if he is aware of any schools or proposed schools that may already meet these new criteria. (AQO 387/01)

Mr M McGuinness: My Department is aware of only one proposed post-primary school that may already meet the new viability criteria of an initial intake of 50 pupils.

School Transport: Cost

Mr Hussey asked the Minister of Education to detail the cost of the current school transport system in each education and library board. (AQO 410/01)

Mr M McGuinness: Estimated expenditure by each education and library board on home to school transport in 2000/01 is as follows:

	£000's
Belfast	3,467
North Eastern	11,452
South Eastern	10,270
Southern	12,798
Western	9,629
Total	47,616

Criteria for Irish Medium and Integrated Schools

Mr McElduff asked the Minister of Education to detail the likely impact that his recent decision to lower the viability criteria for Irish medium and integrated schools will have on these sectors. (AQO 393/01)

Mr M McGuinness: The reduction of the viability criteria for both Irish-medium and integrated schools will enable both sectors to grow and to strengthen. Indeed, once viability has been established and approval granted, schools will be eligible to receive recurrent funding immediately. This will secure the long-term future of such schools in a shorter timescale than was

previously possible. The arrangements are designed to operate within the context of the Good Friday Agreement and my Department's statutory duties to encourage and facilitate Irish-medium and integrated education.

School Transport: Southern Board Area

Mr Savage asked the Minister of Education if he will undertake to address the issues of inequity raised by the situation in the Southern Education Board area where some school children travelling from Waringstown to Banbridge have been issued with bus passes and others have not. (AQO 408/01)

Mr M McGuinness: The operation of the home to school transport arrangements is a matter for the appropriate education and library board. The Southern Board has advised that the following arrangements apply to pupils living in Waringstown and travelling to Banbridge -

- Pupils gaining a grammar school place in Banbridge Academy are eligible for assistance;
- Pupils enrolling in first year of Banbridge High School are not eligible because Lurgan Junior High School is less than 3 miles from their homes. They would only be eligible if they were unable to gain a place in Lurgan Junior High School.
- Pupils transferring at age 14 are eligible as they are over 3 miles from any suitable school.

In determining pupils' eligibility the board has regard to the current approved arrangements which enable transport to be provided where pupils have been unable to gain a place in all suitable schools within statutory walking distance of their home (3 miles for pupils in post-primary schools) measured by the nearest available route.

For the purposes of the transport arrangements the term "suitable school" has a precise definition. It relates solely to the established educational categories of controlled, Catholic maintained, integrated and Irish-medium and, in the grammar sector, denominational and non-denominational schools.

Non-integrated Schools: Running Costs

Mrs E Bell asked the Minister of Education to detail the proposed total running costs, in this financial year, of (i) non-integrated primary schools (ii) non-integrated secondary schools and (iii) non-integrated teacher training facilities; and to make a statement.

(AQO 399/01)

Mr M McGuinness: The apportionment of running costs between the two categories requested will not be known until the end of the financial year. Funding allocations made under LMS formulae to non-integrated

primary and non-integrated secondary schools are recorded in the following table. The figures do not take account of any additional funding that schools may receive outside the formula, for example, substitution costs met centrally, earmarked allocations linked to board or Department initiatives etc.

Type	Formula Funding (£'000)
Non-Integrated Primary Schools ⁽¹⁾	£281,357
Non-Integrated Secondary Schools ⁽²⁾	£400,178

Notes:

⁽¹⁾ Includes Controlled Schools, Maintained Schools and schools with Nursery Classes and excludes Controlled Integrated and Grant Maintained Integrated Schools,

⁽²⁾ Includes Controlled Schools, Maintained Schools and Voluntary Grammar Schools and excludes Controlled Integrated and Grant Maintained Integrated Schools,

Teacher training facilities are not financed by my Department. Responsibility for their funding falls within the remit of my colleague, Dr Farren, Minister for Employment and Learning.

EMPLOYMENT AND LEARNING

Cross Border FEC

Mr McMenamin asked the Minister for Employment and Learning if he will undertake to set up a cross border Institute of Further and Higher Education which would serve the three district council areas of Strabane, Letterkenny and Derry. (AQW 613/01)

The Minister for Employment and Learning (Dr Farren): I have no plans to set up a cross border initiative.

My Department will continue to work in partnership with the North West Institute of Further and Higher Education and to facilitate co-operation between it and other colleges in the wider region including on a cross border basis.

NI Hotel and Catering College and University of Ulster Merge

Mr Neeson asked the Minister for Employment and Learning, pursuant to AQO 1383/00, to give an update on plans to merge the Northern Ireland Hotel and Catering College with the University of Ulster.

(AQW 650/01)

Dr Farren: The governing body of the Northern Ireland Hotel and Catering College and the Council of the University of Ulster have formally agreed to the merger of the college and the university. My Department

is preparing a draft administrative order to facilitate the merger and will be initiating a consultation process shortly.

Duplication of Student Course Work

Mr Beggs asked the Minister for Employment and Learning why the Training and Employment Agency requires further education college lecturers to duplicate student course work that has already been provided to examination bodies. (AQW 663/01)

Dr Farren: Further education colleges are contracted by my Department to deliver training under the Training and Employment Agency's Jobskills programme. The agency, normally requires providers, including colleges, to achieve National Vocational Qualifications outcomes. The process of evidence gathering and acceptability is a matter for the appropriate awarding body, overseen by the Qualifications and Curriculum Authority and is not a matter for the agency. I will draw the attention of QCA and/ or appropriate awarding bodies to any examples of unnecessary paperwork which are reported to the Department.

Individual Learning Accounts

Mr Paisley Jnr asked the Minister for Employment and Learning to detail (a) the number of people who have been defrauded out of Individual learning accounts and (b) any action being taken to bring those engaged in this fraud to justice. (AQW 684/01)

Dr Farren: In announcing the suspension of the scheme I said that while there is currently no evidence of fraud in the scheme in Northern Ireland, as had been reported in England, it is something that my Department takes very seriously. My Department investigates all complaints and, if there is evidence of fraud, will not hesitate to take appropriate action.

Individual Learning Accounts

Mr B Hutchinson asked the Minister for Employment and Learning if applications are still being processed for the Individual Learning Account Grant Scheme and if applicants can still apply. (AQW 725/01)

Dr Farren: No new applications for individual learning accounts are being accepted after 26 October 2001, the date on which the scheme was suspended. Existing account holders can still use their account to enrol on eligible courses provided the course is booked on the Individual Learning Account Centre system by 7 December 2001.

ENTERPRISE, TRADE AND INVESTMENT

Job Losses and Jobs Created: Strabane District Council Area

Mr McMenamin asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to detail the number of jobs lost and the number of jobs created in Strabane District Council area in the last year. (AQW 587/01)

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment (Sir Reg Empey): During the period September 2000 to October 2001 there were 112 confirmed redundancies in the Strabane Job Centre area.

Detailed information on the precise number of jobs created is not available. However, figures from the NI Census of Employment can be used to estimate the net change in employee jobs between Censuses. Latest figures from the September 1999 Census of Employment showed that there were 9,092 employee jobs in Strabane District Council area. This represented an increase of 90 (1%) from the previous Census figure (September 1997).

Cross Border Business Park

Mr McMenamin asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment if he will undertake to set up a cross border business park in the Strabane/ Lifford area. (AQW 616/01)

Sir Reg Empey: IDB and IDA officials are co-operating in a number of ventures under the Invest North West Initiative aimed at attracting further investment to Strabane, Derry, Limavady and Donegal Council areas. There are no plans currently for a cross border business park at Strabane/Lifford. However IDB is currently evaluating proposals from developers for the provision of 30,000 sq ft of new business space at Orchard Road. There is also some private sector interest in a possible mixed use development at Lifford Road but this is at an early stage.

ENVIRONMENT

Golden Jubilee Celebrations

Mr Shannon asked the Minister of the Environment to detail those district councils who are planning events for the Golden Jubilee Celebrations and to itemise their plans. (AQW 628/01)

The Minister of the Environment (Mr Foster): The planning of events for the Golden Jubilee Celebrations

is entirely a matter for individual district councils. The Department of the Environment would not necessarily be involved in such plans.

Golden Jubilee Celebrations

Mr Shannon asked the Minister of the Environment to outline any funding available for district councils in relation to the 2002 Golden Jubilee Celebrations.

(AQW 642/01)

Mr Foster: No funding has been made available for district councils, in relation to the Golden Jubilee Celebrations. Councils would have to provide for any expenditure on the event in their 2002/2003 budgets.

Water Pollution: Nitrates

Mr K Robinson asked the Minister of the Environment to detail (a) his plans to reduce water pollution caused by nitrates from agriculture sources and (b) the steps he has taken to comply with the EU nitrates directive - 91/676/EEC.

(AQW 667/01)

Mr Foster: In March 1999 the former Department of the Environment for Northern Ireland designated three Nitrate Vulnerable Zones under the Protection of Water Against Agricultural Nitrate Pollution Regulations (NI) 1996. These Regulations transposed into Northern Ireland legislation the requirements of the EU Nitrates Directive.

The former DOE (NI) also implemented action programmes in respect of the designated Nitrate Vulnerable Zones in June 1999. These programmes specified limits to the amount of nitrates to be applied within the Nitrate Vulnerable Zones. Farmers with land inside the zones received copies of an advisory booklet prepared by DOE (NI) and the former Department of Agriculture. They also received copies of the Code of Good Agricultural Practice for the protection of water from pollution by nitrates. Adherence to this code is compulsory within Nitrate Vulnerable Zones. My Department also operates a groundwater and surface water monitoring network. Monitoring data from this network is analysed on a regular basis to assess the impact of agriculturally derived nitrate on all waters.

It is my Department's view that, as a result of the identification and designation of the three Nitrate Vulnerable Zones and the implementation of the action programmes, Northern Ireland is in compliance with the requirements of the Nitrates Directive.

Shooting Permits: Strangford Lough Area

Mr Shannon asked the Minister of the Environment to detail the number of shooting permits issued

for the Strangford Lough area in each of the last 10 years.

(AQW 685/01)

Mr Foster: No shooting permits were issued in the last 10 years for those parts of the Strangford Lough area owned by my Department.

Shooting rights for most of the foreshore of the lough are owned or leased by the National Trust, and administered under its Strangford Lough Wildlife Scheme. The revenue from the issue of shooting permits goes towards the costs of operating the scheme. Because of its conservation benefits, the scheme is also supported by grant aid from the Environment and Heritage Service of my Department.

Shooting Permits

Mr Shannon asked the Minister of the Environment to outline (a) where the monies collected for shooting permits are spent and (b) which Departments benefit from these monies.

(AQW 686/01)

Mr Foster: No shooting permits were issued in the last 10 years for those parts of the Strangford Lough area owned by my Department.

Shooting rights for most of the foreshore of the lough are owned or leased by the National Trust, and administered under its Strangford Lough Wildlife Scheme. The revenue from the issue of shooting permits goes towards the costs of operating the scheme. Because of its conservation benefits, the scheme is also supported by grant aid from the Environment and Heritage Service of my Department.

FINANCE AND PERSONNEL

Decentralisation of Civil Service Jobs

Mr McMenamin asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel whether equality impact assessments and new targeting social need will be taken into consideration in the decentralisation of Civil Service jobs and if he will undertake to keep the needs of West Tyrone and Strabane to the fore in respect of this restructuring.

(AQW 614/01)

The Minister of Finance and Personnel (Mr Durkan): I can confirm that the examination of the scope for the decentralisation of Civil Service jobs, which forms part of the Strategic Review of Civil Service Office Accommodation, will take account of a range of relevant factors and policies, including new targeting social need and the impact on equality of opportunity as well as the number of jobs already in an area in relation to the local workforce, the Regional

Development Strategy, business efficiency, service delivery and cost. My Department is currently undertaking an Equality Impact Assessment on developing policy on the location of Civil Service jobs which will inform the conclusions of the strategic review.

With regard to the needs of West Tyrone and Strabane, it would be wrong for me to prejudge the outcome of the accommodation review or to speculate as to the precise locations which might be involved in any subsequent dispersal of Civil Service jobs but I will convey the Member's view to the consultants undertaking the review so that it too can be taken into account in the development of conclusions and recommendations.

Public-Private Partnerships: Review

Ms Hanna asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel to make a statement in respect of the review of public-private partnerships and to assure that their use will be driven by practical reasons and by need only.

(AQO 379/01)

Mr Durkan: The infrastructure investment deficit in our public services, estimated to be at least £4 billion over the next 10 years, makes it important for the Executive to explore new ways of financing and providing much needed public services, such as the use of public-private partnerships. We have therefore established the PPP working group to carry out a review of the use of PPP taking into account in its deliberations evidence on the benefits and constraints from a wide range of perspectives.

All options will be carefully and objectively examined by the working group in preparing its final report and recommendations by March 2002. This will enable the Executive to determine a clear policy framework in this area by September 2002 following public consultation.

Whatever options are determined, it is essential that the use of PPPs, where appropriate, to deliver public services infrastructure must be affordable, deliver value for money and provide effective solutions to meet the needs of our public services in the public interest. In that sense, the use of PPPs is not ideologically driven. Their use is only one means of helping us deal with real needs of our public services.

PAC and Comptroller and Auditor General

Mr J Wilson asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel what procedures are in place within his Department to ensure that issues raised by the Public Accounts Committee and the Comptroller and Auditor General are adequately and fully dealt with.

(AQO 390/01)

Mr Durkan: Primarily it is duty of subject Departments to consider reports issued by both the Comptroller and Auditor General and Public Accounts Committee. However, in relation to the latter, my Department has a formal role to ensure that issues raised in these reports are responded to in the form of a memorandum of reply. Following the laying of memoranda, my officials then monitor commitments given to ensure that they have been addressed as appropriate.

HEALTH, SOCIAL SERVICES AND PUBLIC SAFETY

Treatment Programmes Available to Drug Users

Mr M Robinson asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the number of treatment programmes available to drug users.

(AQW 596/01)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety (Ms de Brún): There are five statutory and two non-statutory in-patient treatment programmes available to drug users.

Eight community addiction teams cover the four board areas and offer community based treatment services. In addition, a number of voluntary and community sector organisations offer specialist counselling and support services to drug misusers.

At its last meeting the Drug and Alcohol Ministerial Strategic Steering Group approved the allocation of an additional £1.59 million over three years to the community addiction teams for the provision of counselling services for young drug users. This initiative is a partnership between the community addiction teams and specialist voluntary sector agencies.

Tá cúig chlár reachtúla agus dhá chlár neamhreachtúla i gcóireáil othar cónaitheach ar fáil do lucht mí-úsáide drugaí.

Clúdaíonn na hocht bhFoireann Andúile Pobail limistéir na gceithre Bhord agus tairgíonn siad seirbhísí pobalbhunaithe cóireála. Ina theannta sin, tairgíonn roinnt eagrás ón earnáil dheonach agus phobail sainsheirbhísí comhairle agus tacaíochta do lucht mí-úsáide drugaí.

Ag an chruinniú dheireanach, d'fhorghas an Grúpa Straitéiseach Aireachta ar Stiúradh Drugaí agus Alcóil dáileadh £1.59 milliún breise thar na trí bliana seo chugainn ar Fhoirne Andúile Pobail le seirbhísí comhairle a sholáthar do lucht óg mí-úsáide drugaí. Is páirtíocht idir na Foirne Andúile Pobail agus na sainghníomhaireachtaí ón earnáil dheonach í an scéim seo.

Waiting List for Drug Treatment

Mr M Robinson asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the total number of addicts who are currently appearing on a waiting list for drug treatment. (AQW 598/01)

Ms de Brún: I have been advised that a total of 52 people with drug misuse problems are currently on waiting lists for assessment or treatment.

Cuireadh in iúl dom go bhfuil 52 duine a bhfuil fadhbanna mí-úsáid drugaí acu ar liostaí feithimh faoi láthair le haghaidh measúnaithe nó cóireála.

Criteria for Interim Sub-fertility Service

Mr Ford asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety, following her announcement of interim arrangements for the funding of infertility treatments, what steps have been taken to screen the criteria under section 75 of the Northern Ireland Act 1998. (AQW 599/01)

Ms de Brún: The eligibility criteria for the interim sub-fertility service, which begins on 17 December, were not subjected to an equality impact assessment under the 1998 legislation, as this service is an intermediate measure pending a public consultation on the future of sub-fertility services. Any long-term proposals for the future of sub-fertility services will be subject to an equality impact assessment.

Ní raibh na critéir bhailíochta don tseirbhís eatramhach fhothorthúlachta, a thosóidh ar 17 Nollaig, faoi réir measúnú tionchair chomhionannais de réir reachtaíocht na bliana 1998, mar gur beart eatramhach í an tseirbhís seo atá ag fanacht le comhairliú poiblí ar thodhchaí sheirbhísí fothorthúlachta. Beidh moladh fadtéarmach ar bith do thodhchaí sheirbhísí fothorthúlachta faoi réir measúnú tionchair chomhionannais.

Criteria for IVF Treatment

Mr Ford asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety why the criteria under the new interim arrangements for IVF treatment exclude those who already have children living with them, and if this criterion has been screened under section 75 of the Northern Ireland Act 1998. (AQW 600/01)

Ms de Brún: I refer the Member to my answer to AQW 599/01. The criteria for the interim sub-fertility service are those recommended in an advisory report of a steering group established by the Regional Services Medical Consortium. The criteria for access to longer-term sub-fertility services will be the subject of public consultation. Any long-term proposals for the future

of sub-fertility services will be subject to an equality impact assessment.

Luaim don Bhall an freagra a thug mé ar AQW 599/01. Is iad na critéir don tseirbhís eatramhach fhothorthúlachta na critéir sin molta i dTuairisc Chomhairleach Ghrúpa Stiúrtha bunaithe ag an Chuibhreannas Míochaine um Sheirbhísí Réigiúnacha. Beidh na critéir úsáidte le seirbhísí fadtéarmacha fothorthúlachta a fháil faoi réir comhairlithe phoiblí. Beidh moladh fadtéarmach ar bith do thodhchaí sheirbhísí fothorthúlachta faoi réir measúnú tionchair chomhionannais.

IVF Treatment: Consultation

Mr Ford asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what consultation has taken place with consumers regarding the new interim funding arrangements and criteria for IVF treatment. (AQW 602/01)

Ms de Brún: The criteria for the interim sub-fertility service are those recommended in an advisory report of a steering group, established by the Regional Services Medical Consortium. The steering group, which included a representative of health and social services councils, met representatives of patient groups during the course of its work. The criteria for access to longer-term sub-fertility services will be the subject of public consultation. Any long-term proposals for the future of sub-fertility services will be subject to an equality impact assessment.

Is iad na critéir don tseirbhís eatramhach fhothorthúlachta na critéir sin molta i dTuairisc Chomhairleach Ghrúpa Stiúrtha bunaithe ag an Chuibhreannas Míochaine um Sheirbhísí Réigiúnacha. Bhuaill an Grúpa Stiúrtha a bhfuil ionadaí ó na Comhairlí Sláinte agus Seirbhísí Sóisialta air, bhuaill siad le hionadaithe ghrúpaí othar le linn a chuid saothair. Beidh na critéir úsáidte le seirbhísí fadtéarmacha fothorthúlachta a fháil faoi réir comhairlithe phoiblí. Beidh moladh fadtéarmach ar bith do thodhchaí sheirbhísí fothorthúlachta faoi réir measúnú tionchair chomhionannais.

Class A Prescription Drugs

Mr M Robinson asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what safeguards are in place to ensure that class A prescription drugs cannot be obtained illegally. (AQW 635/01)

Ms de Brún: Control of the supply, possession, manufacture and administration of Class A drugs, ie those listed in part 1 of schedule 2 to the Misuse of Drugs Act 1971 (the Act), is subject to misuse of drugs legislation. It is the responsibility of the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety (the Department),

through its Misuse of Drugs Inspector, to monitor this legislation.

Regulations made under the Act include safeguards to ensure proper storage, record keeping and documentation and these aspects apply to all those involved in handling these controlled substances whether by automatic right under the Regulations or by licence of the Department. In this regard I announced last week a funding package to assist community pharmacists to upgrade the current security arrangements in respect of drugs liable to abuse.

Companies and individuals including practitioners and community pharmacists are subject to announced and unannounced inspection visits which may require production of all stocks, documents and records on demand. Practitioners and community pharmacists also have specific legal obligations regarding the writing of prescriptions and the supply and administration of these preparations.

Tá stiúradh, seilbh, déanamh agus tabhairt drugaí Rang A, is é sin na drugaí sin liostáilte i gCuid 1 de Sceideal 2 d'Acht Mí-úsáid Drugaí (An tAcht), tá siad go léir faoi réir reachtaíochta ar mhí-úsáid drugaí. An Roinn Sláinte, Seirbhísí Sóisialta agus Sábháilteachta Poiblí (An Roinn) atá freagrach as monatóireacht a dhéanamh ar an reachtaíocht seo trína Cigire ar Mhí-úsáid Drugaí.

Ar na rialacháin déanta de réir an Achta tá cinnteacht le stóras ceart a chosaint, taifid agus cáipéisí a choinneáil agus baineann na gnéithe seo leo go léir a raibh páirt acu i láimhseáil na substaintí stiúrtha seo, bíodh sin go huathoibríoch mar is ceart de réir na Rialachán nó trí chead na Roinne, nó ná bíodh. Maidir leis seo, d'fhógair mé an tseachtain seo a chuaigh thart go gcuirfí pacáiste maoinithe ar fáil chun cuidiú le cógaiseoirí pobail na socruithe slándála atá acu faoi láthair a athchóiriú i dtaca leis na drugaí a mbeadh baol ann go mbainfí mí-úsáid astu.

Tá comhlachtaí chomh maith le daoine aonair, dochtúirí agus cógaiseoirí pobail san áireamh, faoi réir cuairteanna cigireachta fógartha agus neamhfhógartha a mbeadh taispeáint na stoc, na gcáipéisí, agus na dtaifead go léir atá acu i gceist dá n-éileofaí orthu. Tá dualgais ar leith ar dhochtúirí agus ar chógaiseoirí pobail maidir le hordú scríofa cógas chomh maith lena soláthar agus lena dtabhairt amach.

Meals on Wheels Service

Mr Beggs asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to outline (a) how she ensures equality of distribution for the meals on wheels service across the health and social services community trusts and (b) her method of monitoring. (AQW 640/01)

Ms de Brún: Meals on wheels is only one of a range of community services which trusts can arrange to provide care and support for clients in their area. Each community based health and social services trust is responsible for decisions on the extent to which meals in the community are provided and on their delivery to service users in its area. Trusts must have regard to their duties under section 75 of the Northern Ireland Act 1998.

My Department is committed to carry out an equality impact assessment of its community care policy this year. It will use routinely collected information on receipt of meals on wheels for each programme of care to inform the equality impact assessment process.

Níl sa tseirbhís béilí ar rothaí ach ceann den réimse seirbhísí pobail is féidir le hIontaobhais a shocrú le cúram agus le tacaíocht a sholáthar do chliaint ina limistéar féin. Tá gach Iontaobhas pobalbhunaithe Sláinte agus Seirbhísí Sóisialta freagrach as a fhairsinge agus a sholáthraítear béilí don phobal agus as a soláthar d'úsáideoirí na seirbhíse ina limistéar féin. Ní mór d'Iontaobhais tábhacht a thabhairt do chomhlíonadh a ndualgas de réir Mhír 75 d'Acht Thuaisceart Éireann 1998.

Tá an Roinn s'agamsa geallta do Mheasúnú Tionchair Chomhionannais a dhéanamh ar a polasaí Cúraim Phobail i mbliana. Bainfidh sí úsáid as eolas bailithe go rialta ar fháil béilí ar rothaí do gach clár cúraim le heolas a thabhairt le linn an phróiseas Mheasúnú Tionchair Chomhionannais.

Tyrone County Hospital: Staffing Levels and Financial Situation

Mr Hussey asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the current staffing levels and financial situation at Tyrone County Hospital in Omagh. (AQO 411/01)

Ms de Brún: The number of staff employed in Tyrone County Hospital at 8 November 2001 is as follows:

Administrative & Clerical	83
Ancillary & General	19
Nurses & Midwives	261
Social Work	1
Professional & Technical	91
Medical & Dental	46
Total	501

As regards the financial situation, Sperrin Lakeland Health and Social Care Trust has reported an overall deficit of some £528k for the period up to 30 September 2001. The trust has advised that Tyrone County Hospital accounts for some £212k of this

deficit. The trust is however forecasting a breakeven position at the year-end, through a combination of measures including in year savings and additional non-recurring assistance from the Western Health and Social Services Board.

Is mar seo a leanas atá an líon foirne atá ar fostú ag Ospidéal Chontae Thír Eoghain an 8 Samhain 2001:

Riarachán & Cléireach	83
Coimhdeach & Ginearálta	19
Altraí & Cnáimhseacha	261
Obair Shóisialta	1
Gairmiúil & Teicniúil	91
Míochaine & Fiaclóireacht	46
Iomlán	501

Maidir leis an staid airgeadais, thuairisc Iontaobhas Cúraim Shóisialaigh agus Sláinte Speirín, Tír na Lochanna easnamh foriomlán de £528 míle don tréimhse go dtí 30 Meán Fómhair 2001. Chuir an tIontaobhas in iúl go bhfuil Ospidéal Chontae Thír Eoghain freagrach as £212 míle den easnamh sin. Tá an tIontaobhas ag tuar, áfach, go mbeidh sé meá ar mheá ag deireadh na bliana trí bhearta éagsúla, lena n-áirítear coigiltí bliana agus cabhair bhreise neamhinfillte ó Bhord Seirbhísí Sláinte agus Sóisialacha an Iarthair.

NI Fire Authority: Funding

Mr McFarland asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail her financial bid for the administration of the Northern Ireland Fire Authority in the financial year 2002-03. (AQO 407/01)

Ms de Brún: The existing baseline provides for £57million and no additional funds were sought outside of normal inflation uplifts.

I am mindful of the need for the Fire Authority to continue to be adequately staffed, trained and equipped to deal with an ever changing and developing role, and I consider that this allocation will enable the authority to continue to provide an efficient level of service.

A bid has also been made for Executive Programme Funding, amounting to £2 million, in respect of a new Digital Trunk Radio Communications System.

Forálann an bhunlíne atá ann cheana do £57 milliún agus níor lorgadh aon chistí breise lasmuigh de na gnátharduithe boillsithe.

Is léir domh an gá atá ann go leanann an tÚdarás Dóiteáin de go leor foirne, oiliúna agus trealaimh a fháil le déileáil le ról a bhíonn go síoraí ag athrú agus ag forbairt, agus measaim go gcuirfidh an leithdháileadh seo ar chumas an Údaráis leanúint de sheirbhís ag leibhéal éifeachtach a sholáthar.

Rinneadh tairiscint chomh maith do Mhaoiniú an Chláir Feidhmiúcháin, a rinne suas £2 mhilliún, i leith Chóras Digiteach Cumarsáide Raidió Trunca.

Breast Feeding

Mr J Wilson asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to outline (a) the method for collating information for the 2000 Infant Breast Feeding Survey (b) her proposals to increase breast feeding rates in Northern Ireland in line with the UK average (c) if she has set targets for breast feeding and (d) if they are being achieved. (AQO 372/01)

Ms de Brún: The information is as follows

- Questionnaires were sent out to mothers of 2,600 babies born between August and October 2000 and designed to arrive when they were 6-10 weeks old. Further questionnaires were issued at 4-5 months and again at 8-9 months.
- We have in place a breastfeeding strategy which identifies co-ordination of breastfeeding activities, commissioning support for breastfeeding mothers, raising public awareness of the importance of breastfeeding and improving training for health professionals as key areas for action. In addition we are in the process of appointing a regional breastfeeding co-ordinator to promote breastfeeding here.
- We have two targets for breastfeeding rates:
 - By 2002 the proportion of women breastfeeding during the first two or three days after birth should be increased to 50%.
 - By 2002 the proportion of women breastfeeding at 6 weeks should be increased to 35%
- Preliminary findings from the 2000 Infant Feeding Survey suggest that the first target has been achieved. Between 1995 and 2000 there was a significant increase in breastfeeding here; the rates have increased from 45% in 1995 to 54 % in 2000. Data to monitor progress towards the second target will not be available until early in the new year when the full survey results will be published.

Seo a leanas an t-eolas:

- Cuireadh ceistiúcháin amach chuig máithreacha 2600 naíonán a rugadh idir Lúnasa agus Deireadh Fómhair 2000 agus dearadh iad le teacht nuair a bheadh na naíonáin 6-10 seachtaine d'aois. Eisíodh tuilleadh ceistiúchán nuair a bhí na naíonáin 4-5 mí d'aois agus arís nuair a bhí siad 8-9 mí d'aois.
- Tá Straitéis Beathaithe Cíche againn a shainaithníonn comhordú ghníomhaíochtaí beathaithe cíche, a dhéanamh coimisiúnú ar thacaíocht do mháithreacha atá ag tabhairt na cíche dá naíonáin, a ardaíonn

feasacht an phobail ar an tábhacht a bhaineann le beathú cíche agus a fheabhsaíonn oiliúint do ghairmigh sláinte mar eochair-réimsí gníomhaíochta. Chomh maith leis sin táimid i mbun Comhordaitheoir Réigiúnach Beathaithe Cíche a cheapadh le beathú cíche a chur chun cinn anseo.

- c) Tá dhá sprioc againn do na rátaí beathaithe cíche:
- Faoi 2002 ba chóir go mbeadh méadú chuig 50% ar an chion ban a thugann beathú cíche i rith na chéad dhá nó trí lá i ndiaidh na breithe.
 - Faoi 2002 ba chóir go mbeadh méadú chuig 35% ar an chion ban a thugann beathú cíche ag 6 seachtaine.
- d) Tugann réamhthorthaí ón Suirbhé um Beathú Naíonán 2000 le tuiscint go bhfuil an chéad sprioc bainte amach. Idir 1995 agus 2000 bhí méadú suntasach ar bheathú cíche anseo, mhéadaigh na rátaí ó 45% i 1995 go dtí 54% i 2000. Ní bheidh fáil ar shonraí le monatóireacht a dhéanamh ar an dul chun cinn i dtreo an dara sprioc go dtí luath san athbhliain nuair a fhoilseofar torthaí iomlána an tsuirbhé.

Budget Increases

Mr S Wilson asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the increases in the budget for her Department in each of the last two years and (b) the increase requested for the next financial year. (AQO 395/01)

Ms de Brún: I inherited a baseline for the 2000-01 financial year of £2,031 million. As a result of allocations in successive monitoring rounds, through the Agenda for Government, and from the Chancellor's March 2000 Budget, my Department's baseline eventually totalled £2,157 million.

The initial baseline for the current financial year was set, on the new resource basis, at £2,294 million. As a result of the June and September monitoring decisions and allocations from the Executive Programme Funds, my Department has received an additional £61 million, bringing the 2001-02 baseline up to £2,355 million.

My Department's indicative baseline for 2002-03 was £2,456 million. The draft Budget proposes to increase that to £2,487 million. An uplift of £31 million contrasts sharply, however, with the bid for an additional £128 million which I put forward for 2002-03.

Tháinig bunlíne de £2,031 milliún anuas chugam don bhliain airgeadais 2000-01. Mar thoradh ar leithdháiltí i mbabhtáí Monatóireachta i ndiaidh a chéile, tríd an Chlár Oibre do Rialtas agus ó Bhuiséad an tSeansailéara i Márta 200, bhí bunlíne de £2,157 milliún san iomlán ag mo Roinnse faoi dheireadh.

Socraíodh an bhunlíne thosaigh don bhliain airgeadais reatha ag £2,294 mhilliún. Mar thoradh ar chinní Monatóireachta i Meitheamh agus i nDeireadh Fómhair, fuair mo Roinnse £61 milliún breise, ag tabhairt bunlíne 2001-02 suas go dtí £2,355 mhilliún.

Is £2,456 mhilliún a bhí i mbunlíne tháscach mo Roinnse do 2002-03. Molann an Dréachtbhuiséad é sin a mhéadú chuig £2,487 milliún. Tá ardú de £31 milliún i gcodarsnacht mhór, áfach, leis an tairiscint de £128 milliún breise a chuir mé féin chun cinn do 2002-03.

Winter Pressures: Funding

Mr McElduff asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety if she has adequate funding to deal with winter pressures. (AQO 378/01)

Ms de Brún: Demand for health and social services during winter is difficult to predict accurately, since it depends on a number of variables, including weather conditions and the prevalence of influenza and other illnesses in the general population. Health and social services boards and trusts have developed comprehensive plans for this winter on the basis of past experience. Significant additional financial provision has been made for this. At the start of the financial year, I allocated an additional £5 million for winter pressures and community care services. A further £5.8 million was allocated in August: this will help to strengthen community infrastructure and services, facilitate early discharge from hospital, help to avoid unnecessary hospital admissions and address winter pressures and waiting lists.

Is doiligh an t-éileamh ar sheirbhísí sláinte agus sóisialacha i rith an gheimhridh a thuar go cruinn, mar go mbraitheann sé ar roinnt athróg, lena n-áirítear coinníollacha aimsire agus forleithneacht fliú agus breoiteachtaí eile sa daonra tríd is tríd. Tá pleananna cuimsitheacha forbartha ag Boird agus ag Iontaobhais Seirbhísí Sláinte agus Sóisialacha don gheimhreadh seo ar bhonn taithí ón am a chuaigh thart. Rinneadh soláthar suntasach breise airgeadais dó seo. Ag tús na bliana airgeadais, leithdháil mé £5 mhilliún breise do bhrú an gheimhridh agus do sheirbhísí Cúraim Phobail. Leithdháileadh £5.8 milliún breise i Lúnasa: cuideoidh sé sin le hinfrastruchtúr agus seirbhísí pobail a neartú, éascóidh sé scaoileadh luath ón ospidéal agus cuideoidh le ligean isteach neamhriachtanach chuig ospidéal a sheachaint agus tabharfar aghaidh ar bhrú an gheimhridh agus ar liostaí feithimh.

Travel Expenses for Board Members

Mr B Bell asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety, pursuant to AQW 410/01, what action she proposes to take over the non availability of

travelling expenses claims for board members in respect of those bodies within her responsibility.

(AQO 397/01)

Ms de Brún: HPSS boards, trusts and agencies and non-departmental public bodies provide information on board members' remuneration in a note to their accounts. The information disclosed is in accordance with the requirements of the Companies (Northern Ireland) Order 1986.

The disclosure requirements of the Companies (Northern Ireland) Order 1986 with regard to directors' remuneration do not extend to travel and subsistence expenses and therefore HSS bodies and non-departmental public bodies are not required to disclose the travel and expenses of board members separately.

We will consult with HPSS Bodies and Non Departmental Public Bodies on the current system for recording this information and will address the potential for establishing a system to record and disclose this information separately for 2002/03.

The Department will consider the potential for maintaining separate records in respect of this information.

Soláthraíonn Boird, Iontaobhais agus Gníomhaireachtaí SSSP agus Comhlachtaí Poiblí Neamhrannacha eolas ar luach saothair chomhaltaí bord i nóta lena gcuntais. Nochtar t-eolas faoi réir fhorálacha Ordú na gCuideachtaí (Tuaisceart Éireann) 1986.

Ní chumhdaíonn forálacha nochta Ordú na gCuideachtaí (Tuaisceart Éireann) 1986 maidir le luach saothair stiúrthóirí costais taistil agus cothabhála, agus dá bhrí sin níl sé riachtanach ag comhlachtaí SSS agus ag Comhlachtaí Poiblí Neamhrannacha costais taistil chomhaltaí bord a nochtadh ar leithligh.

Rachaimid i gcomhar le Comhlachtaí SSSP agus le Comhlachtaí Poiblí Neamhrannacha ar an chóras reatha le taifead a choinneáil ar an eolas seo agus tabharfaimid aghaidh ar an fhéidearthacht córas a bhunú le taifead a dhéanamh ar an eolas sin, agus an t-eolas sin a nochtadh, ar leithligh do 2003-03.

Breithneoidh an Roinn an fhéidearthacht le taifid ar leithligh a choinneáil maidir leis an eolas seo.

REGIONAL DEVELOPMENT

Air Services: Belfast International

Mr Dalton asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail what discussions have taken place with Belfast International Airport regarding the provision of alternative services following the decision by British

Airways to withdraw its Belfast International/ London Heathrow services.

(AQW 479/01)

The Minister for Regional Development (Mr P Robinson): Responsibility for air services is a reserved matter; however, my officials have been in close touch with the management of Belfast International Airport and are closely monitoring developments. My predecessor, Gregory Campbell wrote to the Secretary of State for Transport, Local Government and the Regions to urge that he intervene and use his influence to encourage British Airways to review its decision, or, at least, to secure the existing Heathrow slots for an alternative Northern Ireland service.

I understand that the Department for Transport, Local Government and the Regions is constrained in the actions that it can take over slot allocations at Heathrow. However, I have since written further to the Secretary of State to ask him to consider how he might assist in the acquisition of slots at Gatwick for services to Northern Ireland.

Road Services Expenditure

Mr Shannon asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail Roads Service expenditure on (i) roads maintenance; (ii) minor work schemes; and (iii) salaries for the Ards Borough Council area in each of the last five years.

(AQW 580/01)

Mr P Robinson: The table below shows the expenditure incurred by my Department's Roads Service in the Ards Borough Council area on road maintenance and minor road works in each of the last five years:

EXPENDITURE ON ROADS (ACTUAL CASH PRICES)

Type of works	1996/97 £K	1997/98 £K	1998/99 £K	1999/00 £K	2000/01 £K
Road maintenance	£2,530	£2,091	£2,314	£2,030	£2,280
Minor road works	£340	£432	£417	£204	£391

Whilst the salaries of Roads Service staff in the Ards Section Office would be wholly attributed to the Ards Borough Council area, there are a large number of other staff (for example, those involved in client, consultant and industrial activities) who provide services in a number of council areas. It would be very difficult and time consuming to apportion their salaries across Council areas. In the circumstances, the information requested could only be obtained at disproportionate cost.

Road Improvement: Jordanstown/Monkstown Junction

Mr K Robinson asked the Minister for Regional Development if he will undertake to improve the

Jordanstown/Monkstown Road junction; and to make a statement. (AQW 582/01)

Mr P Robinson: My Department's Roads Service has carried out a number of surveys of vehicular and pedestrian movements at the Jordanstown Road/ Monkstown Road junction. Following an analysis of the surveys, preliminary design for a scheme to provide traffic signals, incorporating full pedestrian facilities, at this location has been prepared. The scheme will be included in a list with other potential schemes to be considered for possible inclusion in the Roads Service 2002/2003 programme of works. As the funds for the roads programme are limited, the scheme will have to compete for priority against other worthwhile proposed schemes.

Road Adoption: Strabane Estates

Mr McMenamin asked the Minister for Regional Development to list those roads within Strabane estates that have yet to be adopted. (AQW 623/01)

Mr P Robinson: There are currently about one hundred private streets in housing developments within the Strabane District Council area that have been determined through the planning process but have not yet been adopted by my Department. A list of those streets, all at various pre-adoption stages and some of which have been partially adopted, has been placed in the Assembly Library.

Free Transport for Senior Citizens

Mr Beggs asked the Minister for Regional Development why senior citizens utilising free transport are not being given return tickets on request. (AQW 639/01)

Mr P Robinson: Return tickets are vulnerable to loss, may never be used for the return journey or could be open to misuse by someone other than the concession holder. The Department for Regional Development pays for free travel by senior citizens on the basis of journeys actually incurred by them. The Department must ensure that public money is used wisely and, therefore, requires that tickets for free travel are issued on a single fare basis only.

Journey Times: A29 Through Moy

Mrs Carson asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail journey times on the A29 through Moy in comparison with other towns and villages on this route. (AQW 646/01)

Mr P Robinson: The most recent information my Department's Roads Service has about journey times on the A29 was compiled in 1998. The information,

which relates to Moneymore, Cookstown, Dungannon and Moy, is detailed in the table below:

A29 JOURNEY TIMES

Towns	Routes	Average time between speed limits (seconds)	Average speed between speed limits	
			kph	mph
Moneymore	A31/A29 Magherafelt-Cookstown	121	40	25
	A29/A31 Cookstown-Magherafelt	119	41	26
Cookstown	A29 Moneymore-Dungannon	401	32	20
	A29 Dungannon-Moneymore	423	31	19
Dungannon	A29 Cookstown-Armagh	380	41	26
	A29 Armagh-Cookstown	432	38	24
Moy	A29 Dungannon-Armagh	133	48	30
	A29 Armagh-Dungannon	133	48	30

The surveys were carried out in May and June during the morning peak between 7:30 – 9:30.

SOCIAL DEVELOPMENT

Invalid Care Allowance

Mr Hilditch asked the Minister for Social Development to detail (a) the number of people claiming Invalid Care Allowance in each constituency and (b) any plans to review benefits available to carers.

(AQW 665/01)

The Minister for Social Development (Mr Dodds):

(a) The total number of Invalid Care Allowance recipients by constituency in Northern Ireland is as set out in the table below.

Parliamentary Constituency	Number of Recipients
Belfast East	1,341
Belfast North	2,526
Belfast South	1,169
Belfast West	3,896
East Antrim	1,125
East Londonderry	1,613

Parliamentary Constituency	Number of Recipients
Fermanagh and South Tyrone	1,586
Foyle	2,879
Lagan Valley	1,298
Mid Ulster	2,099
Newry and Armagh	2,342
North Antrim	1,475
North Down	9,33
South Antrim	1,345
South Down	1,967
Strangford	1,454
Upper Bann	2,137
West Tyrone	2,052
Incomplete postcodes*	1,293
Total	34,530

* A number of records have missing or incomplete postcodes and therefore cannot be allocated to a geographical area.

- (b) Last autumn a package of measures to enhance social security provision for carers was announced. Two of these measures were implemented in April this year. The Invalid Care Allowance earnings limit was increased to £72 per week and the Carer Premium paid with income-related benefits was increased to £24.40 per week. Further measures to extend entitlement to Invalid Care Allowance for up to eight weeks after the death of the severely disabled person and to allow carers over the age of 65 to claim the allowance will be introduced as soon as the legislative timetable permits.

Community Care Grant

Mr Hilditch asked the Minister for Social Development, in respect of the Social Fund Community Care Grant, to detail (a) the number of applications for the grant, (b) the number of successful applications, (c) the appeal process to be followed in respect of unsuccessful applications and (d) the current budget allocation for this grant. (AQW 666/01)

Mr Dodds: In the current financial year:

- (a) 33,050 Community Care Grant applications have been received;
- (b) 20,605 were successful;
- (c) customers who are unhappy with a decision should in the first instance contact their local Social Security Office for a review, within 28 days of the date on their decision letter. If necessary, customers can request a further review by the Social Fund

Inspector, who is independent of the Social Security Agency;

- (d) the Community Care Grant budget for 2001/02 is £10,260,000.

Minimum Income Guarantee

Mr Dalton asked the Minister for Social Development to give his assessment of the expected impact of the Minimum Income Guarantee on unemployment figures in South Antrim. (AQW 670/01)

Mr Dodds: The Minimum Income Guarantee will have no impact on unemployment figures as this benefit is intended for people over 60. Unemployment figures reported are based on the number of people under 60 who receive Jobseeker's Allowance.

Game Licences

Mr Shannon asked the Minister for Social Development to detail (a) the number of game licences that have been sold in each of the last three years and (b) the amount of revenue that has been received in each of the last three years. (AQW 687/01)

Mr Dodds: According to statistics supplied by the Post Office, the number of game licences sold and the revenue received during each of the last three years are as follows:

- 1998/1999 – 926 licences sold, amounting to £5,278;
- 1999/2000 – 960 licences sold, amounting to £5,458;
- 2000/2001 – 958 licences sold, amounting to £5,408.

Motability Task Force Report

Mr Carrick asked the Minister for Social Development when he expects the final report of the joint DSD Motability Task Force to be published; and to make a statement. (AQW 764/01)

Mr Dodds: The final report of the Task Force is published today, and I will place copies in the Library. The report makes a number of recommendations to help reduce the level of fraud and abuse in the scheme; these include:

- the removal of drivers with an unacceptable insurance claims history;
- increasing the level of vetting of driver and hirer information at application;
- a series of random spot checks on the vehicle use to be carried out during the contract hire period; and
- a review of dealership accreditation processes to ensure that they are as robust as practically possible.

Although the Task Force completes its terms of reference with the production of this report, officials in my Department will continue to work closely with Motability and the other agencies involved to ensure that the recommendations are implemented.

ASSEMBLY COMMISSION

Addressing Graffiti in Parliament Buildings

Mr Hilditch asked the Assembly Commission when the letters "IRA" will be removed from one of the lifts on the east wing of Parliament Buildings.

(AQW 592/01)

The Representative of the Assembly Commission (Rev Robert Coulter): The Assembly Commission only became aware of this particular problem on receipt of your written question and asked the Office of the Keeper to inspect all of the lifts in Parliament Buildings. This investigation revealed two instances of graffiti, the one in the lift on the east wing of the building which you identified and a second in the lift on the south side of the building.

The Office of the Keeper has been advised that the vandalised panels will need to be rubbed down, lightly abraded and restained and that the work has already been commissioned. A weekly inspection of the lifts has now been introduced which will at least provide early identification of any further acts of vandalism.

Environmentally Friendly Policy

Mr Hussey asked the Assembly Commission to detail progress on the implementation of a "green policy" in relation to the re-use and recycling of materials used in Parliament Buildings. (AQW 647/01)

The Representative of the Assembly Commission (Mrs E Bell): The Assembly Commission is committed to the implementation of environmentally friendly policies. To date, the Commission, through the Office of the Keeper, has implemented the following actions:

- Paper waste disposable bags are located in all offices for confidential and non-confidential waste. On average, 197 bags of waste paper are produced and removed for recycling from Parliament Buildings monthly.
- Glass receptacles are located at refreshment points throughout Parliament buildings. Newspaper and cardboard waste are collated centrally. The glass, newspaper and cardboard waste are transferred to the Belfast City Council's recycling stream.
- Can receptacles are located at refreshment points throughout Parliament buildings and are centrally collated for collection by Bryson House, a registered charity.
- All waste cooking oil is collected for recycling by the supplier.

The Assembly Commission is also in the process of exploring the potential, where possible, for the recycling of food organic waste for compost usage within the Stormont Estate and the sourcing from suppliers of recycled materials such as paper. A programme of awareness raising and training within the Assembly on this important issue is ongoing and will remain a priority for the future.

NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

Friday 30 November 2001

Written Answers to Questions

OFFICE OF THE FIRST MINISTER AND DEPUTY FIRST MINISTER

Loyalist Commission

Mr Armstrong asked the Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister if it has received any representation to meet the recently formed Loyalist Commission. (AQO 441/01)

Reply: A request to meet the Loyalist Commission was received last week.

North/South Ministerial Council

Mrs Courtney asked the Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister to make a statement on the next proposed plenary meeting of the North/South Ministerial Council. (AQO 423/01)

Reply: The next plenary meeting of the North/South Ministerial Council is scheduled to take place on 30 November 2001. In accordance with section 52 (6) of the Northern Ireland Act 1998, a report on the meeting will be made to the Assembly as soon as reasonably practicable after the meeting.

An agenda for the meeting has not yet been agreed

AGRICULTURE AND RURAL DEVELOPMENT

Flying Union Flag: 2 Newry Road, Armagh

The Lord Kilclooney asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to outline (a) if she has provided a Union flag at the Department's premises at 2 Newry Road, Armagh City, (b) if any arrangements have been made to fly the flag at these

premises on designated dates, and (c) why it was not flown on Remembrance Sunday; and to make a statement. (AQW 749/01)

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development (Ms Rodgers): My Department has provided a Union flag for its premises at 2 Newry Road, Armagh and arrangements are in place to fly the flag on designated days. I understand that due to an oversight at Newry Road the flag was not flown on Remembrance Sunday.

Relocation of Trillick Office

Mr McElduff asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development whether she has any plans to relocate her Department's office in Trillick, Co Tyrone; and to make a statement. (AQW 774/01)

Ms Rodgers: I can confirm that the Department is considering the future of this particular office though I should make it clear that I have not yet taken any decisions on whether or not it should be relocated elsewhere. The current Trillick office is leased on a monthly basis and the landlord has recently advised the Department that he has other plans for the property. So the Department is compelled to leave this office.

As relocation to another site will almost inevitably involve additional expenditure, now is an appropriate time to consider if this is the correct course of action. Accordingly I will want to reflect on the cost and staffing considerations of this on one hand and the needs and alternatives for the local community on the other. I will also be interested to hear the views of the industry before coming to a final view on this matter.

Foyle, Carlingford and Irish Lights Commission

Mrs Nelis asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development what plans she has to bring forward legislation in respect of the Foyle, Carlingford and the Irish Lights Commission; and to make a statement. (AQW 785/01)

Ms Rodgers: I would refer you to my statement to the Assembly of 12 November on the Foyle, Carlingford and Irish Lights Commission sectoral meeting which was held in Bundoran on 26 October 2001 when I updated members in relation to the progress in bringing forward the Foyle and Carlingford Fisheries Bill.

As you may know my Department and the Department of the Marine and Natural Resources in the Republic of Ireland are jointly preparing legislation to enhance the functions of the Foyle, Carlingford and Irish Lights Commission (FCILC) in line with the North/South Co-operation (Implementation Bodies)

(Northern Ireland) Order 1999 and to update the inland fisheries provisions of the Foyle Fisheries Act (NI) 1952 and the Foyle Fisheries Act 1952 in a number of respects.

Officials from my Department and the Department of the Marine and Natural Resources continue to work together to progress this legislation. I had hoped to be in a position to introduce this Bill to the Assembly in the early part of next year, but that has had to be delayed further due to lack of progress by the South in producing their parallel draft Bill. A number of policy issues also remain to be resolved but should not delay progress unduly.

Coarse Angling

Mrs Nelis asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to detail progress by the Loughs Agency in promoting coarse angling and, in particular, the provision of stocks of unusual fish to facilitate marine tourism; and to make a statement.

(AQW 791/01)

Ms Rodgers: I would refer you to my statement to the Assembly of 12 November on the Foyle, Carlingford and Irish Lights Commission Sectoral meeting which was held in Bundoran on 26 October 2001 when I advised members of the introduction of a coarse angling licence in the Foyle and Carlingford Areas.

The Loughs Agency has carried out coarse fish stock assessments in various areas of the Foyle and Carlingford catchments in conjunction with local councils, tourism and angling interests. The most recent survey concentrated on the Newry Canal. This survey identified the potential for the development of a very significant pike fishery, which is particularly attractive to continental anglers. Other species of note found were tench, bream, roach and their hybrids. It is the Agency's aim to develop the canal and re-establish it as an internationally known coarse fishery, as it was for the 1984 World Coarse Angling Championship. Consideration is also being given to the proposed development of a carp fishery at Campsie in the Foyle catchment.

Other species which are showing significant potential to attract tourists include tope in Carlingford Lough and sea bass in both loughs. The Agency is also aware of large tuna being caught by game anglers close to the area seaward of Lough Foyle, an area for which it has responsibility, and proposes to liaise with interests in the area to assess its potential for the Foyle Area.

Sheep Subsidy Fraud

Mr Kennedy asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to make a statement regarding the recent decision by her Department on advice from the

Director of Public Prosecutions not to prosecute persons accused of sheep subsidy fraud. (AQW 886/01)

Ms Rodgers: Following the investigation of the shortfalls of sheep identified after the Foot and Mouth culls, 12 cases were referred to the Director of Public Prosecutions with a view to prosecution. Seven of these had been accepted by the DPP and dates had been set for hearings when the loss of an unrelated appeal case caused the DPP to review the evidence and the legislation. He decided that he would be unable to secure a conviction due to limitations within the legislation. It was not therefore a decision by my Department but a decision by the DPP not to proceed with prosecutions. However, some of the farmers may still remain liable to legal action because they did not present their flock records when requested.

The limitation identified is that the Regulations provide for an offence only where false or misleading information is furnished by the claimant, and this effectively means at the time of the submission of a claim. Consequently, where a shortfall of sheep occurs after the claim has been submitted, it would be necessary to prove that the claimant did not intend, at the time he claimed, to keep the specified number of sheep.

An amending regulation has been laid and comes into operation on Tuesday 4 December when the 2002 scheme opens for applications. The amendment creates an additional offence where a farmer does not notify the Department of material changes to the particulars of his or her claim. Claimants are already required to do this under the Scheme rules and are subject to penalties if they do not. The new regulations will, in addition, make them liable to prosecution.

Farmer Early Retirement Scheme

Mr Bradley asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development what assessment has she made on the reports by Queens University, Belfast and University College, Dublin into the economic experiences of other governments, as result of their Farmers Retirement Schemes. (AQO 413/01)

Ms Rodgers: The research into farmer early retirement and new entrant schemes which I commissioned from The Queen's University of Belfast and University College, Dublin earlier this year will not be completed until early summer 2002.

Access to Forests

Mr Dallat asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to outline what additional measures are being taken to promote access to forests; and to make a statement. (AQO 447/01)

Ms Rodgers: I plan to discount the entrance charges for older people from 1 January next year. This will be achieved through the Annual Permit system.

The condition of forest paths is being surveyed to identify and publicise those which are suitable for less able people and in particular those people who rely on wheelchairs. Where it is affordable and there is demand, the condition of paths will be improved.

My Department also co-operates with other Departments in encouraging visitors to use forests.

Rural Development Programme

Mr McMenamin asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to outline the monetary value, timescale and key objectives of the Rural Development Programme; and to make a statement. (AQO 428/01)

Ms Rodgers: The value of the Programme over the period from 2001 to 2006 will be in the order of £80 million, and I anticipate that this support will lever additional private and public funds bringing a total investment of around £100 million.

The Programme for Building Sustainable Prosperity and the LEADER+ Initiative formally commenced on 1 January 2000 and will close on 31 December 2006. The Peace II Programme, which will run for 4 years, also commenced on 1 January 2000, and will close on 31 December 2004. All approved works must be completed and claims paid within 2 years of the closure of the Programmes.

My key objective will be to expand upon the work of the previous Rural Development Programmes. I aim to create a flexible Programme which can identify and respond to the widest possible range of opportunity and need in rural areas. In particular, key objectives of the Programme will focus on:

- Capacity Building (strengthening rural communities);
- Local Regeneration Projects and Programmes;
- Sectoral and Area Based Development Projects and Programmes;
- Micro-business development; and
- Natural Resource Rural Tourism.

Sheep Annual Premium, South Armagh

Mr C Murphy asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to make a statement on the enquiry into subsidiary fraud in South Armagh. (AQO 435/01)

Ms Rodgers: Of the original 58 claims for Sheep Annual Premium from South Armagh containing irregularities 23 are still being investigated, 33 have been examined and penalties or rejection of the claims have been confirmed and 2 have had penalties reduced or

removed where additional information has been provided. However, although appropriate penalties have been applied, because of the high standards of evidence required it will not be possible to pursue a prosecution in all cases for which no satisfactory explanation was provided to explain the discrepancy.

In view of this, I have announced my intention to strengthen the Sheep Annual Premium Regulations to create an offence where a claimant does not notify the Department of material changes, as required by the rules of the Scheme.

CULTURE, ARTS AND LEISURE

Queen's Golden Jubilee in 2002

Mr Gibson asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure if he will introduce plans to encourage the celebration of British cultural identity through the celebrations of the Queen's Jubilee in 2002. (AQW 710/01)

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure (Mr McGimpsey): I am enclosing a copy of an information leaflet which has just been issued to District Councils for distribution to their community groups. Copies of this leaflet will also be placed in the Assembly Library. You will note the five themes for the Queen's Golden Jubilee which have been agreed by Buckingham Palace and, in particular, the emphasis by the Palace on Community and Commonwealth.

In drawing up these themes, the Palace has stated:

"We hope that the celebrations will reach into every community and can involve everyone no matter what their background, age, culture, ethnic origin, religion or status. The Golden Jubilee is an inclusive occasion and it is hoped that the celebrations will be accessible to all those who want to participate. The importance of the Commonwealth to the life of our nation is central to the programme of Golden Jubilee events scheduled for 2002."

My Department has been asked to co-ordinate the Northern Ireland programme for the Queen's Golden Jubilee which are part of the UK and Commonwealth celebrations, and we will of course be complying with these themes.

Creating a Soccer Strategy for Northern Ireland

Mr Dalton asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to give his assessment of when he expects the recommendations of 'Creating a Soccer Strategy for Northern Ireland' report, to be implemented in full. (AQW 741/01)

Mr McGimpsey: The Advisory Panel's Report "Creating a Soccer Strategy for Northern Ireland, which was presented to me on 30 October is currently being subjected to an 8-week period of consultation. Comments are required to be submitted to the Department by Friday 28 December 2001.

The Department's objective is to then produce its strategy for Soccer, taking account of the Advisory Panel's report and the views and comments received during consultation. The target is for the Department to publish its strategy as soon as possible after the end of the consultation period, and hopefully early in 2002.

Sport in Local Communities

Mr Gibson asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to outline progress against his targets for encouraging sport in local communities.

(AQW 753/01)

Mr McGimpsey: The following illustrates progress against some of the targets set for encouraging sport in local communities: new quality sporting opportunities have been provided after school for 60% of Northern Ireland's schools;

- five regional Youth Sport Programmes have been established (target is six) involving 38,000 children from all communities;
- almost £600,000 pounds has been invested in the first six months of this year in sports clubs, the target is one million by this year end;
- Lottery programmes Sports share and Community sport have invested in six major projects awards of £813,000.
- Derry City Council are about to appoint a new Community Sports Development officer aided by SCNI funding;
- 82 regional squads have been set up covering communities in all five education and Library Boards;
- The Countryside Activities and Access Network has broadened access to the countryside for many thousands of people through its new way-marked ways and eco trails.

Visitor Amenities

Mr McGrady asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure what funding will be provided for the promotion and marketing of visitor amenities; and to make a statement.

(AQW 766/01)

Mr McGimpsey: The promotion and marketing of visitor amenities will always, in the first instance, remain the responsibility of those who operate them. However, my Department will be considering what its role should be in the promotion and marketing of

visitor amenities as part of its work in taking forward the Local Museums and Heritage Review. It is too early to say what the resource implications will be, but when they have been quantified I may need to make a bid for additional resources.

Value of Sport to the Quality of Life

Mrs Nelis asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure if he will research the role of sport in deprived areas; and to make a statement.

(AQW 801/01)

Mr McGimpsey: In October 2001, the Sports Council released a Report on the Value of Sport to the Quality of Life in Northern Ireland. The information presented in this report was taken from research and evaluative projects carried out over the last decade on the value of sport in improving the quality of people's lives in all sections of the community, including deprived areas. The need for further research is kept under constant review.

50-Metre Pool

Mr B Hutchinson asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to investigate the feasibility of creating a 50-metre pool for competitive swimming.

(AQO 449/01)

Mr McGimpsey: Plans are well advanced for a Northern Ireland Institute of Sport at the Jordanstown Campus of the University of Ulster, which is being developed as part of the network of the United Kingdom Sports Institute.

Subject to costings and a detailed appraisal, the aspiration is to provide a 50m pool as an integral part of the Sports Institute at the Jordanstown site. This will be designed, as with all other UKSI sports facilities, with a focus on assisting the training of international performers.

Further to the Member's question, I have asked the Sports Council to provide me with an estimate of the cost of upgrading the proposed training pool to provide a 50m competition pool, which must include 8 lanes, with boom, spectator accommodation for a minimum of 400 and suitable facilities for television and media, to allow me to consider the options.

EDUCATION

Support Programme for Schools in North Belfast

Mr K Robinson asked the Minister of Education to detail specific measures he has introduced to support the pupils and staff in (a) Holy Cross, (b) Wheatfield, (c) Ballygolan and (d) Cliftonville Primary Schools as a result of the ongoing problems in the north of the city.

(AQW 727/01)

The Minister of Education (Mr M McGuinness):

After extensive consultation between my Department, the Belfast Education and Library Board and the Council for Catholic Maintained Schools I announced on 25 October a support programme for Holy Cross and the nearby Wheatfield Primary School. The funding, which totals £154,000, will be used to support the measures which the schools themselves have identified as necessary to meet the needs of pupils and staff. These include, for each school, additional substitute teachers, classroom assistants, curriculum support for P7 pupils, including those taking the transfer test, and respite activities for pupils and staff. My Department is also meeting the cost of a turning circle for vehicles at Holy Cross, estimated at £25,000. The Belfast Board continues to provide support to all schools in the area and, in response to the problem of increased vandalism, has installed additional security features at Ballygolan and Cliftonville Primary Schools.

As part of the Executive response to the problems in North Belfast, additional funding and support will be provided to other schools in the area which have been affected and to the youth service. The details of this support package are being finalised and will be announced shortly.

Funding for Schools in North Belfast

Mr K Robinson asked the Minister of Education if the Belfast Education and Library Board and the Council for Catholic Maintained Schools will be expected to fund the special arrangements provided to support the pupils and staff of (a) Holy Cross, (b) Wheatfield, (c) Ballygolan and (d) Cliftonville Primary Schools, as a result of the ongoing problems in the north of the city. (AQW 730/01)

Mr M McGuinness: As I have indicated, additional resources totalling £154,000 have been made available to the Belfast Education and Library Board to fund the special arrangements which have been put in place to address the unique circumstances at Holy Cross and Wheatfield Primary Schools. These resources are earmarked and will be directed through the BELB to the schools through their LMS budget. The cost of the vehicle turning circle at Holy Cross will also be met by my Department. As part of the Executive response to the situation in North Belfast, additional funding and support will be provided to other schools which have been affected and to the Youth Service. This support package is currently being finalised and details will be announced shortly.

Funding for School Support Programme: North Belfast

Mr K Robinson asked the Minister of Education to detail the breakdown of the various budget headings

which have been used to provide support to the pupils and staff in (a) Holy Cross, (b) Wheatfield, (c) Ballygolan and (d) Cliftonville Primary Schools as a result of the ongoing problems in the north of the city.

(AQW 731/01)

Mr M McGuinness: Support measures relating to Holy Cross and Wheatfield Primary Schools have been funded from the generality of minor in-year savings arising within the Department of Education budget. Funding for the education support measures included in the Executive initiative on North Belfast will be additional to the education budget.

Expenditure for the Provision of Sport

Mr Gibson asked the Minister of Education to detail the expenditure by each education and library board on the provision of sport and recreation facilities from 1997 to date; and to make a statement. (AQW 738/01)

Mr M McGuinness: Expenditure by education and library boards on sport and recreation facilities from 1997 is as follows:

	£000
Belfast	778
Western	483
North-Eastern	1,025
South-Eastern	885
Southern	515

Boards have also incurred expenditure on sport and recreation facilities in new schools built since 1997 but it is not possible to show this expenditure separately.

Implementation of the Burns Report

Mr K Robinson asked the Minister of Education when implementing the recommendations of the Burns report, in respect of the primary school sector, how will he ensure at an early stage that staff are properly trained and schools adequately resourced to meet the new demands that pupil profiling will place upon them.

(AQW 762/01)

Mr M McGuinness: The establishment of a Pupil Profile is a key recommendation of the Review Body's Report which estimates that some £2 million per year might be needed over a 3 year period for related training, professional development and moderation. No decisions on the shape of future arrangements will be taken until after the public consultation and it will not be possible to put firm figures on the resources required until then. Any necessary additional resources will be sought from the Executive. I am very conscious of the bureaucratic burden on teachers and I will

continue to work to reduce this in any new arrangements that are implemented.

Ulster-Scots Culture

Mr K Robinson asked the Minister of Education to outline his plans for teachers at initial training and at in-service training courses to have available resources which will enable them to introduce the Ulster-Scots culture into our society. (AQW 763/01)

Mr M McGuinness: There is scope, 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.

My Department has recently met with members and officers of Tha Boord o Ulster-Scotch about its corporate plan and we are facilitating further discussions between the Boord and relevant educational bodies.

Nursery School Places: Newtownards

Mrs I Robinson asked the Minister of Education to detail (a) the number of places provided in state funded nursery schools in Newtownards, in each of the last five years and (b) the number of applications that have been submitted for these nursery schools in each of the past five years. (AQW 772/01)

Mr M McGuinness: The number of state funded nursery places in Newtownards and the number of applications for these places is as follows:

School Year	Number of applications	Number of nursery places
1996/97	-	152
1997/98	-	151
1998/99	-	184
1999/00	298	209
2000/01	359	208

Information in respect of the number of applications for the 1996/97, 1997/98 and 1998/99 school years is not available.

Bullying in Schools

Mr M Robinson asked the Minister of Education what steps he is taking to reduce bullying in schools. (AQW 775/01)

Mr M McGuinness: My Department has repeatedly made it clear that bullying behaviour is unacceptable, most recently in 'Pastoral Care in Schools; Promoting

Positive Behaviour'. I intend at the next legislative opportunity to make it a requirement for schools to have an anti-bullying policy. During 2002 the findings from research about bullying here will be published and a locally based good practice guide on countering bullying is in preparation.

Official Engagements

Mr Hilditch asked the Minister of Education, pursuant to AQW 539/01, to state the nature of the official business. (AQW 820/01)

Mr M McGuinness: I was on official business in the Republic of Ireland. I was the keynote speaker at the opening of the Annual Conference of the Association of Principals of Vocational Schools and Community Colleges in Westport, Co. Mayo.

Literacy and Numeracy Targets

Mr Dallat asked the Minister of Education, pursuant to the draft Programme for Government, why the Key Stage Three targets for pupil literacy and maths have been reduced. (AQW 839/01)

Mr M McGuinness: The targets published in the Literacy and Numeracy Strategy for Northern Ireland were provisional. They were based on only one, incomplete, year's assessment results and were, therefore, only a best estimate. The revised targets do not represent a reduction in standards but are, rather, more realistic targets based on the additional information available after 4 years of statutory assessment.

EMPLOYMENT AND LEARNING

Evaluation of Time Spent on Teaching and Assessment

Mr Beggs asked the Minister for Employment and Learning to outline (a) any assessment he has made in respect of the time Further Education Lecturers spend completing assessment reports in comparison to the time teaching students and (b) any plans he has to introduce new technology and reporting methods which would help increase the proportion of teaching time. (AQW 662/01)

The Minister for Employment and Learning (Dr Farren): The Education and Training Inspectorate evaluate the quality of teaching and assessment but do not compare the time spent on each. I have invested £10m in a strategy for information and communication technology in FE, one strand of which is the training

of lecturers to use technology to enhance teaching and learning and for assessment.

Individual Learning Accounts

Mr Paisley Jnr asked the Minister for Employment and Learning to outline (a) his reasons for suspending Individual Learning Accounts and (b) when he intends to restore these accounts. (AQW 682/01)

Dr Farren: I announced the review and suspension of Individual Learning Accounts on 26 October 2001. My reasons were that I wanted to examine how the programme could be best targeted at those most in need, as well as protecting the public interest against the potential for mis-selling by some providers. I intend to bring forward revised arrangements as soon as possible.

Employment Support Scheme

Mrs Nelis asked the Minister for Employment and Learning to outline the current situation in respect of the supported employment scheme which was terminated in September and if there are other proposals to assist the disabled into employment. (AQW 724/01)

Dr Farren: My Department's Employment Support scheme has not been terminated. A moratorium on new applications was, however, introduced in October 2000, to allow a long waiting list which had developed to be cleared. The Executive approved funding for an additional 50 places on the Employment Support programme from the current year, and I am pleased to advise that Employment Support is again accepting new applications.

Tuition Fees

Mr Gibson asked the Minister for Employment and Learning to make a statement on the future of tuition fees in relation to student support. (AQW 758/01)

Dr Farren: I have increased the parental income threshold to £20,000 in 2001/02. This will increase the number of Northern Ireland higher education students who do not have to pay any contribution to tuition fees to around 50 percent. In addition, I have abolished fees for full-time students, aged over 19, on vocational courses in further education.

Application of Student Support Awards

Mr M Murphy asked the Minister for Employment and Learning what safeguards are in place to ensure that the awards for students enrolling for a post

graduate course are applied equally by the Education and Library Boards; and to make a statement.

(AQW 838/01)

Dr Farren: Within the framework of the Department's general guidance, each Board develops its own specific criteria. The formation of a Boards' Consortium on Student Support has greatly assisted a co-operative approach and the point has now been reached where only minor differences exist between the respective criteria applied by the Boards.

Funding for Further Education Colleges

Mr Gibson asked the Minister for Employment and Learning what plans he has to increase funding for further education colleges; and to make a statement.

(AQW 845/01)

Dr Farren: MLAs and others have had the opportunity to consider the proposals in the draft budget for 2002-03. I, together with my colleagues, will carefully study all proposals for change before finalising the Budget for presentation to the Assembly on 3 December. Final decisions on the funding available for colleges will be made in the New Year.

ENTERPRISE, TRADE AND INVESTMENT

Bradfor Ltd, Rostrevor

Mr Bradley asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment if he will undertake to visit the factory premises of Bradfor Ltd, Rostrevor, during his next visit to South Down. (AQW 683/01)

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment (Sir Reg Empey): I would be happy to visit the premises of Bradfor Ltd on my next visit to the area, particularly as I understand that the business has developed successfully and provides significant employment opportunities for people in rural areas around Rostrevor despite operating in the relatively difficult textiles market sector.

Effects of 11 September 2001 on Tourism in NI

Mr Gibson asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment if he will make a statement on the effects that the terrorist attacks on New York and Washington have had on the promotion of tourism to Northern Ireland. (AQW 732/01)

Sir Reg Empey: As a result of the events of 11th September the current context is one of uncertainty with regard to tourism demand due to the unpredictability of the economic, political and travel situation over the coming months. Northern Ireland Tourist Board (NITB) was due to complete its Marketing Strategy for Northern Ireland in October 2001. This is now being revised as was Tourism Ireland's strategy in order to reflect the changing environment.

NITB will work in partnership with key carriers and operators to determine the best prospects for visitors in 2002 and will benefit from the additional activity Tourism Ireland Limited will provide the capacity of the extensive British Tourist Authority (BTA) network to promote NI regions and products in key markets.

There will therefore be an increased focus on European markets for 2002 and a particular focus on the surface access market from Britain where the advent of low cost carriers is also acting as a driver for growth.

New Businesses in Northern Ireland

Mr Gibson asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to detail (a) the steps he is taking to promote the setting up of new businesses, and (b) his plans to increase the output of the manufacturing sector. (AQW 751/01)

Sir Reg Empey:

- (a) Work is currently underway within my department to develop a Business Birth Rate Strategy (a Programme for Government action) to address the issue of the low rate of start-ups in Northern Ireland. The development of this strategy will involve all those with a role to play in promoting entrepreneurship and will seek to transform attitudes to entrepreneurship and enterprise; to develop entrepreneurial capabilities and to encourage the establishment of successful businesses.

It is anticipated that this strategy will be adopted and implemented by Invest Northern Ireland (INI).

In his statement Chairman of the INI Shadow Board, Fabian Monds indicated Business Birth Rates as a key strategic principle for INI. The Chairman outlined a key role for INI in encouraging and promoting a climate in which risk taking is not only accepted, but understood and admired.

In addition the recent launch of the Council / LEDU Business Start Programme will provide a key vehicle for creating more business start-ups on a regional basis.

- (b) Raising the competitiveness of the business base in Northern Ireland and therefore by inference the output of the manufacturing sector, is a strategic priority for INI. We must ensure that the needs of

locally based businesses are fully understood and that services are provided to meet these needs. This business base is dominated by small firms, which cannot always employ the expertise, nor access the information and knowledge they need to develop. Providing access, and encouraging businesses to exploit information, knowledge and expertise will form a key area of support.

In its current operations LEDU has a range of initiatives to improve access to information, research, innovation and training for small firms, as well as improving their financial environment. These are important areas for policy intervention to facilitate this internationalisation process. Greater use of ICT and E-commerce are now prerequisites of business success in the global market place. Therefore, the competitiveness of small firms in Northern Ireland will be enhanced by continued policy actions in the following areas:

- Information access (markets and research)
- R&D/Innovation
- Skilled workforce
- Access to Finance
- E-Commerce/ICT

Local Economic Development Initiatives

Mr K Robinson asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment what steps he is taking to co-ordinate local economic development initiatives undertaken by district councils with the agencies under his control. (AQW 767/01)

Sir Reg Empey: Councils recently submitted Local Economic Development Action Plans outlining proposed activity for the next few years.

The plans have included wide consultation with the DETI Agencies who will also be involved in part funding and part involvement in many of the programmes of action. The agencies are also invited to comment on completed plans on submission for funding and this again provides the opportunity to co-ordinate efforts to add value to the economy.

In addition to the preparation of plans, LEDU represents the Department and its Agencies on the various Council Partnership Boards, and Local Strategy Partnerships.

LEDU's involvement will continue into Invest Northern Ireland where we envisage further added value in the delivery of economic services locally and the sharing of best practise throughout the country.

Broadband Communications: Foyle Constituency

Mrs Nelis asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment what plans he has to ensure the availability and accessibility of broadband communications in the Foyle constituency. (AQW 809/01)

Sir Reg Empey: The provision of broadband communications is a commercial decision for the telecommunications providers. The Executive is committed to working with all telecommunication operators to encourage them to extend broadband services across Northern Ireland. My Department has been working with the specialist telecommunications consultants Mason Communications in the approach being taken to address the rollout of broadband services. I have recently placed in the Assembly library copies of the executive summary of the Masons report "Strategy for a World Class Telecommunications Infrastructure in Northern Ireland" which is influencing our approach. IRTU is currently working with a number of telecommunication providers to identify appropriate and affordable technology opportunities, in particular broadband satellite services, with an emphasis on meeting the needs of rural areas.

ENVIRONMENT

Environment Protection: Magheramorne.

Mr K Robinson asked the Minister of the Environment what steps he is taking to protect the environment in the areas around the former quarry and spoil heaps at Magheramorne. (AQW 735/01)

The Minister of the Environment (Mr Foster): My Department's Environment and Heritage Service undertakes regular monitoring of the marine water quality of Northern Ireland. The monitoring carried out covers a network of specified sites within Northern Ireland's five sea Loughs namely Carlingford Lough, Belfast Lough, Strangford Lough, Lough Foyle and Larne Lough. In addition to these, other coastal and offshore sites are monitored. Larne Lough is monitored at five sites for water and sediment quality under the Northern Ireland Estuarine and Coastal Waters Monitoring Programme (NIECWMP) which was set up to classify the estuarine and coastal waters of Northern Ireland.

One of the monitoring sites used in the NIECWMP surveys is located very close to the Magheramorne quarry spoil site. The monitoring includes water quality sampling and sediment sampling which provides information on nutrient levels in the seawater and contamination levels in the sediments.

The results to date from this site indicate that the former Magheramorne quarry and the spoil heap are having no effect on the overall water quality of Larne Lough.

Leisure Services: District Councils

Mr Gibson asked the Minister of the Environment to detail any legislation which exists that details the level of leisure services which district councils must provide; and to make a statement. (AQW 736/01)

Mr Foster: Article 10 of the Recreation and Youth Service (NI) Order 1986 allows for provision by district councils of facilities for recreational, social, physical and cultural activities. A council must provide adequate facilities in its area and may carry out this function alone or together with another district council or individual. It is the responsibility of each council to determine what is adequate.

District Council Expenditure: Sport and Leisure

Mr Gibson asked the Minister of the Environment to detail any expenditure by local district councils on the provision of sport and recreation facilities from 1997 to date; and to make a statement. (AQW 737/01)

Mr Foster: Expenditure by individual district councils on sport and leisure facilities, during the period 1997/1998 to 2000/2001, is set out in the Table below. The budget for this function is for each council to determine.

District	1997/1998	1998/1999	1999/2000	2000/2001*
Antrim	1,003,122	1,114,976	1,401,610	1,492,974
Ards	689,516	840,338	1,462,489	1,699,723
Armagh	570,274	500,511	807,572	1,047,815
Ballymena	873,588	867,916	*1,278,294	1,385,461
Ballymoney	513,904	569,712	763,994	755,169
Banbridge	531,088	595,077	619,103	780,162
Belfast	8,714,240	9,187,339	10,110,833	11,349,887
Carrick-fergus	418,726	443,192	827,620	827,489
Castlereagh	1,990,874	1,574,847	2,477,802	2,550,041
Coleraine	596,261	564,144	734,045	822,809
Cookstown	613,651	480,481	869,400	1,068,377
Craigavon	1,897,293	1,893,018	2,284,194	2,348,149
Derry	1,991,982	1,852,442	2,420,223	2,648,052
Down	856,695	861,360	1,430,151	1,407,355
Dungannon	482,741	480,785	838,444	904,466
Fermanagh	720,584	618,000	1,119,907	1,102,093
Larne	434,181	437,947	779,657	785,750
Limavady	322,490	498,350	1,103,407	1,185,233
Lisburn	2,058,215	2,247,833	3,323,727	3,409,445
Magherafelt	1,091,857	746,706	995,096	1,069,146

District	1997/1998	1998/1999	1999/2000	2000/2001*
Moyle	79,221	96,270	255,439	271,873
Newry & Mourne	863,647	1,109,997	1,707,216	1,657,831
Newtown-abbey	2,534,334	2,645,633	*3,919,988	3,925,690
North Down	489,879	503,626	1,229,393	1,529,393
Omagh	749,481	752,502	1,059,784	1,134,026
Strabane	706,094	713,598	*696,611	688,944
Totals	31,793,938	32,196,600	44,515,999	47,847,353

*Figures have not yet been certified by Local Government Audit Office

Retrospect Planning Permission

Dr Birnie asked the Minister of the Environment if he has any plans to revoke the provision which permits retrospective permission being granted for planning applications. (AQW 750/01)

Mr Foster: I have no plans to revoke this provision at present.

You may be aware that I propose to bring a Planning (Amendment) Bill before the Assembly in this Session. One of the primary aims of that Bill will be to strengthen existing enforcement powers and introduce new procedures, which will enable my Department to respond more speedily and effectively to those cases which raise public concern, including instances of unauthorised development.

The issue of making it an offence to commence building any structure without first obtaining planning permission was raised recently with my Department by the Environment Committee.

My Department is currently considering this but the issues are complex and far reaching. I want to consider them fully and carefully, and in the context of existing and proposed enforcement powers, before deciding whether such a change should be made.

Tree Preservation Orders

Mr K Robinson asked the Minister of the Environment what plans he has to (a) enhance the status of Tree Preservation Orders, and (b) increase the penalties for breaches of such orders. (AQW 768/01)

Mr Foster: A proposed Planning (Amendment) Bill, which I hope to introduce to the Assembly before the Summer recess in 2002, will include:-

- An extended definition of the scope of a Tree Preservation Order (TPO). In future, a TPO will prohibit not only the cutting down of trees without consent, but also the causing or permitting of such cutting down;

- A new duty on landowners to replace trees subject to a TPO that are removed. The existing TPO would automatically apply to the new trees planted as it did to the original trees, thereby providing that the removal of trees in itself does not automatically render the land suitable for development;
- A new power for the Department to enforce the replacement of trees, subject to a TPO, that are removed;
- A new power for the Department to enter onto land to carry out works required to secure the replanting of trees subject to a TPO, that are removed, and to recover any costs incurred as a civil debt;
- Higher penalties for breaches of TPOs. This involves an increase from £5,000 to £20,000 in the maximum level that can be imposed on summary conviction by a court. In addition, there will be no limit to a fine that can be imposed on conviction on indictment so as to enable the court to take into account the financial benefit that may have accrued as a consequence of the offence;
- A new power for the Department to prevent the removal of trees in a Conservation Area;
- A new power for the Department to take out an injunction to prevent breaches of a TPO; and,
- A new power for the Department to enter land for investigative purposes.

You may also wish to be aware of various non-legislative actions being taken by the Department in relation to the protection of trees. The Department is currently working with the Forest of Belfast and the Construction Employers Federation to prepare a booklet of "best practice" in relation to the protection of trees during the development process. The booklet will highlight the significant benefits of tree retention and examples of poor practice on development sites that should be avoided.

Finally, I am very aware of the strong interest in this area, and the Department will continue to examine options for improving and enhancing the protection of trees.

FINANCE AND PERSONNEL

Quinquennial Review of the Rate Collection Agency

Ms Lewsley asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel to provide an update on the Quinquennial Review of the Rate Collection Agency. (AQW 792/01)

The Minister of Finance and Personnel (Mr Durkan): I have just received the final report of the

first stage of the review of the Rate Collection Agency. Copies have been placed in the Library.

I now intend referring the Report to the Committee for Finance and Personnel for consideration and comment by 31 January 2001. Views will also be sought from staff representatives and the Equality Commission. On the wider front, a targeted mailshot, drawing attention to the document on the DFP web site, will be sent to organisations from the Community and Voluntary Sector, including representative groups and other individuals who have been consulted on the Department's Equality Scheme. A general press release announcing the start of the consultation period will also be issued.

HEALTH, SOCIAL SERVICES AND PUBLIC SAFETY

Occupational Therapy: Home Adaptations

Mr Hilditch asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety, pursuant to AQW 495/01, to detail (a) the frequency of home adaptations by occupational therapists which are failing to meet their targets, by Board area and (b) any plans she has to address the under funding in this area. (AQW 664/01)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety (Ms de Brún): The information is not available in the form requested. I have provided additional funding for the service this year, on a recurrent basis. Further funding will be considered in the light of other health and social services pressures.

Níl an t-eolas ar fáil san fhoirm iarrtha. Thug mé maoiniú breise don tseirbhís seo i mbliana ar bhonn rialta. Déanfar machnamh ar thuilleadh maoinithe a thabhairt mar gheall ar bhrúnna eile ar na seirbhísí sláinte agus sóisialta.

Speech and Language Therapy Services: East Antrim

Mr K Robinson asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail (a) the action she is taking to address the demand for speech therapists in Special Needs Schools in East Antrim (b) any plans to employ private speech therapists as a temporary measure to address this problem; and (c) to make a statement. (AQW 673/01)

Ms de Brún: The provision of speech and language therapy services in the East Antrim area is the responsibility of Homefirst Community Trust. I understand that the Trust has explored a number of alternative methods of filling speech and language therapy vacancies.

Measures have included an unsuccessful attempt to set up a speech and language therapy bank and more recently the possibility of using agency staff. The Trust is continuing to do all it can to fill current vacancies.

My Department has reached agreement with the University of Ulster to increase by 10 the number of student places for speech and language therapy from the start of the current academic year. In addition, it is undertaking a comprehensive review of Health and Personal Social Services workforce planning. This will identify what further measures need to be taken to address specific issues in particular services.

My Department has also established a joint working group with officials from the Department of Education to look at all aspects of support for children with special needs, including opportunities for jointly funded pilot projects to enhance service provision.

Iontaobhas Pobail Homefirst atá freagrach as seirbhísí teiripe labhartha agus teanga a sholáthar i limistéar Aontroma Thoir. Tuigim gur scrúdaigh an tIontaobhas roinnt modhanna eile le folúntais theiripe labhartha agus teanga a líonadh. I measc na mbeart a rinneadh bhí iarracht in aisce sciathán teiripe labhartha agus teanga a chur ar bun agus ar na mallaibh an fhéidearthacht go bhfostófaí oibrithe ón ghníomhaireacht. Tá an tIontaobhas ag déanamh a dhíchill go fóill na folúntais reatha a líonadh.

Tháinig an Roinn s'agamsa ar chomhaontú le hOllscoil Uladh líon na n-áiteanna ar fáil do mhic léinn san ábhar teiripe labhartha agus teanga a mhéadú faoi 10 áit ó thús na bliana reatha acadúla. Ina theannta sin, beidh sí ag déanamh athbhreithnithe chuimsithigh ar phleanáil na Seirbhísí Sláinte agus Sóisialta Pearsanta don mheitheal oibre. Aimseoidh sé seo na bearta breise a bheadh orthu le déanamh le tabhairt faoi cheisteanna ar leith i seirbhísí áirithe.

Bhunaigh an Roinn s'agamsa comhghrúpa oibre le hoifigigh ón Roinn Oideachais le smaoineadh ar na gnéithe uile tacaíochta atá ar fáil do pháistí le riachtanais speisialta, deiseanna do scéimeanna píolótacha comh-mhaoinithe le cur lena soláthar seirbhísí san áireamh.

Staffing Levels and Financial Position: Whiteabbey Hospital

Mr K Robinson asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the current staffing levels and financial situation at Whiteabbey Hospital. (AQW 675/01)

Ms de Brún: The number of staff employed in Whiteabbey Hospital is as follows:

Administrative & Clerical	142
Nursing	287

Ancillary & General	99
Professions Allied to Medicine	43
Medical	52
Professional & Technical	8
Tradesmen	18
Pharmacy	6
Total	657

As regards the financial position, United Hospitals HSS Trust (which includes Whiteabbey Hospital) has reported a surplus of £50k for the period up to 30 September 2001. The Trust has advised me that there is an overspend of £312k for the 6 months up to 30 September in those areas for which Whiteabbey Hospital has its own budget. The Trust is however forecasting a breakeven position at the year-end, through a combination of measures including in year savings and a resolution of funding issues.

Seo a leanas líon na n-oibrithe fostaithe in Otharlann na Mainstreach Finne:

Riarthach & Cléireachas	142
Altranas	287
Coimhdeach agus Ginearálta	99
Gairmeacha Bainteach le Míochaine	43
Míochaine	52
Gairmiúil & Teicniúil	8
Trádálaithe	18
Cógaisíocht	6
Iomlán	657

Maidir leis an riocht airgeadais de, thug Iontaobhas SSS na nOtharlann Aontaithe (ina bhfuil Otharlann na Mainstreach Finne), le fios go raibh fuilleach de £50k acu don tréimhse suas go dtí 30 Meán Fómhair 2001. Chuir an tIontaobhas in iúl dom go raibh caiteachas iomarcach de £50k caite acu do na 6 mí suas go dtí 30 Meán Fómhair sna réimsí sin a bhfuil a buiséad féin ag Otharlann na Mainstreach Finne dóibh. Tá an tIontaobhas ag meas áfach go mbeadh sé gan gnóthú ná cailleadh faoi dheireadh na bliana trí roinnt beart, coigiltis ionbhliana agus réiteach ar cheisteanna maoinithe san áireamh.

Coleraine Hospital

Mr McClarty asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety, pursuant to AQW 1582/00, to outline progress to date. (AQW 676/01)

Ms de Brún: Originally, it had been anticipated that Coleraine Hospital would be decommissioned – to facilitate its disposal – approximately six months after the opening of the new Causeway Hospital in April 2001. However at a meeting between officers of my

Department, Causeway Trust and Valuation and Lands Agency, on 6 September 2001, the Trust advised that it was unlikely that the decommissioning of the hospital would be achieved before the end of January 2002. It was tentatively agreed that the sale of the hospital should be by way of public auction, possibly in mid-April 2002. It was agreed however that a further meeting would be held on 10 January 2002, when it was anticipated that the Trust could be definitive regarding the decommissioning/vacation of the hospital site.

Immediately following the meeting on 6 September 2001, Dalriada Doctor on Call expressed an interest in acquiring part of the site to build a Primary Care Centre. This expression of interest is currently being pursued and a meeting between Dalriada Doctor on Call and officers of my Department, Causeway Trust, Valuation and Lands Agency has been arranged for 30 November 2001.

Ar dtús, réamh-mheasadh go ndíchoimisiúnófaí Otharlann Chúil Raithin – chun a cur de lámh a éascú – timpeall is sé mhí i ndiaidh oscailt Otharlann nua an Chlocháin in Aibreán 2001. Ag cruinniú idir oifigigh mo Roinne, Iontaobhas an Chlocháin agus an Ghníomhaireacht Luachála agus Tailte ar 6 Meán Fómhair 2001 áfach, chuir an tIontaobhas in iúl nár dhócha go mbainfí díchoimisiúnú na hotharlainne amach faoi dheireadh mhí Eanáir 2002. Comhaontaíodh go faicheallach gur chóir go ndíolfaí an otharlann ar cheant phoiblí, i lár mhí Aibreáin 2002 b'fhéidir. Comhaontaíodh áfach go mbeadh cruinniú eile ann ar 10 Eanáir 2002, nuair a bheifí ag súil go bhféadfadh an tIontaobhas bheith níos soiléire maidir le díchoimisiúnú/fágáil shuíomh na hotharlainne.

Go díreach i ndiaidh an chruinnithe ar 6 Meán Fómhair 2001, léirigh an tseirbhís Dochtúir Dhál Riada ar Dualgas suim cuid den suíomh a cheannach chun Ionad Príomhchúraim a thógáil. Tá an léiriú suime seo á leanúint faoi láthair agus socraíodh cruinniú idir an tseirbhís Dochtúir Dhál Riada ar Dualgas, oifigigh mo Roinne, Iontaobhas an Chlocháin agus an Ghníomhaireacht Luachála agus Tailte do 30 Samhain 2001.

Causeway Hospital

Mr McClarty asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the current staffing levels and financial situation at the Causeway Hospital. (AQW 677/01)

Ms de Brún: The number of staff employed in Causeway Hospital is as follows:

Administrative & Clerical	154
Nursing	592

Ancillary & General	175
Medical & Dental	81
Professional & Technical	90
Tradesmen	8
Social work	10
Total	1,110

As regards the financial position, Causeway Health and Social Services Trust has reported a deficit of £139,000 for the period up to 30 September 2001. The deficit is forecast to increase to £300,000 at the year-end and the Trust has indicated that this is due to pressures at the new Causeway Hospital. Discussions are ongoing with the NHSSB regarding funding for these pressures.

Seo a leanas líon na n-oibrithe fostaithe in Otharlann an Chlocháin:

Riarthach & Cléireachas	154
Altranas	592
Coimhdeach agus Ginearálta	175
Míochaine agus Déadach	81
Gairmiúil & Teicniúil	90
Trádálaithe	8
Obair Shóisialta	10
Iomlán	1,110

Maidir leis an riocht airgeadais de, chuir Iontaobhas Sláinte agus Seirbhísí Sóisialta an Chlocháin in iúl go raibh easnamh de £139,000 acu don tréimhse suas go dtí 30 Meán Fómhair 2001. Meastar go méadóidh an t-easnamh go £300,000 ag deireadh na bliana agus chuir an tIontaobhas in iúl go bhfuil sé seo amhlaidh mar gheall ar na brúnna in Otharlann nua an Chlocháin. Tá caibidlí ag dul ar aghaidh faoi láthair leis an BSSST i dtaca le maoiniú a fháil do na brúnna seo.

Causeway Hospital

Mr McClarty asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the number of day procedure and overnight beds available at the Causeway Hospital and how this compares with the combined number of beds at the former Coleraine and Route Hospitals. (AQW 678/01)

Ms de Brún: Currently there are 235 total beds in the Causeway Hospital, 22 of which are in the Day Procedures Unit.

Previously there were a total of 270 beds available at Coleraine and Route Hospitals, 12 of which were in the Day Procedure Unit at Route Hospital.

Faoi láthair tá 235 leaba san iomlán in Otharlann an Chlocháin, tá 22 acu siúd in Aonad Gnáthamh Lae.

Roimhe seo bhí 270 leaba san iomlán ar fáil in Otharlanna Chúil Raithin agus Route, bhí 12 acu siúd san Aonad Gnáthamh Lae ag Otharlann Route.

Causeway Hospital

Mr McClarty asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what assessment she has made in relation to the supply and demand of bed spaces at the Causeway Hospital. (AQW 679/01)

Ms de Brún: I am advised that a rigorous assessment of the supply and demand of bed spaces at the Causeway Hospital was carried out prior to construction and that during the construction and commissioning period, the clinical profile of the new hospital was kept under continual review by a team of representatives of the Trust, Board, GPs and the then DHSS.

As a further measure, the Eastern and Northern Boards established a two-year pilot scheme in June 1999, examining the number of emergency medical admissions across the two Board areas. The scheme, which is due to be evaluated shortly, will enable the Boards to monitor the level of demand and the number of beds required to effectively manage emergency hospital admissions in the area.

Cuireadh in iúl dom go ndearnadh measúnú dian ar sholáthar agus ar éileamh na leapacha in Otharlann an Chlocháin roimh a tógáil agus gur choinnigh foireann ionadaithe ón Iontaobhas, ón Bhord, de Ghnáthdhochtúirí agus ón iar-RSSS próifíl chliniciúil na hotharlainne nua faoi athbhreithniú leanúnach le linn tréimhse a tógála agus a coimisiúnaithe.

Mar bheart breise, chuir Boird an Oirthir agus an Tuaiscirt scéim phiolótach dhá bhliain ar bun i Meitheamh 1999 le scrúdú a dhéanamh ar líon an ghlactha isteach éigeandála mhíochaine ar fud an dá cheantar Bhoird. Cuirfidh an scéim, atá le measúnú ar ball, ar chumas Bhoird monatóireacht a dhéanamh ar leibhéal an éilimh ar leapacha agus ar an líon leapacha a bheidh de dhíth leis an ghlacadh isteach éigeandála in otharlanna sa cheantar a láimhseáil go héifeachtach.

Dermatology Treatment: Northern Health Board Area

Mr Paisley Jnr asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to make a statement on the provision of dermatology treatment in the Northern Health Board Area. (AQW 681/01)

Ms de Brún: I am advised that that the Dermatology Service in the Northern Board Area is under increasing pressure due to a significant increase in GP referrals. There is currently one Consultant Dermatologist, based

at the United Hospitals Trust, and a locum, based at the Causeway Trust.

The Board and Trusts are working collaboratively to ensure this speciality has the level of cover required. Plans are also in place through the regional training programme to provide for an increase in the overall number of Consultant Dermatologists across all Board areas.

Cuireadh in iúl dom go bhfuil an tSeirbhís Deirmeolaíochta i gCeantar an Bhoird Thuaisceartaigh faoi bhrú atá ag méid mar gheall ar mhéadú mór in atreuithe Ghnáthdhochtúra. Faoi láthair, níl ach Deirmeolaí Comhairleach amháin ann, lonnaithe in Iontaobhas na nOtharlann Aontaithe, agus ionadaí lonnaithe in Iontaobhas an Chlocháin.

Tá an Bord agus na hIontaobhais ag comhoibriú le chéile le cinntiú go mbeidh an leibhéal ceart cumhdaigh ann atá de dhíth ar an speisialtóireacht seo. Tá bearta curtha i bhfeidhm tríd an chlár réigiúnach oiliúna le líon iomlán na nDeirmeolaithe Comhairleacha a mhéadú ar fud na gceithre cheantar Bhoird go léir.

Trauma and Orthopaedic Specialty

Mrs Carson asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety, pursuant to AQW 485/01, how many of the 93 patients were treated for ballistic injuries in the Trauma and Orthopaedic speciality. (AQW 694/01)

Ms de Brún: Of the 93 patients referred to in AQW 485/01, nine were recorded as having a diagnosis of assault with a handgun or other firearm.

Den 93 othar a ndearnadh tagairt dóibh in AQW 485/01, cláraíodh gur fáthmheasadh naonúr mar ionsaithe le gunna láimhe nó le harm tine.

Trauma and Orthopaedic Specialty

Mrs Carson asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety, pursuant to AQW 485/01, to detail the total cost of treating the 93 patients in the Trauma and Orthopaedic speciality in 2000-01. (AQW 695/01)

Ms de Brún: The information requested is not available.

Níl an t-eolas a iarradh ar fáil.

Trauma and Orthopaedic Specialty

Mrs Carson asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety, pursuant to AQW 485/01, to detail the length of time and average length of time the

93 patients being treated in the Trauma and Orthopaedic speciality in 2000-01 remained in hospital.

(AQW 696/01)

Ms de Brún: The 93 patients referred to in AQW 485/01 spent a total of 552 days in hospital. The average length of stay was 6 days.

Chaith na 93 othar a ndearnadh tagairt dóibh in AQW 485/01 552 lá san iomlán in otharlann. Ba é an seal ama a d'fhan siad ná 6 lá de ghnáth.

Free Nursing and Personal Care for the Elderly

Mrs I Robinson asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to outline what plans she has to provide free nursing and personal care for the elderly. (AQW 699/01)

Ms de Brún: In May, the Executive agreed in principle to the introduction of free nursing care in nursing homes from April 2002. Unfortunately, the scenario envisaged in the Executive's draft budget proposals, announced on 25 September 2001, does not provide sufficient resources to allow for the introduction of free nursing care next year and therefore it has been necessary to defer this important initiative until sufficient resources are available.

Our intention in this area remains unchanged and I intend to bring forward the legislation shortly, through the proposed Health and Personal Social Services (No1) Bill, to allow for free nursing care to be introduced once the necessary resources are identified.

The Executive agreed in May that an interdepartmental group should be set up to examine the costs and implications of introducing free personal care, taking account of the recent work commissioned by the Scottish Executive. The inter-departmental Group, which is being led by officials from my Department, will ensure that a detailed and considered examination of this issue is undertaken, before fully informed decisions can be made.

I mí na Bealtaine, chomhaontaigh an Feidhmeannas i bprionsabal go dtabharfaí cúram saor altrachta isteach i dtithe altrachta ón Aibreán 2002. Ar an drochuair, ní chuireann an plean measta i moltaí dhréachtbhuisead an Fheidhmeannais, fógartha ar 25 Meán Fómhair 2001, ní cuireann sé go leor acmhainní ar fáil le cúram saor altrachta a thabhairt isteach an bhliain seo chugainn agus mar sin de, b'éigean an scéim thábhachtach seo a chur siar go mbeadh go leor acmhainní ar fáil.

Níl sé i gceist againn ár n-intinn a athrú i dtaca leis an réimse seo agus tá sé ar intinn agam an reachtaíocht a thabhairt chun tosaigh ar ball tríd an Bhille (Uimh. 1) Sláinte agus Seirbhísí Sóisialta Pearsanta molta,

chun cúram saor altrachta a thabhairt isteach a luaithe is a aimsítear na hacmhainní atá de dhíth.

Chomhaontaigh an Feidhmeanas i Mí na Bealtaine go mbunófaí grúpa idir-rannach le costais agus le himpleachtaí thabhairt isteach chúraim shaoir phearsanta a scrúdú, ag glacadh na hoibre is déanaí coimisiúnaithe ag Feidhmeannas na hAlban san áireamh. Cinnteoidh an Grúpa idir-rannach a bhfuil oifigigh mo Roinne i gceannas air go ndéanfar mionscrúdú tuisceanach ar an cheist seo sular féidir bearta iomlána cuimsitheacha a dhéanamh.

Funding for Staff Training

Mr Douglas asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the level of funding allocated for staff training needs, by discipline, in each of the Health Trust areas for the years 1999-00 and 2000-01. (AQW 706/01)

Ms de Brún: This information is not available in the form requested.

Níl an t-eolas ar fáil san fhoirm a iarradh é.

999 Requests

Mr Shannon asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety, pursuant to AQW 391/01, to detail (a) the number going to 999 requests and (b) the number taking patients to hospital. (AQW 712/01)

Ms de Brún: During the three year period from 1 October 1998 to 30 September 2001, 45 vehicles broke down on their way to a 999 request or call out. A further 26 vehicles broke down on their way to hospital with a patient, following a call out.

Le linn na tréimhse trí bliana ó 1 Deireadh Fómhair 1998 go dtí 30 Meán Fómhair 2001, bhris 45 feithicil anuas ar a mbealach chuig iarratas 999 nó ar glao amach. Bhris 26 feithicil eile anuas ar a mbealach chun na hotharlainne agus othar leo, i ndiaidh glao amach.

Orthopaedic Appointments: Ulster Community & Hospital HSS Trust

Mr Shannon asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the number of people waiting for orthopaedic appointments for each of the last three years in the Ulster Community & Hospital HSS Trust area. (AQW 713/01)

Ms de Brún: Figures for numbers of persons waiting for outpatient appointments are collected on a quarterly basis. It is therefore not possible to produce annual figures. Information on numbers of persons waiting for their first outpatient appointment in the

Trauma & Orthopaedics specialty at the Ulster Community & Hospitals HSS Trust for the quarters ending June 1999, June 2000 and June 2001 is detailed in Table 1 below.

TABLE 1. PERSONS WAITING FOR A FIRST OUTPATIENT APPOINTMENT IN THE TRAUMA & ORTHOPAEDICS SPECIALTY IN THE ULSTER COMMUNITY & HOSPITALS HSS TRUST

Quarter Ending	Total
June 2001	2,624
June 2000	2,109
June 1999	1,420

Bailítear figiúirí ar líon na ndaoine ag fanacht le coinní othair sheachtraigh ar bhonn ráithiúil. Mar sin de, ní féidir figiúirí bliantúla a chur amach. Mionléirítear i dTábla 1 thíos eolas ar líon na ndaoine ag fanacht lena gcéad choinne othair sheachtraigh sa speisialtóireacht Tráma agus Ortaipéide in Iontaobhas SSS Phobal Uladh agus Otharlanna do na ráithí ag críochnú Meitheamh 1999, Meitheamh 2000, agus Meitheamh 2001.

TÁBLA 1. DAOINE AG FANACHT LENA GCÉAD CHOINNE OTHAIR SHEACHTRAIGH SA SPEISIALTÓIREACHT TRÁMA AGUS ORTAIPÉIDE IN IONTAOBHAS SSS PHOBAL ULADH AGUS OTHARLANNA

Ráithe ag Críochnú	Iomlán
Meitheamh 2001	2,624
Meitheamh 2000	2,109
Meitheamh 1999	1,420

Orthopaedic Appointments: Ulster Community & Hospital HSS Trust

Mr Shannon asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the average waiting time for orthopaedic appointments in the Ulster Community & Hospital HSS Trust area. (AQW 714/01)

Ms de Brún: Average waiting time cannot be calculated as this information is collected on the basis of time bands, as detailed in Table 1 below.

TABLE 1. PERSONS WAITING FOR A FIRST OUTPATIENT APPOINTMENT IN THE TRAUMA & ORTHOPAEDICS SPECIALTY IN THE ULSTER COMMUNITY & HOSPITALS HSS TRUST

Quarter Ending	Time Waiting (months)									Total
	0-2	3-5	6-8	9-11	12-14	15-17	18-20	21-23	24+	
June 2001	408	382	228	253	291	250	184	149	479	2624

Ní féidir an meánam feithimh a áireamh mar go mbailítear an t-eolas seo de réir bandaí ama, mar a mhionléirítear i dTábla 1 thíos.

TÁBLA 1. DAOINE AG FANACHT LENA GCÉAD CHOINNE OTHAIR SHEACHTRAIGH SA SPEISIALTÓIREACHT TRÁMA AGUS ORTAIPÉIDE IN IONTAOBHAS SSS PHOBAL ULADH AGUS OTHARLANNA

	Am ag Fanacht (míonna)									
Ráithe ag Críochnú	0-2	3-5	6-8	9-11	12-14	15-17	18-20	21-23	24+	Iomlán
Meithemh 2001	408	382	228	253	291	250	184	149	479	2624

Medical Crutches

Mr Beggs asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the number of medical crutches that were issued by each health trust during the last financial year. (AQW 720/01)

Ms de Brún: This information is not available on a consistent basis across all Trusts.

Níl an t-eolas seo ar fáil ar bhonn rialta ar fud na nIontaobhas go léir.

Medical Crutches

Mr Beggs asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the number and cumulative cost of medical crutches that were purchased by each health trust during the last financial year. (AQW 721/01)

Ms de Brún: This information is detailed in the table below.

NUMBER AND CUMULATIVE COST OF MEDICAL CRUTCHES PURCHASED IN EACH TRUST, 2000/01

Trust	No. purchased	Cost
BCH	650	£5,000.00
Down Lisburn	1,306	£4,785.27
Green Park	2,722	£11,104.00
Mater	440	£1,778.59
North & West Belfast	34	£135.08
Royal Group	2,702	£12,846.25
South & East Belfast	118	£525.80
U C & H	1,820	£7,235.16
Causeway	828	£3,291.30
Homefirst	20	£324.00
United	1,636	£6,557.18
Armagh & Dungannon	200	£795.00
Craigavon Area	2,118	£8,419.05
Newry & Mourne	296	£2,353.20
Altnagelvin	1,548	£12,423.00
Sperrin Lakeland	988	£3,480.00
Total	16,776	£76,052.88

LÍON AGUS COSTAS CARNACH MAIDÍ CROISE MÍOCHAIINE CEANNAITHE AG GACH IONTAOBHAS, 2000/01

Iontaobhas	Líon Ceannaithe	Costas
OCBF	650	£5,000.00
An Dún/Lios na gCearrbhach	1,306	£4,785.27
Páirc Ghlas	2,722	£11,104.00
Mater	440	£1,778.59
Béal Feirste Thuaidh & Thiar	34	£135.08
An Grúpa Ríoga	2,702	£12,846.25
Béal Feirste Theas & Thoir	118	£525.80
P & OU	1,820	£7,235.16
An Clochán	828	£3,291.30
Homefirst	20	£324.00
Aontaithe	1,636	£6,557.18
Ard Mhacha & Dún Geanainn	200	£795.00
Ceantar Craigavon	2,118	£8,419.05
An tIúr & Mhúrn	296	£2,353.20
Alt na nGealbhan	1,548	£12,423.00
Speirín Tír na Lochanna	988	£3,480.00
Iomlán	16,776	£76,052.88

Wheelchair Allocation

Mr Beggs asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the number of standard wheelchairs that have been allocated to patients by each health trust during the first six months of this financial year. (AQW 722/01)

Ms de Brún: Wheelchairs are supplied by the Regional Wheelchair Centre to users in response to requests from occupational therapists in community Health and Social Services Trusts. The number of standard wheelchairs issued during the period 1 April 2001 – 1 September 2001, by Trust, is as follows:

Armagh & Dungannon	14
Causeway HSST	13
Craigavon & Banbridge	18
Down Lisburn Trust	15
Foyle HSS Trust	13
Green Park Healthcare Trust	4
Homefirst	27
Newry & Mourne	14
North & West Belfast	14
South & East Belfast	20
Sperrin Lakeland	13
Ulster Community & Hospitals Trust	16
Total	181

Tá an t-eolas seo léirithe sa tábla thíos.

An tIonad Réigiúnach Cathaoireacha Rothaí a sholáthraíonn cathaoireacha rothaí d'úsáideoirí ar iarratais theiripithe saothair in Iontaobhais Phobail Shláinte agus Sheirbhísí Sóisialta. Seo a leanas líon na ngnáthchathaoireacha rothaí soláthraithe le linn na tréimhse 1 Aibreán 2001 – 1 Meán Fómhair 2001 de réir Iontaobhais:

Ard Mhacha & Dún Geanainn	14
ISSS an Chlocháin	13
Craigavon & Droichead na Banna	18
Iontaobhas an Dúin/Lios na gCearrbhach	15
Iontaobhas SSS an Fheabhail	13
Iontaobhas Cúraim Shláinte na Páirce Glaise	4
Homefirst	27
An tIúr & Mhúrn	14
Béal Feirste Thuaidh & Thiar	14
Béal Feirste Theas & Thoir	20
Speirín Tír na Lochanna	13
Iontaobhas Pobail Uladh agus na nOtharlann	16
Iomlán	181

Wheelchairs

Mr Beggs asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the number of wheel chairs that have been returned to each local health trust during the past financial year to enable them to be reallocated to other patients. (AQW 723/01)

Ms de Brún: The total number of wheelchairs that have been refurbished since November 2000 to date is as follows:

Non-powered (manual) wheelchairs	535
Powered (battery) wheelchairs	72
Total Number of refurbished wheelchairs	607

Seo a leanas líon na gcathaoireacha rothaí a athchóiríodh ón tSamhain 2000 go dtí seo:

Cathaoireacha Rothaí gan chumhacht (láimhe)	535
Cathaoireacha Ceallchumhachta Rothaí	72
Líon iomlán na gcathaoireacha rothaí athchóirithe	607

Medical Crutches

Mr Beggs asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the number of medical crutches that were returned to each health trust during the last financial year. (AQW 726/01)

Ms de Brún: This information is not available.

Níl an t-eolas seo ar fail.

Orthopaedic Appointments: Ulster Community & Hospital HSS Trust

Mr Shannon asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the timescale for the completion of the review of those waiting orthopaedic appointments in the Ulster Community and Hospital HSS Trust. (AQW 728/01)

Ms de Brún: I have not commissioned any review relating specifically to waiting lists for orthopaedic appointments at the Ulster Community and Hospital Health and Social Services Trust. However, on foot of the Framework for Action on Waiting Lists, which I issued last September, validation exercises are being undertaken on waiting lists to ensure that the information contained in them is accurate and up-to-date. This process is carried out on a continual basis at the Ulster Community and Hospital Health and Social Services Trust.

Níor choimisiúnaigh mé athbhreithniú ar bith i dtaca le liostaí feithimh go díreach do choinní ortaipéideacha ag Iontaobhas Seirbhísí Sláinte agus Sóisialta Phobal & Otharlann Uladh. Ag leanstan Creatlaigh le hAghaidh Gnímh ar Liostaí Feithimh, áfach, a d'eisigh mé i Meán Fómhair seo caite, tá cleachtaí bailíochtaithe á ndéanamh ar liostaí feithimh le cinntiú go bhfuil an t-eolas atá istigh iontu cruinn agus suas chun dáta. Déantar an próiseas seo ar bhonn rialta ag Iontaobhas Seirbhísí Sláinte agus Sóisialta Phobal & Otharlann Uladh.

Alzheimer's Disease: Newry & Mourne HSS Area

Mr C Murphy asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to outline the criteria for allocating resources to sufferers of Alzheimer's disease in the Newry and Mourne Health and Social Services Trust area. (AQW 745/01)

Ms de Brún: I am informed by Newry and Mourne Health and Social Services Trust that in the allocation of resources, the Trust does not differentiate between frail elderly people and people with dementia.

A care management assessment will be undertaken in respect of clients who meet the following criteria:

(i) Over 65 years of age

And

(ii) where the care needs of client are significant and continue to fluctuate on a regular basis requiring continuous reassessment

And

(iii) client has no friends or relatives who are able or willing to provide the required support that would enable them to live at home

Or

- (iv) client has friends or relatives who have been providing support but are no longer willing or able to provide the support required to keep the vulnerable person at home

And

- (v) in the opinion of GP or Primary Care Worker, the current primary care service provision is inadequate to maintain the client in the community in the foreseeable future. This includes requests for short term Residential or Nursing Home Care.

Chuir Iontaobhas Sláinte agus Seirbhísí Sóisialta an Iúir agus Mhúrn in iúl dom nach ndéanann sé idirdhealú ar bith idir seandaoine anbhanna agus daoine a théann le gealtachas. Déanfar measúnú ar bhainistíocht chúraim maidir leis na cliaint a chomhlíonann na critéir seo a leanas:

- (i) Daoine níos mó ná 65 bliain d'aois

Agus

- (ii) Nuair nach bhfuil riachtanais chúraim an chliant mór agus nuair a athraíonn siad ar bhonn rialta go fóill sa dóigh go bhfuil athmheasúnú leanúnach de dhíth orthu

Agus

- (iii) nuair nach bhfuil cairde nó gaolta ag an chliant atá ábalta nó toilteanach an tacaíocht atá de dhíth a thabhairt chun cur ar a gcumas cónaí sa bhaile.

Nó

- (iv) Nuair atá cairde nó gaolta ag an chliant a bhí ag tabhairt tacaíochta ach nach bhfuil ábalta nó toilteanach anois an tacaíocht atá de dhíth a thabhairt chun an duine anbhann a choinneáil sa bhaile

Agus

- (v) Nuair is í tuairim Ghnáthdhochtúra nó Oibrí Príomhcúraim go bhfuil an soláthar seirbhíse príomhcúraim i láthair na huairé easnamhach leis an chliant a choinneáil sa phobal roimh i bhfad. Cuireann sí seo iarratais ar Chúram ghearrthéarmach Cónaithe nó ar Chúram ghearrthéarmach Altrachta Baile san áireamh.

REGIONAL DEVELOPMENT

Residents' Parking Scheme

Mrs Courtney asked the Minister for Regional Development if he has any plans to introduce a residents' parking scheme. (AQW 661/01)

The Minister for Regional Development (Mr P Robinson): The powers to introduce residents parking schemes are included in the Road Traffic Regulation (Northern Ireland) Order 1997 and, following requests from residents and public representatives, my Department's Roads Service would be prepared to carry out a small number of pilot schemes to test the necessary administrative and enforcement procedures that would be involved.

Such schemes will, however, only be of benefit to residents if they are effectively enforced and, under current arrangements, enforcement is a matter for the Police. I understand that they have indicated that they are not in a position to carry out this work.

Public Transport: South Antrim

Mr Dalton asked the Minister for Regional Development to outline his plans to improve public transport in the constituency of South Antrim. (AQW 668/01)

Mr P Robinson: There has been significant improvement recently to public transport in the South Antrim constituency. The reinstatement of the Antrim to Bleach Green railway line represented an investment of some £17m in railway infrastructure in South Antrim. Travel by train in the South Antrim area will be further enhanced when Translink introduce its new rolling stock during 2003-04. Translink plan to open a new halt on the Antrim to Bleach Green line at Templepatrick and a new bus passenger terminal is to be developed in Antrim town centre which Translink hope will be completed by early 2003. Improvements in public transport do, of course, depend on the Assembly allocating sufficient funds for this purpose.

Bus Depot: Antrim Town

Mr Dalton asked the Minister for Regional Development to outline (a) the location of the new bus depot site in Antrim town, (b) when work on the new depot will commence and (c) the timetable for completion. (AQW 669/01)

Mr P Robinson: Translink has advised that the location of the new bus passenger terminal in Antrim will be located at the corner of Church Street and Railway Street, comprising an area of approximately 0.42 hectares. Translink has added that work on site is currently expected to begin in early 2002 with completion of the project expected within 12 months.

Traffic Calming Measures: South Antrim

Mr Dalton asked the Minister for Regional Development to list, including their exact location, the traffic calming measures that have been introduced within the constituency of South Antrim. (AQW 672/01)

Mr P Robinson: Since traffic calming measures were first introduced into Northern Ireland, 18 such schemes have been completed within the constituency of South Antrim. These schemes are listed in the attached Appendix.

TRAFFIC CALMING MEASURES PROVIDED IN SOUTH ANTRIM

Scheme	Measures	Date of Implementation
Lough Road, Antrim	Road humps and mini-roundabout	February 1993
Glenavy Road, Crumlin	Gateway	July 1993
A6, Templepatrick	Central hatching and pedestrian refuges	September 1994
Fountain Street/Cunningham Way, Antrim	Traffic islands and mini-roundabout	March 1995
Neillsbrook, Randalstown	Build-outs to introduce a priority system and mini-roundabout	February 1996
Upper Greystone Road, Antrim	Gateway and traffic islands	February 1996
Ballyrobert village	Gateway signing and pedestrian refuges	September 1996
Farmley Crescent/Gardens, Glengormley	Road humps	February 1997
Moneynick Road, Toome	Gateway and extended speed limit	March 1997
Parkhall, Antrim	Coloured central road hatching and mini-roundabout	January 1998
Dublin Road, Antrim	Roundabout, central hatching and pedestrian refuges	March 1998
Lylehill Road and Old Coach Road, Templepatrick	Gateways	September 1998
Approach roads to Parkgate, Antrim	Gateways and central hatching	March 1999
Springfarm Road/Niblock Road, Antrim	Build-outs to introduce a priority system and mini-roundabout	March 1999
Mallusk village, Glengormley	Gateway signing and pedestrian refuges	September 1999
Portglenone Road, Randalstown	Gateway	June 2000

Scheme	Measures	Date of Implementation
Steeple Road, Antrim	Central coloured hatching, pedestrian refuges, 3 mini-roundabouts and short length of bus lane	August 2000
Elmfield Road, Glengormley	Road humps	September 2000

Jordanstown/Monkstown Road

Mr K Robinson asked the Minister for Regional Development what plans he has to include the improvement of the Jordanstown/Monkstown Road junction in the Roads Service schedule for the financial year 2002-03. (AQW 680/01)

Mr P Robinson: I would refer you to my answer of 16 November 2001 in response to your recent Written Assembly Question AQW 582/01.

School Bus Routes

Mr Beggs asked the Minister for Regional Development to list the length of those school bus routes that will remain ungritted during the winter period by (i) district council area and (ii) by constituency. (AQW 692/01)

Mr P Robinson: My Department's Roads Service has advised me that the information you requested is not readily available and could only be compiled at disproportionate cost. I can advise, however, that during the recent review of Roads Service's winter service activities, it was estimated that to include all school bus routes in Northern Ireland would involve salting approximately 2 to 2½ times more roads than are in the current salting schedule, at an extra cost of some £4.5M to £7.0M every year.

Rolling Stock

Mr K Robinson asked the Minister for Regional Development what progress has been made in acquiring new rolling stock for Northern Ireland Railways to increase the commuter potential in East Antrim. (AQW 701/01)

Mr P Robinson: The closing date for the receipt of tenders for the supply of new rolling stock was 16 November. The tenders are now being evaluated and Translink hope to be in a position to award supplier contracts in early 2002. Delivery of the new trains is expected to take place in two phases during 2003, the first around February 2003 and the second around September 2003. Each train should be ready for scheduled

service after a 6 month commissioning period by Northern Ireland Railways. The new trains should therefore begin to enter service in the late summer of 2003. Translink has not yet finalised its operational plans on how best to deploy the new rolling stock, but to the extent that they are used in East Antrim they should encourage increased patronage by commuters in this area.

Clearance of Snow

Mr Beggs asked the Minister for Regional Development how the proposal by the Roads Service Agency to employ contractors and farmers to clear blocked roads in prolonged periods of lying snow will be implemented. (AQW 719/01)

Mr P Robinson: In early November my Department's Roads Service placed advertisements in the local press, the local farming journal 'Farm Week' and other approved tendering journals, seeking quotations from contractors and farmers for the hire of plant and drivers to assist in the clearance of snow from the public road network in exceptional circumstances. Quotations for a single hire rate, whether for weekdays or weekends, have been sought for each council area.

The closing date for return of quotations was 15 November 2001. By the end of November 2001 Roads Service Section Offices will be provided with a list of those contractors and farmers prepared to assist in this activity. Depending on the amount of assistance required in each Council area, those on the list will be called off, as necessary.

Traffic Congestion: Sandyknowes

Mr K Robinson asked the Minister for Regional Development what steps he will be taking to address the serious traffic congestion afflicting the M2 junction at Sandyknowes in Newtownabbey; and to make a statement. (AQW 733/01)

Mr P Robinson: My Department's Roads Service has commissioned consultants to carry out a Feasibility Study on various measures which might improve the capacity of the Sandyknowes interchange with a view to reducing congestion at this location in the short to medium term. The consultants have recently completed an extensive survey of traffic patterns at Sandyknowes during the morning and evening peak periods and their report is due to be completed by February 2002.

The reality of the situation, however, is that traffic demand at the interchange exceeds the existing road capacity and it is likely that a significant improvement can only be achieved by a major works scheme to provide additional traffic lanes. A study of possible major improvement options in the longer term is therefore also being carried out by Roads Service in

conjunction with the development of the Belfast Metropolitan Transport Plan.

Future of Antrim - Knockmore Railway Line

Mr Dalton asked the Minister for Regional Development to give his assessment of the progress being made in regard to the consultation document on the future of the Antrim-Knockmore railway line. (AQW 743/01)

Mr P Robinson: The Consultation Document on the Equality Impact Assessment of the proposed discontinuance of services on the Antrim to Knockmore railway line was issued to over 600 consultees and local interest groups on 31 August 2001. The closing date for responses was 23 November. There were 23 responses received. I will consider the responses and then issue a report. I am satisfied that consultees have been given every opportunity to put forward their views.

Union Flag: Ballynahonemore Road, Armagh

The Lord Kilclooney asked the Minister for Regional Development to outline (a) if he has provided a Union flag at the Road Services Agency premises at Ballynahonemore Road, Armagh City, (b) if any arrangements have been made to fly the flag at these premises on designated dates, and (c) why it was not flown on Remembrance Sunday; and to make a statement. (AQW 747/01)

Mr P Robinson: My Department's Roads Service has advised me that a Union flag has been provided at its depot at Ballynahonemore Road, Armagh. Arrangements have been made to fly the flag on designated dates but, due to an oversight at the depot, it was not flown on Remembrance Sunday, 11 November 2001. I have asked Roads Service to review its arrangements to ensure that the flag is flown on future designated dates.

Road Improvement Schemes

Mr Beggs asked the Minister for Regional Development to (a) list all four lane carriageways or sections of carriageways which have been built during the last five years and (b) detail the traffic levels recorded prior to their development. (AQW 754/01)

Mr P Robinson: The following schemes have been completed in the last five years:

- the A26 Antrim to Ballymena Stages 2 & 3 - involved construction of a second 2-lane carriageway to provide a dual carriageway. The traffic flow prior to opening was 24,000 vehicles per day (vpd).

- the A26 Windyhall, Coleraine - involved construction of a second 2-lane carriageway to provide a dual carriageway. The traffic flow prior to opening was 13,000vpd.
- the Strand Road, Londonderry - a 2-lane road was widened to a 4-lane road. The traffic flow prior to opening was 29,000vpd.

Road Traffic Markings

Mr K Robinson asked the Minister for Regional Development when he will implement a repainting time table for the road traffic markings on routes in East Antrim. (AQW 760/01)

Mr P Robinson: My Department's Roads Service undertakes an annual inspection of road markings on all routes. Arising from this inspection, a repainting programme is compiled for each district council area. Within these programmes, the works are prioritised to ensure that the worst worn markings are repaired.

In addition to its annual inspections, Roads Service inspects all roads on a regular basis and, where necessary, arrangements are made for road markings to be renewed

Anti-Skid Surfaces

Mr K Robinson asked the Minister for Regional Development what plans he has to install an anti-skid surface at the junction of the A2 Shore Road and the Old Shore Road at Whiteabbey. (AQW 765/01)

Mr P Robinson: My Department's Roads Service plans to undertake a major revision of the junction between the A2 Shore Road and the Old Shore Road at Whiteabbey. The scheme is programmed to commence early in 2002 and will include the provision of anti-skid surfacing on the A2 Shore Road approaches to the junction. The scheme will also involve the provision of pedestrian crossing facilities and incorporate pedestrian refuge islands and traffic signals in the centre of the carriageway.

Traffic Congestion: Sandyknowes

Rev Robert Coulter asked the Minister for Regional Development what action he is taking to address the traffic problems at the M2/Sandyknowes junction. (AQW 800/01)

Mr P Robinson: My Department's Roads Service has commissioned consultants to carry out a Feasibility Study on various measures which might improve the capacity of the Sandyknowes interchange with a view to reducing congestion at this location in the short to medium term. The consultants have recently completed an extensive survey of traffic patterns at Sandyknowes

during the morning and evening peak periods and their report is due to be completed by February 2002.

The reality of the situation, however, is that traffic demand at the interchange exceeds the existing road capacity and it is likely that a significant improvement can only be achieved by a major works scheme to provide additional traffic lanes. A study of possible major improvement options in the longer term is therefore also being carried out by Roads Service in conjunction with the development of the Belfast Metropolitan Transport Plan.

SOCIAL DEVELOPMENT

House Sales Scheme

Ms Armitage asked the Minister for Social Development has he any plans to introduce a cash discount policy for Housing Executive tenants to enable them to move to the private sector. (AQW 740/01)

The Minister for Social Development (Mr Dodds): I have no plans to do so at the present time. The Housing Executive's review of its House Sales Scheme addresses this issue but concludes that it is not a viable option. I await with interest the responses to this consultation to see if there is any support for a cash discount scheme.

Child Support Regulations

Mr Shannon asked the Minister for Social Development what steps are being taken to include rates in the housing costs for those who are being assessed by the Child Support Agency. (AQW 744/01)

Mr Dodds: The amount of maintenance to be paid for a child is worked out according to a national formula which is laid down in child support law. It takes account of the income and essential expenditure of both parents and is based on Income Support rates and allowances.

Regulations govern the amounts to be included in the calculation of a parent's expenditure, including an amount in respect of their housing costs. However, no allowance is made in respect of rates in this part of the formula.

The formula does include an important safeguard, known as protected income, which represents the level below which a non-resident parent's income is not allowed to fall as a result of meeting their maintenance obligation. Current child support regulations specify that housing costs and rates are included in the calculation of protected income.

A completely new child support scheme will be introduced from April 2002. Non-resident parents will pay a flat rate percentage of their net income depending on the number of children to be maintained. No account will be taken of the housing costs of either parent in the reformed scheme.

Flying the Union Flag: Crown Buildings, Alexander Road, Armagh City

The Lord Kilclooney asked the Minister for Social Development to outline (a) if he has provided a Union flag at the Crown Buildings, Alexander Road, Armagh City, (b) if any arrangements have been made to fly the flag at these premises on designated dates, and (c) why it was not flown on Remembrance Sunday; and to make a statement. (AQW 748/01)

Mr Dodds: A flag has been provided for Armagh Crown Buildings and arrangements are in place to fly the Union Flag on designated dates. Because of an oversight the flag was not flown on Remembrance Day until 12.00 noon. It was subsequently removed at 3.00 pm for safekeeping when all staff had left the

building. Steps will be taken to ensure that the oversight does not occur again. The staff concerned have been reminded of their responsibilities in this matter and of the importance of ensuring that the Union Flag is flown on the designated dates.

New Deal for 50+

Mr Gibson asked the Minister for Social Development what action he is taking to assist unemployed people over the age of 50 years. (AQW 786/01)

Mr Dodds: The New Deal for 50+ is part of the Government's Welfare to Work programme and aims to help people aged 50 and over who are looking for or considering a return to work. In Northern Ireland, the lead responsibility for this initiative lies with the Department of Education and Learning. The Department of Social Development assists the Department of Education and Learning with the identification of those jobseekers who are eligible for New Deal 50+.

NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

Friday 7 December 2001

Written Answers to Questions

OFFICE OF THE FIRST MINISTER AND DEPUTY FIRST MINISTER

Interdepartmental Working Group: Flags, Emblems and Graffiti

Mr Dalton asked the Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister to outline the progress the Executive has made on establishing an Interdepartmental Working Group to address the removal of paramilitary flags, emblems and graffiti from public property. (AQW 671/01)

Reply: We have not taken a decision on whether to establish such a group. In the draft Programme for Government, we have made clear our commitment to support local communities in dealing with matters of dispute and division, including the proliferation of sectarian graffiti, unauthorised flag flying, the erection of memorials and other issues that can lead to community tensions.

We will bring forward proposals to address these issues as part of our cross-departmental strategy and framework for the promotion of community relations and to ensure an effective and co-ordinated response to sectarian and racial intimidation.

AGRICULTURE AND RURAL DEVELOPMENT

Disposal of Building and Land Assets

Mr Gibson asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to detail any building or land assets that she intends to dispose of in counties Fermanagh, Tyrone and Londonderry. (AQW 826/01)

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development (Ms Rodgers): My Department intends to dispose of the following land:

- 45.2 hectares of land at Favour Royal Demesne, Augher, Co Tyrone;
- 2 dwellings, 1 at Baronscourt and 1 at Derrynoyd, Co. Tyrone;
- 2.3 hectares of Lough Erne accreted foreshore between Erne Hospital and Mill Street, Enniskillen, Co. Fermanagh; and
- A small store, known as the Camus Store, at Curriagh Road, Coleraine, Co. Londonderry.

Buildings/Land Assets: Fermanagh, Tyrone, Londonderry

Mr Gibson asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to detail the building and land assets that belong to her department within the counties of Fermanagh, Tyrone and Londonderry. (AQW 827/01)

Ms Rodgers: The following list details the building or land assets owned by the Department within Counties Fermanagh, Tyrone and Londonderry:

Fermanagh
Main Site-Enniskillen College (Approx 120.31 Ha)
Student Accommodation Irvinestown
Farm Worker Accommodation Irvinestown
Student Accommodation Mullaghmeen Rd
Farm Worker Accommodation Mullaghmeen
Farm Manager Accommodation Mullaghmeen
Castle Archdale Farm
Land at Enniskillen Agricultural College -Thornhill Glebe
Dwelling Lettermoney Rd Riversdale
Student Accommodation Mullaghmeen Rd
Farm Worker Accommodation Mullaghmeen
Farm Manager Accommodation Mullaghmeen
Altmore FMU (Land-586.2 Ha)
Belmore FMU (Land-881.2 Ha)
Big Dog FMU (Land-1097.2 Ha)
Carrigan FMU (Land-1790.20ha)
Castle Archdale FMU (Land-522.6 Ha)
Castle Caldwell FMU (Land-205.6 Ha)
Conagher FMU (Land-1066.0 Ha)
Derrylin & Naan Island FMU (Land-105.0 Ha)
Ely Lodge FMU (Land-262.8 Ha)
Florence Court FMU (Land-1361.68 Ha)
Kesh FMU (Land-2036.27 Ha)
Lough Navar FMU (Land-2622.8 Ha)
Mullaghfad FMU (Land-1779.0 Ha)

Necarne FMU (Land-90.6 Ha)
Pubble FMU (Land-97.54ha)
Riversdale FMU (Land- 137.2 Ha)
Sillees FMU (Land-535.8 Ha)
Tyrone
Site of VIC Omagh
Main Site Loughry College (Approx 93.2 Ha)
Aghyaran FMU (Land-423.0 Ha)
Baronscourt FMU (Land-630.0 Ha)
Bradkeel FMU (Land-141.4 Ha)
Caledon FMU (Land-191.776 Ha)
Carrickaholten FMU (Land-488.0 Ha)
Castleberg FMU (Land-40.9 Ha)
Clabby FMU (Land-229.0 Ha)
Cookstown FMU (Land-213.6 Ha)
Creggan FMU (Land-674.0 Ha)
Drum FMU (Land-93.8 Ha)
Dunmoyle FMU (Land-392.4 Ha)
Fardross FMU (Land-884.6 Ha)
Favour Royal FMU (Land-512.0 Ha)
Gortin Glen FMU (Land-1576.40ha)
Killens FMU (Land-83.8 Ha)
Knockmany FMU (Land-401.2 Ha)
Lack FMU (Land-738.4 Ha)
Ligfordrum FMU (Land-625.805 Ha)
Lough Bradan FMU (Land-2105.534 Ha)
Moneygal FMU (Land-325.4 Ha)
Parkanaur FMU (Land-199.186 Ha)
Pigeon Top FMU (Land-376.4 Ha)
Pomeroy FMU (Land-173.7 Ha)
Seskinmore FMU (Land-136.4 Ha)
Slievedoo FMU (Land-1237.6 Ha)
Trillick FMU (Land-250.2 Ha)
Offices-Portacabin Woodside Ave
Offices-Main Woodside Ave
Stores Woodside Ave Omagh
Workshop & Stores St Julians Rd Omagh
Londonderry
Site of Fish Farm Movangher
Aghadowey FMU (Land-95.8 Ha)
Banagher FMU (Land 1696.00 Ha)
Ballintempo FMU (Land-1906.80 Ha)
Ballykelly FMU (Land-97.6 Ha)
Bann Woods North FMU (Land-34.0 Ha)
Bann Woods South FMU (Land-110.4 Ha)
Binevenagh FMU (Land-799.8 Ha)
Cam FMU (Land-1364.2)

Davagh FMU (Land-1517.80ha)
Derrynoyd FMU (Land-104.0 Ha)
Downhill FMU (Land-83.0 Ha)
Garvagh FMU (Land-208.6ha)
Glenshane FMU (Land-1022.4 Ha)
Goles FMU (Land-416.6 Ha)
Gortnamoyagh FMU (Land-929.6)
Grange Park FMU (Land-1270 Ha)
Iniscarn FMU (Land-159.6 Ha)
Learmount FMU
Loughermore FMU (Land-1344.5 Ha)
Loughermore East FMU (Land-339.0 Ha)
Moydamlaght FMU (Land-298.4 Ha)
Moyola FMU (Land-47.8 Ha)
Somerset FMU (Land-153.8 Ha)
Springwell FMU (Land-1288 Ha)
Muff Glen FMU (Land-33.8 Ha)
Bed & Soil/Recreational Lough Erne
Leased Foreshore Lough Erne
Dwelling at Lock Castleroe Rd Coleraine
Lock & Sluice Castleroe Rd Coleraine
Offices & Yard Castleroe Rd Coleraine
Portna Lock Kilrea
Lockkeepers Hse Portna Rd Coleraine

Building and Land Assets

Mr Gibson asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to outline (a) the methodology she follows to dispose of land and/or building assets and (b) if this includes competitive tendering or preferred bidders. (AQW 828/01)

Ms Rodgers:

- (a) My Department follows the methodology for the disposal of publicly owned land and buildings as set out in the document “Disposal of Surplus Land and Buildings by Public Sector Bodies” issued by the Central Advisory Unit of the Valuation and Lands Agency,
- (b) The Department disposes of land and / or building assets by means of a competitive process which may take the form of public auction or open market tenders.

Building and Land Assets

Mr Gibson asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to outline what land and building assets have been disposed of by her department since 1996. (AQW 829/01)

Ms Rodgers: Information in the form requested for the 1996/1997 financial year is not readily available and could only be compiled at disproportionate cost. However, for the 1997-2001 period, the Department sold the following:

- Land at Felden, Newtownabbey, Co. Antrim;
- Land at Desertcreat, Cookstown, Co. Tyrone;
- Land at Loughall, Co. Armagh;
- Land at Castlearchdale, Co. Fermanagh;
- Land at Newforge Lane, Belfast;
- Lock-keepers Cottage at Portora, Co. Fermanagh; and
- Land at Levaghey, Co. Fermanagh.

Sheep Annual Premium

Mr Shannon asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to make a statement on the Director of Public Prosecutions directive that prosecutions should not proceed in respect of false claims for the Sheep Annual Premium scheme. (AQW 870/01)

Ms Rodgers: Following the investigation of the shortfalls of sheep identified after the Foot and Mouth culls, 12 cases were referred to the Director of Public Prosecutions with a view to prosecution. Seven of these had been accepted by the DPP and dates had been set for hearings when the loss of an unrelated appeal case caused the DPP to review the evidence and the legislation. He decided that he would be unable to secure a conviction due to limitations within the legislation and therefore he directed that the prosecutions should not proceed. However, some of the farmers may still remain liable to legal action because they did not present their flock records when requested.

The limitation identified is that the Regulations provide for an offence only where false or misleading information is furnished by the claimant, and this effectively means at the time of the submission of a claim. Consequently, where a shortfall of sheep occurs after the claim has been submitted, it would be necessary to prove that the claimant did not intend, at the time he claimed, to keep the specified number of sheep.

An amending regulation came into operation on Tuesday 4 December when the 2002 scheme opened for applications. The amendment has created an additional offence where a farmer does not notify the Department of material changes to the particulars of his or her claim. Claimants are already required to do this under the Scheme rules and are subject to penalties if they do not. The new regulations will, in addition, make them liable to prosecution.

Forest Service

Mr McClarty asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development whether she could confirm that the Forest Service achieved its target of 'paying visitors' for the 2000/01 season. (AQW 900/01)

Ms Rodgers: As published in the Forest Service's Annual Report and Accounts for 2000/01, the number of paying visitors achieved was 400,507, against a target of 440,000. The target was not achieved.

Forest Service

Mr McClarty asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development what assessment she has made in relation to the Forest Service's marketing strategy to promote forest recreation. (AQW 901/01)

Ms Rodgers: The Forest Service markets forests mainly as a venue for those who wish to enjoy a sense of seclusion and quietness. I have been personally involved with two new developments – the Peace Maze at Castlewellan and the Millennium Wood in Favour Royal.

Other marketing of forest recreation is carried out by means of local initiatives and targeted advertising. I am satisfied that local users of forests are well aware of the facilities on offer. The Forest Service is also building relationships with other bodies such as the Tourist Board to see what more can be done to promote forests as a venue.

My assessment is that current practices are both appropriate and cost-effective, and that the Forest Service is taking steps to ensure that its marketing continues to be effective.

CULTURE, ARTS AND LEISURE

De-Escalating Sectarianism in Sport

Mr Shannon asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure what action will he take to de-escalate sectarian tensions following the actions of some supporters whereby they failed to recognise the one minute silence at the Linfield/Cliftonville football match on 10 November 2001. (AQW 798/01)

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure (Mr McGimpsey): I regard sectarianism both as a problem for soccer and symptomatic of wider problems facing society. Action is being considered as part of the development of a soccer strategy and recommendations for dealing with sectarianism in soccer are contained in Part 10 of the Consultative Document 'Creating a

Soccer Strategy for Northern Ireland'. My Department hopes to have the Soccer Strategy published early in 2002.

In addition it is already a condition of grant under the Safe Sports Grounds Scheme, administered by the Sports Council, that successful applicants will be required to formulate an Equity Statement for inclusion in the organisation's Constitution highlighting practical measures of how family, disability and sectarianism issues will be addressed.

You should also note that the IFA, the body responsible for football, is fully committed to an anti-sectarianism policy through its 'Football for All' Campaign which is supported by the Sports Council. Measures include:

- a compulsory community relations module for IFA coaching and refereeing awards;
- a Handbook for coaches, referees and players;
- outreach into primary Schools, including special needs;
- strong community relations messages at international matches;
- support for clubs and organisations on cross-community projects.

EDUCATION

Dromintee Primary School, Killeavy

Mr C Murphy asked the Minister of Education to outline any progress for the proposed capital works scheme at Dromintee Primary School, Killeavy. (AQW 793/01)

The Minister of Education (Mr M McGuinness): An Economic Appraisal which addresses options for meeting Dromintee's capital needs is nearing completion.

The school's Board of Governors is currently seeking an alternative site for the school and hopes to finalise this exercise shortly. The economic appraisal will then be completed which will clear the way for initial planning of the scheme to commence.

Ulster-Scots Ethos

Mr K Robinson asked the Minister of Education to detail any progress by CCEA and the Education and Library Boards to produce materials which will enable teachers to reflect the Ulster-Scots ethos in the classroom. (AQW 805/01)

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. I understand that proposals in the Agency's Corporate Plan include the development of resources

for use in the classroom and that discussions with CCEA are being arranged.

Cost of Vandalism

Mr Dalton asked the Minister of Education to detail (a) the approximate cost of damage repair to school facilities following acts of vandalism over the past year and (b) any action he is taking to eradicate the problem of vandalism, notably at Glengormley High School and Templepatrick Primary in the South Antrim constituency. (AQW 825/01)

Mr M McGuinness: The approximate cost of repairs in the 2000/2001 financial year is estimated at £1 million of which approximately £870,000 was spent by Education and Library Boards on repairing damage in controlled and maintained schools. Action to prevent vandalism includes the installation of fencing, security lighting, window grilles, burglar alarms, CCTV systems and door entry systems. At Glengormley High School the North-Eastern Board has installed CCTV, intruder alarms, security lighting and anti-climb measures and is planning to erect additional fencing. The Board has indicated that it is not aware of any major problems with vandalism at Templepatrick Primary School.

Protecting the Identity of Children

Mr M Robinson asked the Minister of Education to give his assessment of the need to protect the identity of children connecting to the internet through school computer systems and what guidance he has issued on this matter. (AQW 832/01)

Mr M McGuinness: I fully recognise the importance of protecting the identity of children connecting to the Internet through school computer systems. The advice issued to schools includes:

- my Department's 'Policy on the Acceptable Use of the Internet in Schools' (circular 1999/25);
- a pack 'Superhighway Safety: Safe Use of the Internet', published by the British Educational Communications and Technology Agency;
- specific advice to use a class or teaching group email address system to protect anonymity and reduce the risk of unsolicited attention.
- Schools are also advised to draw up and implement a policy on acceptable use and advise parents accordingly.

'Citizenship' as a Curriculum Subject

Mr Gibson asked the Minister of Education what preparations remain to be completed in respect of the introduction of 'citizenship' as a curriculum subject. (AQW 850/01)

Mr M McGuinness: It is intended to phase citizenship into the curriculum for pupils in post-primary schools as soon as possible, with the current pilot being extended to a number of other schools (on a voluntary basis) from September 2002. Course content is currently being developed, and a major inservice programme for teachers is in planning.

Making Education More Attractive

Mr K Robinson asked the Minister of Education to detail the steps he is taking to make education more attractive for school age members of the Unionist tradition in areas of multiple deprivation; and to make a statement. (AQW 897/01)

Mr M McGuinness: I fully recognise the need to make education attractive to young people, as this is key to improving attendance, motivation and results. I am aware of the concerns of principals about the appropriateness of the curriculum for some young people. In response my Department has co-funded a study of young people's views on their post-primary education, and introduced a pilot scheme to provide more flexibility for schools to offer work-related courses in Key Stage 4. CCEA are conducting a full review of the curriculum, and have already revised some programmes of study to make them more practical and relevant. All of these measures relate to all schools and all pupils.

In addition, my Department's New TSN Action Plan is specifically aimed at tackling disaffection and social exclusion so that all young people can take full advantage of the educational opportunities on offer, and the School Support Programme, and specifically the Group One Schools initiative, are aimed at improving the quality of education in the most disadvantaged areas and where pupil achievement and motivation are lowest. These initiatives are focused where need is greatest and benefit both communities.

EMPLOYMENT AND LEARNING

Access to Higher Education

Mr M Robinson asked the Minister for Employment and Learning to outline the criteria used by his department to measure the level of success in widening access to higher education. (AQW 779/01)

The Minister for Employment and Learning (Dr Farren): My Department will measure the level of success in widening access to higher education by monitoring the impact of policies on the student profile. I have required the universities to produce three year Strategies and Action Plans which detail activities,

targets and performance indicators associated with widening access. My Department will monitor progress towards the achievement of these targets, and, in particular, will complete an evaluation to measure the effectiveness of the additional support made available as a result of my recent review into student finance to assist with widening access.

Ulster-Scots Cultural Ethos

Mr K Robinson asked the Minister for Employment and Learning to detail the number of courses funded in the last three years which reflect the Ulster-Scots cultural ethos. (AQW 803/01)

Dr Farren: The Department for Employment and Learning does not fund individual courses but allocates funding to Higher and Further Education institutions which are responsible for the delivery of teaching and learning in Northern Ireland. As autonomous bodies, the institutions are responsible for their own policies, procedures and practices, which includes course provision.

New Deal

Mr Gibson asked the Minister for Employment and Learning what is the impact of New Deal for the long-term unemployed in West Tyrone. (AQW 810/01)

Dr Farren: Since the introduction of New Deal in April 1998, unemployment in the target groups for the New Deal for 18-24 year olds and New Deal for over 25 in West Tyrone has fallen by 55% and 53% respectively. In the same period total unemployment in West Tyrone fell by 30%.

Post Graduate Certificate in Education

Mr Shannon asked the Minister for Employment and Learning if it is possible for students to obtain funding from local education authorities to complete a post graduate certificate in education in the Republic of Ireland. (AQW 837/01)

Dr Farren: Students undertaking post graduate certificate in education courses at publicly funded institutions in the Republic of Ireland are eligible for support in respect of tuition fees, loans and supplementary grants from the Education and Library Boards in accordance with the Education (Student Support) Regulations (Northern Ireland).

Quality of Teaching

Mr Gibson asked the Minister for Employment and Learning what assessment has he made of the quality of teaching in further education. (AQW 844/01)

Dr Farren: The Education and Training Inspectorate reports regularly to me on the quality of teaching and learning in further education colleges. The reports indicate a quality of provision which is at least satisfactory, and often good or better.

Adult Basic Education

Mr M Robinson asked the Minister for Employment and Learning what progress is being made in raising levels of adult literacy. (AQW 858/01)

Dr Farren: The Further Education funding formula provides additional weightings for Adult Basic Education. The Department has also introduced, through the Basic Skills Unit, Community and Workplace Innovation Funds which support innovative projects attracting new adult learners. In addition, my Department will publish shortly a consultation document containing a framework for improving the levels of adult literacy.

University of Ulster: Temporary Contracts

Mr Neeson asked the Minister for Employment and Learning how many teaching staff at the University of Ulster are on temporary contracts. (AQO 461/01)

Dr Farren: The University of Ulster, in common with all other UK universities, is an autonomous body entirely responsible for its own policies and procedures, including staff contractual matters. I am advised that, while the numbers of temporary contract teaching staff employed by the University fluctuates during the course of the academic year according to need, the number of such staff currently in post is 94.

Taskforce for Employability and Long-Term Unemployment

Mr Ford asked the Minister for Employment and Learning to make a statement on the Taskforce for Employability and Long Term Unemployment. (AQO 464/01)

Dr Farren: The Taskforce, which has met on six occasions, has circulated 2100 discussion documents. Sixty-five written responses have been returned. We have completed a series of thirty engagement meetings with a wide range of organisations as well as bilaterals with Government Departments. The Taskforce is now considering the information gathered with a view to preparing an Action Plan by 31 March 2002.

Individual Learning Accounts

Ms Lewsley asked the Minister for Employment and Learning to outline the timescale for a review of

the Individual Learning Accounts initiative and when does he expect to bring forward revised proposals. (AQO 483/01)

Dr Farren: I will review the operation of the scheme and announce replacement arrangements as quickly as possible.

Since my announcement of the review on 26 October, there has been a most serious development. On Friday 23 November, due to police investigations in England into serious allegations of fraud and theft concerning Individual Learning Accounts, the ILA Centre system, which administers the programme for England and Scotland as well as Northern Ireland, was shut down. This was essential to protect both the interests of individual ILA holders in Northern Ireland and public funds.

The police investigations are continuing, and the system remains unavailable. In these circumstances it would be impossible to put in place essential additional safeguards before the 7 December closing date for new course bookings. I have therefore, regrettably, concluded that the ILA scheme for Northern Ireland in its present form is now effectively closed a few days ahead of the earlier announced end date.

My Department will be writing immediately to all ILA holders and education and training providers affected by this development. All ILA holders who had valid course bookings made on the ILA Centre system before it was shut down will have that commitment honoured and will receive the appropriate ILA support. Anyone who had been contemplating using their ILA to enrol on a course before 7 December should call the learndirect free phone help-line for advice not only on courses, but also on what support may be available.

While there have been difficulties with the programme, it has been successful in attracting many new learners. My review will build on that success while addressing the practical issues that have arisen in its present operation.

Part-Time Workers

Mrs Nelis asked the Minister for Employment and Learning if he has any plans to encourage the extension of the scope of the regulations in respect of part-time work to cover those part-time workers not included in the framework agreement on part-time work. (AQO 477/01)

Dr Farren: The Part-Time Regulations were designed to give full effect to the EU Directive covering the Framework Agreement, and I have no plans to encourage the extension of the scope of the Regulations beyond this.

European Programme for Building Sustainable Prosperity

Mr O'Neill asked the Minister for Employment and Learning what groups are eligible for funding under the European Programme for Building Sustainable Prosperity. (AQO 458/01)

Dr Farren: A wide range of organisations may apply for funding under Priority 2 of the Northern Ireland Programme for Building Sustainable Prosperity including voluntary, community and other educational and training organisations. Indeed the only exclusions under European Social Fund Regulations are individuals, sole traders, or organisations which are not legally constituted.

ENTERPRISE, TRADE AND INVESTMENT

Global Point Industrial Park

Mr K Robinson asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment what progress has been made by his agencies to attract tenants into the Global Point Industrial site at Newtownabbey. (AQW 804/01)

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment (Sir Reg Empey): Global Point International Business Park has been included in the visit programmes of a number of potential investors from the telecommunications, engineering, electronics and food manufacturing sectors. The Park has also been the subject of recent interest by a number of property consultants.

The proposed provision of a 40000 sq ft speculative build light industrial unit and an office style campus will enhance the attractiveness of Global Point as a prestigious high quality business location.

Electricity Prices

Mr K Robinson asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment what steps he is taking to ensure electricity prices in Northern Ireland fall to a level comparable with other parts of the UK. (AQW 812/01)

Sir Reg Empey: Action taken, or under way, to reduce the higher electricity prices in Northern Ireland includes: the opening up of 35% of the electricity market to competition, two years ahead of EU requirements; the consideration by my Department of responses to the consultation paper recently published by the Regulator on proposals for moving to a fully competitive electricity market with accompanying industry structure reforms; the proposed commissioning of the electricity

interconnector with Scotland in January 2002, thereby providing a new source of competitively priced electricity; the Regulator's continuing discussions with the generators on reducing generation costs; the Regulator's ongoing review of NIE's transmission & distribution price controls (revised controls to be introduced from April 2002); the allocation of the £60 million Government support package for electricity consumers; the accelerated roll-out of the natural gas programme in the Greater Belfast licence area; the agreement by the Executive on grant support for the construction of gas transmission pipelines from Gormanstown to Antrim and from Antrim to the North West of Northern Ireland; the promotion by my Department of the most cost effective and environmentally friendly combined heat and power technology and the continuing campaign to promote greater energy efficiency.

In addition, I hope to publish an initial consultation paper on a new energy strategy for Northern Ireland and accompanying proposals requiring legislation to give effect to that strategy, in the near future. The achievement of significant electricity price reductions will be a main focus of those proposals.

Finally, the planned progressive development of an all-island energy market will further increase choice and encourage downward pressure on electricity prices in both jurisdictions.

Job Losses: East Antrim

Mr Hilditch asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment, pursuant to AQW 632/01, what plans he has to redress the 1218 jobs lost in the East Antrim area. (AQW 819/01)

Sir Reg Empey: LEDU has been working with other Government agencies, LEDCOM and other bodies in liaison with employers to provide support and advice to employees who are to be made redundant. It will also continue to work with its enterprise partners to develop programmes and initiatives aimed at the development of export markets and job creation.

IDB's Trade International and Business Excellence Service offer a range of programmes and initiatives aimed at helping IDB and LEDU client companies increase their competitive advantage. Many companies are participating on these including several who operate in the East Antrim area.

In addition IDB maintains contact with Newtownabbey, Carrickfergus and Larne Borough Councils to understand their priorities for economic development and to work with the CORE group of councils, of which they are part, to market the region to potential investors.

Performance Standards: NIE

Mr Hilditch asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment, pursuant to AQW 631/01, if he has any plans to review the level of compensation to non-domestic customers; and to make a statement.

(AQW 822/01)

Sir Reg Empey: The performance standards which NIE is currently required to achieve in relation to repairs to the electricity network and the payments which it is required to make to customers for breaches of those standards are prescribed in Regulations made by the Regulator with the consent of the Department.

The latest changes to the performance standards and payment levels were introduced, via the Electricity (Standards of Performance) (Amendment No 3) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 1999 (Statutory Rule 1999 No 366), in October 1999. This followed a review by the Regulator of the earlier requirements which included a public consultation exercise.

The current standards and payment levels for both domestic and non-domestic customers are constantly monitored by the Regulator, and there are no plans for a further review at this time.

Investment in Larne

Mr K Robinson asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to detail (a) the level of investment and number of jobs created in Larne over the last three years by (i) IDB and (ii) LEDU and (b) the steps he will be taking to improve the current situation.

(AQW 841/01)

Sir Reg Empey:

- (a) (i) In the past 3 years IDB has offered some £4 million to projects which are investing almost £13 million in the Larne Borough Council area. These projects involved the promotion of 271 new jobs and the safeguarding of a further 62 jobs.
- (ii) Over the past 3 years LEDU has provided some £840,000 towards projects creating 130 jobs in the Larne Borough Council area.
- (b) IDB continues to work with companies to encourage them to become more internationally competitive. Several companies have been involved in Trade International and Business Excellence programmes and initiatives which are aimed at increasing their competitive advantage.

In addition IDB maintains contact with Larne Borough Council to understand its priorities for economic development and with the CORE group of councils, of which Larne is part, to market the region to potential investors.

LEDU works closely with LEDCOM and Larne Council and has been involved in a number of joint economic initiatives. Further joint projects are currently being discussed.

Unemployment Figures: Larne

Mr K Robinson asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to detail (a) the unemployment figures for Larne over the last three years and (b) how he proposes to address this situation.

(AQW 842/01)

Sir Reg Empey: Unemployment statistics at District Council level are only available from the claimant count. Details of claimant count unemployment in Larne Borough Council and a comparison with Northern Ireland as a whole can be found in Table 1.

The Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment continues to work, through IDB and LEDU, with companies in Larne to ensure they are able to compete in the global marketplace.

IDB has six client companies in the Borough employing almost 1,800 people. Several companies have been involved in Trade International and Business Excellence programmes and initiatives which are aimed at increasing their competitive advantage. In addition IDB maintains contact with Larne Borough Council in order to understand its priorities for economic development and with the CORE group of councils, of which Larne is part, to market the region to potential investors.

LEDU works closely with the LEDCOM enterprise agency and Larne Council and has been involved in a number of joint economic initiatives. Further joint projects are currently being discussed.

TABLE 1
NUMBER AND RATE OF CLAIMANT COUNT UNEMPLOYED IN LARNE BOROUGH COUNCIL AND NORTHERN IRELAND.

Date	Numbers Unemployed		% of the Workforce	
	Larne	Northern Ireland	Larne	Northern Ireland
October 1998	726	55,629	6.5	7.1
October 1999	610	45,881	5.7	5.8
October 2000	591	40,555	5.5	5.1
October 2001	628	37,904	5.8	4.8

TeleTech Call Centre

Dr Birnie asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to detail the percentage of employees

in the TeleTech Call Centre who are residents of the Belfast BT15 area. (AQW 853/01)

Sir Reg Empey: TeleTech has invested over £11m in a customer interaction centre at Northgate, North Belfast that will employ approximately 950 people by 2004.

At present the company employs 130 people at the centre, with 8 employees (6%) resident in the BT15 area. The company employs a total of 26 people (21%) resident in any of the north Belfast and adjacent Newtownabbey postcode areas.

TeleTech is very keen to employ as many people from the immediate locality as possible in the centre and is conscious of its role in the community. However as the project is still in its start-up phase the company's immediate requirement is for persons with previous experience in call centre/customer service work.

Unemployment Statistics: Coleraine

Mr McClarty asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to detail the unemployment figures for Coleraine over the last three years and what assessment he has made in respect of these figures. (AQW 905/01)

Sir Reg Empey: Unemployment statistics at District Council level are only available from the claimant count.

Details of claimant count unemployment in Coleraine District Council and a comparison with Northern Ireland as a whole can be found in Table 1.

The unemployment figure for Coleraine, whilst higher than for Northern Ireland as a whole, has fallen at a similar rate.

My Department, through IDB and LEDU, and, when it is established, the new economic development agency Invest Northern Ireland, will continue to work with companies and with the District Council and local enterprise agencies to promote further economic activity and employment in the area.

TABLE 1
NUMBER AND RATE OF CLAIMANT COUNT UNEMPLOYED
IN COLERAINE DISTRICT COUNCIL AND NORTHERN
IRELAND.

Date	Numbers Unemployed		% of the Workforce	
	Coleraine	Northern Ireland	Coleraine	Northern Ireland
November 1998	2,033	54,326	7.9	6.9
November 1999	1,717	43,720	6.7	5.5
November 2000	1,500	40,007	5.9	5.1
November 2001	1,352	36,865	5.3	4.7

Invest Northern Ireland

Mr Byrne asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment what implications will the new Single Economic Development Agency, Invest Northern Ireland, have for the regional LEDU offices. (AQO 452/01)

Sir Reg Empey: When Invest Northern Ireland is established on 1 April 2002, it is likely that it will adopt the existing LEDU regional office network. Subsequent decisions on the location and responsibilities of INI regional offices will be guided by operational needs and will seek to maximise the effective and efficient operation of INI.

Investment Projects

Mrs Nelis asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment what steps he has taken to ensure that job announcements translate into actual jobs. (AQO 478/01)

Sir Reg Empey: Implementation of investment projects and the provision of associated jobs is the responsibility of the companies involved. When the Department of Enterprise Trade and Investment offers financial assistance towards such projects, payments under the offers are dependent upon the companies fulfilling agreed conditions, including those related to satisfactory employment performance.

ENVIRONMENT

Designation of Small Streams: Newtownabbey Area

Mr K Robinson asked the Minister of the Environment what plans he has to designate small streams in the Newtownabbey area, which are threatened by building developments, in order to protect their unique environmental contribution and ecosystems. (AQW 769/01)

The Minister of the Environment (Mr Foster): None of the small streams in the Newtownabbey area have been identified as requiring national or international designation for nature conservation purposes. Nevertheless, these streams are currently afforded the same degree of protection as all waterways throughout Northern Ireland through the planning process and through the regulation of discharges that may impact on water quality.

My Department may, however, identify sections of some of these river corridors as Sites of Local Nature Conservation Importance or Local Landscape Policy

Areas in the proposed Belfast Metropolitan Area Plan (BMAP). A BMAP Issues Paper will be published on 7 December 2001. Public meetings will be held following its publication, providing an opportunity for Newtownabbey Borough Council, Environmental and Amenity Groups and members of the public to suggest those rivers and streams which should be protected because of their nature conservation value and landscape importance. Where such sites are identified, the BMAP will set out specific planning policies which will apply to development proposals on these sites.

Protection of Larne Lough Coastline

Mr K Robinson asked the Minister of the Environment what plans he has to protect further Larne Lough and surrounding coastline from insensitive developments and ongoing pollution. (AQW 770/01)

Mr Foster: The coastline around Larne Lough was designated as a Countryside Policy Area (CPA) in the Larne Area Plan 2010. The strategic objectives of a CPA are to protect areas of countryside under pressure from development; to protect the visual amenity of areas of landscape quality; and to maintain the rural character of the countryside.

In recognition of the importance of this area, my Department also designated Larne Lough and Swan Island as Special Protection Areas under the EC Birds Directive. This Directive requires member states to take special measures to conserve the habitats of certain rare and migratory bird species.

My Department has also designated Larne Lough as a Ramsar Site under the Ramsar Convention on the Conservation of Wetlands of International Importance.

I am advised that the Department for Regional Development's Water Service has a number of sewerage systems which discharge into Larne Lough and the coastal side of the Islandmagee Peninsula. The level of treatment at each discharge point varies.

There are 5 main outfalls, which discharge into Larne Lough (ie Glynn, Magheramorne, Ballycarry, Ballystrudder and Millbay). It is intended to divert the wastewater from Glynn and Magheramorne to the proposed new Wastewater Treatment Works (WWTWs) at Larne. The new Works is currently programmed to commence on site in June 2002 and will take 2 years to complete. The cost involved is £10 million.

At the Coastal Side of Islandmagee Peninsula there are 4 main outfalls which discharge into coastal waters to the East of the Islandmagee Peninsula (ie Ferris Bay, Browns Bay, Mullaghbuoy and Whitehead). The total cost of upgrading wastewater treatment facilities in Islandmagee is £2.8 million. Work will be carried out on a phased basis starting in 2002.

You may be interested to know that work has commenced on the preparation of an Area Plan covering the Antrim, Ballymena and Larne Districts. This will afford the opportunity to further consider issues concerned with the potential of Larne Lough and its surroundings.

Belfast Metropolitan Area Plan

Mr K Robinson asked the Minister of the Environment if he has any plans to designate parts of Jordanstown as an area of townscape character, as previously identified by Newtownabbey Borough Council. [R] (AQW 771/01)

Mr Foster: My Department is presently working on the Belfast Metropolitan Area Plan (BMAP), which will examine, amongst other things, the issue of Built Heritage Protection.

The Team preparing the Plan has already received a large number of letters requesting the introduction of Planning Policies to protect the townscape character of the Jordanstown area. Consultants have been appointed to consider and advise on the need to designate additional Areas of Townscape Character. This issue will also be raised in the BMAP Issues Paper, which is due to be published on 7 December 2001. The Issues Paper and the public meetings, which will be held following its publication, will provide an opportunity for those who wish to make representations regarding the need for additional Areas of Townscape Character.

The Draft BMAP is programmed to be published at the end of 2002. Any additional Areas of Townscape Character proposed for designation will be included in the Draft Plan. Following publication of the Draft Plan, 6 weeks will be allowed for the submission of objections. All unresolved objections submitted within the 6-week period will be considered at a Public Inquiry.

Inclusion of Areas of Townscape Character in the BMAP will ensure that the areas designated enjoy full statutory protection.

Ozone Depleting Substances Regulations

Mr Shannon asked the Minister of the Environment who will monitor the progress of local district councils towards achieving the targets set by Ozone Depleting Substances Regulations. (AQW 794/01)

Mr Foster: EC Regulation 2037/2000 provides for new controls on ozone depleting substances and is directly applicable to all Member States. However, Member States have also to establish in national legislation penalties for non-compliance and provide relevant agencies with powers of enforcement.

Article 16 of the Regulation deals with the recovery, recycling and reclamation and destruction of such substances. It does not set targets but requires that from 1 January 2002 such substances must be recovered for destruction using only approved technologies.

District councils will be required to take account of the new requirement in carrying out their waste activities, particularly their current practices in relation to the collection and disposal of domestic fridges. It is expected that compliance with the EU requirement will be regulated through the waste management licensing system. Under proposed new Waste Management Licensing Regulations, currently in preparation, my Department will become the regulatory authority.

Member States have also to establish enforcement procedures to deal with other aspects of the EC Regulation in relation to the importation, exportation, production, use and placing on the market of such substances.

Importation is a reserved matter and will be enforced by HM Customs and Excise. Decisions have yet to be taken on the appropriate bodies and mechanisms to enforce the other aspects. It is therefore not possible to say at this stage the role which district councils might play.

Ozone Depleting Substances Regulations

Mr Shannon asked the Minister of the Environment to detail any financial assistance that local district councils will receive to assist with implementing the "Ozone Depleting Substances Regulations".

(AQW 795/01)

Mr Foster: EC Regulation 2037/2000 provides for new controls on ozone depleting substances.

Article 16 of the Regulation provides that with effect from 1 January 2002 the recovery, recycling and reclamation and destruction of such substances may be undertaken using only approved technologies.

I know that a number of councils have concerns about how this requirement will affect their waste management activities, particularly their current practice in relation to the collection and disposal of domestic fridges. At the moment there are no facilities in the United Kingdom that are capable of removing such substances from the insulating foam of fridges. This means that district councils may be required to store such items for an indefinite period prior to disposal.

Two councils have already written to my Department about the financial implications arising from the new requirement. My officials are looking urgently at the matter to gauge the extent of the additional costs. I will thereafter wish to consider what action might be appropriate. There are no additional resources currently earmarked for this purpose.

Portstewart's Promenade

Mr McClarty asked the Minister of the Environment what action will be taken to preserve the unique character of Portstewart Promenade. (AQW 847/01)

Mr Foster: The distinctive character of the Promenade derives more from a combination of the relationship of the street with the sea and the harbour and the orientation of the buildings on its eastern side, rather than any significant quality in the buildings. These are generally of limited quality, almost all having lost much of their detailing and character, especially during the 1960s and 1970s. As a result, the Promenade is not designated as a Conservation Area, nor does it have any listed buildings. The physical condition of some buildings is poor, and there is considerable obsolescence. Any residual character that remains in the terraces facing Portstewart Bay, is derived largely from the scale and rhythm created by individual buildings.

In approving a number of planning applications for redevelopment of major buildings along the Promenade over recent years, my Department has sought to ensure that proposals for replacement buildings are consistent in terms of height, roofs and proportions, and successfully integrate with existing properties.

While previous studies have concluded that the Promenade is unsuitable for Conservation Area protection, my Department will consider again what merit remains in the townscape of the Promenade under the forthcoming Northern Area Plan.

Portstewart's Promenade

Mr David McClarty asked the Minister of the Environment what assessment he has made in relation to the ongoing destruction of built fabric along Portstewart Promenade. (AQW 848/01)

Mr Foster: The distinctive character of the Promenade derives more from a combination of the relationship of the street with the sea and the harbour and the orientation of the buildings on its eastern side, rather than any significant quality in the buildings. These are generally of limited quality, almost all having lost much of their detailing and character, especially during the 1960s and 1970s. As a result, the Promenade is not designated as a Conservation Area, nor does it have any listed buildings. The physical condition of some buildings is poor, and there is considerable obsolescence. Any residual character that remains in the terraces facing Portstewart Bay, is derived largely from the scale and rhythm created by individual buildings.

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Northern Area Plan

Mr McClarty asked the Minister of the Environment what progress has been made in the preparation of the Northern Area Plan. (AQW 851/01)

Mr Foster: The preparation of the Northern Area Plan 2016 was announced in March of this year. Since that time work has been undertaken in relation to a number of key areas with the expectation that an "Issues Paper" will be published early in the new year, in line with the Development Plan Programme set out in the Planning Service's 2001-02 Corporate and Business Plan.

The work undertaken to date includes extensive consultation with statutory and other agencies. Retail surveys have also been conducted within Limavady, Coleraine, Ballymoney, Ballycastle, Portrush, Portstewart and Dungiven. My Department also held a series of meetings in August-October of this year with the Chief Executives and councillors of the four local councils - Limavady, Coleraine, Ballymoney and Moyle - to discuss the plan process, and to highlight issues that are of concern to councillors and the communities they represent.

In relation to community consultation, my Department has contracted Community Technical Aid (CTA), an independent voluntary organisation, to carry out the Community and Public consultation for the "Issues Stage" of the plan. This process is undertaken in two parts. The first part of the process has been completed and involved establishing contact with 856 community, voluntary and sports groups in the Northern Plan area to advise them of the impending process, and to encourage them to become involved in the consultation process, and to offer their views on the new plan.

Following this exercise a series of four community group briefing meetings were organised during October 2001, in Armoy, Garvagh, Limavady and Loughguile, to discuss matters to be addressed in the issues paper. CTA is to produce a report on this process, which is expected by mid December.

The second part of the consultation will follow the publication of the Issues Paper early in the new year. CTA is also contracted to carry out consultation on the equality obligations under Section 75 of the N I Act 1998.

Since the plan was announced earlier this year, Planning Service has received over 800 representations from the general public covering a wide range of subjects. These representations will form an important part of the consideration process.

Northern Area Plan

Mr McClarty asked the Minister of the Environment to detail all public participation to date in the preparation of the Northern Area Plan issues paper. (AQW 852/01)

Mr Foster: The preparation of the Northern Area Plan 2016 was announced in March of this year. Since that time work has been undertaken in relation to a number of key areas with the expectation that an "Issues Paper" will be published early in the new year, in line with the Development Plan Programme set out in the Planning Service's 2001-02 Corporate and Business Plan.

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from the general public covering a wide range of subjects. These representations will form an important part of the consideration process.

Recycling Measures

Mr McClarty asked the Minister of the Environment what action is being taken to increase and promote household recycling measures. (AQW 862/01)

Mr Foster: My Department's Waste Management Strategy sets demanding targets for the recycling of household waste by District Councils. The Waste Management Plans of District Councils will indicate how these targets will be met. Financial assistance is available from my Department towards preparing the Plans and further assistance will be provided for their implementation. The Plans will be subject to public consultation early in 2002 and, in order to promote an informed public debate, my Department is preparing public awareness and education campaigns, which will highlight, among other things, the need for recycling.

At present, my Department is providing assistance, through European grant-aid, to a number of projects involving the recycling of household waste. The Belfast-based charity Bryson House is receiving £140,000 towards a kerbside recycling scheme currently being trialled over 7,500 homes in the Ards, Belfast and Castlereagh council areas.

Assistance is also being given to a company that collects and recycles plastic bottles and containers in a number of District Council areas. Two companies are receiving assistance in establishing materials recycling facilities, which will receive household waste, disposed of through skips.

A key aim of our Waste Management Strategy is to shift waste management practices towards increased reuse, recycling and recovery for all waste streams, including household and industrial waste. Glass, paper and plastic products make up a significant proportion of these waste sources.

Last August my Department published the findings of a Waste Arisings Survey for the year 1999 to 2000. The Survey found the household waste recovery rate (which includes composting) to be only 6.6%, equating to approx. 55,000 tonnes per annum. Of the materials collected paper/card accounted for 29%, glass 9%, but the amount of plastics was negligible.

The Survey produced a poor return rate from the industrial and commercial waste sectors and therefore reliable recycling data for paper, glass and plastic from these sources are unavailable. My Department is currently organising a further survey to obtain more reliable data.

Recycling Measures

Mr McClarty asked the Minister of the Environment what assessment he has made in relation to (i) the actual, and (ii) the potential level of recycling of glass, paper and plastic products. (AQW 863/01)

Mr Foster: My Department's Waste Management Strategy sets demanding targets for the recycling of household waste by District Councils. The Waste Management Plans of District Councils will indicate how these targets will be met. Financial assistance is available from my Department towards preparing the Plans and further assistance will be provided for their implementation. The Plans will be subject to public consultation early in 2002 and, in order to promote an informed public debate, my Department is preparing public awareness and education campaigns, which will highlight, among other things, the need for recycling.

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Nitrate Vulnerable Zones

Mr K Robinson asked the Minister of the Environment, pursuant to AQW 667/01, to detail (a) the

geographical area of the three Nitrate Vulnerable Zones in Northern Ireland, and (b) data from the groundwater and surface water monitoring network over the last 2 years. (AQW 879/01)

Mr Foster: Two Nitrate Vulnerable Zones (NVZ), 11.5 km² and 0.5 km² respectively, are located between Comber and Newtownards, Co Down. A third NVZ, 3.8 km², lies to the west of Cloughmills in Co Antrim. The NVZs are shown in Maps 1, 2 and 3, copies of which are available in the Assembly Library.

Routine groundwater monitoring on a quarterly basis was established at a network of 78 points in 2000. Mean nitrate concentrations at these points are shown in Map 4.

Surface freshwater monitoring for nitrate has been carried out at 262 river and lake sites since the early 1990s. Sampling frequency has varied over the years but is monthly at present. Some 49 of these sites are the most downstream freshwater sampling points for major river catchments and have been declared as 'the monitoring network' to the European Commission.

Mean nitrate concentrations for the two-year period 1999/2000 for the 49 'major catchment' sites are shown in Map 5.

Mean nitrate concentrations for 1999/2000 for all the surface water sampling points are shown in Map 6.

Taxi Licensing

Mr McLaughlin asked the Minister of the Environment if he has any plans to initiate a review of taxi licensing; and to make a statement. (AQW 911/01)

Mr Foster: I have currently no plans to initiate a review of taxi licensing in Northern Ireland which is governed by the Road Traffic (Northern Ireland) Order 1981.

While I believe there would be value in beginning work to bring the regulatory arrangements for taxis up to date, this would have resource implications for my Department. I have bid for the additional resources necessary to carry out such a review but have not yet been successful.

I have also considered whether the resources needed could be reallocated from other parts of my Department. I have had to conclude that this is not currently possible given other pressures and priorities, not least in pursuing PfG and PSA commitments and in meeting national and international, including EU, obligations.

I will, of course, continue to keep this option under review.

FINANCE AND PERSONNEL

Senior Civil Service Review

Mr Close asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel to give an update on the Senior Civil Service Review.

(AQW 752/01)

The Minister of Finance and Personnel (Mr Durkan): The first meeting of the Review Team took place on Monday 5 March and since then the team has considered and analysed a wide range of issues. The Team has also undertaken a programme of consultation with key stakeholders and other interested parties.

It is anticipated that the Review Team will report to the Minister for Finance and Personnel by mid December. Subsequently I, or my successor, will then bring the report back to the Executive Committee.

Local Strategy Partnership

Mr K Robinson asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel what steps he is taking to increase the allocation per capita for the Carrickfergus Local Strategy Partnership under Priority 3 of the Peace II Programme given the current long term unemployment figures for the borough.

(AQW 811/01)

Mr Durkan: I have received proposals from the Special EU Programmes Body for the allocation of money to Local Strategy Partnerships for the purposes of Measures 1 and 2 of the PEACE II Programme. The proposed allocations are based on a formula consisting of 3 factors – the intensity of deprivation in each district council area, the scale of deprivation in the area, and the population of the area. This formula has been applied consistently across the 26 district council areas to produce proposed financial allocations to each Local Strategy Partnership. These proposals are the subject of consultation at present. Final proposals will be put to the Executive for a final decision on the matter.

Peace II Programme

Mr K Robinson asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel what steps he will take to ensure the under-developed community groups in parts of East Antrim do not become further marginalised by established groups seeking funding under the current Peace II Programme. [R]

(AQW 813/01)

Mr Durkan: Under the PEACE II Programme all areas, groups and sectors will be afforded equal access to PEACE II funding. The fact that a project in itself was funded under the PEACE I Programme is no guarantee that it will be funded under PEACE II. Instead all projects seeking funding under the PEACE

II Programme will be required to submit full applications and be considered in competition with other project applicants. A number of agreed horizontal principles will govern the way in which the PEACE II Programme will be implemented and these principles address equality of opportunity and balanced interventions. Furthermore, in accordance with Section 75 of the Northern Ireland Act 1998, the Special EU Programmes Body, which is the Managing Authority for PEACE II, has a statutory responsibility to promote equality of opportunity.

Local Strategy Partnership

Mr K Robinson asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel what steps he is taking to increase the level of funding for the Larne Local Strategy Partnership under Priority 3 of the Peace II Programme, in light of the recent community relations problems suffered by the town. [R] (AQW 814/01)

Mr Durkan: I have received proposals from the Special EU Programmes Body for the allocation of money to Local Strategy Partnerships for the purposes of Measures 1 and 2 of the PEACE II Programme. The proposed allocations are based on a formula consisting of 3 factors – the intensity of deprivation in each district council area, the scale of deprivation in the area, and the population of the area. This formula has been applied consistently across the 26 district council areas to produce proposed financial allocations to each Local Strategy Partnership. These proposals are the subject of consultation at present. Final proposals will be put to the Executive for a final decision on the matter.

Review of Civil Service Accommodation

Mr K Robinson asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel if the current review of accommodation and location of civil service staff will enhance the low numbers of civil servants working in the boroughs of Larne, Newtownabbey and Carrickfergus. [R] (AQW 823/01)

Mr Durkan: The strategic review of civil service office accommodation, which will examine the scope for decentralisation of civil service jobs, is scheduled for completion in April 2002. An interim report was submitted by the consultants last week and is currently being considered at official level. Until the review is concluded, it would be wrong for me to prejudge the outcome or to speculate as to the precise locations which might be involved in any subsequent dispersal of civil service jobs.

Local Strategy Partnership

Mr K Robinson asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel to outline the implications, if any, for the

Larne Local Strategy Partnerships, as a result of the Peace II capita allocation for Larne being reduced from that provided under Peace I funding. (AQW 840/01)

Mr Durkan: I have received proposals from the Special EU Programmes Body for the allocation of money to Local Strategy Partnerships for the purposes of Measures 1 and 2 of the PEACE II Programme. The proposed allocations are based on a formula consisting of 3 factors – the intensity of deprivation in each district council area, the scale of deprivation in the area, and the population of the area. This formula has been applied consistently across the 26 district council areas to produce proposed financial allocations to each Local Strategy Partnership. These proposals are the subject of consultation at present. Final proposals will be put to the Executive for a final decision on the matter.

HEALTH, SOCIAL SERVICES AND PUBLIC SAFETY

Homefirst Community Trust

Mr Beggs asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to outline her plans to redress the current underfunding of Homefirst Community Trust. (AQW 565/01)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety (Ms de Brún): I acknowledge that Homefirst Community Trust, like all other HSS Trusts, does not have sufficient resources to respond to all the demands that are being placed on it. However, our ability to address this issue is heavily constrained by the overall level of funding available. I have secured additional resources in the September Monitoring round and this will enable some additional funding to be made available to Homefirst Trust, to help address some of their current pressures.

Admhaím nach bhfuil go leor áiseanna ag Iontaobhas Phobal Homefirst, mar aon le gach Iontaobhas eile SSS, le freastal ar na héilimh uile atá á gcur orthu. Is mór an -iallach atá ar ár n-ábaltacht le dul i ngleic leis an cheist seo, ámh, mar gheall ar an leibhéal foriomlán maoinithe atá ar fáil. Tá tuilleadh áiseanna faighte agam i mbabhta Monatóireachta Mheán Fómhair agus, mar gheall air sin beifear in ann maoiniú breise a chur ar fáil d'Iontaobhas Homefirst, le cuidiú a thabhairt dóibh chun dul i ngleic le cuid dá mbrúnna láithreacha.

Financial Assistance for Nursing and Personal Care for the Elderly

Mrs I Robinson asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to make a statement

in relation to financial assistance for nursing and personal care costs for the long term care of the elderly and how this compares to the rest of the United Kingdom. (AQW 773/01)

Ms de Brún: Free nursing care was introduced in England from 1 October 2001 and in Wales the NHS will pay for the nursing care needed in a nursing home from Monday 3 December 2001. At present there are no plans to introduce free personal care in England and Wales. In Scotland, free nursing and personal care in all settings will be introduced from April 2002.

In May, the Executive agreed in principle to the introduction of free nursing care in nursing homes from April 2002, subject to the availability of sufficient resources. As announced earlier today, the allocation of additional resources to my Department in the Executive's budget will allow for the introduction of free nursing care from 1 October 2002.

I intend to bring forward the necessary legislation shortly, through the proposed Health and Personal Social Services (No1) Bill, so that this decision may be put into effect.

The Executive also agreed in May that an inter-departmental group should be set up to examine the costs and implications of introducing free personal care, taking account of the recent work commissioned by the Scottish Executive. The interdepartmental Group, which is being led by officials from my Department, will ensure that a detailed and considered examination of this issue is undertaken, before fully informed decisions can be made.

Tugadh cúram saor altranais isteach i Sasana ó 1 Deireadh Fómhair 2001 agus sa Bhreatain Bheag, íocfaidh an SNS as an chúram altranais atá de dhíth i dteach altranais ón Luan 3 Nollaig 2001. Níl sé beartaithe i láthair na huairé cúram saor pearsanta a thabhairt isteach i Sasana agus sa Bhreatain Bheag. In Albain, tabharfar cúram saor altrachta agus pearsanta isteach i ngach suíomh ó Aibreán 2002.

I mí na Bealtaine, chomhaontaigh an Feidhmeannas i bprionsabal go dtabharfaí cúram saor altranais isteach i dtithe altranais ón Aibreán 2002 ag brath ar infaighteacht leoracmhainní. Mar a fógraíodh ní ba luaithe inniu, ligfidh an dáileadh breise do mo Roinnse i mBúiséad an Fheidhmeannais de theacht cúram saor altranais a thabhairt isteach ó Dheireadh Fómhair 2002.

Tá sé mar rún agam an reachtaíocht riachtanach a thabhairt chun tosaigh gan mhoill, tríd an Bhille (Uimh.1) Sláinte agus Seirbhísí Sóisialta Pearsanta molta, sa dóigh go gcuirfí an cinneadh seo i bhfeidhm.

Chomhaontaigh an Feidhmeannas i Mí na Bealtaine go mbunófaí grúpa idir-rannach le costais agus le himpleachtaí thabhairt isteach chúraim shaoir phearsanta a scrúdú, ag glacadh na hoibre is déanaí coimisiúnaithe

ag Feidhmeannas na hAlban san áireamh. Cinnteoidh an Grúpa idir-rannach a bhfuil oifigigh mo Roinne i gceannas air go ndéanfar mionscrúdú tuisceanach ar an cheist seo sular féidir bearta iomlána cuimsitheacha a dhéanamh.

Professional Development: Nurses and Midwives

Mr M Robinson asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what plans she has to facilitate qualified nurses and midwives to take time off for continuous professional development.

(AQW 776/01)

Ms de Brún: In order for nurses and midwives to meet their professional development requirements for UKCC they must have 5 days study in 3 years to maintain registration. HPSS employers are aware of their responsibilities to ensure the competency of qualified nurses and midwives and support this in a number of ways, including in-house training, mentorship and "shadowing" other trained staff. Continuous professional development does not necessarily require time off.

Lena riachtanais ghairmiúla fhorbartha a chomhall don UKCC ní mór d'altraí agus do mhná cabhrach 5 lá bheith caite acu ag staidéar laistigh de thrí bliana lena glárú a choinneáil. Cuirtear freagrachtaí na bhfostóirí SSSP le cumas altraí agus ban cáilithe cabhrach a chinntiú in iúl dóibh agus le tacú leis seo ar roinnt dhóigheanna, oiliúint inmheánach, comhairle agus maoirseacht na foirne eile oilte san áireamh. Ní gá am saor a bheith agat le forbairt ghairmiúil leanúnach a dhéanamh.

Resources Available for Continuous Professional Development

Mr M Robinson asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what plans she has to increase the resources available for continuous professional development for qualified nurses and midwives.

(AQW 777/01)

Ms de Brún: My Department currently provides in excess of £9 million annually to resource commissioning of post registration education and development for nurses and midwives. New commissioning arrangements for supporting identified post registration training needs of nurses and midwives are being developed and the resources required are kept under review. There are no indications that current resources are inadequate to meet identified training needs.

Tugann an Roinn s'agamsa breis agus £9 milliún sa bhliain i láthair na huairé chun coimisiúnú oideachais iarchláraithe agus forbairt altraí agus bhan cabhrach a

mhaoiniú. Tá socruithe nua coimisiúnaithe le tacú le riachtanais aitheanta oiliúna iarchláráithe altraí agus bhan cabhrach á bhforbairt agus coinnítear na hacmhainní atá de dhíth faoi athbhreithniú. Níl cosúlacht ar bith ann nach leor na hacmhainní atá ann faoi láthair le riar ar riachtanais aitheanta oiliúna.

Occupied Beds

Mr M Robinson asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the percentage of beds in the health service that were occupied by people over the age of (a) 65 and (b) 75 in each of the last five years. (AQW 778/01)

Ms de Brún: Information is available on the percentage of occupied bed days in local hospitals accounted for by people aged 65 and over and 75 and over, and is detailed in the table below.

PERCENTAGE OF OCCUPIED BED DAYS IN LOCAL HOSPITALS ACCOUNTED FOR BY PERSONS AGES 65 AND OVER AND 75 AND OVER, 1996/7 - 2000/01

	Aged 65 +	Aged 75 +
1996/97	27.2%	14.8%
1997/98	27.3%	14.9%
1998/99	27.5%	15.2%
1999/00	28.2%	15.8%
2000/01	28.3%	16.0%

Tá eolas ar fáil ar chéatadán laethanta leapa sealbhaithe in otharlanna áitiúla ar chúis le daoine 65 agus níos sine agus 75 agus níos sine an sealbhaithe, agus mionsonraithe sa tábla thíos.

CÉATADÁN LEAPACHA SEALBHAITHE IN OTHARLANNA ÁITIÚLA AR CHÚIS LE DAOINE 65 AR NÍOS SINE AGUS 75 AGUS NÍOS SINE AN SEALBHAITHE, 1996/7 - 2000/01

	Aois 65 +	Aois 75 +
1996/97	27.2%	14.8%
1997/98	27.3%	14.9%
1998/99	27.5%	15.2%
1999/00	28.2%	15.8%
2000/01	28.3%	16.0%

Children Aged 0-4: Ulster Community & Hospitals HSS Trust Area

Mr Shannon asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the number of children aged 0-4 years within the Ulster Community & Hospitals HSS Trust area. (AQW 780/01)

Ms de Brún: The latest available information indicates that there are 7,030 children aged 0-4 years in the Ulster Community & Hospitals Trust catchment area.

Léiríonn an t-eolas is déanaí atá ar fáil go bhfuil 7,030 páiste idir 0-4 bliain d'aois ann i limistéar Iontaobhas Pobail Uladh agus Otharlann.

New Cancer Centre: Belfast City Hospital

Mr Shannon asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what is the proposed completion date for the new cancer centre at Belfast City Hospital. (AQW 781/01)

Ms de Brún: The completion date cannot be specified at this time. The business case for the Regional Cancer Centre is currently being considered as a matter of urgency by DFP. It is hoped that it will be cleared shortly which will allow the PFI process to be concluded and decisions taken on the funding and timetable of the project.

Ní féidir an dáta críche a shonrú ag an am seo. Tá machnamh á dhéanamh ar chás gnó don Ionad Ailse Réigiúnach faoi láthair mar ábhar práinne ag RAP. Táthar ag súil go socrófar é gan mhoill agus go gcuirfidh seo deireadh le próiseas TFP agus le cinní déanta ar mhaoiniú agus ar chlár ama an tionscadail.

Live Births: Ulster Community & Hospitals HSS Trust

Mr Shannon asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the number of live births within the Ulster Community & Hospitals HSS Trust in each of the last three years. (AQW 782/01)

Ms de Brún: This information is detailed in the table below.

LIVE BIRTHS IN THE ULSTER COMMUNITY AND HOSPITALS TRUST, 1999 - 2001

1998/99	2,457
1999/00	2,352
2000/01	2,363

Tá an t-eolas seo léirithe sa tábla thíos.

BREITHEANNA BEO IN IONTAObHAS PHOBAL & OTHARLANNA ULADH, 1999 - 2001

1998/99	2,457
1999/00	2,352
2000/01	2,363

Break-Even Criterion

Mr Shannon asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what steps she is taking to remove the break-even criterion that has been set for the Ulster Community & Hospitals HSS Trust. (AQW 96/01)

Ms de Brún: The Ulster Community and Hospitals HSS Trust, in line with other HSS Trusts, has a statutory duty to break even and ensure that it lives within its available resources. Furthermore, all Trusts must break even in year since all expenditure incurred by the HPSS now comes within the Department's public expenditure limits. Accordingly, the statutory duty to break even must remain in place, for the Ulster and all other Trusts, so that our public expenditure limits are not breached.

Tá dualgas reachtúil ar Iontaobhas SSS Pobail Uladh agus Otharlann de réir Iontaobhas SSS eile bheith gan gnóthú gan cailleadh agus le cinntiú nach bhfuil a mhála níos mó ná a sholáthar. Chomh maith leis sin, ní mór do na hIontaobhais go léir bheith gan gnóthú gan cailleadh sa bhliain mar go gcuimsítear an caiteachas iomlán tarraingthe ar na SSSP i gcailceanna poiblí caiteachais na Roinne anois. Mar sin de, ní mór d'Iontaobhas Uladh agus do na hIontaobhais eile go léir an dualgas reachtúil atá orthu le bheith gan gnóthú gan cailleadh bheith i bhfeidhm go fóill sa dóigh nach sárófar cailceanna poiblí caiteachais s'againn.

Nursing and Residential Care

Mr M Robinson asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the number of elderly people in hospital or at home, who having been assessed for nursing or residential care, died before securing a placement, in each year from 1996-2000.

(AQW 797/01)

Ms de Brún: This information is not collected centrally and could only be obtained at disproportionate cost.

Ní bhailítear an t-eolas seo go lárnach agus ní féidir é a fháil ach ar chostas díréireach.

Response Times for Emergency Ambulances

Mr K Robinson asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the response times for emergency ambulances serving Newtownabbey, Carrickfergus and Larne taking patients to (a) Antrim Area Hospital and (b) Belfast Hospitals.

(AQW 799/01)

Ms de Brún: For the month of October 2001, the average times for an ambulance in the Newtownabbey, Carrickfergus and Larne area, to take a patient to the following receiving hospitals in Antrim and Belfast, in response to an emergency call were as follows:

Hospital	Time
Antrim	20min 47sec
Belfast City	18min 51sec

Mater	13min 07sec
Royal Maternity	17min 04sec
Royal Sick Children	20min 40sec
Royal Victoria	20min 31sec

I mí na Samhna 2001, is iad a leanas na gnáthamanna a bhain sé as otharcharr i mBaile na Mainistreach, Carraig Fhearghais agus ceantar Latharna, le hothar a thabhairt chuig na hotharlanna a bhí ag glacadh isteach in Aontroim agus i mBéal Feirste mar fhreagairt ar ghlaoch éigeandála:

Otharlann	Am
Aontroim	20 bom 47 soic
Cathair Bhéal Feirste	18 bom 51 soic
Otharlann Mater	13 bom 07 soic
Otharlann Ríoga Máithreachais	17 bom 04 soic
Otharlann Ríoga do Pháistí Tinne	20 bom 40 soic
Otharlann Ríoga Vichteoiria	20 bom 31 soic

Fire Authority: Response Times

Mr K Robinson asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the average response times for Fire Authority vehicles to attend emergency call outs to (a) Newtownabbey (b) Carrickfergus and (c) Larne and to assess if these times can be maintained given the traffic congestion in East Antrim.

(AQW 802/01)

Ms de Brún: The Fire Brigade here use Department of Transport, Local Government and Regions (DTLR) standards in relation to response times, which apply to all Brigades.

For the period 01 April – 30 September 2001, the following average response times have been recorded:

Glengormley Fire Station (Newtownabbey)	- 5.31 minutes
Carrickfergus Fire Station	- 6.20 minutes
Larne Fire Station	- 6.50 minutes

There is no indication that the response times of these Fire Stations have been affected by the amount of traffic on the roads in East Antrim.

Úsáideann an Bhriogáid Dóiteáin abhus anseo caighdeáin na Roinne Iompair, Rialaithe Áitiúil agus Réigiún (RIRR) a bhaineann leis na Briogáidí go léir i dtaca le hamanna freagartha.

Seo a leanas na meánamanna freagartha a cláraíodh le linn na tréimhse 1 Aibreán – 30 Meán Fómhair 2001:

Stáisiún Dóiteáin Ghleann Ghormlaithe (Baile na Mainistreach)	- 5.31 nóiméad
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Stáisiún Dóiteáin Charraig Fhearghais	- 6.20 nóiméad
Stáisiún Dóiteáin Latharna	- 6.50 nóiméad

Níl aon chosúlacht ann go raibh tionchar ag an mhéid tráchta ar na bóithre in Aontroim Thoir ar amanna freagartha na Stáisiún Dóiteáin seo.

Radiotherapy: Waiting Times

Mr M Robinson asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail (a) the recommended optimum waiting time for radiotherapy and (b) the current average waiting time.

(AQW 806/01)

Ms de Brún: The recommended optimum waiting time for urgent cases requiring palliative treatment is 1-2 days. This target is being achieved by Belvoir Park Hospital. In the case of curative and post-operative radiotherapy, the recommended waiting time, from the Consultant's decision to treat a patient, is 2 weeks. The current average waiting time at Belvoir Park Hospital is 4 - 6 weeks. As much of the radiotherapy equipment at Belvoir Park is nearing the end of its useful life, funding has been secured for two new linear accelerators, the provision of which should improve waiting time significantly.

Is é an t-uas-am feithimh molta do chásanna práinneacha a mbíonn cóireáil mhaolaitheach de dhíth orthu ná 1-2 lá. Tá an sprioc sin á bhaint amach ag Otharlann Pháirc Belvoir. I gcás raiditeiripe iarobraíde agus íocshláinte is é an tréimhse feithimh, ó thráth chinneadh an tSainchomhairleora cóireáil a chur ar othar, ná 2 sheachtain. Is é an meán am feithimh faoi láthair ag Otharlann Pháirc Belvoir ná 4-6 seachtain. De bharr go bhfuil go leor den trealamh raiditeiripe in Otharlann Pháirc Belvoir ag teacht chuig deireadh ré oibre tá maoiniú aimsithe do dhá luasghéaraitheoir, soláthar a chuideoidh go mór le feabhas a chur ar an liosta feithimh.

Anti-Smoking Initiatives

Mr M Robinson asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail those anti-smoking initiatives that have been introduced and any future initiatives she plans to launch. (AQW 808/01)

Ms de Brún: Current anti-smoking initiatives include a public information campaign aimed at increasing public awareness about the dangers of smoking and the development of comprehensive smoking cessation services in each Health Board area.

The public information campaign has, to date, included television advertisements, a website and a magazine aimed at discouraging smoking among young people.

Two advertisements, aimed at second and third year pupils, have already been broadcast and the next phase of the campaign, beginning in early January, will include a hard-hitting television advertisement, supported by a telephone helpline service, aimed mainly at disadvantaged adult smokers.

Earlier this year I established an inter-sectoral Working Group on Tobacco to develop and oversee the implementation of a comprehensive action plan to tackle smoking. The plan is still being developed and will be issued for consultation early in the New Year. It will address issues such as changing the public's perception of tobacco use, helping smokers to quit and protecting the public from tobacco smoke. In addition a regional training framework for the delivery of smoking cessation services is being prepared and will be available in the New Year.

I measc na dtionscnamh frithchaithe tobac atá ann tá feachtas eolais phoiblí a bhfuil sé mar aidhm aige níos mó daoine a chur ar an eolas faoi chontúirtí caitheamh tobac agus faoi fhorbairt sheirbhísí cuimsitheacha le stop a chur le caitheamh tobac i ngach ceantar Bord Sláinte.

Cuireadh san áireamh san fheachtas eolais phoiblí, rinneadh úsáid as fógraí teilifíse, líonláithreán agus as iris go dtí seo chun daoine óga a athchomhairliú ar chaitheamh tobac. Craoladh dhá fhógra cheana féin, dírithe ar dhaltáí scoile sa dara agus sa tríú bliain, agus sa chéad chéim eile den fheachtas, a thosóidh i mí Eanáir, craolfar fógra tromchúiseach teilifíse, tacaíthe ag seirbhís líne cabhrach, dírithe ar chaiteoirí fásta tobac atá ar an anás den mhórchuid.

Ní ba luaithe sa bhliain, bhunaigh mé Grúpa idir-rannógach Oibre ar Thobac le cur i bhfeidhm gníomhaíochta chuimsitheach le tabhairt faoi chaitheamh tobac a fhorbairt agus a stiúradh. Tá an plean á fhorbairt go fóill agus eiseofar é le haghaidh comhairlithe go luath san Athbhliain. Rachaidh sé i ngleic le ceisteanna amhail barúil an phobail ar úsáid tobac a athrú, ag cuidiú le caiteoirí tobac éirí as agus an pobal a chosaint ar an tobac. Ina theannta seo táthar ag ullmhú creatlach reigiúnach treanála chun seirbhísí le héirí as tobac agus beidh sé ar fáil san Athbhliain.

Law Relating to the Placement of Children

Mrs Courtney asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail any plans she has to change the rules governing children in need of care being placed with a relative. (AQW 815/01)

Ms de Brún: I have no plans at present to change the law relating to the placement of children looked after by Health and Social Services Trusts.

Níl pleananna agam faoi láthair an dlí a bhaineann le socrúchán páistí a bhíonn faoi chúram Iontaobhais Sheirbhísí Sláinte agus Sóisialta a athrú.

Cost of Hearing Aids

Mr Hussey asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety, pursuant to AQW 506/01, to detail the number, type and cost of each type of analogue hearing aid provided by the health service in each of the last three years. (AQW 816/01)

Ms de Brún: This information is not collected centrally and could only be obtained at disproportionate cost.

Ní bhailítear an t-eolas seo go lárnach agus ní féidir é a fháil ach ar chostas díréireach.

Tyrone County Hospital: Staffing Levels & Financial Situation

Mr Hussey asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety, pursuant to AQO 411/01 and AQO 375/01, to detail (a) the distribution of allocations made in monitoring rounds in order to make good some of the pressures manifested as a result of previous decisions in relation to the South Tyrone Hospital and (b) those pressures still to be addressed. (AQW 817/01)

Ms de Brún:

- (a) I can confirm that, in June Monitoring, the Executive made available £3.8 million to address the additional costs associated with the temporary closure of South Tyrone Hospital. In addition, the SHSSB has allocated additional funds to Sperrin Lakeland HSS Trust as set out in AQO 285/01.
- (b) Sperrin Lakeland HSS Trust is currently experiencing pressures caused by additional activity in the following specialties: Surgery and Medical, including Cardiology, Gynaecology, Obstetrics and Paediatrics. The Trust has however agreed a recovery plan with the WHSSB which will allow it to achieve a break even position in 2001/02 and future years. The Department has provided some £1.2 million to the WHSSB to help finance the recovery plan and address a number of service issues in year.
- (a) Is féidir liom deimhniú gur chuir, le Monatóireacht na Bealtaine, an Feidhmeannas £3.8 milliún ar fáil le dul i ngleic leis na costais bhreise a bhain le druidim shealadach Otharlann Thír Eoghain Theas. Ar a bharr, chuir an BSSSD maoiniú breise ar fáil d'Iontaobhas SSS Speirín Tír na Lochanna de réir mar atá leagtha amach in AQO 285/01.
- (b) Tá Iontaobhas SSS Speirín Tír na Lochanna faoi bhrú i láthair na huairde de thairbhe gníomhaíochta breise sna sainfheidhmeanna a leanas: Mainliacht agus Míochaine, Cairdeolaíocht, Gínéiceolaíocht, Cnáimhseachas agus Péidiatraic. Shocraigh an tIontaobhas plean gnóthaithe leis an BSSSI a

cheadóidh dó pointe meá ar mheá a bhaint amach i 2001/02 agus sna blianta romhainn. Chuir an Roinn £1.2 milliún ar fáil don BSSSI chun cuidiú leis an phlean gnóthaithe a mhaoiniú agus dul i ngleic le roinnt ceisteanna seirbhíse i mbliana.

Therapy for Children

Mr Hussey asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety, pursuant to AQO 377/01, what boards and trusts benefited from the allocation of an additional £400,000 of recurrent funding to provide extra therapy for children of pre-school and school age. (AQW 818/01)

Ms de Brún: The additional £400,000 was allocated, on a capitation basis, to each of the four Health and Social Services Boards, which in turn distributed the funding to each community Trust in their area according to identified need.

Dáileadh an £400,000 breise, ar bhonn caipitíochta, do gach ceann de na ceithre Bhord Sláinte agus Seirbhísí Sóisialta, a dháil ina dhiaidh sin an maoiniú ar gach Iontaobhas pobail ina gceantar de réir riachtanais aimsithe.

REGIONAL DEVELOPMENT

Speed Restrictions: Larne/Belfast Railway

Mr Beggs asked the Minister for Regional Development, pursuant to AQW 518/01, to advise of any speed restrictions that applied between each railway station on the Larne/Belfast railway line during each of the past three years. (AQW 690/01)

The Minister for Regional Development (Mr P Robinson): The information requested, that has been supplied by Translink, is as follows:

Stations	Between mileposts	Period of speed restriction	Speed restriction applied
Yorkgate - Whiteabbey	0.50-0.75	February 2001 – May 2001	20mph
Whiteabbey–Jordanstown	4.75-5.00	December 2000 – ongoing	30mph
Downshire–Whitehead	12.25-12.50	July 1995 – ongoing	20mph
Downshire–Whitehead	14.25-14.50	October 1998 – November 2001	20mph
Downshire–Whitehead	13.25-13.50	March 1999	20mph

Stations	Between mileposts	Period of speed restriction	Speed restriction applied
Downshire–Whitehead	13.25–13.50	July 1999 – September 1999	30mph
Downshire–Whitehead	13.25–13.50	December 1999 – September 2000	20mph
Downshire–Whitehead	12.50–13.00	January 2001 – February 2001	5mph initially, then increased to 30mph
Downshire–Whitehead	13.00–13.25	May 2001	20mph
Downshire–Whitehead	12.50–13.00	October 2001 – ongoing	20mph
Ballycarry–Magheramorne	18.25–18.50	January 1999 – ongoing	20mph
Magheramorne–Glynn	20.00–20.25	October 2000 – January 2001	15mph
Glynn – Larne	22.75–23.25	April 1999 – June 1999.	20mph

Railway Line Between Belfast & Larne

Mr K Robinson asked the Minister for Regional Development what steps he is taking to ensure that the status of the rail line between Belfast and Larne harbour as a Trans European network route is not endangered. (AQW 700/01)

Mr P Robinson: The railway line between Belfast and Larne is part of the trans-European Rail Network running between Cork, Dublin, Belfast, Larne and Stranraer and was adopted by the European Council in 1994. The European Commission recently revised the trans-European Network Guidelines but there were no alterations to Northern Ireland's trans-European Rail Network nor to the status of the Belfast to Larne railway line.

I recognise the importance of the railway line between Belfast and Larne in the overall context of the trans-European Rail Network in improving West to East connections to Great Britain and on to continental Europe. In its December 2000 Budget the Assembly allocated resources to upgrade the section of track between Belfast and Whitehead and I am looking forward to receiving shortly from Translink its proposals for this project.

However, the Assembly has not yet allocated resources to upgrade the section of track beyond Whitehead. The future of that section of track will need to be considered in the context of the ten-year Regional Transportation Strategy.

Personal Safety of Staff and Passengers

Mr Dalton asked the Minister for Regional Development what plans he has to ensure the personal safety of

staff and passengers on public transport in view of recent attacks in the Antrim area. (AQW 742/01)

Mr P Robinson: I deplore all attacks on Translink staff, passengers and vehicles. The personal safety and well-being of staff and passengers on public transport is paramount and continues to be a priority for Translink.

Translink has advised that it is working very closely with the Police and the local community to overcome the problem of stone-throwing attacks on buses in the Antrim area. Translink has identified younger children as being a significant part of the problem and is actively seeking to educate primary school children to all the dangers of this unacceptable behaviour through an Education Package, entitled The Voyager.

Railway Services Between Whitehead & Larne Harbour

Mr K Robinson asked the Minister for Regional Development what plans he has for the maintenance of the rail services between Whitehead and Larne Harbour. (AQW 761/01)

Mr P Robinson: The budget approved by the Assembly in December 2000 did not provide resources to upgrade railway tracks outside the core railway network of the most heavily used lines. The section of track between Whitehead and Larne Harbour is outside of this core network and, as a result, there are currently no resources available to upgrade it. However, Translink considers that services can continue to operate safely to and from Larne Harbour for the time being and it intends to maintain its current level of services.

I hope that the Assembly will in due course and in the context of the ten-year Regional Transportation Strategy allocate sufficient resources to my Department to enable this stretch of track to be upgraded.

Road Improvement at Lower Main Street, Greyabbey

Mr Shannon asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail the initial budget set aside for the road improvement scheme at Lower Main Street, Greyabbey. (AQW 783/01)

Mr P Robinson: My Department's Roads Service has advised me that a total budget of £97k was set aside for the improvement scheme at Lower Main Street, Greyabbey. This included a contribution of £47k from the Department of the Environment's Planning Service to cover the cost of overhead BT cables being relocated underground and the enhancement of surface and street furniture.

The final cost of the scheme is expected to be in the region of £105k. The scheme was substantially completed by 23 November 2001, some 18 weeks longer than anticipated. Some outstanding works should be completed within the next 2 weeks.

Road Improvement at Lower Main Street, Greyabbey

Mr Shannon asked the Minister for Regional Development to outline (a) the final cost of the road improvement scheme at Lower Main Street, Greyabbey and (b) the length of time it ran over its proposed completion date. (AQW 784/01)

Mr P Robinson: My Department's Roads Service has advised me that a total budget of £97k was set aside for the improvement scheme at Lower Main Street, Greyabbey. This included a contribution of £47k from the Department of the Environment's Planning Service to cover the cost of overhead BT cables being relocated underground and the enhancement of surface and street furniture.

The final cost of the scheme is expected to be in the region of £105k. The scheme was substantially completed by 23 November 2001, some 18 weeks longer than anticipated. Some outstanding works should be completed within the next 2 weeks.

Public Transport & the Visually Impaired

Mr M Robinson asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail plans he has to help people with visual impairment to increase their use of public transport. (AQW 807/01)

Mr P Robinson: My Department has a number of measures in place to assist those who are visually impaired to increase their use of Public transport. Under the Northern Ireland Concessionary Fares Scheme all persons who are registered blind can avail of free travel on all public transport in Northern Ireland.

My Department also supports with grant aid Translink's efforts to improve the infrastructure of bus and rail stations including the installation of audio equipment and better lighting designed to assist visually impaired passengers. Passenger Awareness Cards have been introduced to enable Translink staff to discreetly identify passengers with a variety of disabilities and thereby offer appropriate assistance. This particular innovation was the winner of a National Bus Industry Award announced on 15th November 2001.

Financial support is provided under the Transport for Disabled People Programme for specialised services on a door to door or group hire basis for disabled persons including those who are visually impaired.

Strabane Industrial Estate

Mr Hussey asked the Minister for Regional Development who has responsibility for the road infrastructure in Strabane Industrial Estate. (AQO 486/01)

Mr P Robinson: My Department's Roads Service has advised me that the Industrial Estate was developed in the 1970s and 1980s by the Industrial Development Board of the then Department of Commerce. None of the roads within the site was adopted by Roads Service. I understand that the Industrial Development Board sold the entire site, including access roads, to Heron Brothers of Draperstown in 1994. Responsibility for the roads within the Industrial Estate is therefore a matter for Heron Brothers.

SOCIAL DEVELOPMENT

Child Support Scheme

Mr Gibson asked the Minister for Social Development if he has any plans to reinstate the first eight weeks of maintenance payments by absent parents under the child support regulations; and to make a statement. (AQW 787/01)

The Minister for Social Development (Mr Dodds): The Child Support, Pensions and Social Security Act (Northern Ireland) 2000 provides for major reform of the Child Support scheme. One of the main aims of the reform is to have maintenance assessed and collected within a few weeks of receiving an application. I can confirm that the current 8-week deferral provision whereby child support liability can be deferred in certain circumstances will, therefore, not be carried forward to the reformed scheme.

Modernisation of Social Welfare Services

Mr Gibson asked the Minister for Social Development what plans he has to improve co-ordination between the benefits system and those agencies responsible for helping the unemployed back into work. (AQW 788/01)

Mr Dodds: My Department in conjunction with the Department of Employment and Learning has developed a major programme to modernise social welfare services. This programme includes two major projects designed to improve co-ordination between the benefit system and those agencies responsible for helping the unemployed back to work. A joint project between the Social Security Agency and Training and Employment Agency has been set up to co-locate the 2 agencies. Joint offices have already been set up and further offices will be

introduced starting early next year. In addition, the new benefit and work-focused service known as ONE was introduced in Dungannon to provide a streamlined approach for people of working age claiming benefits.

Assisting Mothers from Welfare to Work

Mr Gibson asked the Minister for Social Development what plans he has to assist mothers with young children in the transition from welfare to work programmes. (AQW 790/01)

Mr Dodds: A wide range of help for mothers with young children making the move from welfare to work has already been introduced.

A large percentage of the participants in the new deals for partners and lone parents are women, benefiting from advice and support in looking for work, training and childcare. To help with the transition to full-time work extended payments of Housing Benefit and mortgage interest payments have been introduced. For lone parents there are also extended payments of Income Support. For those participating in employment and training programmes while remaining on benefit there is the disregard of training premiums and childcare costs which have been reimbursed.

These measures are supported by the Northern Ireland Childcare Strategy and the introduction of the Working Families Tax Credit.

AntiSocial Behaviour

Mr Shannon asked the Minister for Social Development to outline the Housing Executive's procedure for dealing with antisocial behaviour by tenants, in particular, those tenants who continually misbehave. (AQW 873/01)

Mr Dodds: The Housing Executive normally attempts to deal with antisocial behaviour through mediation, using its Neighbourhood Dispute system. However, it has a range of options available where mediation does not produce the desired result and/or incidences are repeated.

Housing Executive tenancies are normally "secure" tenancies, which means that the tenancy can only be brought to an end by a court order. While eviction is very much a last resort when all other methods have failed, the Housing Executive can seek an order for possession (ie eviction) against one of its own tenants where the tenant's behaviour provides grounds for the court to make such an order. The grounds for possession, which are set out in legislation, include certain forms of antisocial behaviour such as causing nuisance or annoyance to neighbours and using a house for illegal or immoral purposes.

The Housing Executive can also seek an injunction against one of its own tenants, where the tenant has breached, or threatens to breach, his tenancy agreement (such a breach could include antisocial behaviour such as causing nuisance to neighbours). Where the court has granted such an injunction, and the tenant breaches or continues to breach the tenancy agreement, the tenant can be held to be in contempt of court.

The Housing Executive has developed a wider approach to the problems of antisocial behaviour in the context of community safety. It has set up a Central Antisocial Behaviour Unit, that includes a Police Officer, which will examine the options and advise the local district office on the most appropriate course of action. In addition it has developed seminars with staff from other bodies to promote closer working relationships, introduced Neighbourhood Wardens and provided for the imposition of sanctions against those on the Waiting Lists who have a history of antisocial behaviour.

The forthcoming Housing Bill will strengthen the existing legislation streamlining the legal process for eviction and provide new and extended grounds for possession for evicting tenants for antisocial behaviour by their visitors and guests. It will also introduce new measures such as power for the courts to grant injunctions, power for social landlords to offer introductory tenancies and a power for the Housing Executive to decide not to assist applicants under the homelessness legislation if they have a history of antisocial behaviour.

Households Awaiting Home Adaptations

Mr Clyde asked the Minister for Social Development to detail the number of householders currently awaiting home adaptations in the borough of Antrim. (AQW 890/01)

Mr Dodds: At 30 November 2001 the information requested is as follows:

Category	Number
Public Sector - Major	20
Public Sector - Minor	22
Private Sector - DFG Applications	128
Total	170

Notes: Major Adaptations include lifts, extensions and heating.
Minor Adaptations include showers, handrails and ramps.
DFG - Disabled Facilities Grant.

Appeals Against Housing Decisions

Mr O'Connor asked the Minister for Social Development to detail the number of appeals against housing

decisions that were made in (a) the last year and (b) the last three years. (AQO 457/01)

Mr Dodds: I understand that the question refers to appeals against decisions on tenancy allocations. Currently, the system used by the Housing Executive does not categorise appeals under the heading of tenancy allocations. Consequently, information could only be gathered and made available at disproportionate cost. A computerised complaints management system is under development which will allow such information to be extracted more easily in the future. My Department provides an independent appeals mechanism for customers of Registered Housing Associations. During the period November 1998 to November 2001, three complaints about allocation decisions were received from tenants of, or applicants to, Registered Housing Associations. One of these complaints was received in the last year.

Income Support/Jobseekers Allowance: Community Care Grants

Mr O'Neill asked the Minister for Social Development under what circumstances would an individual in receipt of Income Support and Jobseekers Allowance be precluded from accessing Community Care Grants. (AQO 459/01)

Mr Dodds: A person who is getting Income Support or income-based Jobseeker's Allowance is eligible to apply for a community care grant. Community care grants are available under the discretionary part of the Social Fund and are aimed mainly at helping certain particularly vulnerable people to establish themselves in the community, and at families under exceptional stress.

Community care grants can cover a wide range of personal circumstances and the award of a grant depends on all of the conditions being met and whether the needs of the applicant are of sufficient priority to warrant a payment from the funds available.

All applications for grants are decided by Decision Makers, taking account of, among other things, directions and guidance issued by my Department.

Rural Communities: Benefits and Grants

Mr Armstrong asked the Minister for Social Development what plans he has to increase awareness within rural communities in respect of their entitlement to benefits and other grants that may be available. (AQO 451/01)

Mr Dodds: I am very conscious of the needs within rural communities and my Department, including the Social Security Agency and the Northern Ireland Housing Executive, has already implemented a number of measures to increase awareness within rural areas of

entitlement to benefits and other grants that might be available.

The Social Security Agency is working jointly with the Family Farm Development Organisation to identify specific needs and develop a comprehensive guide to public services for the agricultural community and has plans to improve the delivery of social security services to, among others, people in isolated areas by March 2003.

The Housing Executive promotes its activities in rural areas, including the availability of grant-aid through its newsletter, Rural Matters. My Department has also publicised a Small Grants Programme, under the Active Community Initiative, to help in areas of weak community infrastructure.

Sale of Stock of Registered Housing Associations

Mr Savage asked the Minister for Social Development what proportion of the total stock of NI Housing Associations has been sold off to former tenants. (AQO 472/01)

Mr Dodds: Just under 2% of the total stock of Registered Housing Associations was sold to tenants during the period 1 April 1995 to 23 November 2001. However, as the Member will no doubt be aware, much of the stock of housing associations is ineligible for sale having been provided for the elderly or people with special needs and therefore falls outside the scope of the sales scheme.

Antisocial Behaviour: Housing Executive Tenants

Mr McMenamin asked the Minister for Social Development, taking into consideration the introduction of the Housing Bill, what assurances can he give that antisocial behaviour among Housing Executive tenants will be addressed effectively in the intervening period. (AQO 490/01)

Mr Dodds: The Housing Executive has a range of measures at its disposal for dealing with antisocial behaviour, including its Neighbourhood Dispute system and, in more serious cases, legal remedies such as injunction and eviction. The forthcoming Housing Bill will reinforce the existing measures and provide new options. Initiatives being taken forward in advance of the introduction of the Bill include a specialised Antisocial Behaviour Unit, formal contacts with other bodies to promote closer working relationships, Neighbourhood Wardens and sanctions against Waiting List applicants who have a history of antisocial behaviour. I can assure the Member that the Housing Executive will continue to develop these strategies pending the introduction of the new legislation.

Housing Executive Adaptations

Mr McCarthy asked the Minister for Social Development how many Housing Executive properties have been adapted to meet the needs of the disabled and elderly in the last two years. (AQO 460/01)

Mr Dodds: Over the last 2 years to 31 March 2001 the Housing Executive has carried out 4,782 major

adaptations. These include alterations such as extensions, on 415 of its properties, 313 lifts for disabled tenants, and the changing of heating systems in 4,054 of its properties.

In addition, over 5,000 minor works have been carried out.

NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

Friday 14 December 2001

Written Answers to Questions

OFFICE OF THE FIRST MINISTER AND THE DEPUTY FIRST MINISTER

Funding for Victims Groups

Mr Beggs asked the Office of the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister to detail the amount of funding for Victims Groups emanating from (a) EU sources and (b) all other sources in the past two years by (i) local district council area and (ii) constituency area. (AQW 755/01)

Reply:

(a) Approximately £4.2 million was allocated to victims groups by the Northern Ireland Voluntary Trust from the European Peace I Programme. Some groups also received Peace I funding from other Measures and Local District Partnerships. Details of this are not held centrally.

EU funding of approximately £370,000 from the Victims Measure of Peace II has been awarded to victims groups by the Office of the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister under the Interim Funding Arrangements and some groups have received Interim Funding from Measures managed by other Departments. Information on the breakdown of EU funding by District Council and constituency areas is not available and could only be compiled at disproportionate cost.

(b) In the 2001-02 financial year the Victims Unit had funding of £420,000 to assist victims, which was allocated as follows:

Northern Ireland Memorial Fund	£340,710
Derry City Council	£13,000
Ulster Community & Hospitals Trust	£20,000
WAVE Trauma Conference	£3,000
EHSSB Trauma Advisory Panel	£20,000
WHSSB Trauma Advisory Panel	£17,290
SHSSB Trauma Advisory Panel	£6,000

The Community Relations Council administered a Victims Support Grant Scheme funded by the Northern Ireland Office with a total budget of £225,000 to cover the period July 2000 to July 2001. In the 2000-01 financial year it gave other grants to victims groups in the following local district council areas:

Belfast City Council	£46,577
Craigavon Borough Council	£1,500
Derry City Council	£4,462
Dungannon District Council	£1,351
Multiple areas	£5,700

In the current financial year it has also awarded grants in the following local district council areas:

Belfast City Council	£3,400
Craigavon Borough Council	£8,856
Newry & Mourne District Council	£4,166
Multiple areas	£2,500

Information on the breakdown of funding by constituency areas is not available and could only be compiled at disproportionate cost.

The Northern Ireland Office has, to date, had responsibility for providing core funding for victims groups under the Core Funding Grant Scheme, which is administered by Northern Ireland Voluntary Trust. Specific questions on funding should be referred to that Department.

The Victims Unit of the Office of the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister has been allocated £650,000 in the current financial year to assist victims. Decisions on the allocation of this funding have not yet been made.

Review of Parades Commission

Mr Dalton asked the Office of the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister if it was consulted regarding the Government's intention to initiate a review of the Parades Commission. (AQW 824/01)

Reply: We have not jointly been consulted about the intention to initiate a review of the Parades Commission.

Civil Response to a Major Emergency

Mr Gibson asked the Office of the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister to make a statement on its plans for co-ordinating a civil response in respect of a major terrorist attack. (AQW 846/01)

Reply: The initial response to any serious incident is led by the Department whose responsibilities are affected. Where there is a widespread or major

emergency, arrangements for a co-ordinated response on behalf of the Executive, and the public service more widely, would be initiated. This co-ordinated response would involve an inter-departmental Crisis Management Group whose role would be to take a strategic view of events and the response to them, and to agree priorities, actions, roles and responsibilities, mutual aid arrangements and a long-term recovery strategy.

Departments have established plans, covering a range of threats, for responding to major incidents and ensure that these plans are up to date and tested for all functions within their areas of responsibility. The Central Emergency Planning Unit of our Department facilitates the co-ordination of the emergency planning activities of Departments and the emergency services. All Departments have renewed and updated their plans since 11 September.

British - Irish Council: Meeting

Rev Robert Coulter asked the Office of the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister to make a statement on the recent meeting of the British - Irish Council. (AQO 532/01)

Reply: Earlier today I made a report to the Assembly on behalf of all the Ministers who attended the second summit meeting of the British - Irish Council meeting that was held on 30 November. A copy of the communiqué issued following the meeting has been placed in the Assembly Library.

North Belfast Initiative

Mr A Maginness asked the Office of the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister what further progress will be made following their welcome initiative in North Belfast and what steps are envisaged in the weeks and months ahead. (AQO 529/01)

Reply: Our key objective remains the promotion of dialogue between the local communities, and the Senior Liaison Officer is continuing to facilitate and support efforts to establish a Joint Community Forum.

We are also determined to move forward as quickly as possible on the measures that we announced on 23 November. The necessary statutory procedures to bring forward a traffic - calming scheme on the Ardoyne Road are under way. We have commissioned the preparation of a detailed design for the regeneration and improvement of the Alliance Avenue intersection and related community safety measures which fall to this Administration, including possible road realignment at the intersection. This work will be progressed urgently in full consultation with local communities and other interests. The target date for completion of the design is mid-January.

Last week we visited North Belfast to launch, with the Minister for Social Development, the North Belfast Community Action Project. This Project aims to put in place a plan of short, medium, and long-term actions to address social and community issues in North Belfast. It will focus in particular on building community capacity in those areas in which this is weak, and maintaining community activity where there is working well. An outreach advisory service will be provided to help ensure that all areas can take full advantage of existing programmes including Peace II.

Its aim is to help the people of North Belfast to address their own needs by engaging more effectively with the devolved administration and the statutory agencies. It is also about enabling them to work with other communities in a positive and co-operative manner.

The project will be led by the Very Rev Dr John Dunlop and each of the six North Belfast MLAs will be invited to nominate community representatives to work with the project team.

While we hope the project will bring forward early action, we recognise that there is no "quick fix" to the problems of North Belfast. We are fully committed to the medium- and long-term work which will be needed to heal the divisions in this area.

Sectarianism

Mr McClarty asked the Office of the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister if any correspondence has been received from the Secretary of State regarding his proposals to deal with sectarianism. (AQO 536/01)

Reply: The previous Secretary of State wrote to the First Minister and Deputy First Minister in September 2000 about proposals to strengthen the law on hate crime, including crimes motivated by sectarianism. Subsequently, Ministers Haughey and Nesbitt received correspondence from the then Northern Ireland Office Minister, Adam Ingram, in May 2001, and his successor, Des Browne, in September 2001. Ministers Haughey and Nesbitt have also met Adam Ingram and Des Browne to discuss the matter.

Peace II

Mr Beggs asked the Office of the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister if Community Relations specialists within the Office were consulted in deciding the funding allocations under Peace II for the Local Strategy Partnerships. (AQO 530/01)

Reply: This matter is the responsibility of the Department of Finance and Personnel and the Special European Union Programmes Body, which is the managing authority for the Peace II Programme. The

Minister of Finance intends to put proposals from the SEUPB to the Executive in the near future. We will give careful consideration to these proposals in relation to all of the policy areas for which we are responsible, including community relations.

Reform of Local Government

Mrs E Bell asked the Office of the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister what progress has been made towards the reform of local government; and to make a statement. (AQO 503/01)

Reply: The good governance of Northern Ireland requires systems of regional and local government which complement each other.

The organisation of local government services will be considered in the context of the review of public administration, which will cover all aspects of the public sector.

The Executive gave a commitment in the draft Programme for Government for 2002-03 to launch the review of public administration by spring of 2002. We have made good progress towards finalising the details of the review and are on target to launch it in the spring of next year.

Promoting Social Inclusion

Mr Gallagher asked the Office of the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister to make a statement on future priorities for promoting social inclusion. (AQO 528/01)

Reply: In line with a commitment we made in the Programme for Government published last year, we have consulted widely on future cross-departmental issues to be tackled under the Promoting Social Inclusion element of New TSN.

As a result of the consultation, our new Programme for Government announces two new priority areas: disability and older people.

Some other issues arising from the consultation are still under consideration and we look forward to announcing further priorities in the near future.

Work on these new priorities will begin during 2002.

International Fund for Ireland

Mr McElduff asked the Office of the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister to detail those projects that have received financial assistance from the International Fund for Ireland (IFI) in the past two years; and to make a statement. (AQO 496/01)

Reply: The International Fund for Ireland is administered by an independent board appointed jointly by the British and Irish Governments. The Board publishes an Annual Report of its activities, including a list of all projects that are offered assistance. Copies of the Fund's 1999 and 2000 Reports have been placed in the Assembly Library. We understand the International Fund for Ireland's 2001 Annual Report will be published early in the New Year.

Successive evaluations of the International Fund's achievements have shown that it has been very successful in meeting its objectives and in particular has made a very significant contribution to economic regeneration in the most disadvantaged areas.

A recent independent evaluation by KPMG Consulting of the Fund's impacts confirms this position and a copy of the evaluation has been placed in the Assembly Library.

Human Rights Commission Report: Rights of the Elderly

Mr McCarthy asked the Office of the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister to make a statement on the Northern Ireland Human Rights Commission Report on Rights of the Elderly. (AQO 514/01)

Reply: The report contains some 23 recommendations, of which two deal with a matter which is the responsibility of this Department, namely legislation on anti-discrimination. These recommendations will be considered when developing policy and legislative proposals in this area.

The report has been drawn to the attention of those Departments with responsibility for the matters which are the subject of the remaining recommendations.

AGRICULTURE AND RURAL DEVELOPMENT

Importation of Potatoes

Mr Savage asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to detail (a) the quantity of potatoes, both loose and pre-pack, imported into Northern Ireland in the month of November 2001; (b) the origin of these potatoes; (c) their destination; and (d) if they were all tested for brown rot and ring rot. (AQW 1142/01)

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development (Ms Rodgers): The only imports of potatoes into Northern Ireland during November 2001 were from other EU Member States. There were none from

non-EU countries. However, records of imports of potatoes from within the EU are not available as such information is not collected by my Department. This is because under Council Directive 2000/29/EC, it is no longer possible for Member States to adopt any special plant-health provisions on the introduction into their territory of plants or plant products originating in other Member States, with all provisions on plant-health requirements being established at Community level. However, I am glad to reassure the Member that potatoes traded within the EU are traceable by virtue of the mandatory registration number that is attached to the packaging.

The EC plant health controls in relation to intra-community trade are based on a Plant Passport regime, and while ware potatoes do not require plant passports for trade within the EC, they are subject to this 'traceback' regime.

While specific controls at borders must be excluded, the Directive provides for a system of official checks to ensure that the Community regime is complied with. These controls must be carried out at random, without any discrimination in respect of the origin of the plants or plant products and in accordance with the following provisions:

- Occasional checks, at any time and at any place where plants, plant products or other objects are moved;
- Occasional checks on premises where plants, plant products or other objects are grown, produced, stored or offered for sale, as well as on the premises of purchasers; and
- Occasional checks at the same time as any other documentary check which is carried out for reasons other than plant health.
- Provision is made in the Directive that in the event of discovery of non-compliance targeted checks may be undertaken.

In line with these provisions, DARD inspectors undertake random checks on ware potatoes at registered potato businesses, including importers, packers and processors to ensure compliance with plant health requirements. Moreover, DARD portal inspectors are present at the ports to check third country imports arriving in NI. Although the Directive does not permit DARD to undertake systematic checking at ports, our inspections of consignments arriving, whether undertaken upon notification of landing at port of arrivals or at processing destination, requires satisfactory traceability information, failing which we can, and do, order the consignment to be returned to the country of origin.

In order to minimise the risk that imported potatoes could be harbouring Brown Rot or Ring Rot we carry out frequent visual checking and sampling for laboratory analysis of imported material at the importers' or

processors' premises. We also remain vigilant in ensuring safe disposal of waste from processing units.

CULTURE, ARTS AND LEISURE

Promoting the History and Heritage of Coleraine

Mr McClarty asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure what plans he has to promote the unique history and heritage of Coleraine. (AQW 865/01)

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure (Mr McGimpsey): This is, in the first instance, a matter for the local council. However, my Department is involved in a range of initiatives that should assist the council in its endeavours.

One such initiative is the Cultural Forum, which was established to bring together local councils and a range of other relevant public bodies. The Forum has already provided direct assistance to councils in preparing cultural strategies in the context of local integrated plans.

The Local Museum and Heritage Review provides a further, more strategic opportunity for helping to promote local history and heritage. We see a link between its recommendations and the work of the Cultural Forum, and my Department will be giving more details of its response to the review in the New Year.

British Association of Shooting and Conservation

Mr Shannon asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure if the British Association of Shooting and Conservation is eligible for funding from the Sports Council for Northern Ireland. (AQW 874/01)

Mr McGimpsey: No, the British Association of Shooting and Conservation is not eligible for funding from the Sports Council for Northern Ireland, on the grounds that it is not the recognised governing body for target shooting.

Ulster Grand Prix

Mr Clyde asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure what talks he has had with potential promoters of the Ulster Grand Prix; and to make a statement. (AQW 887/01)

Mr McGimpsey: I understand that the future of the Ulster Grand Prix has now been settled. Recent contact with the governing body (Motor Cycle Union of Ireland) has indicated that the local Dundrod and

District Motorcycle Club will be assuming the promotional responsibilities for the 2002 event.

I am pleased about this development, and although I have not met with the promoters I can assure you that the Department and the Sports Council for Northern Ireland, who have overall responsibility for the promotion and development of sport within the Province, will continue to work with the governing body to preserve this important event in the sporting calendar.

Mr Clyde asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure whether the motorcycle road racing task force carried out a risk assessment of the Ulster Grand Prix, and to detail the findings and financial implications of this report. (AQW 888/01)

Mr McGimpsey: The Motor Cycle Union of Ireland (MCUI) conducted comprehensive risk assessments on all road race courses in the Province as part of the fact-finding stage of the Road Race Task Force's safety review. These assessments were conducted by the road race safety experts within the MCUI and were designed to provide the Task Force with an overview of the actions required to reduce, but not eliminate, the danger at each course.

The risk assessment conducted at the Ulster GP course at Dundrod revealed that the following items of "roadside furniture" would require relocation and/or removal.

Removable barbed wire fencing	260 metres
Re-site BT poles	7
Re-site NIE poles	1
Removable Road Signs	2
Slope of level grass banks	110 metres
Pipe and level large drains	60 metres
Removable concrete posts	2
Tarmac	20 square metres

Costings provided by the MCUI, the Department for Regional Development, Northern Ireland Electricity and British Telecom indicated that the cost of carrying out would be in the region of £35K.

EDUCATION

Report on Effective Pre-School Provision

Mr K Robinson asked the Minister of Education what is the current position of the research report 'Effective Pre-School Provision Project'. (AQW 880/01)

The Minister of Education (Mr M McGuinness): It is anticipated that the 'Effective Pre-school Provision in Northern Ireland' (EPPNI) research project will be

completed in spring of 2003 and a report in respect of the overall findings of the study will be published later that year.

In the interim, Technical Paper No.1 'Characteristics of pre-school environments in Northern Ireland: An analysis of observational data', which forms part of an interim report by the project is currently being printed. Technical Paper No.2 'Cognitive and social/behavioural development at 3-4 years in relation to family background', has already been published and is available from Stranmillis College, price £4.50.

O'Neill Memorial Primary School, Crossnacreevy

Mrs I Robinson asked the Minister of Education what plans have been made to safeguard the future of O'Neill Memorial Primary School in Crossnacreevy. (AQW 893/01)

Mr M McGuinness: I understand that the South Eastern Education and Library Board has met the Board of Governors and parents to discuss the decline in enrolments at the school, which currently stand at 24. The South Eastern Board is keeping the future of the school under review.

'A New Impetus for European Youth'

Mr Hussey asked the Minister of Education what assessment he has made in respect of the European Commission White Paper 'A New Impetus for European Youth' (Com (2001) 681). (AQW 906/01)

Mr M McGuinness: This White Paper has implications for Departments other than Education as "youth" is regarded as covering the 15 to 25 age range.

From the Education perspective I accept the fundamental principles which the Commission has applied to youth policy and agree with the key messages of promoting active citizenship, expanding opportunities for voluntary service, developing autonomy among young people and guaranteeing the rights of minorities.

I welcome the Commission's acknowledgement of the limits of its competence in youth affairs as it is important to ensure that the freedom to determine our own programmes is not constrained.

Internet Access

Mr M Robinson asked the Minister of Education how many schools currently have access to the Internet. (AQW 908/01)

Mr M McGuinness: All schools have access to the Internet through NINE Connect, which provides a

range of services from electronic mail and conferencing facilities to online educational content.

Pre-School Education Expansion Programme

Mr Gibson asked the Minister of Education what progress is being made to ensure that every child between three and four years of age has access to a nursery place. (AQW 933/01)

Mr M McGuinness: As a result of my Department's Pre-School Education Expansion Programme, the availability of funded places for children in their immediate pre-school year has increased from 45% in September 1997 to at least 85% in the current academic year. The ultimate aim, as set out in the Executive's Programme for Government, is to provide one year's pre-school education for every child whose parents wish it by March 2003.

Teachers Leaving Profession

Mr Gibson asked the Minister of Education to detail the number of teachers, in each of the last five years, who left the profession within their first three years of employment; and to make a statement. (AQW 934/01)

Mr M McGuinness: The numbers of teachers who have left the profession within their first three years are as follows:

Academic Year	Number of Teachers
1996-97	46
1997-98	28
1998-99	32
1999-00	24
2000-01	43

These figures include teachers in all schools and Institutions of Further and Higher Education.

Teacher Vacancies

Mr Gibson asked the Minister of Education to detail the number of teacher vacancies in (a) primary schools and (b) secondary schools. (AQW 935/01)

Mr M McGuinness: I would refer the Member to the reply I gave to the Member from Lagan Valley on 21 September 2001, where I indicated that information on current teaching vacancies is not held by the Department of Education nor collated by the relevant employing authorities. Employers have not reported to the Department any large-scale problems with teacher shortages here.

Salary Structures: Senior Teachers

Mr K Robinson asked the Minister of Education what steps he is taking to address salary structures for senior teachers; and to make a statement. (AQW 950/01)

Mr M McGuinness: The pay settlement reached last January between Management Side and Teachers' Side of the Teachers' Salaries and Conditions of Service Committee (Schools) provides a main pay scale rising to £24,843, normally after seven years, based on qualifications and experience. It also provides the opportunity for teachers on this point for one year to apply for threshold assessment with an uplift to £26,919 based on 1 April 2001 rates. In addition, allowances from £942 to £9,927 are payable for management responsibilities, special educational needs teaching and recruitment and retention considerations.

New pay arrangements were also introduced for principals and vice-principals offering scope to meet local circumstances and reward performance on an overall leadership pay spine ranging from £33,375 to £78,783 for schools of different sizes.

Over 13,000 teachers have applied for threshold assessment. I expect the success rate to be high, with the result that the negotiated agreement increases average earnings in the profession.

EMPLOYMENT AND LEARNING

Initial Teacher Training

Mr McClarty asked the Minister for Employment and Learning to detail (a) the proposed intake of students for the forthcoming academic year 2002-03 at (i) Stranmillis University College and (ii) St Mary's University College and (b) the comparative figures for the last five years. (AQW 854/01)

The Minister for Employment and Learning (Dr Farren):

- Information on the proposed intake of Initial Teacher Training (ITT) students in the 2002-03 academic year is not available from this Department. However, it may be available from the Department of Education. With regards to non-ITT provision for 2002-03 the figures are not yet available from this Department.
- Information on the actual intake of students in the 2001-02 academic year is not yet available. The following table sets out the actual number of new entrants in each given academic year from 1997-98 to 2000-01.

Institution			1997-98	1998-99	1999-00	2000-01
Stranmillis	Teacher training course	Full-time	183	201	198	223
		Part-time				
	Non teacher training course	Full-time		54	93	90
		Part-time	24	106	87	91
St Mary's	Teacher training course	Full-time	179	185	202	194
		Part-time	1			
	Non teacher training course	Full-time		2		67
		Part-time		36	97	13
Total			387	584	677	678

PGCE Student Numbers

Mr McClarty asked the Minister for Employment and Learning to detail (a) the proposed intake of students to PGCE courses for the forthcoming academic year 2002-03 at (i) Queen's University, Belfast and (ii) University of Ulster and (b) the comparative figures for the last five years. (AQW 855/01)

Dr Farren:

- (a) Information on the proposed intake of students in the 2002-03 academic year is not the responsibility of this Department. PGCE student numbers are determined by the Department of Education.
- (b) Information on the actual intake of students in the 2001-02 academic year is not yet available. The following table sets out the actual number of full time new entrants to PGCE courses in each given academic year from in the 1997-98 to 2000-01 academic years.

Institution	1997-98	1998-99	1999-00	2000-01
QUB	180	164	178	193
UU	101	130	172	191
Total	281	294	350	384

Making Education Attractive

Mr K Robinson asked the Minister for Employment and Learning to detail the steps he is taking to make education more attractive to young people of the Unionist tradition in the north of the city of Belfast and areas of multiple deprivation across Northern Ireland. (AQW 896/01)

Dr Farren: My Department assists young people of all traditions in these areas to perceive the value and attractions of education and training through the work of the careers service in schools and through our sympathetic investments in further, higher education and training. The

development of the education village at Springvale will assist young people, particularly in North and West Belfast.

Learndirect Learning Centres

Mr Beggs asked the Minister for Employment and Learning to list the location of current Learning Direct Centres by (a) local district council area and (b) constituency area. (AQW 920/01)

Dr Farren: Learndirect is the brand name of the University for Industry (Ufi). Its strategy is that there will be at least one learndirect learning centre serving each district council area. I have arranged for details of current centres to be placed in the Assembly library for your information. I understand Ufi is in the process of evaluating proposals for centres to serve remaining areas and the outcome will be known early in the New Year.

Drug and Alcohol Strategy

Mr Beggs asked the Minister for Employment and Learning what is his current and future strategy in combating drug abuse in tertiary education and is there potential to increase co-operation with student organisations in promoting drug education programmes. (AQW 921/01)

Dr Farren: As part of the implementation process of the Drug and Alcohol Strategy for Northern Ireland, an interdepartmental Education and Prevention Working Group has been established, and includes Department for Employment and Learning representation. It is tasked to develop, by April 2002, action plans to deliver the outcomes and targets of the strategy. These will apply to all sectors, including the further and higher education sector.

The Department has also issued guidance to further education colleges for the design and implementation of policies on drugs and substance abuse, to be in place by September 2002. In developing their policies, colleges are encouraged to liaise with all relevant external agencies.

University Colleges: Funding

Mr K Robinson asked the Minister for Employment and Learning to detail any investment he has made at both Stranmillis University and St Mary's University College in areas of (a) Art and Design; (b) Technology and Design; and (c) Physical Education; and to make a statement. (AQW 931/01)

Dr Farren: Since assuming responsibility for the funding of the two University Colleges on foot of devolution in December 1999, my Department has provided the colleges with recurrent and capital

funding, which they have deployed according to their strategic priorities. The outturn figures for the 2000-01 academic year were:

Recurrent	Capital	
Stranmillis	£3.919m	£36,000
St Mary's	£3.948m	£44,000

The allocations for the 2001-02 academic year are:

Recurrent	Capital	
Stranmillis	£4.012	£44,000
St Mary's	£3.995	£44,000

Each college has been allocated £130,000 for disability works in the government financial year 2002-03 which overlaps with the academic year 2001-02. The capital figures given above for the latter may therefore be adjusted depending on the phasing of expenditure.

University Colleges: Capital and Revenue Expenditure

Mr K Robinson asked the Minister for Employment and Learning to outline his plans for capital and revenue expenditure at (a) Stranmillis University; and (b) St Mary's University College for the next five years; and to make a statement. (AQW 932/01)

Dr Farren: Under Spending Review 2000, allocations were made to Departments to cover the three financial years 2001-02 to 2003-04. I have already confirmed the allocations for the 2001-02 academic year in answer to AQW 931/01. Allocations, for the 2002-2004 government financial years, which may be subject to change are:

	Recurrent £	Capital £
2002-03	8.351m	348,000
2003-04	8.560m	88,000

These allocations cover both colleges and relate to government financial years rather than academic years. The 2002-03 capital figure includes £260,000, in respect of disability works, which has been apportioned equally between the two colleges: otherwise no apportionment of moneys has taken place.

Student Employment Rights

Mr Carrick asked the Minister for Employment and Learning to outline (a) how he is supporting the employment rights of students in the casual labour market; and (b) the impact that increased levels of student part-time work is having on the quality of tertiary education provision. (AQW 937/01)

Dr Farren:

- Casual workers enjoy protection from unlawful discrimination on the grounds of sex, race and fair employment legislation, and are covered by the provisions of the Part-time Workers (Prevention of Less Favourable Treatment) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2000 and the Working Time Regulations (Northern Ireland) 1998.
- Recent research suggests that having a part-time job, per se, does not have an adverse effect upon the ability of students to perform well. However it is suggested that working long hours – more than 15 per week – will be detrimental. The revised £65 million student support package that I recently announced provides significant support, which will help to tackle the issue of debt aversion, which in turn can impel some people to work longer part-time hours.

New Deal

Mr Gibson asked the Minister for Employment and Learning to detail the number of people who have gained employment through New Deal since May 1997. (AQW 938/01)

Dr Farren: Between May 1997 and August 2001 a total of 21,103 people have gained employment through New Deal for 18-24 and New deal for 25+ in Northern Ireland. Some of these people will have participated in New Deal more than once; this figure will therefore not correlate with published statistics which relate to participants. In order to ensure that there is clarity about the definitions used for New Deal statistics I have attached a glossary of terms for future reference.

Glossary Of Terms Used For New Deal Statistical Purposes

A participant is defined for statistical purposes as an individual on a single episode on New Deal. This is the preferred way of counting individuals on New Deal. This is because one person may have more than one episode and so to count outcomes it is necessary to count each episode separately. For example, if an individual has been on two episodes of New Deal and gained employment as a result of only one, it is a more accurate reflection of the programme to record this as two participants of whom one has found work.

The start of a New Deal episode is defined as when an individual has either joined New Deal for the first time or rejoined after a gap of at least 13 weeks since the end of their last New Deal activity.

The end of an episode of New Deal is counted as when an individual has left a New Deal activity and not entered another New Deal activity within 13 weeks.

Where an individual rejoins New Deal after a gap of less than 13 weeks they are considered to have rejoined the previous episode.

Moves into employment from New Deal are defined as either when a participant finishes an episode of New Deal and finds work within 13 weeks of leaving the programme or is currently on, or has been on, subsidised employment. Only one case of employment is counted for any New Deal episode.

Post - New Deal employment is defined as where an individual finds employment within 13 weeks of leaving an episode of New Deal.

Work is considered to have been sustained where a participant finds post - New Deal employment within 13 weeks and sustains it for a minimum of 13 weeks.

Where an individual has had more than one spell of employment following a New Deal episode only the latest one up to the 13 week point will be counted. (i.e. no participant can have more than one "found work" attached to a New Deal episode).

Skills Shortages

Mr K Robinson asked the Minister for Employment and Learning what action will be taken to reduce skills deficiencies. (AQW 945/01)

Dr Farren: The Northern Ireland Skills Task Force, a body established to advise Government on local skills shortages, published a summary report in October which contains a wide range of recommendations to tackle skills deficiencies at all levels. My Department will consider these recommendations when developing and implementing future policies and strategies. The Task Force has already completed a range of research work and based on that a number of initiatives have been taken including targeting increases in Higher and Further Education places on areas of skills needs, including skills conversions programmes, working with employers on the Bridge to Employment Programme, increasing Modern Apprenticeships and focusing mainstream provision such as Jobskills on specific skill areas.

Mr K Robinson asked the Minister for Employment and Learning to detail (a) those sectors that are experiencing a skills shortage; and (b) his plans to address this situation. (AQW 969/01)

Dr Farren: It would not be possible to simultaneously carry out detailed research on skills needs for all sectors of the economy. My Department has therefore commissioned research into the priority skills areas identified by the Northern Ireland Skills Task Force as having potential for growth and for strengthening the economy. These are Electronics, ICT, Engineering, Tourism & Hospitality and Construction. Education and training resources are being targeted towards these

areas, as well as addressing cross-sectoral areas of concern, such as literacy and numeracy skills.

Skills Development and Training

Mr K Robinson asked the Minister for Employment and Learning what research he has undertaken to ascertain if skills development and training in the Higher and Further Education sectors are adequate in addressing the basic needs provision of businesses. (AQW 970/01)

Dr Farren: Research commissioned by the Northern Ireland Skills Task Force has allowed my Department to target additional funding and places for Further and Higher Education in the priority skills areas. Details of the Department's research are contained in the most recent Labour Market Bulletin, which I have made available to Assembly Members. My Department has also encouraged educational establishments to ensure their programmes match current business needs by involving employers in the design, recognition and review of qualifications and in the delivery of work-place learning elements of their courses.

Inward Investment

Mr K Robinson asked the Minister for Employment and Learning to ensure that incoming foreign direct investment will be attracted to Northern Ireland by putting in place innovative education and training programmes that are above the likely demands of existing employers. (AQW 975/01)

Dr Farren: The quality of the Northern Ireland labour pool has traditionally been one of the major factors in attracting inward investment. My Department will continue to ensure that the Northern Ireland economy has the skills required to sustain and grow local industry. The Department works closely with the Industrial Development Board and others to ensure relevant high-quality education and training provision, and, where specific skill needs are identified, ensures that appropriate initiatives are put in place.

ENTERPRISE, TRADE AND INVESTMENT

Enterprise Park (Comber)

Mr Shannon asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment what plans he has to provide an Enterprise Park for Comber. (AQW 872/01)

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment (Sir Reg Empey): The Department does not have plans to create a specific Enterprise Park in Comber although locally we work with our partners,

such as Ards Business Centre to review the economic needs of the area.

Ards Business Centre forms part of a network of 31 Enterprise Agencies throughout Northern Ireland, providing workspace and ongoing support to start-up companies. This service covers the Comber area.

In addition, I understand that a recent private sector application seeking planning approval to develop a light industrial park in the town has been supported by IDB.

My Department recognises that the lack of adequate suitable premises can sometimes be an obstacle to both the start-up of new business and the expansion of existing businesses and wish to help overcome this. A number of schemes are currently administered through LEDU to help provide physical workspace for businesses. For example the Property Developers Scheme provides financial encouragement to private developers to provide buildings, and I understand LEDU is currently in discussion with a number of interested parties in the area.

In situations where the private sector does not meet needs, Community Economic Development Organisations can receive assistance through the Ulster Community Investment Trust. UCIT has received substantial funding from LEDU, DETI, DSD and IFI to help groups provide buildings.

IDB is continuing to work with DOE Planning Service to ensure adequate industrial land provision for the Ards Borough in the forthcoming draft Ards/Down Area Plan 2015. Publication of the draft plan is expected early 2002. It is understood that a 6.2 acre site at Ballygowan Road, Comber, zoned under the current area plan, still remains undeveloped.

New Businesses: South Antrim Constituency

Mr Clyde asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to detail the number of new businesses that have been encouraged to locate in the South Antrim constituency; and to make a statement. (AQW 889/01)

Sir Reg Empey: In the past three years LEDU has assisted 151 business start-ups in the South Antrim constituency.

Over the same period IDB client companies in the constituency have brought forward projects involving investments of £97.6 million (towards which IDB offered Selective Financial Assistance of £11.1 million), 552 new jobs and the safeguarding of a further 374 jobs. There have also been 132 new and repeat visits by potential investors to the South Antrim constituency during this time. In addition, Field Boxmore relocated its Belfast operation to a state-of-the-art facility at Mallusk where it currently employs almost 200 people.

IDB and LEDU maintain contact with Newtownabbey and Antrim Borough Councils to understand their priorities for economic development and to work with the CORE group of councils, of which they are part, to market the region to potential investors.

Tourism: Coleraine Area

Mr McClarty asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment what progress has been made to attract new international investment to Coleraine and its hinterland in terms of the hospitality and tourism sectors. (AQW 898/01)

Sir Reg Empey: Creating a positive profile for an area is the first stage in stimulating developers' interest. When projects come forward, the Northern Ireland Tourist Board (NITB) will work with developers to provide advice, information and, if appropriate, financial support.

For assistance with capital product development, the NITB, under the 1992 Tourism (NI) Order, operates a Selective Financial Assistance Scheme, known as the Tourism Development Scheme (TDS). Annually, some £4.714 million is available.

In relation to Coleraine Borough Council, the NITB provided advice and £20,000 to produce a 2001-10 development strategy for tourism in the area. To deliver the strategy, a small tourism task force has been established and the NITB is represented on it by Gareth Kirk, Director of Investment.

Since 1988, 86 projects located in the Coleraine Borough Council area have been offered £7.3 million grant for capital development, including support to attract a hotel in Portrush with an international marketing brand (Comfort Hotel). At present, a further 16 applications for financial support of approximately £2.5 million are under consideration.

Unemployment Rate: South Antrim

Mr Dalton asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to detail, by electoral ward, the unemployment rate for the parliamentary constituency of South Antrim. (AQW 927/01)

Sir Reg Empey: Up-to-date unemployment statistics at ward level are only available from the claimant count. However, whilst the number of unemployed claimants at ward level may be obtained, unemployment rates at ward level are not available.

Details of the number of claimant count unemployed for each ward in South Antrim parliamentary constituency Area can be found in Table 1 overleaf. Also provided (Table 2) is an unemployment rate for south Antrim parliamentary constituency area as a whole compared to Northern Ireland.

TABLE 1: NUMBER OF CLAIMANT COUNT UNEMPLOYED IN SOUTH ANTRIM PARLIAMENTARY CONSTITUENCY AREA BY ELECTORAL WARD AT NOVEMBER 2001.

District Council	Ward	Male	Female	Total
Antrim	Toome	27	9	36
Antrim	Drumanaway	17	5	22
Antrim	Cranfield	23	13	36
Antrim	Randalstown	26	12	38
Antrim	Tardree	9	7	16
Antrim	Templepatrick	14	7	21
Antrim	Rathenraw	22	4	26
Antrim	Springfarm	36	17	53
Antrim	Massereene	32	10	42
Antrim	Balloo	16	7	23
Antrim	Fountain Hill	40	11	51
Antrim	Steeple	26	10	36
Antrim	Stiles	25	11	36
Antrim	Greystone	39	18	57
Antrim	NewPark	16	7	23
Antrim	Ballycraigy	29	10	39
Antrim	Clady	21	17	38
Antrim	Aldergrove	18	6	24
Antrim	Crumlin	44	18	62
Newtownabbey	Mallusk	35	14	49
Newtownabbey	Doagh	31	12	43
Newtownabbey	Ballyclare North	71	15	86
Newtownabbey	Ballyclare South	35	10	45
Newtownabbey	Ballynure	35	9	44
Newtownabbey	Hawthorne	36	10	46
Newtownabbey	Ballyduff	31	11	42
Newtownabbey	Carnmoney	40	17	57
Newtownabbey	Mossley	46	8	54
Newtownabbey	Burnthill	14	4	18
Newtownabbey	Ballyhenry	17	11	28
Newtownabbey	Glengormley	30	13	43
Newtownabbey	Glebe	25	3	28
Newtownabbey	Hightown	27	13	40
Newtownabbey	Collinbridge	26	14	40
Total	South Antrim PCA	979	363	1,342

Tourism Ireland: Marketing Strategy

Mr McClarty asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment what progress has been made by Tourism Ireland to produce a marketing strategy for Northern Ireland for 2002. (AQW 946/01)

Sir Reg Empey: The Northern Ireland Tourist Board is currently working with Tourism Ireland Ltd

(TIL) to finalise those elements of TIL's international marketing programme which will deliver business for Northern Ireland in 2002. It will be Tourism Ireland's function from January 2002 to undertake the marketing of the island of Ireland in international markets while overall responsibility for the success of Northern Ireland tourism, and the role of securing business for Northern Ireland and its product providers, will continue to reside with the Northern Ireland Tourist Board.

Tourism Ireland launched an outline marketing strategy and 2002 operations programme to tourism and travel industry representatives in Belfast, Dublin and London during the first two weeks of November. Consultation has also been ongoing between TIL and the new all-island Tourism Marketing Partnership which comprises representatives of the tourism industry from Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland on an equal basis.

Tourism: Contribution to GDP

Mr McClarty asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment what assessment he has made in relation to the contribution of tourism to Northern Ireland's GDP in (i) 2000-01; (ii) 2001-02; and to make a statement. (AQW 947/01)

Sir Reg Empey: Estimates of tourism's contribution to Northern Ireland's GDP in 2000-01 and 2001-02 are unavailable, as the required data for such estimation is as yet incomplete. In 1999, visitor and domestic tourism in Northern Ireland was estimated to have contributed 1.9% of total Northern Ireland GDP, an initial assessment would suggest a similar figure for 2000-01.

THE ENVIRONMENT

Emissions from Sellafield

Mr Shannon asked the Minister of the Environment to detail (a) the body responsible for monitoring the emissions from BNFL, Sellafield, (b) are their findings made public and (c) who is responsible for setting the emission standards. (AQW 836/01)

The Minister of the Environment (Mr Foster): Emissions from British Nuclear Fuels Ltd (BNFL), Sellafield are monitored by the Environment Agency in England and Wales and by the Food Standards Agency. In addition, it is a condition of the Certificates of Authorisation issued by the Environment Agency that BNFL also monitor its emissions to the environment to demonstrate compliance with the limits placed on the company.

The results are published in the following annual reports:

- 'Radioactivity in Food and the Environment', published by the Food Standards Agency and the Scottish Environment Protection Agency;
- 'Radioactivity in the Environment', published by the Environment Agency; and
- 'Environmental Health and Safety Report', published by BNFL.

The emission standards are set by the Environment Agency and these are designed to ensure that internationally recommended dose limits to members of the public are not exceeded. In addition, the Environment and Heritage Service, the Scottish Environment Protection Agency and the Radiological Protection Institute of Ireland assess the impact of discharges from Sellafield on their local coastal environments. These organisations also publish their results.

Badger Clearance Zone

Mrs I Robinson asked the Minister of the Environment to outline how the approved planning application X/2000/0266/RO can proceed when no work can be carried out due to a "badger clearance zone".

(AQW 866/01)

Mr Foster: There is no area on the approved plans for application X/2000/0226/RO described as a "badger clearance zone" or within which no development can be carried out. The plans do indicate an area at the access to the site, where the entrances to the badger sett are located, where no dwellings can be constructed. The planning approval, which was granted on appeal by the Planning Appeals Commission on 16 November 2001, provides for access to the proposed housing site across a portion of this area. The access road is specially designed to avoid damage to the existing badger sett and its underground tunnels, and to allow normal badger activity. In addition, the developer has agreed not to carry out any work within 25 metres of the entrance to each badger tunnel.

The housing development can therefore proceed subject to the protection of the badger sett. The method of this protection will be agreed between my Department's Environment and Heritage Service and the developer. The agreed measures will be implemented outside the period 1 December 2001 to 30 June 2002, in order to protect the badgers during the breeding season. A similar arrangement will apply in succeeding years while construction work is in progress on the site.

Mrs I Robinson asked the Minister of the Environment to detail the size and dimensions of the "badger clearance zone" in respect of planning application X/2000/0266/RO for the construction of 39 dwellings

at 41 Main Road, Cloughey and lands to the rear of 33-35 Main Road Cloughey. (AQW 867/01)

Mr Foster: There is no area on the approved plans for application X/2000/0226/RO described as a "badger clearance zone" or within which no development can be carried out. The plans do indicate an area at the access to the site, where the entrances to the badger sett are located, where no dwellings can be constructed. The planning approval, which was granted on appeal by the Planning Appeals Commission on 16 November 2001, provides for access to the proposed housing site across a portion of this area. The access road is specially designed to avoid damage to the existing badger sett and its underground tunnels, and to allow normal badger activity. In addition, the developer has agreed not to carry out any work within 25 metres of the entrance to each badger tunnel.

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Housing Development on Brownfield Sites

Mr Gibson asked the Minister of the Environment to detail (a) the proportion of new housing being constructed on brownfield sites; and (b) any plans to increase this amount. (AQW 882/01)

Mr Foster: My Department undertakes an annual monitor of housing land availability in cities and towns throughout Northern Ireland. To date this has focused largely on the monitoring of lands zoned for housing in development plans, which under the prevailing approach to meeting housing need, have largely been on green fields. The Housing Land Availability Study has not, to date, differentiated between development on brownfield and greenfield sites. Therefore, it is not possible to provide the information requested at (a).

However, you may be aware that the recently published Regional Development Strategy, which is the responsibility of the Department for Regional Development, has set a regional target of 60% of new urban housing to be constructed within the existing urban footprint. Specific sites will be identified through the preparation of development plans. Clearly, however, the potential for "brownfield" development will vary according to the circumstances of each location.

The emphasis on "brownfield" development is a major change in providing for future housing growth.

My Department is now putting a system in place to monitor progress towards the regional target. It will involve extending the scope of the annual Housing Monitor currently undertaken by the Planning Service.

CCTV

Mr Gibson asked the Minister of the Environment to detail the number of applications for CCTV funding that have been rejected in the last two years.

(AQW 884/01)

Mr Foster: In June 1999, the former Police Authority for Northern Ireland took the lead in promoting and administering a scheme called the “Town Centre CCTV Competition Challenge”. District councils were encouraged to submit business cases, outlining how CCTV might benefit their area and compete for funding. The Department of the Environment had no direct involvement in the scheme and, therefore, has no details of applications.

Reform of Planning Process

Mr Gibson asked the Minister of the Environment what progress he is making to reform the planning system; and to make a statement. (AQW 885/01)

Mr Foster: My Department keeps the planning process under ongoing review. On 1 November 2001, the Planning Service announced a number of new measures aimed at enhancing transparency, including accessibility, for the benefit of all interested parties, including applicants, third party interests and the general public.

The key new measures include:

- letting people know the reasons for a planning decision;
- making representations on planning applications, including objections, openly available;
- making available details of consultation with District Councils;
- enhanced access to the planning application file;
- new measures to highlight disputed facts; and
- letting people know about the planning procedure.

These new measures will significantly enhance the customer focus of the Planning Service, and meet a commitment given under the Programme for Government.

This will complement a further Programme for Government commitment to review the operational planning system. My Department proposes to publish a discussion paper during January 2002, which will put forward proposals and invite views on the Planning Service’s three business areas, namely, development control; development plans; and policy. The consultation process will be inclusive and wide ranging, seeking views from all interested parties on the planning system.

In addition, a number of measures are proposed in a Planning (Amendment) Bill, which I hope to introduce to the Assembly before the Summer recess in 2002, aimed at strengthening my Department’s existing enforcement powers, and giving primacy to development plans in deciding planning applications. The opportunity is also being taken to introduce other provisions to strengthen and improve the planning system in Northern Ireland.

Expenditure on Sport and Leisure: Relevant Penny Rate

Mr Hussey asked the Minister of the Environment, pursuant to AQW 649/01, to detail the spend on sport and leisure facilities in terms of the relevant penny rate for each district council from 1998 to date.

(AQW 902/01)

Mr Foster: Expenditure on sport and leisure facilities, in terms of the relevant penny rate for each district council, during the period 1998-99 to 2000-01, is set out in the table below.

District	1998/1999	1999/2000	2000/2001*
Antrim	18.78	23.62	24.93
Ards	11.32	19.21	22.21
Armagh	10.87	17.07	21.73
Ballymena	12.33	*18.07	19.38
Ballymoney	26.89	35.18	33.95
Banbridge	16.53	16.78	20.34
Belfast	19.54	21.43	23.89
Carrickfergus	11.47	20.62	20.24
Castlereagh	21.49	33.03	31.02
Coleraine	8.09	10.41	11.43
Cookstown	17.09	30.64	36.47
Craigavon	22.82	27.01	27.16
Derry	15.77	20.54	22.54
Down	14.54	23.81	22.89
Dungannon	11.90	20.32	21.61
Fermanagh	11.05	19.72	18.92
Larne	11.63	20.88	20.73
Limavady	17.76	38.87	40.44
Lisburn	17.94	26.10	26.41
Magherafelt	23.63	31.12	32.56
Moyle	7.02	18.30	18.56
Newry & Mourne	14.87	22.50	20.71
Newtownabbey	28.61	*41.59	40.91
North Down	5.07	12.23	14.97
Omagh	16.59	23.37	24.01
Strabane	24.84	23.85	23.13

* Expenditure figures, on which these data have been calculated, have not yet been certified by Local Government Audit Office.

General Exchequer Grant

Mr Hilditch asked the Minister of the Environment to outline (a) how the £2 million cut in the General Exchequer Grant from the local district councils meets the equality agenda; (b) will this cut be for one year only; and to make a statement. (AQW 903/01)

Mr Foster: Following consultation on the draft budget for 2002-03, the Executive reconsidered their original proposal to reduce the resources element of the General Exchequer Grant by £2 million. The revised Budget announced on 3 December 2001 restored the indicative allocation of £19.5 million. The Budget was approved by the Northern Ireland Assembly on 11 December 2001.

Safety at Sellafield

Mr McLaughlin asked the Minister of the Environment if he has made any representations to HM Government in relation to public concern about safety at Sellafield; and to make a statement. (AQW 910/01)

Mr Foster: As you are aware, my Department has no jurisdiction over the operation of the Sellafield plant. The decision to approve the MOX plant was taken jointly by the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs and the Secretary of State for Health.

However, I acknowledge the concerns that have been expressed about a range of potential safety risks from the operation of the MOX plant. As I said in last week's Assembly debate, my officials had written to their counterparts in the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (DEFRA) to seek confirmation that all relevant risks were fully taken into account in the MOX decision. DEFRA's reply pointed to those parts of the decision document which dealt with the safety, security, environmental and health issues, and in particular to the advice from the Office for Civil Nuclear Security.

I have since written to Margaret Beckett, Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, copied to Patricia Hewitt at the Department of Trade and Industry. My purpose was to seek further information and assurance about the regulation of Sellafield and, in particular, about the security arrangements following the events of 11 September. I await their response.

I shall also ensure that the Northern Ireland considerations are fully taken into account when the Environment Sector of the British-Irish Council comes to discuss the paper on Sellafield being prepared jointly by the Irish and Manx Governments.

My objective is to be fully satisfied that Northern Ireland's interests are sufficiently protected. To that end, I will convey to the Assembly as much of the

information obtained in these exchanges as the constraints of national security will allow.

Disposal of Fridges and Freezers

Mrs I Robinson asked the Minister of the Environment to detail (a) the current cost per unit that local district councils incur through the disposal of fridges and freezers; and (b) the future cost per unit after 1 January 2002. (AQW 928/01)

Mr Foster: The information sought at (a) is not held centrally by my Department.

In relation to (b), in line with the requirements of EC Regulation 2037/2000, after 1 January 2002 district councils will be unable to dispose of fridges and freezers until equipment employing fridge destruction technology which satisfies the Regulation is available. At this stage the cost of disposal is unknown.

My officials are urgently examining this matter, in liaison with their counterparts in the UK Government, in order to establish standards for both interim storage and subsequent disposal of waste refrigeration equipment.

My officials will also shortly be meeting representatives from local councils to discuss the issues surrounding fridge destruction and to consult on the production of guidance documentation. This will in turn inform consideration of the cost of disposal.

Mrs I Robinson asked the Minister of the Environment to detail (a) the number of fridges and freezers which are disposed through local district councils each year; and (b) the breakdown of this figure in district council areas. (AQW 929/01)

Mr Foster: The information sought at (a) and (b) is not held centrally by my Department.

However, my officials are urgently examining issues surrounding the disposal of waste refrigeration equipment. This will include seeking to estimate the numbers of units involved.

In undertaking this work officials are liaising closely with their counterparts in the UK Government. They will also shortly be meeting representatives from local councils to consult on the production of guidance documentation. This will provide an opportunity to review estimates of the numbers of fridges and freezers involved.

Mrs I Robinson asked the Minister of the Environment to detail (a) the relevant European legislation which pertains to the disposal of fridges and freezers after 1 January 2002; and (b) what assistance he will give local district councils to store these fridges and freezers until they are safely disposed of. (AQW 930/01)

Mr Foster: The relevant legislation is EC Regulation 2037/2000, which provides for new controls on ozone depleting substances.

Article 16 of the Regulation provides that with effect from 1 January 2002 the recovery, recycling and reclamation and destruction of such substances may be undertaken using only approved technologies.

This will have significant implications for district councils, particularly their current practice in relation to the collection and disposal of domestic fridges and freezers. At present there are no facilities in the United Kingdom capable of removing such substances from the insulating foam of fridges and freezers. This means that district councils may be required to store such items for an indefinite period prior to disposal.

Two councils have already written to my Department about the financial implications arising from the introduction of the new controls. My officials are looking urgently at the matter to gauge the extent of additional costs. Thereafter I shall wish to consider what action might be appropriate. At the moment there are no specific resources earmarked for this purpose.

Listed Buildings

Mr M Robinson asked the Minister of the Environment how many listed buildings were demolished in each of the last three years. (AQW 944/01)

Mr Foster: One listed building was demolished in 1999, one in 2000 and three, to date, in 2001.

There was also partial demolition in 2001 of a building within the curtilage of a listed building.

In two of these cases prosecutions have successfully been taken. In one case Listed Building Consent was retrospectively issued for demolition. Enforcement action is being pursued in the three remaining cases.

Sustainable Development Strategy

Mr McClarty asked the Minister of the Environment, in relation to the Programme for Government, to detail (a) his plans to implement a Sustainable Development Strategy; (b) when the consultation process will begin; (c) the proposed date for the implementation; and (d) who has been appointed to oversee the consultation process. (AQW 998/01)

Mr Foster:

- (a) The Programme for Government 2001-04 indicated that my Department planned to publish proposals for a Northern Ireland Sustainable Development Strategy in June 2001. A combination of delays in the recruitment of staff and other workload pressures, mainly mandatory EU compliance work, meant

that it was not possible to meet that target date. However, a draft consultation paper has now been prepared, and I plan to seek Executive Committee agreement shortly.

- (b) Subject to Executive Committee agreement, I intend that the consultation process should begin early in the new year.
- (c) The Programme for Government 2002-05 sets a target date for publishing a final Northern Ireland Sustainable Development Strategy of October 2002. This is a challenging target, the achievement of which will depend to a degree on the outcome of the consultation process.
- (d) My Department will oversee the consultation process. However, the Sustainable Northern Ireland Programme, an organisation part funded by the voluntary and local government sectors and my Department, has been asked to organise a number of seminars across Northern Ireland as part of the consultation. These are intended to provide an opportunity for a more participative approach to gathering views and comments. The outcome of these seminars will be fed into the consultation process.

Listed Buildings

Mr McClarty asked the Minister of the Environment to detail, for each of the last three years within East Londonderry, (a) the current location of listed buildings; (b) the number of buildings which have been given the designation of "listed"; and (c) the number of listed buildings which have been demolished.

(AQW 1000/01)

Mr Foster: There are currently 453 listed buildings in the East Londonderry constituency. The precise location of each of these listed buildings can be obtained through my Department's Monuments and Buildings Record at the Environment and Heritage Service, 5-33 Hill Street, Belfast.

Two listed buildings in the area have been demolished within the last three years, one in 1999 and one in 2001. My Department's Planning Service is currently pursuing enforcement action in both cases.

Learner Drivers: Literacy Problems

Mr Dallat asked the Minister of the Environment to outline what arrangements are in place to assist learner drivers sitting the theory test who have literacy problems.

(AQO 531/01)

Mr Foster: Candidates who have difficulties with reading, learning or literacy are allowed up to twice the standard 40-minute time for the test.

The system also provides an audio version of each test that candidates can use if they wish.

By touching the appropriate area on the computer screen, the text is read to them automatically through headphones.

It is accepted that people with reading, learning or literacy problems may need to take longer to prepare for the test, and may need special support and assistance from those with expertise in the field. Appropriate training resources are widely available from commercial providers.

Planning Process

Mrs Courtney asked the Minister of the Environment what regard local planners have for the concerns of residents when considering development proposals. (AQO 527/01)

Mr Foster: My Department recognises that individuals and groups have important contributions to make to the planning process, and aims to facilitate this by publicising planning applications through advertising and neighbour notification, and inviting representations.

The consideration process also includes consultation with local councils, who may request site meetings which objectors can be invited to attend.

All representations which raise relevant planning matters are given very careful consideration by my Department in determining planning applications. Additional measures were introduced on 19 November 2001 to improve accessibility to the planning process. These include: enhanced access to the planning application file; the public availability of all representations including objections and consultation responses; provision of additional information on disputed facts; public availability of council planning application schedules; additional information on applications deferred by council; and the provision of reasons relating to planning application decision notices. These measures will help make the planning application process more easily accessible to all interested parties, including objectors. However, local opposition to a development proposal is not in itself sufficient reason for refusing planning permission. To make proper and lawful decisions, my Department must also take into account prevailing planning policies, including development plans and planning policy statements. Planning Policy Statement 1 provides guidance on this matter and advises that other material planning considerations, including size, layout, siting and design, and the proposed means of access, together with landscaping, impact on the neighbourhood and the availability of infrastructure must also be taken into account.

In addition, in cases where the special procedure laid down in article 31 of the Planning (Northern Ireland) Order 1991 is applied, a public inquiry may be called.

EU Directive: End-of-Life Vehicles

Mr Shannon asked the Minister of the Environment what discussions have taken place with reference to the EU Directive (2000/53/EC) on end-of life vehicles. (AQO 494/01)

Mr Foster: The ELV Directive, which came into force on 21 October 2000, aims to reduce the amount of waste from end-of-life vehicles. It sets a deadline of 21 April 2002 for the requirements of the Directive to be transposed into national legislation.

A UK consultation document seeking comments on three implementation options for the End of Life Vehicles(ELV) Directive was issued in August 2001. Over 150 individuals and organisations in Northern Ireland were included in the consultation.

Three of those consulted in Northern Ireland responded to this consultation process. In light of the responses to the consultation paper, discussions are continuing within Whitehall, led by the Department of Trade and Industry, to determine the best legislative and implementation options for the UK as a whole. My officials have been and will continue to be involved in those discussions.

Species Action Plans for the Irish Hare, Chough and Curlew

Mr Ford asked the Minister of the Environment what discussions his officials have had with the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development on implementing Species Action Plans for the Irish Hare, Chough and Curlew. (AQO 516/01)

Mr Foster: The Species Action Plans for the Irish Hare, Chough and Curlew were published in October 2000 by the Environment and Heritage Service of my Department. Most discussions between my Department and the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development on implementing the action plans take place in the context of meetings of the steering groups set up to oversee them. The steering groups comprise the relevant voluntary bodies and officials from the two Departments. A lead partner from each steering group convenes the meetings. The lead partner for Chough and Curlew is the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds. The lead partner for the Irish Hare is the Ulster Wildlife Trust.

The two lead partners have convened several steering group meetings to discuss work programmes for each action plan. Examples of work involving the two Departments include a large-scale study of the effects of predation on breeding Curlew, monitoring of the habitats used by Irish Hares and land management for Chough.

FINANCE AND PERSONNEL

Introduction of the Euro

Ms Lewsley asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel whether he will give any guidance on the introduction of the euro in January 2002. (AQW 923/01)

The Minister of Finance and Personnel (Mr Durkan): The main impact of the introduction of the euro in January 2002 will be its effect on businesses which will deal with the euro currency. The NI Euro Preparations Forum, led by local business and financed and co-ordinated by the Minister of enterprise, trade and investment, has been engaged in an extensive marketing and euro awareness campaign. This campaign will continue to be implemented over the next few weeks and into the early months of 2002. These activities include the issue of information leaflets, the organization of euro seminars and press and media interviews.

Northern Ireland is likely to see higher levels of euro cash use than most other parts of the UK. But there are no indications that levels of euro use will be any higher than levels of Irish pound use. Sterling and Irish pounds have also been used interchangeably in many border areas, and businesses that operate there tend to hold accounts in both currencies. Traders will simply have their Irish pound accounts converted into euro accounts.

We are satisfied that the publicity arrangements we have made in advance of the effective date will ensure that business and their customers are well informed and aware of the issues which may affect them.

Gap Funding

Dr Birnie asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel, pursuant to AQW 570/01, what is his assessment of

the equity of exclusion for those groups who did not initially apply for Gap Funding and who are now subsequently excluded. (AQW 926/01)

Mr Durkan: To ensure an early flow of funding from the new PEACE II Programme to groups on the ground, Departments were authorised by the Executive to make advance payments to projects which were judged very likely to be eligible under the new Programme. These arrangements were extended for those projects already in receipt of Gap Funding. The Gap Funding arrangements announced in February were available for all existing PEACE I projects and all groups were afforded equal access to this initial round of funding. All applications under the new PEACE II Programme will be open to any project/group whether in receipt of Gap Funding or not, and all projects in receipt of Gap Funding will be required to make a full application under the Programme. There is no guarantee that any project which has been successful in a Gap Funding application will also be successful in a full application under either of the new Operational Programmes.

Outturn Analysis: Northern Ireland Departments

Mr Close asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel to detail (a) the underspend by (i) Departments; (ii) their agencies; and (iii) Non-Departmental Public Bodies in the year 2000-01; and (b) the underspend as a percentage of their total allocation. (AQW 936/01)

Mr Durkan: The outturn information requested is set out in the table below. The figure work is based on Departmental Expenditure Limits (DEL) for each Department as this is the main control for managing

Assigned DEL	Department		Of Which Agencies		Of Which NDPBs	
	Underspend(-)	% of Total DEL	Underspend(-)	% of Allocated DEL	Underspend(-)	% of Allocated DEL
DARD	-4.3	-2.3				
DCAL	-1.7	-2.4	0.2	3.5	0	0.2
DE	-14.8	-1.2			-3.1	-0.3
DEL	-15.6	-3.1	-10.7	-6.8	-0.8	-5.5
DETI	-5.6	-2.4	-2.6	-1.8	0.3	0.5
DFP	-7.6	-6.8	-2.3	-5.9		
DHSSPS	-21.0	-1.0	-0.1	-2.6	-1.1	-2.6
DOE	-2.5	-2.8	-1.9	-4.9		
DRD	-5.0	-1.2	-3.9	-1.1		
DSD	-10.1	-2.4	-1.5	-1.3		
OFMDFM	-1.4	-4.8				
Minor Depts	-0.3	-1.0				
TotalAssigned DEL	-89.9	-1.7				
Total Non Assigned DEL	-25.2	-25.4				
Total Dept DEL	-115.1	-2.1				

public expenditure. It has also been split between the Assigned DEL, where there is the discretion to reallocate to other areas, and the Non Assigned DEL, which covers “ring-fenced” expenditure which is not available for reallocation to other areas.

HEALTH, SOCIAL SERVICES AND PUBLIC SAFETY

Occupational Therapy Assessment: Priority Cases

Mr Beggs asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety, pursuant to AQW 495/01, to detail the actual time taken to commence an occupational therapy priority assessment in each health trust area. (AQW 691/01)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety (Ms de Brún): The time between referral and commencement of occupational therapy assessments for priority cases is dependent on the individual circumstances of each case. Key factors include: whether the person referred for assessment is already known to occupational therapists; clinical need; and the risk to the individual.

Braitheann an t-am idir atreorú agus tosú mheasúnuithe Teiripe Saothair ar chásanna tosaíochta ar thosca indibhidiúla gach cás. I measc na n-eochairfhachtóirí tá: cé acu atá a fhios ag teiripithe saothair cheana féin ar an duine atreoraithe le haghaidh measúnaithe nó nach bhfuil; riachtanas cliniciúil, agus an baol don duine aonair.

On-Site Haematologist: Altnagelvin Hospital

Mr Douglas asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to give her assessment of the level of consultant haematologist cover in Altnagelvin Hospital over the past six months, and to make a statement on the impact this has made on the provision of haematology service in the north-west for this period. (AQW 707/01)

Ms de Brún: I am aware of the difficulties caused by the current lack of an on-site haematologist at Altnagelvin hospital. However, I am advised that measures, involving support from Belfast haematologists, have been put in place to ensure that patients continue to receive the high standard of care to which they are entitled.

I have asked officials to continue to liaise with the boards and trusts to seek an effective and speedy resolution to the situation.

Tá na deacrachtaí arbh iad an easpa Haemaiteolaithe ar an láithreán faoi láthair in Otharlann Alt na

nGealbhan ba chúis leo ar eolas agam. Cuireadh in iúl dom, áfach, gur cuireadh bearta ar thacaigh Haemaiteolaithe Bhéal Feirste leo, cuireadh i bhfeidhm iad le cinntiú go bhfaighidh othair an caighdeán is airde den chúram ar a bhfuil siad i dteideal go fóill.

D'iarr mé ar m'oifigigh comhoibriú go fóill le Boird agus le hIontaobhais chun teacht ar réiteach éifeachtach agus gasta ar an cheist.

Foster Carers

Mr M Robinson asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what plans she has to address any shortage in foster carers. (AQW 857/01)

Ms de Brún: I have set a target in 'Priorities for Action' for Boards and Trusts to increase the number of foster care places by 40 by March 2002 and, to help secure these additional places, I have made available an extra £500,000. However, I am also aware of the difficulties in recruiting and retaining foster carers, and I therefore plan to meet the Foster Care Association next month to hear the carers' views on these issues and how they might be tackled.

Tá sprioc leagtha amach i ‘Tosaíochtaí le hAghaidh Gnímh’ do Bhoird agus d'Iontaobhais líon áiteanna cúram altramaí a mhéadú le 40 roimh Mhárta 2002, chuige seo, chuir mé £500,000 breise ar fáil. Tuigim, áfach, na deacrachtaí cúramóirí altramaí a earcú agus choinneáil agus mar sin de tá sé de rún agam bualadh le Cumann Cúraim Altramaí an mhí seo chugainn chun dearcadh an chúramóra a chluinstin ar na ceisteanna seo agus an dóigh ar féidir dul i ngleic leo.

TARGET Pilot Training Scheme

Mr Close asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety, pursuant to AQW 550/01, to outline (a) the expenditure incurred by the Board to date (b) the objectives of the training scheme and (c) the method of evaluation. (AQW 859/01)

Ms de Brún: The Northern Health and Social Services Board has incurred £70,000 to date implementing the Northern TARGET pilot training scheme. TARGET stands for Time for Audit, Review Guidelines, Education and Training. The objectives of the scheme are to provide comprehensive professional development and training programmes in protected time for primary care professionals to equip them to deliver better patient care. The scheme will be evaluated by monitoring feedback from the participants, by comparison of the effectiveness of the course against conventional education courses, and by quality assurance assessment against similar schemes elsewhere.

Chosain sé £70,000 go dtí seo do Bhord Thuaisceart Éireann agus do Bhord Seirbhís Sóisialta treoirscéim treanála TARGET an Tuaiscirt a chur i gcrích. Seasann TARGET do 'Time for Audit, Review Guidelines, Education and Training'. Is iad cuspóirí na scéime cláir forbartha ghairmúla chuimsitheacha a sholáthar in am cosanta do ghairmithe le cur ar a gcumas cúram othair níos fearr a sholáthar. Déanfar measúnú trí mhonatóireacht aiseolais ó rannpháirtithe, trí chomparáid éifeacht an chúrsa a dhéanamh le gnáthchúrsa oideachais, agus trí mheasúnú dearbhaithe cailiochtaí le scéimeanna cosúil leo in áiteanna eile.

Staff Morale

Mr K Robinson asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what steps she is taking to maintain a high level of staff morale in the local HSS Trusts. (AQW 875/01)

Ms de Brún: The staff of the HPSS are a vital resource and I am taking a number of steps to maintain a high level of staff morale.

My Department has recently worked in partnership with HPSS employers and staff organisations to develop proposals for a comprehensive Human Resources Strategy aimed at delivering a better and fairer workplace for staff. Comments on the consultative document, which was issued in August 2001, are currently under consideration by my officials. The emphasis on the proposals in the document is on positive actions to recruit and retain staff, to encourage former staff back into the service and to develop flexible and fair employment practices which will help staff to realise their full potential.

Proposals for modernising NHS pay were published in February 1999 as 'Agenda for Change – Modernising the NHS Pay System'. They represent a blueprint for a new pay system based on principles of efficiency, fairness, flexibility and partnership. This will give better career progression, less incrementalism and modern conditions of service. My Department is participating along with the Health Departments in England, Scotland and Wales in negotiations with staff organisations on the development of the new arrangements.

My Department also recognises that the threat of violence is a problem for staff, particularly those working in Accident and Emergency Departments and in the community. A number of documents aimed at assisting staff to deal with violence have been issued to HPSS employers. As part of the "Campaign to Stop Violence Against Staff Working in the NHS", the NHS Zero Tolerance Zone Resource Pack was commended to all employers. My Department is currently undertaking a review of the action taken by individual employers to implement the components of Zero Tolerance and is giving consideration to the issue of further guidance.

The health and well-being of staff is also important. To ensure that there is a healthy workforce HPSS employers provide an Occupational Health Service to staff in accordance with guidance issued by my Department. The Department is at present embarking on an extensive review of this service to determine its effectiveness and to examine possible arrangements for improvement.

Is acmhainn rithábhachtach iad foireann SSSP agus tá mé ag glacadh roinnt céimeanna le meanma na foirne a choinneáil go hard.

Ar na mallaibh bhí an Roinn s'agamsa ag obair i bpáirtíocht le fostaitheoirí agus le heagraíochtaí foirne SSSP le moltaí a fhorbairt do Straitéis chuimsitheach Acmhainní Daonna a bhfuil d'aidhm aici áit oibre níos fearr agus níos cothroime a chur ar fáil don fhoireann. Tá tuairimí ar an Doiciméad Comhairleach, a d'eisíodh i Lúnasa 2001, á machnamh ag m'oifigigh faoi láthair. Tá béim na moltaí sa doiciméad ar ghníomhaíochtaí deimhneacha le baill fhoirne a earcú agus a choinneáil, le hiarbhaill fhoirne a spreagadh ar ais sa tseirbhís agus le cleachtais fhostaíochta sholúbtha chothroime a fhorbairt a chuideoidh le baill fhoirne beart a dhéanamh de réir a gcumais.

Foilsíodh moltaí chun pá SNS a nuachóiriú i Feabhra 1999 mar "Clár Oibre don Athrú – ag Nuachóiriú Chóras Pá na SNS." Is é atá iontu ná bunphlean do chóras nua pá bunaithe ar phrionsabail na héifeachtachta, na cothromachta, na solúbthachta agus na páirtíochta. Tabharfaidh seo forchéimniú níos fearr, níos lú incriminteachta agus coinníollacha nua-aoiseacha seirbhíse. Tá an Roinn s'agamsa ag glacadh páirte maraon le Ranna i Sasana, in Albain agus sa Bhreatain Bheag in idirbheartaíochtaí le heagraíochtaí foirne ar na socruithe nua a fhorbairt.

Aithníonn mo Roinn chomh maith go bhfuil bagairt an fhoréigin ina fadhb do bhaill fhoirne, go háirithe iad siúd atá ag obair i Ranna Timpistí agus Éigeandálaí agus sa phobal. Eisíodh roinnt doiciméad d'fhostaitheoirí SSSP dírithe ar chuidiú a thabhairt don fhoireann déileáil le foréigean. Mar chuid de "Feachtas le Foréigean i gCoinne Foirne ag Obair sa SNS a Stopadh," moladh Pacáiste na SNS Caoinfhulaingt ar Bith do na fostaitheoirí go léir. Faoi láthair tá mo Roinn ag tabhairt faoi athbhreithniú ar an ghníomhaíocht atá á déanamh ag fostaitheoirí aonair chun comhpháirteanna Chaoinfhulaingt ar Bith a chur i bhfeidhm agus tá sí ag déanamh machnaimh ar cheist na treorach a théann níos faide.

Tá sláinte agus dea-bhail na foirne tábhachtach chomh maith. Le cinntiú go bhfuil meitheal shláintiúil oibre ann, cuireann fostaitheoirí SSSP Seirbhís Sláinte Gairme ar fáil don fhoireann de réir treoracha a d'eisigh mo Roinn. Faoi láthair tá an Roinn ag tosú ar athbhreithniú leathan ar an tseirbhís seo lena héifeachtacht

a chinntiú agus leis na socruithe a dtiocfadh leo í a fheabhsú a fhiosrú.

Community Care: Direct Payments

Mr Hilditch asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail (a) the number of requests for community care direct payments; (b) the number which have been successful; (c) what appeal procedure is available; and (d) what budget provision has been made. (AQW 891/01)

Ms de Brún: There have been 84 requests for direct payments and of these, 48 have been successful.

There is no formal appeal procedure but anyone who disagrees with a trust's decision may seek to have the decision reviewed under the Trust Complaints Procedure.

There is no specific budget allocation for direct payments. The costs fall to the overall provision for community care services with direct payments another way of providing the service and providing additional choice in how the service is delivered.

Bhí 84 iarratas ann le haghaidh íocaíochtaí díreacha agus díobh seo, d'éirigh le 48 iarratas.

Níl gnáthamh foirmiúil achomhairc ar bith ann ach is féidir le duine ar bith nach n-aontaíonn le cinneadh Iontaobhais iarraidh go ndéantar athbhreithniú ar an chinneadh de réir Ghnáthamh Gearán an Iontaobhais.

Níl dáileadh buiséid áirithe ar bith d'Íocaíochtaí Díreacha. Tá na costais mar chuid den sholáthar iomlán do sheirbhísí cúraim phobail mar gur dóigh eile iad íocaíochtaí díreacha leis an tseirbhís a chur ar fáil agus le rogha eile a thabhairt faoin dóigh a soláthraítear an tseirbhís.

Intercountry Adoptions

Mr Hilditch asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the procedure for foreign adoption applications including the estimated timescale to process an application. (AQW 894/01)

Ms de Brún: In order to safeguard the interests of the children involved in intercountry adoptions, the procedure is necessarily thorough. The main steps, which are common to most applications, are as follows:

- Prospective adopters are counselled and have their suitability assessed by their HSS trust.
- If approved, the application and supporting documents are sent to the appropriate authority in the foreign country. If the application is accepted, the prospective adopters are "matched" with a child.
- The child is adopted abroad and the adopters apply for "entry clearance" to bring the child into this country.

- An adoption order is applied for under our legislation.

Trusts aim to complete the first stage of the process within six months. However, "matching" and adoption in the foreign country can take from eight months to two years depending on the availability of suitable children and the legal process. Under our legislation, an adoption order cannot be made until the child has been living here for 12 months.

Chun sábháilteacht na bpáistí bainteach le huchtú idirtíre a chosaint, tá sé riachtanach go mbíonn an córas cuimsitheach. Seo mar a leanas na príomhchéimeanna, atá coitianta le cuid mhaith de na hiarratais:

- Cuirtear comhairle ar uchtathóirí ionchasacha agus déanann a nIontaobhas SSS measúnú ar a n-oiriúnacht
- Má cheadaítear é cuirtear na doiciméid agus an t-iarratas a thacaíonn leis ag an údarás cuí sa tír iasachta. Má ghlactar leis an iarratas, déantar 'meaitseáil' idir uchtathóirí ionchasacha agus páiste.
- Uchtaítear an páiste thar lear agus iarrann na huchtathóirí 'cead iontrála' chun an pháiste a thabhairt chun na tíre seo.
- Iarrtar ordú uchtaithe faoinár reachtaíocht.

Tá sé mar aidhm ag Iontaobhais an chéad chéim den phroiseas a chríochnú laistigh de 6 mí. Is féidir le meaitseáil agus uchtú idir 8 mí agus 2 bliain a ghlacadh sa tír iasachta ag brath ar infaighteacht páistí oiriúnachta agus an próisis dhleathaigh. Faoinár reachtaíocht, ní féidir ordú uchtaithe a dhéanamh go dtí go mbíonn an páiste ina chónaí anseo le 12 mí.

Child Protection: Improving Services

Mr M Robinson asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what steps are being taken to reduce the number of neglected and abused children and to improve services offered to those children. (AQW 909/01)

Ms de Brún: Child protection agencies have placed family support services high on the child protection agenda. Many agencies now recognise the importance of preventative strategies to balance and complement other intervention strategies and services for children.

There are many examples of family support initiatives in operation. For example, family centres play a crucial role in prevention. They target children and families who are in greatest need. The centres provide a range of services including assessment work, individual work, group work, crèche and playgroup activities. Particular themes include communication, language and play skills, active learning, self-reliance and self-esteem, self-protection and keep safe skills, bullying and problem solving skills. This work involves close collaboration with other professionals such as health visitors, community psychiatric nurses, speech and

language therapists and, on occasions, other professionals involved in working with children.

My Department has consistently promoted the need for parental support and the promotion of good parenting. This is demonstrated by the funding of a number of organisations, programmes and initiatives, including the Sure Start programme and the Parents Advice Centre, which provides a confidential advice and counselling service to parents. Alongside the four boards, my Department provides funds to Gingerbread, Homestart and Lifestart all of which provide support for parents.

Chuir gníomhaireachtaí chosaint an pháiste seirbhísí Tacaíochta Teaghlaigh go mór chun tosaigh ar chlár oibre chosaint an pháiste. Glacann cuid mhór gníomhaireachtaí le tábhacht straitéisí coisctheacha anois chun straitéisí agus seirbhísí eile idirghabhála do pháistí a chothromú agus le cur leo.

Tá cuid mhór eiseamláirí de scéimeanna tacaíochta teaghlaigh ann ag feidhmiú. Mar shampla, tá ról barrthábhachtach ag Ionaid Teaghlaigh i gcosc. Dírionn siad ar pháistí agus ar theaghlaigh is mó anás. Soláthraíonn na hIonaid réimse seirbhísí, obair mheasúnaithe, obair indibhidíúil, obair ghrúpa agus gníomhaíochtaí náiolainne san áireamh. I measc na dtéamaí ar leith tá scileanna cumarsáide, teanga agus súgartha mar aon le foghlaim ghníomhach, féinmhuinín agus féinmheas, scileanna féinchosanta agus sábháilteachta, agus bulaíocht agus scileanna réitigh. San obair seo tá comhoibriú dlúth le

gairmithe eile amhail Cuairteoirí Sláinte, Altraí Síciatracha Pobail agus Teiripithe Labhartha agus Teanga i gceist chomh maith le comhoibriú anois agus arís le gairmithe eile a oibríonn le páistí.

Chuir an Roinn s'agamsa an gá le tacaíocht do thuismitheoirí agus le tuismitheoirí maithe a chur chun cinn i gcónaí. Léirítear seo trí mhaoiniú roinnt eagrais, clár agus scéimeanna, an scéim Sure Start agus an tIonad Comhairle Tuismitheoirí, a thugann comhairle rúnda do thuismitheoirí agus a sholáthraíonn seirbhís chomhairle dóibh, san áireamh. Chomh maith leis na ceithre Bhord, tugann an Roinn s'agamsa maoinithe do na scéimeanna Gingerbread, Homestart agus Lifestart a dtugann tacaíocht do thuismitheoirí.

Care in the Community Programme

Mrs I Robinson asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail (a) the number of patients in each health trust who are registered for the Care in the Community Programme; and (b) the amount of finance allocated to each health trust, for the Care in the Community Programme, over the past year. (AQW 925/01)

Ms de Brún: The Care in the Community Programme does not apply here. However, information on the numbers of community care packages in care management in effect in each trust is detailed in the table below.

CARE PACKAGES IN EFFECT IN EACH TRUST BY PROGRAMME OF CARE, JUNE 2001

Trust	Elderly Care	Mental Health	Learning Disability	Physical & Sensory Disability	Adult Community	Total
North & West Belfast	1,331	58	228	117	7	1,741
South & East Belfast	1,568	117	143	128	4	1,960
Down Lisburn	1,193	60	155	181	0	1,589
Ulster Community & Hospitals	1,345	11	111	125	0	1,592
Causeway	1,202	63	80	136	43	1,524
Homefirst	1,977	173	234	135	62	2,581
Armagh & Dungannon	927	68	171	99	0	1,265
Craigavon & Banbridge	913	84	180	102	0	1,279
Newry & Mourne	616	83	87	137	0	923
Foyle	946	106	68	116	0	1,236
Sperrin Lakeland	799	235	69	67	0	1,170
Total	12,817	1,058	1,526	1,343	116	16,860

Community care services are funded from Boards' baseline resources.

Níl Clár Cúraim sa Phobal i bhfeidhm anseo. Tá eolas ar líon na bpacáistí cúraim pobail ar bhainistíocht chúraim atá i bhfeidhm i ngach Iontaobhas léirithe sa tábla thíos, áfach.

amounted to £8.3 million in 1998-99, £9.8 million in 1999-2000 and £10.1 million in 2000-01.

Is é an méid iomlán ioncaim a bailíodh i ngach

PACÁISTÍ CÚRAIM I BHFEIDHM I NGACH IONTAOBHAS DE RÉIR CLÁR CÚRAIM, MEITHEAMH 2001

Iontaobhas	Cúram Seandaoine	Sláinte Meabhrach	Míchumas Foghlama	Míchumas Fisiceach agu Céadfach	Pobal Aosach	Iomlán
Béal Feirste Thuaidh & Thiar	1,331	58	228	117	7	1,741
Béal Feirste Theas & Thoir	1,568	117	143	128	4	1,960
An Dún/Lios na gCearrbhach	1,193	60	155	181	0	1,589
Pobal Uladh & Otharlanna	1,345	11	111	125	0	1,592
An Clochán	1,202	63	80	136	43	1,524
Homefirst	1,977	173	234	135	62	2,581
Ard Mhacha & Dún Geanainn	927	68	171	99	0	1,265
Craigavon & Droichead na Banna	913	84	180	102	0	1,279
An tÍúr & Mhúrn	616	83	87	137	0	923
An Feabhal	946	106	68	116	0	1,236
Speirín Tír na Lochanna	799	235	69	67	0	1,170
Iomlán	12,817	1,058	1,526	1,343	116	16,860

Maoinítear seirbhísí cúraim pobail ó acmhainní bonnlíne na mBord.

Cost of Osteoporotic Fractures

Mr M Robinson asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the cost of osteoporotic fractures to the Health Service in each of the last three years. (AQW 940/01)

Ms de Brún: The total cost of osteoporotic fractures to the Health Service in each of the last three years is estimated to be:

1998-99 - £320,000

1999-2000 - £273,000

2000-01 - £197,000

Meastar gurb é seo a leanas costas iomlán bristeacha oistéapóraiteacha tarraingthe ar an tseirbhís sláinte i ngach bliain de na trí bliana anuas thíosluaite:

1998-99 - £320,000

1999-2000 - £273,000

2000-01 - £197,000

Prescription Charge Revenue

Mr M Robinson asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the total revenue raised from prescription charges in each of the last three years. (AQW 942/01)

Ms de Brún: The total revenue raised from prescription charge revenue in each of the last three years

bliain de na trí bliana seo anuas ó ioncam tháillí oidis ná £8.3 milliún i 1998/99, £9.8 milliún i 1999/2000 agus £10.1 milliún i 2000/01 san iomlán.

Number of Prescriptions Dispensed

Mr M Robinson asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the number of prescriptions issued in each of the last three years. (AQW 943/01)

Ms de Brún: The information requested is not available. However, the number of prescriptions presented for dispensing is as follows:

1998-99 - 22,780,000

1999-2000 - 23,260,000

2000-01 - 23,980,000

Níl an t-eolas iarrtha ar fáil. Seo a leanas líon na n-oideas a tugadh le haghaidh dáilte áfach:

1998-99 - 22,780,000

1999-2000 - 23,260,000

2000-01 - 23,980,000

Elderly People: Long-Term Care

Mr M Robinson asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety how many elderly

people received long-term care in each of the last three years. (AQW 982/01)

Ms de Brún: Information is not available in the form requested.

Níl an t-eolas ar fáil ar an dóigh iarrtha.

Constituency Enquiry: Mrs Adams

Mr Hussey asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to investigate an incident involving Mrs Ena Adams, a constituent of the Member for West Tyrone, in the X-ray department of Tyrone County Hospital, Omagh, on Wednesday 28 November 2001; and to make a statement. (AQW 1040/01)

Ms de Brún: If the Member will write to me with full details about the person concerned, I shall ensure that the case is fully examined.

Má scríobhann an Teachta chugam le sonraí iomlána an té lena mbaineann, déanfaidh mé deimhin go ndéanfar mioniniúchadh ar an chás.

REGIONAL DEVELOPMENT

Global Point Business Park: Railway Halt

Mr K Robinson asked the Minister for Regional Development what discussions have taken place with the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to ensure that the railway commuter potential of Mossley West and the adjoining Global Point industrial site in Newtownabbey are fully explored. (AQW 702/01)

The Minister for Regional Development (Mr P Robinson): The railway halt at Mossley West will serve the Global Point Business Park and Translink has already asked the Park's developer to take the position of the halt into consideration whenever the Park's internal road network is being designed. Translink will also engage in more detailed discussions with the developer in due course in order to advertise widely the rail service, thereby maximising the Mossley West Halt's commuter potential. I have not had any discussions with the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment on this matter.

Transport Links Between NI and Scotland

Mr K Robinson asked the Minister for Regional Development to outline any plans he has to engage his ministerial counterpart in the Scottish Parliament to discuss improvements to rail services from Larne and Stranraer. (AQW 703/01)

Mr P Robinson: I am keen to promote the transport links between Northern Ireland and Scotland and to encourage closer co-operation between my Department and the Scottish Executive on these matters. I recently had a preliminary discussion with the then Minister for Transport and Planning at the Scottish Executive regarding enhanced liaison between our Departments, and I intend to progress this issue with her successor in the near future.

Translink: Buses and Depots

Mr Hilditch asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail (a) the number of bus depots currently used by Translink, (b) the number of vehicles operating from them, (c) their seating capacity and (d) the age of these vehicles. (AQW 821/01)

Mr P Robinson: Translink has advised that it operates some 25 bus stations or depots in Northern Ireland, 20 Ulsterbus, four Citybus and the Ulsterbus Tours Coaches Travel Centre. There are 1,195 Ulsterbus vehicles and 264 Citybus vehicles with total seating capacities of some 59,625 and 12,866 respectively. The average age of the Ulsterbus fleet is 11.48 years while the average age of the Citybus fleet is 8.09 years.

Pedestrian Crossings

Mr M Robinson asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail how his Department assesses requests for pedestrian crossings. (AQW 830/01)

Mr P Robinson: My Department's Roads Service receives a great many requests for the provision of controlled pedestrian crossing facilities. To ensure a consistent and equitable approach, requests are assessed using criteria based on national guidelines.

The procedure essentially involves an assessment of the number of pedestrians crossing the road and the volume of traffic using it. This information is used, by applying a prescribed formula, to establish the degree of pedestrian/vehicular conflict at the site in question. This acts as an initial sift, in that sites above a particular threshold figure are deemed to merit further consideration for a controlled crossing.

This further consideration takes into account a number of factors including vehicle speed, road geometry, proximity to shops, schools, community centres, hospitals etc, and accident history. Based on this detailed assessment potential sites are prioritised accordingly.

Improvement Measures: M1/Westlink

Mr M Robinson asked the Minister for Regional Development to outline the reasons why he did not

proceed with the slip roads at Kingsway, as part of the M1/Westlink Road system. (AQW 831/01)

Mr P Robinson: My Department's Roads Service had originally included the provision of south-facing slip roads at Kingsway, Dunmurry, as part of its proposed package of improvement measures for the M1/Westlink. However, following the publication of the Environmental Statement and the draft Designation Order for Stage 1 of the proposed measures (i.e. the motorway improvements), Roads Service received a considerable number of responses from local residents expressing concern about the location of the proposed slip roads.

Subsequent Public Inquiries, into the Environmental Statements for Stage 1 and 2 (i.e. the Westlink improvements) were held late last year. In his reports on the Public Inquiries, the Inspector commented that he had concerns about the environmental impact of providing slip roads at Kingsway. Of major concern was the removal of the greater part of a belt of mature trees clearly damaging this scenic approach to the city. In considering these reports, my Department took account of the Inspector's comments and decided that the slip roads should not be constructed as part of the M1/Westlink improvements.

I should point out that the Department's decision does not necessarily rule out the possibility of providing south-facing slip roads in the Dunmurry area at some time in the future. I can assure you, however, that the views of local people will be sought and taken into account before any decision is made.

Translink: Cost of Vandalism

Mr K Robinson asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail the cost of attacks by vandals on vehicles operating out of Translink bus depots in (a) Larne (b) Carrickfergus and (c) Newtownabbey; and to make a statement. (AQW 843/01)

Mr P Robinson: Translink estimate that in the 12-month period since December 2000 the costs of attacks by vandals on vehicles operating out of bus depots in Larne, Carrickfergus and Newtownabbey are in the region of £6,000, £17,000 and £100,000 respectively. These costs include the repairing of broken windows, the replacement of seats and either the repair or replacement of other internal items of trim. In addition, there are costs such as loss of revenue, claims for injury and time lost due to staff absences following attacks which are difficult to fully quantify but are nonetheless real.

I deplore and condemn without reservation these wanton acts of vandalism on public transport vehicles. The money that Translink has used to repair the vehicles could obviously have been much better utilised in improving services. Furthermore, these acts

of vandalism do nothing to encourage the general public to utilise public transport. I will therefore continue to support Translink in its ongoing efforts to try and eradicate such problems.

Trunk Road Improvements

Mr M Robinson asked the Minister for Regional Development how many sections of trunk road were (a) opened and (b) significantly upgraded in order to increase capacity in each year since 1995.

(AQW 856/01)

Mr P Robinson: My Department's Roads Service has advised me that, since 1995, the capacity on the following sections of trunk road has been increased as a result of their opening or significant upgrading:

1995	
Newry Bypass (Stage 2)	Opened
Omagh Throughpass (Stage 2A)	Opened
1996	
Newry Bypass (Stage 3)	Opened
Omagh Throughpass (Stage 2B)	Opened
1997	
A5 Magheramason	Upgraded
1998	
A509 Aghalane	Opened
Cross-harbour Link Road (M3 to Sydenham Bypass)	Opened
A26 Antrim to Ballymena (Stages 2 & 2A)	Upgraded
1999	
A26 Wattstown Dualling	Upgraded
A2 Strand Road, Londonderry	Upgraded
2000	
Dromore Inner Link	Opened
2001	
A5 Leckpatrick	Upgraded
A26 Antrim to Ballymena (Stage 3)	Upgraded

E-WAY

Mr M Robinson asked the Minister for Regional Development to outline his position in relation to the securing of finance for the proposed E-way.

(AQW 860/01)

Mr P Robinson: The Department's present allocations for transport would be insufficient to provide support for the E-WAY project from the public purse. The capital costs alone are expected to be at least £25 million.

My Department has set a strategic objective of developing a transportation system that will support

the Regional Development Strategy. A key mechanism for achieving this lies in the development of a 10-year Regional Transportation Strategy (RTS). I will shortly finalise a proposed RTS that will be published for consultation in January. The piloting of a rapid transit system, such as E-WAY, is being considered for inclusion in the proposed Strategy.

Such an initiative could only proceed, however, if a higher priority is assigned to transportation and additional public or private sector funds are secured.

Bus Service: Coleraine-Belfast International Airport

Mr McClarty asked the Minister for Regional Development to outline the process used by Translink to assess the current demand for a direct bus service between Coleraine and Belfast International Airport.

(AQW 864/01)

Mr P Robinson: Translink has advised that it has assessed the demand for a direct bus service between Coleraine and Belfast International Airport by considering feedback from passenger focus groups, advice from local communities and from Translink's district managers.

Railway Safety

Mr K Robinson asked the Minister for Regional Development what progress has been made to improve passenger safety on trains.

(AQW 877/01)

Mr P Robinson: The A D Little Review of railway safety issued in March 2000 recommended replacement of old rolling stock, upgrading of significant stretches of track and the introduction of updated legislation. Since then the Assembly has allocated additional resources to enable Northern Ireland Railways to purchase 23 new train sets, to improve the most heavily used sections of track and to carry out urgent safety works. A new draft Railway Safety Bill, which is intended to provide a legislative base for modern, safe travel by railway, has been prepared and has been the subject of a public consultation exercise. The Bill has been amended as a result of the process and I hope to introduce the new Railway Safety Bill to the Assembly shortly.

Low-Cost Airlines

Mr M Robinson asked the Minister for Regional Development what assessment he has made in relation to the impact of low - cost airlines on the running costs of airports.

(AQW 878/01)

Mr P Robinson: None. This is a commercial matter that the airports themselves must consider in negotiating terms for the use of their facilities by the airlines. My

Department does, however, intend to examine the role played by low - cost carriers as part of a wider planned study into the air transport market

Road Improvements: East Londonderry

Mr McClarty asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail the total spend on road improvements in the East Londonderry constituency over the last three years and as a percentage of total road improvement spend Province-wide over the same period.

(AQW 899/01)

Mr P Robinson: My Department's Roads Service does not maintain details of expenditure on road improvements on a parliamentary constituency basis. However, I am able to provide statistics for the district council areas of Limavady and Coleraine, which form the bulk of the East Londonderry constituency.

The table below shows Roads Service's capital expenditure on major and minor road improvements. It should be noted, however, that major road improvements are prioritised on a country-wide basis and not on a Roads Service Divisional or district council basis, taking account of a broad range of criteria such as strategic planning policy, traffic flows, number of accidents, potential travel save times, environmental impact and value for money. While the actual spend on a major works scheme may be within one district council area, the benefits of such schemes are not confined to the district council or constituencies in which they are located.

Roads Service's expenditure on minor road improvements includes minor works, accident remedial schemes, traffic calming, transportation measures and minor bridge strengthening. The resources available for such works are allocated to the four Roads Service Divisions and, in turn, apportioned across district council areas using appropriate indicators of need.

CAPITAL EXPENDITURE ON MAJOR AND MINOR ROAD IMPROVEMENTS 1998/1999 TO 2000/01

	1998/99 £	1999/2000 £	2000/2001 £
Coleraine	569,000	1,459,000	801,000
Limavady	259,000	82,000	506,000
Total	828,000	1,541,000	1,307,000
% of Total Capital Expenditure - Province-wide	4.05%	6.8%	4.57%

Capital Expenditure: Road Improvements

Mrs Nelis asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail, by constituency, the capital

expenditure on roads infrastructure, over the past 10 years. (AQW 907/01)

Mr P Robinson: My Department's Roads Service does not maintain details of expenditure on road improvements on a parliamentary constituency basis. However, I am able to provide statistics for the district council areas.

The table below shows Roads Service's capital expenditure on major and minor road improvements over the past 10 years. It should be noted, however, that major road improvements are prioritised on a country-wide basis and not on a Roads Service Divisional or district council basis, taking account of a broad range of criteria such as strategic planning policy, traffic flows, number of accidents, potential travel sometimes, environmental impact and value for money. While the actual spend on a major works scheme may be within one district council area, the benefits of such

schemes are not confined to the district council or constituencies in which they are located.

Roads Service's expenditure on minor road improvements includes minor works, accident remedial schemes, traffic calming, transportation measures and minor bridge strengthening. The resources available for such works are allocated to the four Roads Service Divisions and, in turn, apportioned across district council areas using appropriate indicators of need.

Water Service: Non-Industrial Employees

Mr McNamee asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail (a) the total number of non-industrial civil servants employed in the Water Service over the last five years, (b) the overall salary costs in each of these years, (c) the total number in each grade and (d) the salary of each grade. (AQW 912/01)

CAPITAL EXPENDITURE ON MAJOR AND MINOR ROAD IMPROVEMENTS 1991/1992 TO 2000/01

District Council	91/92 £K	92/93 £K	93/94 £K	94/95 £K	95/96 £K	96/97 £K	97/98 £K	98/99 £K	99/00 £K	00/01 £K
Antrim	628	538	1,834	1,334	1,013	517	3,127	590	707	513
Ards	273	447	458	395	382	406	432	453	204	297
Armagh	502	363	881	809	812	566	614	1,004	1,522	808
Ballymena	286	617	665	1,138	781	2,054	1,483	2,150	2,068	3,819
Ballymoney	203	219	171	396	387	256	193	220	107	505
Banbridge	1,502	333	464	437	427	593	531	342	418	227
Belfast	8,083	8,771	13,512	12,055	5,403	5,542	4,608	2,903	5,991	7,597
Carrickfergus	443	70	453	811	298	992	1,766	514	267	206
Castlereagh	1,425	468	664	529	1,673	1,872	525	1,431	408	870
Coleraine	768	575	1,568	1,051	846	635	560	569	1,459	801
Cookstown	149	214	387	339	373	234	268	165	296	336
Craigavon	1,926	645	550	553	365	490	507	738	535	1,461
Down	273	452	808	952	651	1,123	1,845	728	338	451
Dungannon	407	304	422	459	469	377	1,368	465	516	624
Fermanagh	489	488	612	676	1,157	456	1,375	2,444	630	771
Larne	144	193	202	344	233	70	84	153	46	97
Limavady	383	577	1,110	1,031	600	380	195	259	82	506
Lisburn	2,801	1,008	1,506	1,069	1,529	1,426	2,368	928	646	837
Londonderry	1,622	1,831	1,285	1,159	814	608	1,021	762	965	1,673
Magherafelt	1,922	599	963	311	399	311	793	381	252	260
Moyle	168	119	152	230	149	184	204	132	109	55
Newry and Mourne	365	769	2,151	5,175	6,603	3,223	1,828	1,246	2,115	806
Newtownabbey	507	609	1,119	1,545	1,156	829	1,276	681	612	649
North Down	914	1,528	633	454	509	323	303	509	556	276
Omagh	406	633	805	1,379	2,627	1,791	411	265	639	1,102
Strabane	1,183	1,376	691	423	540	562	1,667	400	1,189	3,037

Mr P Robinson: The detailed information requested is as follows:

- (a) The total number of non-industrial civil servants employed in the Department for Regional Development's Water Service in each of the last five years is as follows:

1997	1,151
1998	1,132
1999	1,130
2000	1,146
2001	1,161

- (b) The overall salary costs of the above staff during the years in question were as follows:

1996/97	£21,727,000
1997/98	£21,662,000
1998/99	£20,516,000
1999/00	£23,242,000
2000/01	£23,870,000

- (c) The total number of staff in each non-industrial grade during the years concerned is as follows:

	1997	1998	1999	2000	2001
Chief Executive	1	1	1	1	1
Grade 5	5	4	5	6	6
Grade 6 and analogous	11	11	10	10	10
Grade 7 and analogous	40	37	39	39	41
DP, SPTO and analogous	95	98	102	108	115
Staff Officer, HPTO and analogous	171	172	179	173	183
EO1, PTO and analogous	370	342	347	346	345
EO2 and analogous	88	93	81	90	89
Asst. Scientific Officer	17	17	13	18	24
Administrative Officer and analogous	203	194	203	215	216
Administrative Assistant and analogous	150	163	150	140	131

For each of the relevant non-industrial grades, the salary bandings for the years in question are as follows:

	1997 £	1998 £	1999 £	2000 £	2001 £
Senior CS (Band 4)	52,020-86,700	53,450-89,090	55,750-92,930	57,367-95,625	59,088-98,494
Senior CS (Band 1)	38,760-60,890	39,830-62,570	41,550-65,270	42,755-67,163	44,038-69,178
Grade 6	29,844-50,360	30,739-51,871	31,354-52,908	31,981-53,966	32,621-55,045
Grade 7	26,154-40,990	26,939-42,220	27,478-43,064	28,028-43,925	28,589-44,804

	1997 £	1998 £	1999 £	2000 £	2001 £
Deputy Principal	19,611-30,371	20,218-31,310	20,634-31,952	21,491-33,617	21,932-34,306
SPTO/SSO	17,146-31,185	17,658-32,116	18,007-32,752	18,727-33,401	19,098-34,062
Chief Typing Mgr.	15,081-21,881	15,599-22,637	15,956-23,154	16,691-24,499	17,072-25,915
Staff Officer	15,839-21,491	16,330-22,157	16,665-22,613	17,358-23,793	17,714-25,034
Typing Manager	13,322-17,266	13,780-17,860	14,095-18,267	14,745-18,684	15,081-19,546
Senior Per. Sec.	12,880-16,691	13,322-17,266	13,626-17,660	14,254-18,063	14,579-18,896
Grad. Trainee Eng.	14,282-15,538	14,750-16,008	15,064-16,327	15,693-16,650	16,008-16,979
HPTO/HSO	13,962-24,645	14,436-25,382	14,750-25,886	15,378-26,398	15,693-26,920
Exec. Officer 1	13,324-18,639	13,737-19,215	14,019-19,611	14,601-20,634	14,901-21,711
PTO/SO	12,076-21,067	12,550-21,696	12,865-22,125	13,491-22,562	13,806-23,009
Tech. Grade 1	11,447-18,727	11,902-19,286	12,236-19,669	12,865-20,057	13,179-20,454
Exec. Officer 2	11,323-15,839	11,673-16,330	11,914-16,665	12,408-17,358	12,663-17,895
Asst. Sci. Officer	8,968-18,727	10,663-19,286	10,977-19,669	11,606-20,057	11,920-20,454
Personal Sec.	9,607-13,172	9,937-13,626	10,164-13,937	10,632-14,254	10,876-14,912
Admin. Officer	9,080-12,735	9,393-13,172	9,607-13,473	10,050-14,095	10,279-14,579
Typist	7,496-10,753	7,932-11,123	8,486-11,377	9,080-11,902	9,716-12,311
Admin. Assistant	7,166-10,753	7,932-11,123	8,486-11,377	9,080-11,902	9,716-12,311
Support Band 1	9,920-11,793	10,227-12,157	10,437-12,408	10,871-12,923	11,095-13,324
Support Band 2	8,870-10,651	9,145-10,982	9,332-11,208	9,720-11,673	9,920-12,034

Water Service: Industrial Employees

Mr McNamee asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail the total number of industrial civil servants employed in the Water Service over the last five financial years. (AQW 913/01)

Mr P Robinson: The total number of industrial staff employed in Water Service at 31 March in each of the past five financial years was as follows:

1996-97	-	1189
1997-98	-	1157
1998-99	-	1092
1999-2000	-	1072
2000-01	-	1034

Water Service: Non-Industrial Employees

Mr McNamee asked the Minister for Regional Development, in respect of non-industrial civil servants employed by the Water Service over the last five years, to detail (a) the principles and structures of pay scales; (b) job evaluation systems and grading criteria; and (c) the number and gender of people employed in each grade. (AQW 914/01)

Mr P Robinson: The details requested are as follows:

(a) The basic principle which underpins the pay systems applied across the Northern Ireland Civil Service is that pay structures should facilitate the recruitment, retention and motivation of staff in a

Support (JEGS) methodology. The grading criteria used are as follows:

- Knowledge and Skills
- Contacts and Communications
- Problem Solving
- Decision Making
- Autonomy
- Management of People
- Financial Responsibility
- Impact

(c) Within the Water Service, the number and gender of staff in each non-industrial grade during the last five years are as follows:

	1997	1998	1999	2000	2001
Chief Executive	1 (1M)	1(1M)	1 (1M)	1 (1M)	1 (1M)
Grade 5	5 (5M)	4 (4M)	5 (5M)	6 (6M)	6 (6M)
Grade 6	11 (11M)	11 (11M)	10 (10M)	10 (10M)	10 (10M)
Grade 7	40 (39M/1F)	37 (36M/1F)	39 (38M/1F)	39 (36M/3F)	41 (38M/3F)
DP, SPTO	95 (87M/8F)	98 (89M/9F)	102 (93M/9F)	108 (100M/8F)	115 (105M/10F)
Staff Off., HPTO	171 (160M/11F)	172 (162M/10F)	179 (166M/13F)	173 (159M/14F)	183 (168M/15F)
EO1, PTO	370 (345M/25F)	342 (317M/25F)	347 (327M/20F)	346 (327M/19F)	345 (327M/18F)
EO2	88 (32M/56F)	93 (39M/54F)	81 (26M/55F)	90 (28M/62F)	89 (28M/61F)
Asst. Sci. Officer	17 (12M/5F)	17 (12M/5F)	13 (9M/4F)	18 (11M/7F)	24 (13M/11F)
Admin. Officer	203 (42M/161F)	194 (40M/154F)	203 (43M/160F)	215 (47M/168F)	216 (46M/170F)
Admin. Asst.	150 (52M/98F)	163 (62M/101F)	150 (59M/91F)	140 (55M/85F)	131 (54M/77F)

(M = Male/ F = Female)

way which is consistent with legal and policy requirements, business objectives, organisational culture and value for money.

For non-industrial staff, including those in the Water Service, the specific principle of the current pay system is to relate pay to performance through the application of performance-related pay arrangements. This is achieved by providing a financial reward to each member of staff according to the level of his/her performance. Each non-industrial grade has a relative pay scale which consists of a series of pay spines or steps placed between the scale minimum and maximum, with each of the steps approximately 1% greater than the one below. Progression through the pay scale is determined by an annual assessment of performance which equates to a number of steps on the scale.

(b) Throughout the Department, including the Water Service, non-industrial posts other than those in the Senior Civil Service are evaluated using Grading Guidance supported by a Job Evaluation and Grading

Water Service: Contractors

Mr McNamee asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail the total expenditure paid to contractors within the Water Service for each of the past five financial years. (AQW 915/01)

Mr P Robinson: Water Service has paid a total of £433.2 million to contractors over the past five years. The expenditure each year is set out below.

Year	£ million
1996/97	72.3
1997/98	73.5
1998/99	81.0
1999/00	94.6
2000/01	111.8

Over 80% of this expenditure was paid to contractors carrying out schemes to upgrade the water and sewerage infrastructure.

Water Service: Consultants

Dr O'Hagan asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail the total expenditure paid to consultants within the Water Service for the past five financial years. (AQW 916/01)

Mr P Robinson: Water Service has paid a total of £51.4 million to consultants over the past five financial years. The expenditure each year is set out below.

Year	£ million
1996/97	8.8
1997/98	8.8
1998/99	10.2
1999/00	10.9
2000/01	12.7

Over 80% of this expenditure was incurred on consultancy support for the delivery of the capital investment programme to upgrade the water and sewerage infrastructure. This consultancy support included appraisal studies, project management, detailed design and site supervision.

Water Service: Non-Industrial Civil Servants

Dr O'Hagan asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail the total amount of labour costs for non-industrial civil servants within the Water Service for each of the past five financial years in respect of (i) salaries, (ii) pensions, (iii) expenses, (iv) bonuses and (v) National Insurance contributions. (AQW 917/01)

Mr P Robinson: The total amount of labour costs for non-industrial civil servants within the Water Service for each of the past five financial years is as follows:

	Overall Salary costs (including bonuses*) £	Employer's Pension Contributions £	Expenses £	Employer's National Insurance Contributions £	Total £
1996/97	21,727,000	2,648,000	98,000	1,690,000	26,163,000
1997/98	21,662,000	2,843,000	97,000	1,649,000	26,251,000
1998/99	20,516,000	2,716,000	88,000	1,571,000	24,891,000
1999/00	23,242,000	3,057,000	81,000	1,760,000	28,140,000
2000/2001	23,870,000	3,149,000	89,000	1,796,000	28,904,000

* The only bonuses payable to non-industrial staff consist of those occasional discretionary payments made to reward special efforts, with the total amount involved being minimal (ie, less than 0.2% of the total payroll). Payments to staff are made through salary and cannot be itemised separately.

Water Service: Efficiency Savings

Dr O'Hagan asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail the level of savings achieved by the Water Service under its efficiency plans in each of the last five financial years. (AQW 918/01)

Mr P Robinson: One of Water Service's strategic aims is to improve business performance. This aim is supported by a key performance target to achieve efficiency savings of 3% on running cost expenditure. The Water Service has met this target in each of the last five financial years.

This has been achieved through the implementation of Water Service's efficiency strategy which is based on the Government's "Modernising Government" and "Better Quality Services" initiatives. The strategy involves implementing an annual programme of efficiency measures which target the activities and processes considered to offer the greatest scope for improvement in quality or cost. The efficiency measures are employed in an integrated manner to deliver the year on year efficiencies which allow the Water Service to operate within the challenging running cost targets it faces annually.

Water Service: Industrial Employees

Dr O'Hagan asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail the total amount of labour costs for industrial civil servants within the Water Service for each of the past five financial years in respect of (i) salaries, (ii) pensions, (iii) expenses, (iv) bonuses and (v) National Insurance contributions. (AQW 919/01)

Mr P Robinson: The labour costs for industrial civil servants within Water Service for the past five years are detailed below.

	96/97	97/98	98/99	99/00	00/01
Wages ⁽ⁱ⁾	19,084,000	18,973,000	19,116,000	19,881,000	19,630,000
Employer's Pension Contributions	1,802,000	1,752,000	1,729,000	2,245,000	2,850,000
Expenses ⁽ⁱⁱ⁾	119,000	110,000	138,000	164,000	168,000
Employer's National Insurance Contributions	1,501,000	1,452,000	1,480,000	1,424,000	1,405,000
Total	22,506,000	22,287,000	22,463,000	23,714,000	24,053,000

Note (i): Includes productivity bonus.

Note (ii): Includes travel expenses, both taxable and non-taxable, and subsistence allowances.

Planning Regulations: Rural Areas

Mr Gallagher asked the Minister for Regional Development what plans he has to change the planning regulations for the erection of houses in rural areas.

(AQO 519/01)

Mr P Robinson: May I take this opportunity to emphasise the importance I attach to the contribution of the rural community to the economic and social well-being of Northern Ireland. This, I believe, is fully recognised in the Regional Development Strategy which was launched on 4 December 2001.

One of its key aims is to develop an attractive and prosperous rural area based on a balanced and integrated approach to the development of town, village and countryside. I believe that this approach will help sustain a strong and vibrant rural community, one which is able to contribute to the overall prosperity of Northern Ireland.

In progressing the strategy, I will be bringing forward detailed strategic regional planning policy guidance on a range of important issues. One key area on which guidance will be prepared is in respect of the countryside. Initial preparatory work and information gathering has already commenced on this important regional guidance. While the final content and nature of this guidance has yet to be decided, it is likely to contain strategic rural planning policies within which Departments will be expected to structure, interpret and implement individual operational policies.

I recognise fully that an issue to be addressed in the emerging policy guidance will be the tension that exists between the desire of individuals to live in dwellings in the countryside and the need to maintain viable and sustainable rural settlements, as outlined in the recently published Regional Development Strategy. A balance will need to be struck if we are to avoid the detrimental

effects of either excessive urban growth or the blight of the countryside through isolated development.

Clearly this is an issue of significant public interest and I will ensure that the Assembly, its Committees and the rural communities, are fully consulted as the work on this strategic regional planning guidance progresses.

Port of Larne: Pedestrian Access

Mr Beggs asked the Minister for Regional Development if his Department was consulted in respect of the Port of Larne's decision to permanently close a pedestrian access gate from Chain Memorial Road as a security measure in the wake of the terrorist attacks in America on 11 September 2001.

(AQW 1050/01)

Mr P Robinson: This pedestrian access was first closed in February 2001 on the instructions of DARD as a foot-and-mouth-disease precaution. Security measures have been put in place at all UK ports following the terrorist attacks on the USA on 11 September 2001. However, there is no requirement on the Port of Larne, as a private company, to consult the Department in relation to such operational matters.

Rail Improvements: Belfast to the North-West

Mrs Courtney asked the Minister for Regional Development if he has any plans to upgrade the railway line from Belfast to the north-west.

(AQO 538/01)

Mr P Robinson: There has already been a substantial upgrade of the railway line between Belfast and the north-west with the re-opening in June of the Antrim to Bleach Green railway line for scheduled passenger services. This has provided significantly increased levels of passenger comfort as well as enhanced journey times for passengers travelling on the Belfast to Londonderry corridor. The resources provided for railways in the Assembly's December 2000 Budget is sufficient only to maintain the core network of the most heavily used lines and for the acquisition of much needed new rolling stock. Lines north and west of Ballymena are outside the core network and any enhancement of these lines can best be considered in the context of the 10 - year Regional Transportation Strategy (RTS) that is currently being prepared by my Department. I will certainly consider seeking additional resources from the Assembly in light of the RTS findings but would point out that any further upgrade plans for lines in the north-west will be dependent on the Assembly allocating the necessary funding.

Planning Policy: Retail Development

Mr M Robinson asked the Minister for Regional Development when he intends to bring forward a

planning policy statement on the review of retail development; and to make a statement. (AQO 526/01)

Mr P Robinson: I am aware of the pressing need to bring forward new regional planning policy guidance on retailing. The recently published Regional Development Strategy gives recognition to the important part retailing plays in the future well-being of Northern Ireland and provides further impetus to moving ahead quickly with the new policy guidance.

I am conscious that Northern Ireland has experienced a major upsurge in shopping development in recent years, reflecting both a "backlog" of retail interest and a need to modernise our shopping outlets. I am aware too of concerns from many quarters about the operation of the existing retail planning policy.

On 21 September, my predecessor, Mr Gregory Campbell, appointed Roger Tym and Partners to carry out a major retail planning research project. I believe that this research is of critical importance. It will provide up to date and independent information on which to base the new regional planning policy guidance. It is due for completion by May 2002. I will, of course, consult the Assembly and the public on the report.

I shall prepare the new draft regional planning policy guidance for Assembly and public consultation by the autumn 2002. Finally, I anticipate that the new guidance will be in place by June 2003.

Limavady Bypass: Progress Report

Mr Campbell asked the Minister for Regional Development to provide a progress report on the Limavady bypass including the estimated cost and completion date. (AQO 493/01)

Mr P Robinson: As I announced on 7 December 2001, my Department's Roads Service has appointed contractors, Graham Construction, to construct the Limavady bypass. Construction work on the £11.5 million bypass commenced last week and is expected to take approximately 18 months to complete. When completed, it will significantly reduce congestion and environmental disturbance in Limavady and will lead to considerable improvements in journey times between Coleraine and Londonderry.

Translink: Current Financial Position

Ms Morrice asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail the current financial position of Translink, including current and planned funding for the company; and to make a statement. (AQO 507/01)

Mr P Robinson: In 2000-01, the constituent companies that make up Translink recorded the following profit or loss after the deduction of tax. Northern Ireland

Railways made a loss of £2.334 million, Citybus made a loss of £1.213 million, Flexibus made a profit of £55,000 and Ulsterbus made a profit of £1.836 million.

The balance sheets for these companies at 1 April 2001 showed that the net assets of Northern Ireland Railways, Citybus, Flexibus and Ulsterbus were £3.214 million, £2.776 million, £1.366 million and £40.041 million, respectively.

In the current year, £12.5 million of revenue subsidy and £28.2 million of grant for the improvement of rolling stock and infrastructure are being provided to Northern Ireland Railways from my Department's budget. Translink's bus companies are receiving £7.1 million of fuel duty rebate, £1.7 million of grant toward the purchase of new buses, £2.8 million of grant for a new ticketing system and £890,000 of revenue subsidy for rural and other uneconomic services. Translink will also receive a concessionary fares grant amounting to £12.4 million.

The planned funding for 2002-03 will provide £16.5 million of revenue subsidy and £56.6 million of capital grants to Northern Ireland Railways. Translink's bus companies have been allocated £8 million of fuel duty rebate, £1.7 million of bus purchase grant, £2.9 million of grant for the new ticketing system and £890,000 of revenue subsidy for rural and other uneconomic services. The concessionary fares grant will be increased to £16.0 million.

Years of underinvestment in bus and rail services have had a depressing effect on patronage, which in turn has eroded the financial position of the Translink companies.

I welcome the significant increase for public transport in the Assembly's budget, particularly the additional funding to improve the safety of the rail network and for new rolling stock. There is still much to do to bring our public transport services up to modern standards, and I shall be bringing forward my plans for further investment within the 10-year Regional Transportation Strategy. I look forward to support from the Assembly in its future budgets.

Downpatrick Waste Water Treatment Works

Mr McGrady asked the Minister for Regional Development if he has any plans to bring forward the date for the commencement of the new Waste Water Treatment Works in Downpatrick; and to make a statement. (AQO 495/01)

Mr P Robinson: A scheme to upgrade the Downpatrick Waste Water Treatment Works was originally programmed to start in October 2000 but successive deferrals have resulted from the need to direct available resources to higher priority projects. The scheme is

currently programmed to commence in 2005 at an estimated cost of £2.3 million.

The Works was designed to treat a population equivalent of up to 16,000 and presently caters for about 13,000. It has, therefore, the capacity to cope with additional development in the Downpatrick area. The Works also consistently complies with the registered discharge standards set by the Department of the Environment's Environment and Heritage Service. Pending the major upgrading, the Water Service will continue to maximise the efficiency of the treatment processes at the Works. This will include the provision of new inlet screens, which are to be installed next March.

A major review of the Water Service's Capital Investment Programme is currently underway in order to ensure that the available funding will be allocated to the highest priority schemes. I will be consulting the Regional Development Committee about this in January.

On-Street Parking: Urban Areas

Dr Birnie asked the Minister for Regional Development to outline any developments on his policy on on-street parking in urban areas. (AQO 518/01)

Mr P Robinson: I can report that my Department's Roads Service:

- is currently involved in consultations with the Police Service of Northern Ireland regarding the development of a service level agreement in relation to the enforcement of on-street parking by traffic wardens employed by the police; and
- is giving consideration to strengthening its powers to control on-street parking. A consultant will be appointed in the spring of 2002 to undertake a feasibility study into decriminalised parking enforcement which would permit Roads Service to enforce on-street parking restrictions.

Roads Service would be prepared to carry out a small number of pilot residents' parking schemes to test the necessary administrative and enforcement procedures that would be involved. Such schemes would only be of benefit to residents if they are effectively enforced and, under current arrangements, this is a matter for the police. I understand that the police have indicated that they are not in a position to carry out this work.

Waste Water: North Down

Mr McFarland asked the Minister for Regional Development when he will be able to provide a plan for waste water treatment in North Down. (AQO 517/01)

Mr P Robinson: I am aware that progress on this issue has been much slower than expected. However, my predecessor and I have been anxious to ensure that both Ards and North Down Borough Councils are fully aware of the process which had led to the identification of the two shortlisted sites. I am currently reviewing the issues with officials and I expect to make a firm announcement early in the new year.

Knockmore Railway Line: Passengers Numbers

Mr Ford asked the Minister for Regional Development to make a statement on his assessment of the number of passengers using the Knockmore railway line. (AQO 515/01)

Mr P Robinson: I will be making a full assessment of the number of passengers using the Antrim-Knockmore line as part of my consideration of the related Equality Impact Assessment. The closing date for comments to the Equality Impact Assessment was Friday 23 November 2001.

Translink has advised that, based on a survey of ticket sales during the six-month period from May to November 2001 that some 13,839 passenger journeys either originated from or terminated at Ballinderry, Glenavy and Crumlin halts. They further advise that this translates into approximately 76 passenger journeys per day on that line. A similar survey in March 2001 indicated just over 100 passenger journeys per day. Translink point out that during the period May to November 2000, some 43,703 passenger journeys either originated from or terminated at these three stations.

Glenshane Pass

Mrs Nelis asked the Minister for Regional Development to explain why the roads west of the Bann, specifically the Glenshane Pass, were not gritted on 6 November 2001. (AQO 492/01)

Mr P Robinson: My Department's Roads Service has advised me that the minimum temperature west of the Bann during both the morning and evening of Tuesday 6 November 2001 was around +5°C. There was therefore no need to salt roads on that day and no problems were reported.

I understand, however, that on Thursday 8 November 2001 the road temperature on the Glenshane Pass dipped earlier than was forecast by the Met Office and icy conditions were reported on it before salting commenced at 6.30pm. Whilst Roads Service will continue to make every effort to prevent ice forming on roads included in the salted network, you will appreciate that conditions can change rapidly and ice-free roads simply cannot be guaranteed.

Bathing Waters: Newcastle

Mr O'Neill asked the Minister for Regional Development, pursuant to the report 'Bathing Waters in Newcastle', to detail how he proposes to improve the sewerage system in Newcastle and thus improve the quality of the sea water; and to make a statement. (AQO 501/01)

Mr P Robinson: I share the disappointment that the bathing waters at Newcastle failed to comply with the EU Bathing Water Directive during the 2001 bathing season, particularly since the bathing waters have consistently met the regulatory standards since 1990.

To achieve compliance with the EC Bathing Water Directive, at least 19 of the 20 regulatory samples collected at any bathing water location must meet the mandatory standards. The bathing waters at Newcastle failed because two out of 20 samples collected during the bathing season did not meet these stringent standards. Meeting the standards can be significantly affected by factors such as changes in tidal patterns, strong winds, a wet or dry summer and by non-sewage related discharges, particularly diffuse agricultural run-off in wet weather. Whether or not failures will occur at one or more of the more vulnerable locations in a particular season is, therefore, to a significant degree influenced by many factors only some of which are within Water Service's control.

The bathing water results for 2001 show the vulnerability of coastal waters in Northern Ireland and highlight the critical need for additional investment to address the historic underfunding of the sewerage infrastructure. The need to direct the limited funding available towards improvements to drinking water quality and waste water treatment has meant that investment in the sewerage system has been severely restricted and is likely to remain so for some time. Water Service plans to commence a study of the sewerage network in Newcastle the Summer of 2002. The study will examine the existing system and identify any upgrading measures required to remedy any deficiencies that may have contributed to failure of the bathing waters. The initial study, which will take around 18 months to complete, will be followed by consultations with Environment and Heritage Service. Regrettably, given the present level of funding available, it is unlikely that any measures identified will be implemented before 2006.

Pending the outcome of the sewerage network study, Water Service plans to implement upgrading measures at the Burren Road pumping station. The pumping station, which has a combined sewer overflow, discharges to the Burren River in wet weather and occasionally results in visible pollution, such as rags and paper, in the river. The installation of a new screen at the works, planned for the Spring of next year, will

significantly reduce any visible pollution occurring at such times.

Water Service Employees

Mr McNamee asked the Minister for Regional Development what steps he has taken to harmonise pay and terms and conditions of employment for Water Service Agency employees. (AQO 512/01)

Mr P Robinson: In view of the Department of Finance and Personnel's general management and control of the NI Civil Service, overall responsibility for the terms and conditions of industrial civil servants, including those within the Water Service, remains a function of that Department. Over recent months, officials from DFP, my own Department and those other Departments which employ industrial staff have been engaged in discussions with the trade unions about the undertaking of a major programme of work to harmonise terms and conditions across all industrial staff in the first instance, and then across industrial and non-industrial staff.

Work is also under way to establish a central consultation body which will provide a forum to discuss and deal with those employment terms and conditions that are not currently delegated to Departments. Centralised pay bargaining will also be dealt with by this body once the continuing links to national pay agreements have been broken and a suitable pay and grading evaluation system for both industrial and non-industrial staff has been developed.

Regional Transportation Strategy: North West

Mr Dallat asked the Minister for Regional Development when he intends to present his case to the Executive for additional funds to extend the M22 motorway to Derry City Council area and to upgrade the railway service from Belfast to the north-west; and to make a statement. (AQO 539/01)

Mr P Robinson: You will be aware that my Department is currently preparing a 10-year draft Regional Transportation Strategy (RTS) which, in support of the Regional Development Strategy, will identify strategic transportation priorities for Northern Ireland over the next decade.

At the same time my Department's Roads Service is in the course of developing a 10-Year Forward Planning Schedule of major road schemes which will be compatible with the RTS. While Roads Service has no current plans to extend the M22 Motorway to Derry City Council area a number of schemes to improve this route are being assessed for possible inclusion in

the Forward Planning Schedule, which will be published after the RTS.

With regard to upgrading the railway service from Belfast to the north-west, the Assembly voted sufficient resources only for the core railway network of most heavily used lines as well as for new rolling stock. The line between Bleach Green and Antrim has just been upgraded but the lines to the north-west from Ballymena are outside the core network and will only be considered in the context of the RTS.

The aim is to publish the proposed RTS for consultation in January 2002.

Roadworks Signage

Mr B Bell asked the Minister for Regional Development what measures he is taking to ensure that all feeder roads into major road systems are properly signed with advance warning of roadworks. (AQO 522/01)

Mr P Robinson: It is a legal requirement in Northern Ireland that warnings of all roadworks shall comply with Chapter 8 of The Traffic Signs Manual. The Manual, which is published by the Stationery Office, contains recommendations on traffic safety measures, including signing, for roadworks.

In addition to containing recommendations regarding the provision of signs on roads affected by roadworks, the Manual also includes recommendations regarding the provision of signs on feeder roads in the immediate vicinity of roadworks. The enforcement of Chapter 8 is a matter for the Police Service of Northern Ireland.

SOCIAL DEVELOPMENT

Social Fund Annual Report 2000-01

Mr Carrick asked the Minister for Social Development when he will publish his annual report on the Social Fund for 2000-01 and the Social Fund Commissioner's annual report. (AQW 869/01)

The Minister for Social Development (Mr Dodds): The Department's annual report on the Social Fund for 2000-01 has been published today and has been laid before the Assembly. The Social Fund Commissioner's report has also been published and copies placed in the library.

Benefit Payments

Mr M Robinson asked the Minister for Social Development to detail (a) the amount of benefit recovered from claimants who either mistakenly or fraudulently received

such benefits in the last year, and (b) how much is estimated to remain uncollected. (AQW 881/01)

Mr Dodds: The amount of benefit recovered from customers that was either received mistakenly or fraudulently in the last financial year is approx. £3.6 million. £28 million is estimated to remain uncollected. The Agency is active in combating fraud within benefits with a comprehensive strategy. Levels of fraud have been identified using the benefit review process. Ministerial targets have also been set to reduce fraud and error in the four main benefits, Income Support, Jobseekers Allowance, Incapacity Benefit and Disability Living Allowance. The Agency has also a number of options when actively pursuing overpayment of benefits. These include:

- A recovery from benefits (where this option is available).
- Voluntary agreements to repay (where the debtor is not in receipt of benefit).
- Enforcement action via the Courts and the Enforcement of Judgements Office.

Housing Executive: Register of Approved Contractors

Mr Hilditch asked the Minister for Social Development what criteria is used to assess contractors for Housing Executive renovations and repairs. (AQW 892/01)

Mr Dodds: The Housing Executive maintains a Register of Approved Contractors and no firm may be invited to tender or contract with the Housing Executive until such time as its name is formally enrolled on that Register. In addition, firms must not allow their registration to lapse, or be suspended or removed from the Register.

The Minimum Criteria for Admission to that Register is that applicants must:

- a. Normally have been trading for at least one year.
- b. Hold a current Construction Industry Scheme Certificate.
- c. Where required by law, be registered for Value Added Tax.
- d. Possess Public Liability Insurance in the sum of at least one million pounds; (this must be increased to £5 million prior to the award of most contracts).
- e. Possess Employers Liability Insurance in the sum of £5 million.
- f. Satisfy the Executive that it has undertaken previous work to a standard acceptable to the Executive.

- g. Produce to the Executive, or Consultant Accountants engaged by the Executive, accounts for examination, audited where appropriate.
- h. Sign a declaration that the firm is not an unqualified company for the purposes of Articles 64 to 66 of the Fair Employment and Treatment (NI) Order 1998.
- i. Sign a declaration that the firm has a Health & Safety Policy / Statement and that it will comply with the Health & Safety Regulations and any approved Health & Safety Plan for any specific scheme which the firm may be awarded, or for which the firm may be cleared as a subcontractor and, in addition, that the person responsible for Health and Safety has attended a recognised course.
- j. In the case of electrical contractors, be registered with the National Inspection Council for Electrical Installation Contracting and have attained Quality Assurance Certification to at least BS 5750 Part 3 / ISO 9000.
- k. In the case of firms wishing to undertake gas installation/repairs, be registered with C.O.R.G.I.

The general criteria for selection is that the firm's registration is in order; that the firm is approved for the category of work(s) included in the scheme(s); that the firm has adequate financial capacity to undertake the proposed works and that its performance on similar type of work has been satisfactory. There may also be additional criteria, for more complex schemes.

NIHE: Religious Composition of Workforce

Mrs Nelis asked the Minister for Social Development to detail, by constituency, the religious composition of the workforce of the Northern Ireland Housing Executive at middle and senior management level.

(AQW 922/01)

Mr Dodds: While this is a matter for the Northern Ireland Housing Executive, for the organisation as a whole, the community background of the middle and senior management grades is as follows:

		Protestant	Roman Catholic
Managers	(Levels 7)	66.45%	31%
Senior Managers	(Level 8+)	62.5%	37.5%

The collection of monitoring information regarding an individual's community background is a sensitive issue and it is collected solely to meet an employer's

monitoring obligations. In addition, the confidentiality of community background monitoring information is protected through Regulations made under the Fair Employment and Treatment (Northern Ireland) Order 1998. These make it a criminal offence, subject to specific exceptions, to disclose information on the community background of an individual which has been obtained or used for the purposes of monitoring under the 1998 Order. The exceptions permitted include disclosure to members of staff or to Trade Union officials, if the nature of their duties renders it reasonable to do so. They also permit disclosure in connection with actual or prospective proceedings before the Fair Employment Tribunal.

The information requested by constituency is not held by the Housing Executive and given the small numbers involved at such a level of disaggregation, information at that level would breach the confidentiality requirements.

Pensions Agency

Mr Gibson asked the Minister for Social Development if he has any plans to introduce a Pensions Agency similar to the one operating in GB. (AQW 924/01)

Mr Dodds: There is no Pensions Agency operating in Great Britain, although there is a Pensions Organisation within the Department for Work and Pensions. My Social Security Agency continues to seek opportunities to improve services to pensioners.

New Deal Scheme for Lone Parents

Mr Gibson asked the Minister for Social Development to detail (a) the targets set for lone parents back into employment through New Deal; and (b) the effectiveness of New Deal for lone parents. (AQW 939/01)

Mr Dodds: The New Deal scheme for lone parents is voluntary. The Department therefore sets a target for numbers participating in the scheme rather than numbers back into employment. The target for the current financial year is for 4,121 Lone parents to participate in the scheme. From April 1998 up until the end of October 2001, the total number of lone parents who agreed to participate in the programme was 7,959. Of these, 4,013 commenced full-time work and were no longer entitled to Income Support. A further 490 commenced part-time work and still were entitled to Income Support.

NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

Friday 11 January 2002

Written Answers to Questions

AGRICULTURE AND RURAL DEVELOPMENT

Disposal of Decommissioned Fishing Boats

Mr Shannon asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development if she would consider allowing the fishing industry to dispose of decommissioned fishing boats at sea. (AQW 997/01)

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development (Ms Rodgers): My Department is not unsympathetic to the request to consider allowing the fishing industry to dispose of decommissioned fishing boats at sea. Indeed it would be willing to seek to have the current decommissioning scheme amended to allow for such action.

The issue is however not straightforward. To create an artificial reef would require a Disposal at Sea Licence (a FEPA licence) from the Environment and Heritage Service. It is understood applicants for such a licence would need to ensure that an environmental report is furnished and the vessels would need to have their anti-fouling paint removed along with the fuel tanks and all other potential sources of contamination, for example, oil, fuel, lubricants, et cetera. In addition, depending on the site, Crown Estate's permission may be required and consultation with other interested parties may highlight objections.

The industry has been advised of these points and the matter rests with them to consider further.

EU Trade Rules: Beef Products

Mr Shannon asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to identify any member states of the European Union that are bringing beef products that originate in Third World countries into Northern Ireland. (AQW 1041/01)

Ms Rodgers: Under EU trade rules, beef products may only be imported from EC approved meat establishments in certain listed Third Countries. Such establishments must meet the equivalent standards as for products in the EU. Once beef products enter the Community through a Border Inspection Post in any Member State, they can be freely traded within the Community. The emphasis is therefore on clearance at the first point of entry into the Community. Thus beef products of Third Country origin can subsequently enter Northern Ireland from another Member State and no record is made that it originally came from a Third Country. It is therefore not possible to provide you with the information that you are seeking.

That said, under EU beef labelling rules, it is compulsory for all beef marketed in the EU, from whatever source, to show the country where slaughtering took place, where the beef was prepared and a reference code for tracing purposes.

Forest Service Guidelines

Mr Gibson asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development if she will review Forest Service guidelines to safeguard wildlife in West Tyrone. (AQW 1051/01)

Ms Rodgers: I am satisfied that the Forest Service guidelines to safeguard wildlife in West Tyrone are adequate for current needs. They are mainly contained in two papers "Afforestation in the DANI statement on environmental policy" (1993) and "The UK Forestry Standard in the Government's approach to sustainable forestry" (1998).

Profitability of the Pig Sector

Mr Gibson asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development what assessment she has made of the profitability of the pig sector. (AQW 1052/01)

Ms Rodgers: My Department monitors the profitability of the pig sector on a weekly, monthly and an annual basis. Financial results show, among other things, margin over feed per finished pig and per kilogram of carcass weight, are calculated weekly and the results published monthly. I attach a copy of the most recent available results for your information and copies have also been placed in the Assembly Library.

Profitability in terms of gross margin per bacon pig is also calculated annually from the Farm Business Survey, and is published each autumn. The average gross margin results (expressed in terms of £ per head) for the years 1996-97 to 2000-01 are: £30; £17; £3; £7 and £18 respectively.

Producer prices have been fairly steady over the past year, averaging some 91p per kg deadweight; that is a significant improvement over the particularly horrendous situation which prevailed for almost two years from late spring 1998.

While producers are no longer operating in a market situation where returns are below the cost of production, I acknowledge that profitability is still disappointing.

Mr Gibson will, I am sure, be aware of the study commissioned in December 1999 to consider the issue of processing capacity in the context of the future outlook for the pig industry, North and South. The consultants' report indicated that without significant improvement in the competitiveness of the industry in all of Ireland, it will face further reduction in both the production and processing sectors.

Unfortunately, progress in developing a joint strategic response was delayed by the foot-and-mouth disease outbreaks. However, the issues raised in the Report have been considered by both Agriculture Departments, the development agencies and the sectoral organisations, with a view to developing appropriate action.

My officials, along with the industry, are seeking to develop initiatives to improve the quality of Northern Ireland pigs, to encourage better marketing and promotion, and to bring together different parts of the industry in supply chain agreements. Furthermore, my Pig Technology staff based at Greenmount Agricultural College are available to assist any individual producer who wishes to take an in-depth look at his business to see how profitability could be improved.

Energy Efficiency

Mr Gibson asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development, in relation to the Programme for Government, if she will make a statement on her policy to promote energy efficiency in agriculture.
(AQW 1054/01)

Ms Rodgers: Promotion of energy efficiency in industry falls outside the remit of my Department, but DARD does have a role to play in the related issue of promoting renewable energy by supporting the growing of energy crops on agricultural land. Provided that it is consistent with the environmental requirements of the Woodland Grant Scheme, grants will be paid on suitable sites for the planting of approved clones of poplars, alders and willows intended for short rotation coppicing. My officials are currently working closely with UK Departments and other bodies on the deployment of the £15 million that has been allocated to Northern Ireland as a result of a recent initiative announced by the Prime Minister to promote renewable energy and the growing of energy crops.

DARD has invested significant sums in energy saving measures across its specialised buildings estate over many years. Such measures include new boilers and controls, lighting controls, thermal insulation, draught proofing of windows. The Department also draws from the Capital Energy Fund managed by DFP for larger projects.

Furthermore, under a 'Green Housekeeping' initiative the Rivers Agency has investigated the possibility of converting its vehicles to an alternative energy system but operational needs do not currently make such conversion cost-effective.

Hospitality Costs: December 2001

Mr Hilditch asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to detail (a) the cost of and (b) to whom she is providing hospitality during the month of December 2001.
(AQW 1068/01)

Ms Rodgers: The estimated cost of hospitality during December 2001 was £50.00.

That figure represents the cost of the refreshments I provided for the pupils of Torbank School and Bloomfield Collegiate, who took part in my Department's Carol Service on Tuesday 11 December 2001.

Foot-and-Mouth Disease Crisis, South Armagh: Staffing

Mr Berry asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to detail the number of staff and job description of each who worked in South Armagh during the foot-and-mouth disease crisis.
(AQW 1073/01)

Ms Rodgers: Dealing with the outbreak of foot-and-mouth disease in Meigh in south Armagh was a complex and difficult operation. As well as Veterinary Service staff, substantial numbers of other DARD staff, staff from other NICS Departments and local District Councils were involved in dealing with the outbreak.

The number of estimated days worked by the Veterinary Service and other parts of DARD that initially dealt directly with the outbreak for approximately the first month was as follows:

Veterinary professional	590 days
Technical (Veterinary Service)	664 days
Technical (DARD)	1,346 days
Administrative	135 days

However, substantial numbers of staff were also involved in the South Armagh area in follow up actions from the outbreak itself, completing the sheep cull, supporting Northern Ireland's attempts to get

regional status and undertaking sheep serology sampling. Information on the numbers of staff involved in this could only be obtained at a disproportionate cost.

Given the substantial range of tasks associated with combating a foot-and-mouth disease outbreak detailed job descriptions were not provided for each individual involved. Internal management instructions and advice were provided to supervisors on the ground who directed day to day duties.

Foot-And-Mouth Disease Crisis: Transfer of Staff

Mr Berry asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development if staff from Newry Veterinary Office were transferred to other areas affected by the foot-and-mouth disease crisis. (AQW 1074/01)

Ms Rodgers: The outbreak of foot-and-mouth disease in Meigh in February 2001 was the first to occur and predated the other outbreaks by seven weeks. During that time the staff in Newry acquired the knowledge and skills needed to deal with outbreaks. It was of great assistance to be able to draw on that knowledge when other outbreaks occurred particularly as the emphasis in Newry had by that stage moved to meeting EU requirements in relation to regionalisation and to the testing of other sheep flocks in the area.

As there were hundreds of staff involved in each of the outbreaks, and a substantial number involved in more than one outbreak, obtaining information on individuals moving between outbreaks could only be obtained at disproportionate cost.

Prescription of Veterinary Medicines

Mr Gibson asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development if she will make a statement in respect of the Code of Practice for prescribing veterinary medicine. (AQW 1097/01)

Ms Rodgers: The prescription of Veterinary Medicines, or rather the sale and supply of these, is not a matter which comes under the responsibility of the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development.

The Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety has responsibility for that legislation.

The Royal College of Veterinary Surgeons Code of Conduct provides extensive advice on the prescription of Veterinary Medicines and the British Veterinary Association has also issued a Code of Practice on Medicines and Guidelines on the prudent use of Antimicrobials.

Prevention of Bee Diseases

Mr Gibson asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development if she will make a statement in respect of what measures are taken to prevent the spread of bee diseases. (AQW 1098/01)

Ms Rodgers: The EU controls relating to animal diseases provide for free movement of bees between member states except where bee health is threatened, in that scenario national controls can be imposed to safeguard against various diseases. For the past 20 years the introduction of disease into Northern Ireland by means of the importation of bees from elsewhere has been strictly controlled by a general prohibition on bee imports under the Importation of Bees Order (NI) 1980.

Direct action to find and prevent the spread of disease is taken by means of Spring and Autumn surveys by Department staff to monitor hives for the presence of varroa, a parasitic mite which weakens bees and increases susceptibility to disease. Other diseases such as American and European foul brood are scheduled as notifiable diseases under the Bee Diseases Control Order (NI) 1998. If disease is recognised, hives are isolated and treated under Department supervision.

A free laboratory diagnostic service is also provided in the event of any suspicion of foul brood disease referred to the Department by bee-keepers. Training courses and Roadshows, to help bee-keepers recognise diseases, have been operated by the Department and courses are available subject to demand.

As Northern Ireland does not have varroa, and imports of bees from elsewhere are prohibited, a combined programme of monitoring, testing, advisory and educational work forms the primary action that can be taken to find and eradicate disease before it can spread.

Rural Tourism: East Londonderry

Mr McClarty asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development what plans she has to develop rural tourism within East Londonderry. (AQW 1099/01)

Ms Rodgers: Last November I announced the new Rural Development Programme. That will bring opportunities for rural tourism project promoters within East Londonderry to bring forward proposals under a range of measures:

PEACE II – The Natural Resource Rural Tourism Initiative will be delivered by locally based partnerships. The Causeway Coast and Glens Heritage Trust Tourism Initiative, 42 Causeway Road, Bushmills, BT57 8SU, have been selected to deliver the Programme in the Antrim region. Sperrins Tourism Limited, 50 Ballyronan Road, Magherafelt, BT45 6EN, will deliver the

Programme in the Sperrins region. Each partnership has been asked to submit a Natural Resource Rural Tourism Strategy for approval based on the area's tourism needs, the strategy will identify the themes and programmes to be delivered in the target areas. These partnerships have up to six months to submit a suitable strategy. The first calls for local applications will be made later this year following agreement of the strategies.

Leader+ will provide opportunities for micro businesses to bring forward proposals. These can include tourism projects. The Leader+ Local Action Groups in the East Londonderry Constituency are Coleraine Local Action Group for Enterprise Limited (COLLAGE) c/o Coleraine Borough Council Offices, Cloonavin, 66 Portstewart Road, Coleraine BT52 1EY and Roe Valley Leader Group Limited, Council offices, 7 Connell Street, Limavady BT49 OHA. Each Action Group will be invited to submit a business plan for approval based on the area's economic needs. The Group has up to three months to prepare and submit plans. The first call for applications will be made later this year after strategies are approved.

Programme for Building Sustainable Prosperity (PBSP) – Rural development measures under PBSP will provide opportunities for community, collective, co-operative and sectoral proposals which can also come from a tourism perspective. Building Sustainable Prosperity applications are currently being received from community groups, collectives and cooperatives. The closing date for receipt of applications is 1 February 2002. I anticipate that applications for proposals under the Sectoral Programme will be advertised in February 2002.

The Rural Development Programme has been developed to be broadly based and to respond to opportunities. The key requirement now will be the submission of innovative and viable proposals.

More specific information is available from my Department's Rural Area Co-ordinator, Jennifer McLemon on Telephone 028 25633815.

Status of the Fishing Industry

Mr Hilditch asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to give her assessment of the fishing industry in light of (a) the decreasing fish stock in the Irish Sea; and (b) the concerns of fishermen for the future of the industry. (AQW 1139/01)

Ms Rodgers: There is no doubt that the fishing industry has been going through a difficult period. The industry has been faced by reductions in fish quotas, closures of traditional fishing grounds because of cod recovery plans and increased fuel prices. The position would have worsened had the draconian cuts proposed by the European Commission for 2002 Total Allowable catches been ratified at the December Fisheries Council. At that Council I was therefore determined to obtain

the best possible deal for Northern Ireland in particular to protect our important prawn fisheries in the face of conservation arrangements. In this I was successful and in fact secured a 25.5% increase in the Commission's proposals in respect of prawns. Increases over the European Commission proposals were also achieved for the Irish Sea stocks of cod, plaice, sole, and haddock. In addition swaps were obtained from the Republic of Ireland for Irish Sea cod and plaice to help offset the losses incurred by the application of the Hague Preference arrangements. The need to conserve fish stocks has to be balanced with the need to preserve the industry if it is to have a long term future. To assist the industry, I announced a Fishing Vessel Decommissioning Scheme in October last year and Letters of Offer have now issued to the owners of 34 fishing vessels. More recently, I announced the opening of grant applications for schemes aimed at the Improvement of Facilities at Northern Ireland Fishing Ports, Aquaculture, Processing and Marketing of Freshwater and Marine Products and Promotions of Fishery Products.

Importation of Root Crop Products

Mr Bradley asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to confirm that root crop products imported from the UK pose no threat to animal health or to home grown produce. (AQW 1156/01)

Ms Rodgers: I am satisfied that root crop products imported into Northern Ireland do not constitute an animal health risk or a risk to home-grown produce. In the context of animal health, notably foot-and-mouth disease, premises identified as diseased constitute a remote risk in that the crops, if moved, could carry the disease in attached soil. However, risk would be minimal since it would be most unlikely that growing root crops would have had direct contact with foot-and-mouth disease susceptible animals. In any case under foot-and-mouth disease regulations no root crops are permitted to leave a foot-and-mouth diseased premises. There should therefore be no risk of infection spreading.

Turning to home-grown produce, whilst there is a wide variety of imported root crops, virtually none of these would be destined other than for multiple store retail outlets or processing plants, in which case contact with home-grown produce, at farm level, would not occur. The potential risk of plant diseases from imported root crops is therefore minimal. Waste from processing plants is subject to regular sampling to detect and eliminate any possible disease risk and I can confirm that no major plant health risk has yet been identified.

I would of course be happy to consider any specific root crops about which the Member has particular concerns.

Foot-and-Mouth Disease: Live Exports

Mr Weir asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development when she expects restrictions on the movements of farm animals from Northern Ireland to Great Britain will be lifted. (AQW 1220/01)

Ms Rodgers: I announced the resumption of live exports of foot-and-mouth disease susceptible animals from Northern Ireland to Great Britain by Press Release on 12 December 2001.

Postgraduate Agricultural Students: Funding

Mr Weir asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development if she has any plans to increase the level of funding available for postgraduate agricultural students. (AQW 1221/01)

Ms Rodgers: This Department follows the guidelines as laid down by the Department for Employment and Learning when determining the level of postgraduate funding for each year.

The level of funding has steadily increased from £5,778 in 1998 to £7,500 for the current academic year. This Department will apply the 2002-03 rates of grant established by the Department for Employment and Learning once they become available.

Global Warming

Mrs I Robinson asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to confirm that (a) global warming, the rise in sea temperatures by 3-4% and the rise in sea levels, is playing a pivotal role in changing the patterns of ocean currents; and (b) this is responsible for the change in behaviour and movement of sea fish and shellfish. (AQW 1223/01)

Ms Rodgers: While there may be a relationship between global warming, increases in sea temperatures and sea levels, and changing patterns of ocean currents, this has still to be established. Recently, the global 'Argo Experiment' has commenced to ascertain the causes of changes in the pattern of ocean currents. I understand that while the behaviour of sea fish and shellfish can be influenced by changes in the patterns of ocean currents, particularly in the open oceans and with migrating species, there is little evidence that this has caused any major change in any of the commercially important fish and shellfish targeted by the Northern Ireland fleet. A major influence on fish stocks' decline is overfishing. Even if the environment plays a bigger role than previously suspected, fish populations will be sensitive to collapse if overfishing and environmental change impact on their reproduction and growth.

Nephrops Quotas

Mrs I Robinson asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to detail the number of jobs lost as a direct result of the cuts in the nephrops quotas, in the last two years. (AQW 1239/01)

Ms Rodgers: Information on employment relating to the nephrops sector is not available but I am unaware of any significant losses as a direct result of cuts in the nephrops quotas in the last two years. There will, of course, be some losses arising from the fishing vessel decommissioning scheme. While there have been cuts in the Area VII nephrops quota in the last two years, the UK did not catch its quota in 2000 and is unlikely to do so in 2001.

Nephrops Industry

Mrs I Robinson asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development what action she intends to take to save the nephrops industry in light of the recent quota cuts. (AQW 1240/01)

Ms Rodgers: While recognising that there have been reductions in the TAC for nephrops in Area VII, I would point out that the nephrops quota for 2002 still exceeds the landings in each of the last two years. Nevertheless, a number of assistance measures have been introduced which will have an impact on the nephrops sector. Those include the fishing vessel decommissioning scheme and more recently the opening of grant applications for schemes aimed at Processing and Marketing of Freshwater and Marine Products and Promotions of Fishery Products.

Irish Sea Herring: Mourne Foreshore

Mrs I Robinson asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to confirm (a) that the herring spawning area off the Mourne foreshore has declined to 3% of the total number of spawning Irish Sea herring; and (b) the emergence of an unrecognised spawning area in the Solway Firth. (AQW 1241/01)

Ms Rodgers: In terms of biomass and numbers, the Mourne component of Irish Sea herring has not been assessed as a separate stock since 1982 but larvae surveys would suggest that the production of fish larvae from the Mourne foreshore is approximately 3% of the total Irish Sea herring larvae production. There is no evidence of major spawning of herring in the Solway Firth. It has, however, been suspected for some time that spawning has occurred to the North of the Isle of Man and this has been recently confirmed by larvae surveys and reports from the fishing industry.

Nephrops Population

Mrs I Robinson asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development what assessment she has made in relation to the decision of the EU to cut 25% in the total average catch of the nephrops population for 2002. (AQW 1255/01)

Ms Rodgers: The European Commission's proposal for a 25% cut in the nephrops total allowable catch for 2002 compared with 2001 would have meant great hardship to the local fishing industry. Nephrops is Northern Ireland's single most important fish stock and the effect of this proposal would have been to reduce the UK's quota to some 4,650 tonnes which is well below current catch limits. At Council I was therefore determined to resist this proposal and to overcome the European Commission's reticence for any increase because of their concerns that in the nephrops fishery there is a by catch of stocks such as cod and whiting which are in need of recovery action. In that I was successful, securing a 25% increase on the Commission's original proposal.

Vision Report

Mr Kane asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development if she will extend the consultation period for the Vision Report. (AQW 1264/01)

Ms Rodgers: In response to requests from the Assembly Committee on Agriculture and Rural Development, and from the industry, I have extended the deadline for comments on the Vision Report by one month to 31 January 2002.

All consultees have been advised by letter of this extension.

Vision Report

Mr Kane asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development what plans she has to implement the recommendations of the Vision report in respect of grading carcasses. (AQW 1265/01)

Ms Rodgers: The Vision Group recommended that my Department should consider, in consultation with the industry, the transfer of carcase classification from the Livestock and Meat Commission to the meat companies.

The fact that the Group has made this recommendation should not be taken to imply that I, or my officials, either support or oppose it. As with the other recommendations contained in the Vision Group report, I will take account of comments received during the consultation process before making any decision.

NIAPA

Mr Kane asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development if she will be reconsidering the role of NIAPA in light of the recent Wool Board Elections. (AQW 1267/01)

Ms Rodgers: The elections to which the Member refers are a matter for NIAPA and the British Wool Marketing Board. My relationship with NIAPA remains unchanged.

CULTURE, ARTS AND LEISURE

New Library Books

Mr Fee asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure how many new titles have been purchased for libraries by each Education and Library Board, in each of the last 5 years (AQW 1084/01)

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure (Mr McGimpsey): The Belfast Education and Library Board began collecting this information in 2000. The number of new titles purchased by the Board in the 2000-01 financial year amounted to 22,698.

The remaining Boards do not gather the information and could obtain it only at a disproportionate cost.

Public Libraries

Mrs I Robinson asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to detail (a) the number of books currently being held in each public library; (b) the size of population which each public library is intended to serve; and (c) the amount of money spent by each Education and Library Board, on libraries under their control, in each of the last five years. (AQW 1091/01)

Mr McGimpsey: Table 1 shows the number of books held in each public library and mobile.

There are no specific catchment areas for public libraries. Each public library is primarily provided to meet the needs of a local community and the scale of the library is broadly proportionate to the population of that community. However, the services of the library are available to everyone no matter where they reside or work and when the Electronic Libraries for Northern Ireland project is implemented it will be possible at any branch library to request books and items from any other branch library in Northern Ireland.

Table 2 shows the amount of money spent by each board over the past five years on the library service.

TABLE 1 NUMBER OF BOOKS CURRENTLY HELD IN EACH BRANCH LIBRARY

Belfast Board	
Central Reference Library	927,067
Central Lending Library	32,770
Mobile library (1)	3,330
Mobile library (2)	3,364
Ballymacarrett	12,661
Ballygomartin	7,792
Chichester	26,092
Falls Road	15,142
Finaghy	16,993
Hollywood Arches	17,761
Ligoneil	10,281
Lisburn Road	22,715
Oldpark	8,692
Ormeau	19,428
Sandy Row	6,557
Shankill	15,469
Skegoneill	16,591
Special Services department	14,900
Suffolk	15,442
Whiterock	13,421
Whitewell	5,472
Woodstock	16,022
Southern Board	
Armagh	23,982
Banbridge	15,039
Bessbrook	7,623
Brownlow	15,333
Coalisland	11,506
Cookstown	20,820
Crossmaglen	7,252
Dromore	7,712
Dungannon	23,483
Fivemiletown	7,339
Gilford	6,037
Keady	8,391
Kilkeel	15,012
Lurgan	22,873
Moneymore	6,715
Moy	5,941
Newry	33,206
Portadown	23,216
Rathfriland	9,737

Richill	8,119
Tandragee	8,119
Waringstown	4,810
Warrenpoint	14,896
South Eastern Board	
Downpatrick	15,506
Ballynahinch	12,042
Castlewellan	8,582
Killyleagh	5,823
Newcastle	13,138
Saintfield	8,729
Mobile (1)	4,458
Mobile (2)	4,030
Dairy Farm	23,133
Dunmurry	6,078
Laurelhill	12,643
Lisburn	18,511
Moirra	8,331
Poleglass	6,553
Mobile (3)	4,769
Tullycarnet	19,149
Belvoir Park	6,002
Branial	6,868
Carryduff	7,921
Cregagh	22,274
Dundonald	19,908
Gilnahirk	6,747
Newtownbreda	18,014
Hollywood	17,431
Bangor	47,642
Comber	14,908
Donaghadee	12,472
Newtownards	30,981
Portaferry	8,184
Mobile (4)	4,319
Mobile (5)	4,677
Western Board	
Castledearg	9,169
Central	42,266
Creggan	23,177
Dungiven	9,378
Enniskillen	24,392
Fintona	8,187
Irvinestown	12,712
Limavady	20,688

Lisnaskea	17,970
Newtownstewart	9,481
Omagh	68,280
Shantallow	21,271
Sion-Mills	8,086
Strabane	25,774
Strathfoyle	14,784
Waterside	27,895
North Eastern Board	
Ahoghill	9,481
Antrim	10,587
Antrim Area Reserve	36,458
Ballee	13,826
Ballycastle	14,573
Ballyclare	24,281
Ballymena	42,669
Ballymoney	19,209
Bellaghy	7,101
Broughshane	10,742
Bushmills	7,539
Carnlough	11,661
Carrickfergus	40,334
Castlerock	5,811
Cloughmills	6,214
Cloughfern	11,803
Coleraine	23,423
Crumlin	10,161
Cullybackey	10,112
Cushendall	12,631
Draperstown	9,837
Garvagh	9,403
Glengormley	38,858
Greenisland	12,246
Greystone	20,128
Irish Room	1,798
Kells and Connor	7,246
Kilrea	8,899
Larne	33,884
Local Studies	4,214
Maghera	14,477
Magherafelt	16,969
Mobiles (total)	52,380
Monkstown	8,002
Portglenone	11,119
Portrush	10,324

Portstewart	10,204
Randalstown	10,473
Rathcoole	24,668
Templepatrick	8,651
Whitehead	11,698

TABLE 2 EXPENDITURE ON THE PUBLIC LIBRARY SERVICE BY THE FIVE EDUCATION AND LIBRARY BOARDS

Board	96/97 £	97/98 £	98/99 £	99/2000 £	2000/01 £
Belfast Board	4,723,954	4,485,306	4,882,055	4,806,282	4,977,187
North Eastern	3,520,006	3,686,152	3,819,006	3,728,363	4,114,287
South Eastern	3,913,944	3,693,406	4,519,994	4,646,721	4,336,317
Southern Board	3,235,562	3,426,769	3,256,670	3,717,693	4,639,190
Western Board	3,341,765	3,475,479	3,306,049	3,237,900	3,326,401

Northern Ireland Film Commission

Mr J Wilson asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure what support he has been able to give the Northern Ireland Film Industry. (AQW 1186/01)

Mr McGimpsey: The Northern Ireland Film Commission (NIFC) is the body responsible for the development of the film industry, and film culture, in Northern Ireland. The NIFC is funded primarily by DCAL and by DETI, via the Local Enterprise Development Unit (LEDU). In the current financial year my Department will provide assistance totalling almost £460,000 to the NIFC, an increase of 66% on the previous year. LEDU will provide £250,000 and the NIFC will receive a further £390,000 from a range of other organisations including the UK Film Council, the Arts Council of Northern Ireland, Ulster Television and Belfast City Council.

The NIFC is currently contracted by the Arts Council of Northern Ireland to provide assessment and monitoring services for all film applications to its Lottery Arts Fund. With my support and encouragement, the Arts Council has agreed to delegate its Lottery film budget to the NIFC, thus putting an additional £1m a year at the NIFC's disposal for an initial period of three years from 1 April 2002.

In the past year the Board of the NIFC has been reconstituted under its new Chairman. My senior officials meet the Chairman and Chief Executive on a regular basis and I recently received a presentation from the Chairman on the NIFC's new strategy proposals for the development of the film, television

and new media industries in Northern Ireland. The strategy proposals, which are currently under consideration by my Department, set out a vision for the next ten years to make Northern Ireland a competitive player in the global film industry. Those include specific proposals for inward investment in production and development; and programmes for training, culture and education. My officials are examining the resource implications of the proposals and will be working with the NIFC in the coming weeks to develop a business case that can win support across the range of relevant Government Departments.

Waterways Ireland

Mr Hilditch asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to detail the costs of consultancy work for Waterways Ireland in respect of (a) the marketing and promotional strategy; and (b) the development of a corporate image. (AQW 1197/01)

Mr McGimpsey: The issue referred to by the Member is now a matter for Waterways Ireland, the North/South Implementation Body for Inland Waterways. Waterways Ireland has the functions of management, maintenance, development and restoration of certain inland navigable waterway systems throughout the island, principally for recreational purposes.

I understand from Waterways Ireland that:

- (a) a maximum contract fee of IR£20,500 (excluding VAT) has been agreed with consultants for the formulation of a report and recommendations regarding a Marketing and Promotional Strategy for the Body; and
- (b) a maximum contract fee of IR£8,448 (excluding expenses and VAT) has been agreed with consultants for the creation and development of a new Corporate Identity for the Body.

Promotion of Arts in Areas of Social and Economic Deprivation

Mr M Robinson asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure what support and encouragement is given to the Arts to help promote events for socially and economically disadvantaged communities. (AQW 1201/01)

Mr McGimpsey: The Arts Council through its Community Arts Revenue programme and Access to the Arts Lottery programme, supports the arts in areas of social and economic deprivation. In addition, the Awards for All lottery programme funds projects in support of the arts and priority is given to those projects located in such areas. Those may take the form of participative arts activity or 'bought in arts'

events. All are funded on the basis that they are accessible to everyone, are of public benefit and are of high quality.

In terms of the Arts Council's approach to locating arts in areas of social deprivation they have undertaken and continue to plan arts activities in conjunction with other agencies such as the Youth Council, the Northern Ireland Housing Executive, the Rural Community Network and the Community Development and Health Network.

EDUCATION

Special Education Units

Mr Gibson asked the Minister of Education how many 'learning support units' have been established in schools; and to make a statement. (AQW 964/01)

The Minister of Education (Mr M McGuinness): If the question refers to special education units for children with statements of special educational needs, there are currently 64 units attached to primary schools and 41 attached to secondary schools. If the question refers to in-school units where pupils are withdrawn for short periods of intensive support, the establishment of such units is a matter for individual schools; no record is kept centrally of numbers of such units.

Levels of Truancy and Exclusion

Mr M Robinson asked the Minister of Education to detail the current level of school truancy and exclusions. (AQW 985/01)

Mr M McGuinness: The most recent returns from the education and library boards are for the 2000-01 school year. During that year, 84 pupils were expelled, 5,388 pupils were suspended and 10,382 pupils were referred to the Education Welfare Service for attendance related problems.

Truancy and Indiscipline in Schools

Mr M Robinson asked the Minister of Education what progress is being made in tackling truancy and indiscipline in schools. (AQW 986/01)

Mr M McGuinness: My Department has set targets in the Programme for Government and the draft Public Service Agreement for improved attendance at school and to reduce the number of pupils who are multiply suspended. Those targets will be reflected in the business plans for the education and library boards and progress will be monitored each year. In addition

there are a number of projects aimed at retaining in education specific groups of young people at risk of 'dropping out'. My Department has recently issued comprehensive guidance to schools on promoting positive behaviour, and each Education and Library Board has established a multi-disciplinary Behaviour Support Team to work with teachers and individual pupils.

Loanends Primary School, Antrim

Mr Clyde asked the Minister of Education to detail his plans for a replacement school at Loanends Primary School, Antrim; and to make a statement.

(AQW 1012/01)

Mr M McGuinness: My Department accepts the need for a new school for Loanends and has been communicating with the North-Eastern Education and Library Board about revisions to its Economic Appraisal on the accommodation needs of the school. When the appraisal is finalised, formal planning of the project can proceed to enable it to be considered for a place in the capital programme.

Thinking Skills Strategy

Mr Hamilton asked the Minister of Education to detail any provision within the school curriculum for the encouragement of lateral thinking by pupils as opposed to systems thinking.

(AQW 1025/01)

Mr M McGuinness: As a result of various CCEA and ELB initiatives there is already an awareness and understanding in schools of lateral thinking. As part of the current curriculum review, CCEA proposes the introduction of a generic skills framework which would specifically include a Thinking Skills category. The Review also aims to promote critical and creative thinking more explicitly through all subjects.

My Department is also co-funding a research project on Sustainable Thinking Classrooms, the aim of which is to create and evaluate practical teaching strategies to improve classroom learning in primary schools, through enhancing pupils' thinking skills across the curriculum.

CCEA Review of Curriculum

Mr K Robinson asked the Minister of Education what steps he will take to consult business and industry in an effort to design the curriculum for school age pupils to meet the needs and educational demands expressed by employers.

(AQW 1026/01)

Mr M McGuinness: In undertaking the current review of the curriculum the Council for the Curriculum, Examinations and Assessment (CCEA) has proposed

that a specific programme for Employability should be provided, as a statutory requirement for all young people in Key Stages 3 and 4. One of the objectives of the review is to encourage pupils to develop the skills and qualities which they will need for the world of work. There has been (and will continue to be) widespread consultation with employers to ensure that their needs are taken into account in a revised curriculum and an Employability Advisory Group has also been set up to co-ordinate their views.

Hospitality: December 2001

Mr Hilditch asked the Minister of Education to detail (a) the cost of and (b) to whom he is providing hospitality during the month of December 2001.

(AQW 1067/01)

Mr M McGuinness: The estimated cost of hospitality during December is £145.00 and was incurred in respect of meetings I held with various groups and organisations.

Studying in Another EU State

Mr Beggs asked the Minister of Education what information he provides to students in relation to additional costs, such as medical, that may result if they decide to study in another EU State outside the UK.

(AQW 1080/01)

Mr M McGuinness: I am not aware of any students of compulsory school age studying in another EU State.

Nursery Places: Newtownards

Mrs I Robinson asked the Minister of Education, pursuant to AQW 772/01, to make a statement in relation to the number of applications for nursery places in the Newtownards area for 2000-01 and the number of places provided.

(AQW 1104/01)

Mr M McGuinness: Figures in AQW 772/01 include multiple applications from parents applying to more than one nursery school. Including 26 places which have been provided at the nursery unit at Abbey from September 2001, the number of statutory nursery places in the Newtownards area has increased from 156 to 234. A further 101 places in the voluntary/private sector in the Newtownards area are being funded under the Pre-School Education Expansion Programme bringing the overall number of places available to 335. Based on the estimated 346 pre-school children in the Newtownards area, there are therefore places for around 97% of the pre-school cohort.

Special Educational Needs

Mr M Robinson asked the Minister of Education what percentage of primary and secondary school pupils are currently recognised as having special educational needs. (AQW 1115/01)

Mr M McGuinness: The October 2000 school census shows 1.43% of primary school children have statements of special educational needs and 1.53% of those in secondary schools. These percentages include both those in mainstream classes and those in special education units. Figures are not yet available for October 2001.

Special Educational Needs

Mr M Robinson asked the Minister of Education to outline what guidance is available for teachers in relation to the supervision of children with special needs during non-teaching periods of the school day. (AQW 1117/01)

Mr M McGuinness: Children with statements of special educational needs have their needs assessed and provided for on an individual basis. Under special education legislation where a child with a statement attends an ordinary school, the Board of Governors must use its best endeavours to secure that the required special educational provision is made. Where additional help is required, Education and Library Boards provide classroom or other assistance which may cover non-teaching periods of the school day.

Ethos of Post-Primary Schools

Mr Gibson asked the Minister of Education what representations he has received in respect of the ethos of post-primary schools in all educational sectors. (AQW 1132/01)

Mr M McGuinness: In response to the Burns Report, my Department has received three submissions expressing concern about grammar schools maintaining their academic ethos in the absence of selection by academic ability. Questions about the ethos of schools were also raised at some of the information seminars undertaken by the Burns Review Body.

The ethos of a school is about the values to which it subscribes rather than the academic ability of the pupils it admits.

Burns Report: Implementation

Mr Hamilton asked the Minister of Education to outline (a) if he has established any Departmental Committees or bodies to oversee the implementation of the Burns Report, or any aspect thereof, in advance

of full public consultation on these proposals having taken place; and (b) if any such bodies or Committees are in the process of being formed and, if so, what is their remit. (AQW 1141/01)

Mr M McGuinness: No committees or bodies have been established to oversee implementation of the Burns Report. Everyone with an interest or an opinion has until 17 May 2002 to respond to the proposals and no decisions will be taken until I have considered all the comments. A small team of my Department's officials has been established to manage the consultation process, receive and analyse comments and bring forward proposals for decision in due course.

Capital/Maintenance Expenditure: Rainey Endowed School, Magherafelt

Rev Dr William McCrea asked the Minister of Education to detail the amount of funding allocated for (a) capital; and (b) maintenance costs at Rainey Endowed School, Magherafelt in each of the last 3 years. (AQW 1143/01)

Mr M McGuinness: The respective capital and maintenance expenditure at each school is indicated below:

School	Capital (£)			Maintenance (£)		
	1998-1999	1999-2000	2000-2001	1998-1999	1999-2000	2000-2001
Rainey Endowed School, Magherafelt	107,724	99,985	209,465	20,853	26,343	16,631
Maghera High School	87,386	7,209	9,120	152,573	257,944	28,617
Magherafelt High School	41,671	23,771	34	44,776	37,090	36,388
St Colm's High School, Draperstown	22,104	5,850	21,932	113,030	71,694	65,128
St Mary's Grammar School, Magherafelt	50,110	8,060	68,115	86,334	36,703	76,247
St Pius X High School, Magherafelt	145,677	262,352	3,449,168	35,541	28,678	21,283
St Patrick's College, Maghera	219,091	11,148	23,733	109,671	166,161	137,673

- (1) Capital represents the combined capital expenditure by education and library boards (including expenditure on school meals accommodation) and capital grants by the Department of Education.
- (2) 'Maintenance' represents the combined 'landlord' maintenance expenditure by education and library boards and 'tenant'

maintenance expenditure by each school (except Rainey Endowed and St Mary's Grammar Schools, Magherafelt).

- (3) Maintenance expenditure by Rainey Endowed and St Mary's Grammar Schools, Magherafelt is met from within their recurrent funding allocations under the Local Management of Schools (LMS) arrangements and the figures shown represent the maintenance expenditure indicated in the respective school accounts for the last three years.

Capital/Maintenance Expenditure: Maghera High School

Rev Dr William McCrea asked the Minister of Education to detail the amount of funding allocated for (a) capital; and (b) maintenance costs at Maghera High School, in each of the last 3 years. (AQW 1144/01)

Mr M McGuinness: The respective capital and maintenance expenditure at each school is indicated below:

School	Capital (£)			Maintenance (£)		
	1998-1999	1999-2000	2000-2001	1998-1999	1999-2000	2000-2001
Rainey Endowed School, Magherafelt	107,724	99,985	209,465	20,853	26,343	16,631
Maghera High School	87,386	7,209	9,120	152,573	257,944	28,617
Magherafelt High School	41,671	23,771	34	44,776	37,090	36,388
St Colm's High School, Draperstown	22,104	5,850	21,932	113,030	71,694	65,128
St Mary's Grammar School, Magherafelt	50,110	8,060	68,115	86,334	36,703	76,247
St Pius X High School, Magherafelt	145,677	262,352	3,449,168	35,541	28,678	21,283
St Patrick's College, Maghera	219,091	11,148	23,733	109,671	166,161	137,673

- (1) 'Capital' represents the combined capital expenditure by education and library boards (including expenditure on school meals accommodation) and capital grants by the Department of Education.
- (2) 'Maintenance' represents the combined 'landlord' maintenance expenditure by education and library boards and 'tenant' maintenance expenditure by each school (except Rainey Endowed and St Mary's Grammar Schools, Magherafelt).
- (3) Maintenance expenditure by Rainey Endowed and St Mary's Grammar Schools, Magherafelt is met from within their recurrent funding allocations under the Local Management of Schools (LMS) arrangements and the figures shown represent the maintenance expenditure indicated in the respective school accounts for the last three years.

Capital/Maintenance Expenditure: Magherafelt High School

Rev Dr William McCrea asked the Minister of Education to detail the amount of funding allocated for (a) capital; and (b) maintenance costs at Magherafelt High School, in each of the last 3 years.

(AQW 1145/01)

Mr M McGuinness: The respective capital and maintenance expenditure at each school is indicated below:

School	Capital (£)			Maintenance (£)		
	1998-1999	1999-2000	2000-2001	1998-1999	1999-2000	2000-2001
Rainey Endowed School, Magherafelt	107,724	99,985	209,465	20,853	26,343	16,631
Maghera High School	87,386	7,209	9,120	152,573	257,944	28,617
Magherafelt High School	41,671	23,771	34	44,776	37,090	36,388
St Colm's High School, Draperstown	22,104	5,850	21,932	113,030	71,694	65,128
St Mary's Grammar School, Magherafelt	50,110	8,060	68,115	86,334	36,703	76,247
St Pius X High School, Magherafelt	145,677	262,352	3,449,168	35,541	28,678	21,283
St Patrick's College, Maghera	219,091	11,148	23,733	109,671	166,161	137,673

- (1) 'Capital' represents the combined capital expenditure by education and library boards (including expenditure on school meals accommodation) and capital grants by the Department of Education.
- (2) 'Maintenance' represents the combined 'landlord' maintenance expenditure by education and library boards and 'tenant' maintenance expenditure by each school (except Rainey Endowed and St Mary's Grammar Schools, Magherafelt).
- (3) Maintenance expenditure by Rainey Endowed and St Mary's Grammar Schools, Magherafelt is met from within their recurrent funding allocations under the Local Management of Schools (LMS) arrangements and the figures shown represent the maintenance expenditure indicated in the respective school accounts for the last three years.

Capital/Maintenance Expenditure: St Colm's High School, Draperstown

Rev Dr William McCrea asked the Minister of Education to detail the amount of funding allocated

for (a) capital; and (b) maintenance costs at St Colm's High School, Draperstown in each of the last 3 years.

(AQW 1146/01)

Mr M McGuinness: The respective capital and maintenance expenditure at each school is indicated below:

School	Capital (£)			Maintenance (£)		
	1998-1999	1999-2000	2000-2001	1998-1999	1999-2000	2000-2001
Rainey Endowed School, Magherafelt	107,724	99,985	209,465	20,853	26,343	16,631
Maghera High School	87,386	7,209	9,120	152,573	257,944	28,617
Magherafelt High School	41,671	23,771	34	44,776	37,090	36,388
St Colm's High School, Draperstown	22,104	5,850	21,932	113,030	71,694	65,128
St Mary's Grammar School, Magherafelt	50,110	8,060	68,115	86,334	36,703	76,247
St Pius X High School, Magherafelt	145,677	262,352	3,449,168	35,541	28,678	21,283
St Patrick's College, Maghera	219,091	11,148	23,733	109,671	166,161	137,673

- (1) 'Capital' represents the combined capital expenditure by education and library boards (including expenditure on school meals accommodation) and capital grants by the Department of Education.
- (2) 'Maintenance' represents the combined 'landlord' maintenance expenditure by education and library boards and 'tenant' maintenance expenditure by each school (except Rainey Endowed and St Mary's Grammar Schools, Magherafelt).
- (3) Maintenance expenditure by Rainey Endowed and St Mary's Grammar Schools, Magherafelt is met from within their recurrent funding allocations under the Local Management of Schools (LMS) arrangements and the figures shown represent the maintenance expenditure indicated in the respective school accounts for the last three years.

Capital/Maintenance Expenditure: St Mary's Grammar School, Magherafelt

Rev Dr William McCrea asked the Minister of Education to detail the amount of funding allocated for (a) capital; and (b) maintenance costs at St Mary's Grammar School, Magherafelt in each of the last 3 years.

(AQW 1147/01)

Mr M McGuinness: The respective capital and maintenance expenditure at each school is indicated below:

School	Capital (£)			Maintenance (£)		
	1998-1999	1999-2000	2000-2001	1998-1999	1999-2000	2000-2001
Rainey Endowed School, Magherafelt	107,724	99,985	209,465	20,853	26,343	16,631
Maghera High School	87,386	7,209	9,120	152,573	257,944	28,617
Magherafelt High School	41,671	23,771	34	44,776	37,090	36,388
St Colm's High School, Draperstown	22,104	5,850	21,932	113,030	71,694	65,128
St Mary's Grammar School, Magherafelt	50,110	8,060	68,115	86,334	36,703	76,247
St Pius X High School, Magherafelt	145,677	262,352	3,449,168	35,541	28,678	21,283
St Patrick's College, Maghera	219,091	11,148	23,733	109,671	166,161	137,673

- (1) 'Capital' represents the combined capital expenditure by education and library boards (including expenditure on school meals accommodation) and capital grants by the Department of Education.
- (2) 'Maintenance' represents the combined 'landlord' maintenance expenditure by education and library boards and 'tenant' maintenance expenditure by each school (except Rainey Endowed and St Mary's Grammar Schools, Magherafelt).
- (3) Maintenance expenditure by Rainey Endowed and St Mary's Grammar Schools, Magherafelt is met from within their recurrent funding allocations under the Local Management of Schools (LMS) arrangements and the figures shown represent the maintenance expenditure indicated in the respective school accounts for the last three years.

Bureaucratic Burden on Teachers

Mr M Robinson asked the Minister of Education how he intends to reduce the amount of time teachers spend on administration.

(AQW 1148/01)

Mr M McGuinness: My aim is to reduce bureaucracy to the minimum consistent with supporting effective teaching. In 1998 my Department issued a Circular which provided detailed advice and guidance about minimising the bureaucratic burden. Further guidance issued in October 2000.

Since 1998, a Working Group has been examining how the external demands on schools can be rationalised and the bureaucratic burden reduced. Research is being carried out into the impact of the guidance issued.

Permanently Excluded Pupils: Educational Review

Mr M Robinson asked the Minister of Education what guidance he has issued regarding educating children who have been permanently excluded from school. (AQW 1151/01)

Mr M McGuinness: No specific guidance about the type of education to be provided has issued. Alternative education arrangements for these pupils need to be tailored to meet individual circumstances. However, Regulations require that a pre-expulsion meeting be held between the Principal, the Chairman of the Board of Governors, the parent(s) of the pupil, a designated officer from the relevant education and library board, and, where appropriate, a designated officer of CCMS, to consider both the proposed expulsion and the future provision of suitable education for the pupil concerned.

Each education and library board has a statutory duty to make arrangements for the provision of suitable education at school or otherwise than at school for those children of compulsory school age who by reason of expulsion from school may not for any period receive suitable education unless such arrangements are made for them.

Capital/Maintenance Expenditure: St Pius X High School, Magherafelt

Rev Dr William McCrea asked the Minister of Education to detail the amount of funding allocated for capital and maintenance costs at St Pius X High School, Magherafelt in each of the last 3 years. (AQW 1163/01)

Mr M McGuinness: The respective capital and maintenance expenditure at each school is indicated below:

School	Capital (£)			Maintenance (£)		
	1998-1999	1999-2000	2000-2001	1998-1999	1999-2000	2000-2001
Rainey Endowed School, Magherafelt	107,724	99,985	209,465	20,853	26,343	16,631
Maghera High School	87,386	7,209	9,120	152,573	257,944	28,617
Magherafelt High School	41,671	23,771	34	44,776	37,090	36,388
St Colm's High School, Draperstown	22,104	5,850	21,932	113,030	71,694	65,128
St Mary's Grammar School, Magherafelt	50,110	8,060	68,115	86,334	36,703	76,247

School	Capital (£)			Maintenance (£)		
	1998-1999	1999-2000	2000-2001	1998-1999	1999-2000	2000-2001
St Pius X High School, Magherafelt	145,677	262,352	3,449,168	35,541	28,678	21,283
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- (1) 'Capital' represents the combined capital expenditure by education and library boards (including expenditure on school meals accommodation) and capital grants by the Department of Education.
- (2) 'Maintenance' represents the combined 'landlord' maintenance expenditure by education and library boards and 'tenant' maintenance expenditure by each school (except Rainey Endowed and St Mary's Grammar Schools, Magherafelt).
- (3) Maintenance expenditure by Rainey Endowed and St Mary's Grammar Schools, Magherafelt is met from within their recurrent funding allocations under the Local Management of Schools (LMS) arrangements and the figures shown represent the maintenance expenditure indicated in the respective school accounts for the last three years.

Capital/Maintenance Expenditure: St Patrick's College, Maghera

Rev Dr William McCrea asked the Minister of Education to detail the amount of funding allocated for capital and maintenance costs at St Patrick's College, Maghera in each of the last 3 years. (AQW 1164/01)

Mr M McGuinness: The respective capital and maintenance expenditure at each school is indicated below:

School	Capital (£)			Maintenance (£)		
	1998-1999	1999-2000	2000-2001	1998-1999	1999-2000	2000-2001
Rainey Endowed School, Magherafelt	107,724	99,985	209,465	20,853	26,343	16,631
Maghera High School	87,386	7,209	9,120	152,573	257,944	28,617
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St Colm's High School, Draperstown	22,104	5,850	21,932	113,030	71,694	65,128
St Mary's Grammar School, Magherafelt	50,110	8,060	68,115	86,334	36,703	76,247
St Pius X High School, Magherafelt	145,677	262,352	3,449,168	35,541	28,678	21,283

School	Capital (£)			Maintenance (£)		
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- (1) 'Capital' represents the combined capital expenditure by education and library boards (including expenditure on school meals accommodation) and capital grants by the Department of Education.
- (2) 'Maintenance' represents the combined 'landlord' maintenance expenditure by education and library boards and 'tenant' maintenance expenditure by each school (except Rainey Endowed and St Mary's Grammar Schools, Magherafelt).
- (3) Maintenance expenditure by Rainey Endowed and St Mary's Grammar Schools, Magherafelt is met from within their recurrent funding allocations under the Local Management of Schools (LMS) arrangements and the figures shown represent the maintenance expenditure indicated in the respective school accounts for the last three years.

Model Primary School, Newtownards

Mrs I Robinson asked the Minister of Education to detail (a) the commencement date for renovation work at the Model Primary School, Newtownards; and (b) the timescale of this work. (AQW 1210/01)

Mr M McGuinness: A scheme for improvement of the accommodation at the Model Primary school, Newtownards is in the early stages. The South-Eastern Education and Library Board, has started an economic appraisal and when this is complete and approved by my Department the scheme will then have to compete with others for funding. It is not possible to say at this stage when work will commence.

Children in Care: Improving Educational Attainment

Mr M Robinson asked the Minister of Education what targets he has set for improving the educational attainment of children in care. (AQW 1228/01)

Mr M McGuinness: I fully accept the need to ensure that the educational attainment of children in care is as high as that of other children. Those children are not, however, a homogeneous group. My Department is working with the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to establish a database on children who are looked after and this will include information about progress in education. This information will be used to inform decisions on targets in due course.

Burns Report: Implementation

Mr Hamilton asked the Minister of Education, pursuant to AQW 1141/01, to detail (a) the terms of

the remit given to the team of officials; (b) the number of officials on the team; (c) whether this team has power to establish sub-committees; and (d) whether such sub-committees have in fact been established. (AQW 1284/01)

Mr M McGuinness: The remit of the team of officials was set out in my reply to AQW 1141/01. From 14 January the team will comprise 6 officials, including support staff. The team proposes to establish working groups with other Department officials to consider the implications of the review; none have yet been established.

EMPLOYMENT AND LEARNING

People with Learning Difficulties

Mr Gibson asked the Minister for Employment and Learning to detail her plans to encourage people with learning difficulties back into work. (AQW 968/01)

The Minister for Employment and Learning (Ms Hanna): My Department provides a range of services to assist people with varying degrees of learning difficulty to enter or re-enter the world of work. That assistance includes appropriate professional advice and guidance. There is a range of training provision and programmes through which people can directly access employment opportunities.

Safety and Security of Staff

Mr Gibson asked the Minister for Employment and Learning what plans she has to ensure the safety of Training and Employment Agency staff. (AQW 976/01)

Ms Hanna: The safety of all staff in my Department is of paramount importance. A nominated officer at each of the Department's offices ensures the safety and security of staff and premises. Staff are made aware of local health and safety arrangements through the Department's Induction Training package. Risk assessments are carried out by qualified staff as appropriate.

Financial Support for Students

Mr Beggs asked the Minister for Employment and Learning what information she provides to students in relation to additional costs, such as medical, that may result if they decide to study in another EU State outside the UK. (AQW 1081/01)

Ms Hanna: Students are advised in my Department's booklet "Financial Support for Higher Education Students" that if they attend an overseas institution for at least eight weeks, as a necessary part of their course,

and if they are required to take out medical insurance, they can then get assistance to help cover the cost.

Hospitality Costs: December 2001

Mr Hilditch asked the Minister for Employment and Learning to detail (a) the cost of and (b) to whom she is providing hospitality during the month of December 2001. (AQW 1110/01)

Ms Hanna: The Minister jointly hosted with the Permanent Secretary, a Christmas reception for approximately 50 of the Department's key stakeholders, at a cost of approximately £450. This was the total cost of hospitality in December excluding the cost of the provision of coffee at business meetings.

Student Funding

Mr M Robinson asked the Minister for Employment and Learning to outline her plans to support people such as mature persons, women and people from low socio-economic backgrounds entering higher education. (AQW 1193/01)

Ms Hanna: Earlier this year, my predecessor announced funding over the next three years to assist students most in need to enter higher education.

That will include bursaries of up to £1500 a year for those whose family income is £10,000 or less and childcare grants for students on low income.

Lone Parent Students: Financial Support

Mr M Robinson asked the Minister for Employment and Learning to outline her plans to support lone parents moving into further and higher education. (AQW 1194/01)

Ms Hanna: In respect of higher education, lone parent students can apply for a Childcare Grant that helps students meet childcare costs: while students with dependants can avail of Dependants Allowance. In Further Education (FE) lone parents can apply for financial assistance from the college's Support Funds (discretionary) budget, as well as the new means tested FE Bursaries.

Student Loans

Mr Kennedy asked the Minister for Employment and Learning to detail (a) the current regulations regarding the payment of income tax on student loans; and (b) any plans or proposals he has to alter the existing position; and to make a statement. (AQW 1200/01)

Ms Hanna: (a) Student loans are exempt from income tax; (b) Income tax is not a devolved matter.

Student Support Review

Dr Birnie asked the Minister for Employment and Learning to outline if she will be making any contribution to Westminster's review of tuition fees and student funding. (AQW 1225/01)

Ms Hanna: I am monitoring the progress of the Student Support Review in Whitehall. I will make my views known to Department for Education and Skills at the appropriate time.

ENTERPRISE, TRADE AND INVESTMENT

Ballylumford Power Station

Mr Hilditch asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to detail (a) the number of foreign nationals currently working at Ballylumford Power Station; and (b) if they meet the minimum wage criteria. (AQW 965/01)

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment (Sir Reg Empey): My Department does not hold that information, which relates to issues outside its remit and to a private company. Nationals of countries from outside the European Union and the European Economic Area require an employment permit to work in Northern Ireland. Responsibility for the issue of employment permits rests with my colleague the Minister for Employment and Learning. The National Minimum Wage is a reserved matter, on which the Department of Trade and Industry leads for the United Kingdom as a whole.

Interface Europe Ltd

Dr O'Hagan asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to detail the funding available to Interface Europe Ltd, Craigavon for training purposes over the past two years. (AQW 974/01)

Sir Reg Empey: Interface Europe Ltd has not received any funding for training through DETI's Company Development Programme in the past two years (July 1999 to date).

Funding for training may also have been available through programmes run by other NI Government Departments.

Impact of Recent Events on Inward Investment

Mr K Robinson asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment what assessment he has made of the impact of recent events in the Great Hall, Parliament Buildings, on Northern Ireland's positive image and the ability to attract foreign direct investment.

(AQW 1011/01)

Sir Reg Empey: Such images of Northern Ireland as those witnessed in the Great Hall can only undermine our efforts to attract new investors. However, my officials at home and in the international marketplace have advised that these specific events did not feature to any significant degree in discussions with potential investors, despite local media coverage. I would, however, be most concerned that a repeat of such circumstances would damage Northern Ireland's image as an area of growing stability in a difficult and uncertain global economy.

Renewable Energy

Mr Douglas asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to detail the amount of electricity generated which has come from renewable resources in the years 1999 and 2000.

(AQW 1017/01)

Sir Reg Empey: I am advised by NIE that in 1999 renewable energy sources supplied 111.36 GWh and in 2000 121.117 GWh of electricity onto the Northern Ireland grid.

This equates to approximately 1.5% of the total electricity supplied onto the grid.

Renewable Energy

Mr Boyd Douglas asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to detail (a) the sources of renewable energy used for electricity production; and (b) the percentage of electricity generated for the grid by each source.

(AQW 1023/01)

Sir Reg Empey: The sources of renewable energy commonly used for the generation of electricity in Northern Ireland are wind, hydro and biomass. Of the total electricity generated by these means and supplied to the grid, 94.6% is derived from wind energy, 5% from small scale hydro schemes and 0.4% from biomass sources.

Production of Energy

Mr Gibson asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment what steps he is taking to encourage a reduction in the use of energy in line with the Programme for Government priority 5.4. (AQW 1064/01)

Sir Reg Empey: My Department is coordinating a programme of well-targeted energy actions which, when implemented gradually and in consultation with those affected, will help meet the Executive's economic and environmental objectives. That in turn will help deliver against the overarching goal of sustainable development.

My Department continues to promote the production of energy from renewable sources and has recently conducted a consultation exercise with a view to setting a target for the proportion of electricity to be produced from such sources by 2010. A small scale renewable energy support scheme has also been launched to demonstrate the benefits to be obtained from renewable energy and associated energy efficiency technologies. My Department has also consented to the introduction of more efficient Combined Cycle Gas Technology at Ballylumford and a proposed new power station at Coolkeeragh – that technology reduces the amount of fuel used for electricity generation.

I am about to embark on a consultation process leading to a new energy strategy for Northern Ireland. In the course of this, I will be emphasising again that our consumption of energy resources must be the minimum consistent with the needs of a modern economy and society.

My Department also promotes energy efficiency in industry and commerce through a programme operated by the Industrial Research and Technology Unit (IRTU). Funds made available from the Climate Change Levy have enabled IRTU to expand the scope of this work to include the Energy Efficiency Best Practice programme (which provides independent energy audits, information seminars and workshops) and also enables them to manage an interest free loan scheme to assist Northern Ireland companies to carry out energy saving projects. In the current year the scheme has lent £723k leading to energy savings of 14.5GWh per annum.

IDB/LEDU Investment and Job Creation: Carrickfergus

Mr K Robinson asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to detail (a) the level of investment and number of jobs created in Carrickfergus over the last 3 years by (i) IDB; and (ii) LEDU and (b) any steps he will be taking in respect of these figures.

(AQW 1096/01)

Sir Reg Empey:

- (a) (i) In the past three years IDB has offered £4.2 million towards project investment of £35 million in the Carrickfergus Borough Council area, promoting 723 new jobs.
- (ii) Over the past three years LEDU has provided some £965,000 towards projects in the Carrick-

fergus Borough Council area. There has been a net increase of 133 jobs in LEDU's active client portfolio and the Business Start-up Programme in the council area.

- (b) IDB continues to work with companies to encourage them to become more internationally competitive. Several companies in the Borough have been involved in Trade International and Business Excellence programmes and initiatives which are aimed at increasing their competitive advantage.

In addition IDB maintains contact with Carrickfergus Borough Council to understand its priorities for economic development and with the CORE group of councils, of which Carrickfergus is part, to market the region to potential investors.

LEDU works closely with both the Council and the local enterprise agency in Carrickfergus and a number of joint programmes and initiatives are currently in progress or being discussed in respect of economic activity in the area.

Hospitality: December 2001

Mr Hilditch asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to detail (a) the cost of and (b) to whom he is providing hospitality during the month of December 2001. (AQW 1109/01)

Sir Reg Empey: In response to (a) the answer is none and in respect of (b) I am not providing hospitality to anyone in December.

Unemployment Statistics: Carrickfergus

Mr K Robinson asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to detail (a) the unemployment figures for Carrickfergus over the last three years; and (b) what assessment he has made in respect of these figures. (AQW 1112/01)

Sir Reg Empey: Unemployment statistics at District Council level are only available from the claimant count.

Details of claimant count unemployment in Carrickfergus Borough Council and a comparison with Northern Ireland as a whole can be found in Table 1 overleaf.

The unemployment figure for Carrickfergus, whilst higher than for Northern Ireland as a whole, has fallen at a similar rate.

My Department, through Industrial Development Board (IDB) and Local Enterprise Development Unit (LEDU), and, when it is established, the new economic development agency Invest Northern Ireland, will continue to work with companies and with the Borough Council and local enterprise agencies to promote further economic activity and employment in the area.

TABLE 1 - NUMBER AND RATE OF CLAIMANT COUNT UNEMPLOYED IN CARRICKFERGUS BOROUGH COUNCIL AND NORTHERN IRELAND.

Date	Numbers Unemployed		% of the Workforce	
	Carrick-fergus	Northern Ireland	Carrick-fergus	Northern Ireland
November 1998	958	54,326	9.5	6.9
November 1999	793	43,720	7.9	5.5
November 2000	675	40,007	6.8	5.1
November 2001	714	36,865	7.1	4.7

Coleraine Borough Council Area: Tourism

Mr McClarty asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment what assessment he has made in relation to the actual and the potential number of bed spaces for tourism within Coleraine Borough Council area; and what progress has been made in attracting new hotel capacity to the area. [R] (AQW 1121/01)

Sir Reg Empey: At December 2001 the Coleraine Borough Council area had 5,172 bed spaces certified by the Northern Ireland Tourist Board (NITB) for tourism use. That number is adequate to satisfy current demand. The ability of the area to attract and hold visitors and its general economic performance will be the main factors in determining future accommodation supply.

The NITB considers that the accommodation targets contained in the Coleraine Borough Council's Tourism Development Strategy 2001 – 2010 to be appropriate and realistic. To assist with developing tourism accommodation in Northern Ireland the NITB has an annual Tourism Development Scheme budget of £4.714 million. In addition, the NITB recently launched, with the International Fund for Ireland (IFI), two financial assistance programmes aimed at helping small hotels and seaside resort Guesthouses to upgrade. In total 16 applications from accommodation providers in the Coleraine area are currently being assessed.

The NITB is also presently engaged with an inward investor seeking to develop a major resort hotel on the North Coast.

Training Courses: Tourism and Retail Sector

Mr McClarty asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment what steps he will take to introduce 'people skills' courses for frontline staff in the tourism and retail sectors. (AQW 1122/01)

Sir Reg Empey: I will ensure that my Department continues to work closely with the respective Sector Training Councils (STCs) for tourism and the retail sector,

namely the Tourism Training Trust and the Wholesale and Retail Training Council. Those STCs are recognised as representing their sectors' training requirements and advise the Department on their respective sectors' priorities.

Both of those sectors participate fully in my Department's mainstream programmes such as Jobskills, Modern Apprenticeships and Lifelong Learning in addition to the training offered at Further Education Colleges and the University of Ulster. All of the qualifications offered in respect of both industries include customer service development and key skills including communications and team working.

Shorts Bombardier: Staffing Details

Mr Shannon asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to detail (a) the number of workers employed at Shorts Bombardier, Interpoint; and, of these, (b) the number who are white collar workers.

(AQW 1130/01)

Sir Reg Empey: That is not information that is held by my Department. I suggest therefore that you contact the company directly for that information.

Gobbins Cliff Path Project

Mr K Robinson asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to (a) give his assessment of the tourist potential that would be generated in the Whitehead/Islandmagee area by a re-established Gobbins Cliff Path; and (b) detail the areas in which his Department might play a proactive role.

(AQW 1219/01)

Sir Reg Empey: The Gobbins Cliff Path Project has the potential to contribute significantly to Larne Borough Council's tourism objectives and to assist with economic development in the Larne area. The project is unlikely to generate direct substantial revenue streams but could have a significant multiplier effect in the local Whitehead/Islandmagee area.

A re-established Gobbins Cliff Path that can demonstrate long-term sustainability would be a welcome addition to the tourism infrastructure of East Antrim. My Department, through the NITB, would be willing to explore with the local Council potential avenues of assistance.

ENVIRONMENT

Wildlife (NI) Order 1985

Mrs I Robinson asked the Minister of the Environment who is responsible for the enforcement of the Wildlife (NI) Order 1985, specifically in respect of the

protection of badgers, and to outline if planning permission can be granted when there is no licence for the closure of a badger sett. (AQW 868/01)

The Minister of the Environment (Mr Foster): The Wildlife (Northern Ireland) Order 1985 (the Wildlife Order) is administered by the Environment and Heritage Service (EHS) of my Department. Investigation of offences may be initiated by the EHS Wildlife Inspector but enforcement is the responsibility of the Police Service.

A developer has the responsibility for obtaining any licence which may be required under the Wildlife Order even where planning permission is granted for the relevant development.

When there is a badger sett on a development site, any planning permission is normally subject to conditions to protect them. These conditions are attached to the decision notice. If the conditions permit any disturbance of the animals or their sett, a licence is needed under the Wildlife Order before the work begins. The absence of a licence would not preclude the issue of a planning permission in such a case, only its implementation.

Planning Services Enforcement Section

Mr M Robinson asked the Minister of the Environment what plans he has to increase the resources available to the Planning Services Enforcement Section.

(AQW 962/01)

Mr Foster: I have no immediate plans to increase the resources available for enforcement matters in the Planning Service. Additional resources were made available in 1998 to create dedicated enforcement teams throughout Northern Ireland. However, the adequacy of resources is something which is kept under regular review by my Department.

Planning Appeals

Mr M Robinson asked the Minister of the Environment what plans he has to increase the resources available to the Planning Appeals Section to reduce the timescale for resolving appeals. (AQW 963/01)

Mr Foster: My Department does not have a Planning Appeals Section. Appeals are dealt with by the individual planning officers involved with the original planning decision.

Under Article 32 of the Planning (NI) Order 1991, all appeals are heard by the Planning Appeals Commission, an independent body set up by statute.

Responsibility for resourcing the Planning Appeals Commission rests with the Office of the First and Deputy First Minister.

Telecommunications Mast: Applications

Mr Hilditch asked the Minister of the Environment to detail (a) the number of successful applications for prior approval to erect a mobile telecommunications mast, under Part 17 of Schedule I of The Planning (General Development) Order (NI) 1993; and (b) how many were refused in the last five years.

(AQW 967/01)

Mr Foster: Details of the number of prior approval applications granted and refused under part 17 of Schedule 1 of the Planning (General Development) Order (NI) 1993 over the last three years, are set out below:

Year	Granted	Refused
1999/2000	165	12
2000/2001	352	91
2001/ to date	291	65
Totals	808	168

Helicopter Noise

Mr Gibson asked the Minister of the Environment what steps he is taking to address the nuisance of helicopter noise in Omagh District Council area.

(AQW 995/01)

Mr Foster: My Department has no remit in relation to helicopter noise. District Councils have powers to act in relation to noise nuisance, but this does not extend to noise from helicopters or aircraft.

I assume that the noise referred to is generated by military helicopter activity, in which case any complaints should be addressed directly to the Ministry of Defence's Civil Adviser at Civil Secretariat, HQNI, BFPO 825. Where loss, injury or damage has resulted from military flying in Northern Ireland, the Area Claims officer for NI, HQNI, BFPO 825 should be contacted.

Listed Buildings: Unauthorised Demolition

Mr McClarty asked the Minister of the Environment to detail the number of prosecutions, in the last 3 years, due to the demolition of 'listed buildings' within East Londonderry.

(AQW 999/01)

Mr Foster: There has been one prosecution arising from the unauthorised demolition of a listed building within East Londonderry during the last three years. The building known as "Chapelfield" at 59 Laurelhill Road, Coleraine was demolished without consent during June 1999. The case was heard before the Magistrates Court in Coleraine on 7 September 2001.

Planning Aid Service of the Royal Town Planning Institute

Mr Weir asked the Minister of the Environment how much money he has allocated, in each of the last 3 years, for the Planning Aid Service of the Royal Town Planning Institute.

(AQW 1043/01)

Mr Foster: No money has been allocated by my Department to the Planning Aid Service of the Royal Town Planning Institute during the last three years. This Service was launched in Northern Ireland on 21 June 2000.

Planning Aid Service of the Royal Town Planning Institute

Mr Weir asked the Minister of the Environment what plans he has to fund the Planning Aid Service of the Royal Town Planning Institute in the next financial year.

(AQW 1044/01)

Mr Foster: No funding has been sought by the Royal Town Planning Institute. If my Department is approached for funding I will, of course, ensure that any bid is considered carefully

Enforcement Notices

Mr Weir asked the Minister of the Environment how much money he has spent in bringing prosecutions for breach of Enforcement Notices, in each of the past three years.

(AQW 1045/01)

Mr Foster: The information requested is not readily available and could only be assembled at disproportionate cost to my Department.

Stop Notices

Mr Weir asked the Minister of the Environment how much money he has spent in bringing prosecutions for breach of Stop Notices, in each of the past three years.

(AQW 1046/01)

Mr Foster: There have been no prosecutions for breaches of Stop Notices issued during the period 1998-99 to 2000-01.

Legal Fees

Mr Weir asked the Minister of the Environment how much money he has spent in legal fees, in each of the past three years.

(AQW 1047/01)

Mr Foster: The information required to identify legal fees associated with Stop Notices and Enforce-

ment Notices in each of the past three years is not available from my Department's financial records.

Waste Management Plans

Mr Gibson asked the Minister of the Environment what structures are being put in place to help local councils achieve their Waste Management Plans as outlined in the Programme for Government.

(AQW 1053/01)

Mr Foster: The Programme for Government emphasises the priority which the Executive is giving to the reduction, recycling and safe management of waste. To bring about effective strategic waste management planning, regional cooperation is essential.

My Department encouraged the District Councils to form three partnership groups which have produced pre-consultation waste management plans. Those plans have been reviewed by my officials and advice and guidance have been offered to the groups before the plans go out to public consultation. To help to promote an informed public debate, my Department has appointed an agency to supply advertising, media buying and related services for a public awareness campaign. That campaign will begin at the same time as the proposed launch, in February 2002, of the public consultation stage of the Councils' waste management plans. I am also pleased to announce that my Department advertised in December 2001 for interested parties to develop a schools' education programme. We hope to conclude that, and appoint an Education Officer to assist with the programme, before the end of January 2002.

In addition, my Department has established a Waste Management Advisory Board to help promote the Northern Ireland Waste Management Strategy and offer help and guidance to all the key stakeholder groups including Councils. The Board will also oversee the introduction and development of a Market Development Programme to help stimulate the demand for recycled materials and products.

Planning Applications: Local Authority Considerations

Mr M Robinson asked the Minister of the Environment what legislation, regulations and guidance relating to environmental protection and public safety, must a local authority take into account when considering a planning application.

(AQW 1062/01)

Mr Foster: My Department is the sole planning authority in Northern Ireland with statutory responsibility for determining planning applications. Under Article 20 (2) of the Planning (NI) Order 1991, the Department must consult with the relevant district council

before making a determination. However, the final decision rests with the Department.

It is ultimately up to each district council to decide what regulations and guidance it takes into account when considering planning applications presented to it by the Department.

Planning Applications: Community Technical Aid

Mr M Robinson asked the Minister of the Environment, in regard to members of the public who have lodged objections to a planning application, what assistance is available to enable them to prepare for and appear at a public inquiry.

(AQW 1063/01)

Mr Foster: Assistance is available from Community Technical Aid (CTA), an independent voluntary organisation which assists disadvantaged community groups to participate in various aspects of the planning process, including public inquiries. CTA is part funded by my Department. Assistance is also available from Planning Aid of the Royal Town Planning Institute to individuals and community groups. That organisation is also independent of my Department.

Planning Process: Public Participation

Mr M Robinson asked the Minister of the Environment how he is promoting public participation in the planning process in recognition of local concerns.

(AQW 1088/01)

Mr Foster: My Department is fully committed to facilitating public participation in all aspects of the planning process including development planning and development control.

With regard to the preparation of development plans, the process provides for consultation with the public and local councils during the plan preparation process, up to publication of the draft plan. My Department is piloting in development plans currently in hand, improvements to processes to enhance the opportunities for local people and elected representatives to raise local concerns. We have introduced an 'Issues Paper' stage early in the plan preparation process intended to act as a means to guide and encourage debate and discussion with local communities on the issues in the local area. In addition, we are appointing for each development plan independent consultants to draw in the views of the public and community groups. To facilitate that consultation a series of public meetings are held at which local concerns can be expressed.

That process has already been followed in the course of preparing three area plans covering the five Council Areas of Ards/Down, Magherafelt, Banbridge/

Newry & Mourne. Early feedback suggests this approach to be well received and worthwhile. A similar process is now being followed for three other area plans: Belfast Metropolitan Area Plan, Northern Area Plan and Antrim/ Ballymena/Larne Area Plan. Through that approach, the public will have a much greater opportunity to make an input, and influence the content of development plans for their local areas.

After publication of the draft plan there will be further opportunity to lodge objections to the proposals and to have these considered at an Independent Public Inquiry. In relation to development control and the processing of planning applications, my Department has recently introduced a number of administrative measures aimed at enhancing transparency and improving accessibility to the planning process. That will benefit all interested parties, particularly members of the public who are concerned about development proposals. That includes an explanation of all the key stages in the planning application process and how further information can be made accessible to assist full participation in the process. Any member of the public who comments on a planning application will also be provided with reasons for any subsequent planning decision.

Planning Permission for Apartments: Coleraine Borough Council Area

Mr McClarty asked the Minister of the Environment to detail the number of individual new apartments with planning approval in Coleraine Borough Council area, in each of the past five years.[R] (AQW 1093/01)

Mr Foster: The number of individual new apartments in the Coleraine Borough Council area which gained planning permission in each of the past five years is:

1997	128
1998	263
1999	399
2000	327
2001	74 (to date)

During the same five year period, planning permission was refused for a total of 200 individual new apartments.

Moyle Interconnector: Noise Pollution

Mr K Robinson asked the Minister of the Environment what steps he is taking to monitor the impact of noise levels associated with the Moyle Interconnector on residential areas in Islandmagee; and to make a statement. (AQW 1105/01)

Mr Foster: In granting outline planning approval for the Moyle Interconnector, my Department imposed three conditions relating to noise. These conditions

applied to the noise generated during construction, the noise emitted during normal operations of converter station site, and a condition designed to minimise the disturbance to nesting birds and their young during cable laying operations.

The Environmental Health Department of Larne Borough Council is the statutory body with responsibility for noise pollution. If the Council draws matters of concern regarding the interconnector to my Department's attention, then action to enforce the relevant planning conditions can be considered. However, to date Planning Service has not received any specific noise complaints.

Hospitality: December 2001

Mr Hilditch asked the Minister of the Environment to detail (a) the cost of and (b) to whom he is providing hospitality during the month of December 2001. (AQW 1108/01)

Mr Foster: My Permanent Secretary and I hosted a Christmas reception for my senior officials and others in my Department who have worked closely with us over the year. The cost of the event was £378.

UK Sustainable Development Strategy

Mr Gibson asked the Minister of the Environment what steps he is taking to encourage the public, private and voluntary sectors to form partnerships in respect of the UK Sustainable Development Strategy as outlined in the Programme for Government. (AQW 1131/01)

Mr Foster: The UK Sustainable Development Strategy, published in 1999, recognised that the devolved administrations in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland had the opportunity to deliver policies for sustainable development which reflect their institutions, landscape, culture and way of life.

In Northern Ireland, the Programme for Government states that sustainable development will be a key theme running through the Executive Committee's work and priorities. With the adoption of 'Promoting Sustainable Living' as a cross-cutting theme and pursuing priorities such as 'Growing as a Community', 'Working for a Healthier People' and 'Securing a Competitive Economy' there is a platform of existing and developing strategic policies which reflect sustainable development principles and which take an integrated approach to tackling issues.

However, I recognise that there is still a need to promote greater participation by as many sectors, groups and individuals as possible. I will therefore be launching for consultation early in the New Year, proposals for a Northern Ireland Sustainable Develop-

ment Strategy. This is the start of a process designed to encourage all sectors and all levels of society to become involved in the sustainable development debate.

My Officials will oversee the consultation process. However, we have engaged the Sustainable Northern Ireland Programme (SNIP) to organise a series of sectoral and sub-regional seminars across Northern Ireland as part of the consultation. These are intended to provide an opportunity for a more participative approach to gathering views and comments. SNIP is also helping to organise a major conference planned for March 2002 as part of the process. The outcome of those seminars and the conference will be fed into the consultation process.

In addition, the my Department is cofunding with the Special EU Programme Body to deliver a co-ordinated programme of training and capacity building on Sustainable Development to Board Members and staff of the Local Strategic Partnerships. The objective of the training packages, which are being delivered by SNIP, is to ensure that the principles of sustainable development are reflected in local integrated development planning under the Peace II Programme.

Driving Test

Mr Hilditch asked the Minister of the Environment to give his assessment of the current driving test in relation to the increasing numbers of accidents and fatalities. (AQW 1138/01)

Mr Foster: The current test reflects the balance that needs to be struck between the demands of people for mobility and access to transport, on the one hand, and for safer roads, on the other. It represents a minimum standard designed to ensure that candidates have a basic level of competence before they are allowed to drive unaccompanied on public roads, and as such it has served its purpose reasonably well over a long period.

When the test was introduced in 1956 there was one road traffic collision for every 45 vehicles on the road in NI each year. The figure for 2000 was around one collision for every 87 vehicles. While there is clearly no room for complacency, there has been significant improvement, and the test has played its part in that process.

The test is also developing and evolving. The theory element of the test was introduced in 1996, while in 1999 the length of the practical test was increased and testing on a wider range of roads was introduced. Further changes, such as the introduction of hazard perception testing, are also being considered.

My Department's Driver & Vehicle Testing Agency works closely with the Driving Standards Agency in Great Britain and with the international driving test committee in Europe to ensure that high and consistent standards of testing are maintained and that the testing

regime in NI compares favourably with the equivalent arrangements elsewhere.

Methodist Church, West Street, Carrickfergus

Mr Hilditch asked the Minister of the Environment what support is available to the congregation of the Methodist Church, West Street, Carrickfergus to enable them to carry out repairs or renovations to this listed building. (AQW 1140/01)

Mr Foster: The Methodist Church, West Street, Carrickfergus, is a grade B listed building. Under the Department's grant-aid policy, grade B church buildings are not eligible for listed building grant-aid.

For as long as the Church remains listed, it may be eligible for a grant under the Listed Places of Worship grant scheme, equivalent to 12.5% of VAT levied on the costs of grant-eligible repairs conducted since 1 April 2001. However, the church is in a very poor structural condition and the Department is proposing to de-list it. Once de-listed, grant under the Listed Places of Worship scheme would not apply.

Planning Legislation: Small Home Extensions

Mr Shannon asked the Minister of the Environment to amend planning legislation to include small house extensions as permitted development. (AQW 1169/01)

Mr Foster: Current planning legislation already permits the carrying out of small alterations and extensions to houses and property without requiring planning permission.

However, as part of its commitment under the Programme for Government, my Department is currently reviewing planning processes in its key business areas including development control. The review will, among other things, examine the scope of the current permitted development rules. As an important element of the review my Department expects to issue a consultation paper soon, inviting comments from the public and all interested parties.

If, following the review, it is decided to amend particular planning processes requiring legislative change, then I will bring forward the necessary legislation in the Assembly.

Apartment Developments in Coastal Resorts

Mr McClarty asked the Minister of the Environment what plans he has to limit apartment developments in coastal resorts. (AQW 1172/01)

Mr Foster: It is my Department's responsibility to zone sufficient land to accommodate the housing growth of each District Council Area as anticipated by the Regional Development Strategy which was recently formulated by the Department for Regional Development.

My Department has commenced preparation of development plans which will cover all of the Northern Ireland Coast from Limavady to Newry and Mourne. Those policy based plans have a key role in the implementation of the Regional Development Strategy. The plans are at various levels of preparation and will highlight the major planning concerns to be addressed in each district. The development plan process provides local communities with an opportunity to comment and influence the future development of their areas, including the location of housing growth. The plan making process will allow issues such as the development of apartments in coastal resorts to be considered. At least some of the pressure for apartments in coastal locations results from pressures for second homes. That issue is specifically covered by the Regional Development Strategy at SPG HOU 6.4. That provides that settlements and areas under pressure from second home development could be identified in development plans. That strategy specifically recommends the development of a set of criteria through the development plan process by which the capacity of a small town or village to absorb new second home development can be evaluated, and also that consideration be given to the need for local planning policies in this area.

A key element of the Regional Development Strategy is to promote a concerted housing drive within urban areas. The Regional Development Strategy also recognises the need to avoid 'town cramming' and my Department has put into place a new policy framework for assessing planning applications for apartment and other housing proposals to meet this requirement. In that context my Department has prepared a Planning Policy Statement 7 - Quality Residential Environments, (published in June 2001), which requires developers to provide high quality proposals which are sympathetic to the existing character of an area. The policy also makes provision for development plans to identify local design requirements for new residential development, whether they be housing or apartment development.

My Department has also published in draft for public comment Development Control Advice Note 8, Small Unit Housing. That will provide specific guidance on proposals for apartment development. While that will not set policy, it will give guidance to developers on the physical form of housing development, including apartments, and on the relationship with surrounding properties.

In addition, I understand that the Department for Regional Development is preparing a Regional Planning Policy Statement on "Housing in Settlements". Normal consultation arrangements will provide the opportunity

for input by the public and elected representatives to the development of planning policies for housing.

Planning Law Enforcement

Mr M Robinson asked the Minister of the Environment (a) what plans he has to upgrade the enforcement section of the Planning Service; and (b) if these plans would include more responsibility for district councils. (AQW 1250/01)

Mr Foster: I answered the first part of your question under AQW 962 on 7 January 2002. District Councils have no statutory authority to enforce planning law and cannot be given responsibility in this area without enabling legislation. I have no plans to introduce such legislation at this time.

FINANCE AND PERSONNEL

Ground Rents Bill

Mr Shannon asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel to detail (a) the expected date for the Ground Rents Bill to pass through its final stages (b) the likely date of implementation and (c) the overall length of time the legislative process is likely to take. (AQW 991/01)

The Minister of Finance and Personnel (Dr Farren): The Ground Rents Bill, as it then was, passed through all its Assembly stages in early 2001. It received Royal Assent on 20 March 2001, and its correct title is now the Ground Rents Act (Northern Ireland) 2001. In relation to the implementation date it is envisaged that the legislation will come into operation over a number of years. The Department's aim is that the voluntary redemption scheme outlined in the Act will be brought into operation in the Spring of 2002. The timing is dependent on a number of factors including further consultation on Land Registry rules and other related matters. The primary legislative process has been completed over a period of less than one year. In terms of the full implementation of the provisions flowing from this process, it is difficult to give an exact estimate of timing, although it is envisaged that the remaining provisions of the Act will come into operation during 2003.

NICS Jobs Located: East Antrim

Mr K Robinson asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel to detail the number of Civil Service jobs located within the (a) Larne Borough Council area; (b)

Carrickfergus Borough Council area; and (c) Newtownabbey Borough Council area; and to make a statement./R/ (AQW 1133/01)

Dr Farren: The information on the number of NICS jobs in the 11 Departments in these areas as at January 2001 is as follows:

Council area	No. of Jobs
Larne Borough Council	146
Carrickfergus Borough Council	85
Newtownabbey Borough Council	127

NICS Jobs Located in East Antrim

Mr K Robinson asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel to detail (a) the number of Civil Service jobs located within the (i) Larne Borough Council area; (ii) Carrickfergus Borough Council area; (iii) Newtownabbey Borough Council area as a percentage of Civil Service jobs throughout Northern Ireland; and (b) the steps he will take to address the situation./R/ (AQW 1134/01)

Dr Farren: The information on the number of NICS jobs in the 11 Departments in those areas as at 1 January 2001, expressed as a percentage of the Northern Ireland total for those Departments, is as follows:

Council area	Percentage
Larne Borough Council	0.6%
Carrickfergus Borough Council	0.3%
Newtownabbey Borough Council	0.5%

I am conscious of the contribution that public sector jobs can make to economic and social development in local communities. Until the strategic review of office accommodation is concluded, however, it would be wrong for me to attempt to prejudge the outcome or to speculate as to the precise locations which might be involved in any subsequent dispersal of civil service jobs.

Apartment Development: Massey Avenue, Stormont

Mr Hamilton asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel if he would take immediate action, under

SRO 1933 No 25, to prevent the building of a four storey block of flats at the Massey Avenue entrance gates to Parliament Buildings. (AQW 1271/01)

Dr Farren: SRO 1933 no 25 relates to section 20 of the Planning and Housing Act (NI) 1931. Since Part 1 (sections 1 to 21) of the 1931 Act was repealed under the provisions of the Planning (Northern Ireland) Order 1972 no powers are available to me in this matter.

HEALTH, SOCIAL SERVICES AND PUBLIC SAFETY

Spending on Public and Private Health Care

Dr Birnie asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what assessment has she made in relation to the average percentage growth of spending on public and private health care, in real terms, in Northern Ireland compared to (a) the UK average and (b) the EU average, in each of the past 10 years. (AQW 571/01)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety (Ms de Brún): I have not made such an assessment in the context of EU spending levels. That would be a major statistical exercise, given the significant differences between services and their funding, to make like-for-like international comparisons. Even comparisons with spending in England, Scotland and Wales are far from straightforward. That is because, in contrast to our integrated health and personal social services, the funding and delivery of health care and social services is in Great Britain split between central government and local authorities. The matter is further complicated by the fact that systematic information on private care is not readily available.

Nevertheless, a substantial amount of relevant information can be derived from successive Departmental Reports which were published annually until the advent of devolution in Scotland and Wales in 1999. Based on figures contained in the Department of Health's and the former Scottish and Welsh Offices' Reports, it appears that real terms health and personal social services growth in the ten years from 1989-90 to 1998-99 was as follows:

	90/91	91/92	92/93	93/94	94/95	95/96	96/97	97/98	98/99
England	4.2%	6.6%	5.3%	2.5%	6.0%	2.7%	1.2%	1.8%	4.5%
Scotland	2.6%	4.2%	6.3%	3.9%	5.1%	2.3%	0.2%	0.2%	0.9%
Wales	4.8%	8.4%	8.2%	3.4%	5.3%	3.0%	2.5%	-0.2%	7.4%
HPSS	2.7%	4.3%	4.3%	4.0%	4.7%	3.6%	-0.7%	3.4%	3.6%
Average	3.6%	5.9%	6.1%	3.5%	5.3%	2.9%	0.8%	1.3%	4.1%

Across the period, therefore, the real terms growth for each jurisdiction was as follows:

England	40.4%
Scotland	28.7%
Wales	51.4%
HPSS	34.3%
Average	39.5%

More significant is the real terms growth per capita, which reflects population changes during this period:

England	35.3%
Scotland	27.9%
Wales	48.1%
HPSS	25.8%
Average	34.8%

The final set of figures shows that, for the ten years in question, expenditure on the HPSS grew by markedly less than expenditure on equivalent services in Great Britain. Subsequent Spending Review settlements have widened the gap with England, the central cost-driver for these services.

Ní dhearna mé a leithéid de mheasúnú i gcomhthéacs leibhéil chaiteachais an AE. Cleachtadh mór staitistiúil a bheadh ann, má chuirtear na difríochtaí tábhachtacha idir na seirbhísí agus a maoiniú san áireamh, comparáidí idirnáisiúnta cosúla a dhéanamh. Níl comparáidí leis an chaiteachas i Sasana, in Albain agus sa Bhreatain Bheag simplí go leor fiú. Is amhlaidh mar atá sé seo mar go bhfuil maoiniú agus soláthar seirbhísí cúraim shláinte agus sóisialta sa Bhreatain Mhór roinnte idir an rialtais ceannais agus na húdarais áitiúla, i gcodarsnacht lenár seirbhísí imeasctha sláinte agus sóisialta pearsanta féin. Tá an scéal níos casta fós mar nach bhfuil eolas rianúil ar chúram phríobháideach ar fáil go réidh.

Mar sin féin, is féidir teacht ar lear mór eolais bhaintigh ó Thuairiscí Rannacha leanúnacha a foilsíodh go bliantúil go dtí tús dílártha in Albain agus sa Bhreatain Bheag in 1999. Bunaithe ar fhigiúirí i dThuairiscí na Roinne Sláinte agus iar-Oifigí na hAlban agus na Breataine Bige, is cosúil gurbh é seo a leanas an borradh i dtéarmaí réadacha sna seirbhísí sláinte agus sóisialta pearsanta sna deich mbliana ó 1989-90 go 1998-99:

	90/91	91/92	92/93	93/94	94/95	95/96	96/97	97/98	98/99
Sasana	4.2%	6.6%	5.3%	2.5%	6.0%	2.7%	1.2%	1.8%	4.5%
Albain	2.6%	4.2%	6.3%	3.9%	5.1%	2.3%	0.2%	0.2%	0.9%
An Bhreatain Bheag	4.8%	8.4%	8.2%	3.4%	5.3%	3.0%	2.5%	-0.2%	7.4%
SSSP	2.7%	4.3%	4.3%	4.0%	4.7%	3.6%	-0.7%	3.4%	3.6%

Le linn na tréimhse, mar sin de, seo a leanas an borradh i dtéarmaí réadacha i ngach limistéar:

Sasana	40.4%
Albain	28.7%
An Bhreatain Bheag	51.4%
SSSP	34.3%
Meán	39.5%

Níos tábhachtaí fós is ea an borradh i dtéarmaí réadacha an duine a léiríonn na hathruithe sna daonraí le linn na tréimhse seo:

Sasana	35.3%
Albain	27.9%
An Bhreatain Bheag	48.1%
SSSP	25.8%
Meán	34.8%

rLéiríonn na figiúirí deireanacha gur tháinig borradh níba lú ar chaiteachas ar na SSSP ná ar an chaiteachas ar a gcomhsheirbhísí sa Bhreatain Mhór do na deich mbliana lena mbaineann siad. Leathnaigh socruithe an Athbheithnithe ar Chaiteachas ina dhiaidh sin an bhearna idir an limistéar seo agus Sasana, an gníomhaí ceannais ar chostais do na seirbhísí seo.

Health Care Expenditure

Dr Birnie asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what assessment has she made in relation to the average spend of health care in Northern Ireland in comparison with (a) UK average and (b) EU average, in each of the last ten years.

(AQW 572/01)

Ms de Brún: Regarding the difficulties surrounding EU comparisons, I refer the Member to the reply which I gave to question AQW 571/01. As to comparisons with Great Britain, those were formerly facilitated by the Departmental Reports published annually until the establishment of devolution in Scotland and Wales. The following table, derived from information contained in the Department of Health, Scottish Office and Welsh Office Reports, gives Health and Personal Social Services per capita expenditure in each of the four jurisdictions for the period 1989-90 to 1998-99:

	90/91	91/92	92/93	93/94	94/95	95/96	96/97	97/98	98/99
Sasana	4.2%	6.6%	5.3%	2.5%	6.0%	2.7%	1.2%	1.8%	4.5%
Albain	2.6%	4.2%	6.3%	3.9%	5.1%	2.3%	0.2%	0.2%	0.9%
An Bhreatain Bheag	4.8%	8.4%	8.2%	3.4%	5.3%	3.0%	2.5%	-0.2%	7.4%
SSSP	2.7%	4.3%	4.3%	4.0%	4.7%	3.6%	-0.7%	3.4%	3.6%

	1989-90 £	1990-91 £	1991-92 £	1992-93 £	1993-94 £	1994-95 £	1995-96 £	1996-97 £	1997-98 £	1998-99 £
England	498	556	625	678	709	759	799	831	869	929
Scotland	637	703	776	851	904	961	1,011	1,047	1,082	1,123
Wales	536	604	691	771	815	867	917	969	994	1,095
HPSS	601	663	728	776	820	864	918	929	984	1,042

Maidir leis na deacrachtaí a bhaineann le comparáidí an AE, luaim don bhall an freagra a thug mé ar cheist AQW 571/01. Maidir le comparáidí leis an Bhreatain Mhór, chuidigh na Tuairiscí Rannacha a foilsíodh go bliantúil go foirmiúil leo gur cuireadh tús le dílárú in Albain agus sa Bhreatain Bheag. Léiríonn an tábla seo a leanas, faighte ó eolas i dTuairiscí na Roinne Sláinte, iar-Oifigí na hAlban agus na Breataine Bige, caiteachas an duine ar na Seirbhísí Sláinte agus Sóisialta Pearsanta i ngach ceann de na ceithre limistéar don tréimhse 1989-90 go 1998-99.

Tá conradh, a shuimíonn go £76,866 san iomlán, ag Iontaobhas Sláinte agus Seirbhísí Sóisialta an Fheabhail do sheirbhísí leis an Chumann Alzheimer. Déantar athbhreithniú ar an chonradh seo, a sholáthraíonn seirbhís fheighle do gach duine a fhulaingíonn ón ghealtachas, gach trí bliana agus tá an conradh faoi láthair le hatosú i Márta 2003. De réir an chonartha, soláthraíonn an Cumann Alzheimer seirbhís thacaíochta ag cur ar chumas daoine atá i bhfeighil fulangaithe an ghealtachais, sos rialta óna gcúram feighle a bheith acu agus tairgíonn sí réimse cuidithe phraiticiúil.

	1989-90 £	1990-91 £	1991-92 £	1992-93 £	1993-94 £	1994-95 £	1995-96 £	1996-97 £	1997-98 £	1998-99 £
Sasana	498	556	625	678	709	759	799	831	869	929
Albain	637	703	776	851	904	961	1,011	1,047	1,082	1,123
An Bhreatain Bheag	536	604	691	771	815	867	917	969	994	1,095
SSSP	601	663	728	776	820	864	918	929	984	1,042
Meán	515	574	645	700	735	785	827	860	897	957

Alzheimer's Society: Foyle Area

Mrs Courtney asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the current position regarding funding for the Alzheimer's Society in the Foyle area. (AQW 660/01)

Ms de Brún: The Foyle Health and Social Services Trust has a contract for services with the Alzheimer's Society amounting to £76,866. That contract, for the provision of a sitting service for all dementia sufferers, is reviewed on a three year cycle and the current contract is due for renewal in March 2003. Under the contract the Alzheimer's Society provides a support service offering carers of people with dementia access to a regular break from caring and a range of practical forms of help.

In addition, since 1998 the Society has provided a specialised domiciliary sitting service for dementia sufferers under 65 using funds provided by the Freemasons of Ireland. Funding for this service is due to end in December 2001 and the Trust is working closely with the Society to assess needs and to look at alternative provision.

Ina theannta sin, ó 1998, sholáthair an Cumann sainsheirbhís fheighle baile d'fhulangaithe faoi 65 bliain an ghealtachais trí úsáid a bhaint as maoinithe soláthraithe ag Máisiúin na hÉireann. Tá an maoiniú don tseirbhís seo le críochnú i Nollaig 2001 agus tá an tIontaobhas ag obair go dlúth leis an Chumann le riachtanais a mheas agus le smaoiniú ar sholáthar eile.

Tobernaven Hospital, Antrim

Mr K Robinson asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what steps is she taking to ensure that patients who are fit to be discharged from Tobernaven Hospital in Antrim can access a care package and return to their homes as a matter of urgency. (AQW 674/01)

Ms de Brún: There are currently seven people who are medically fit for discharge from the Tobernaven, Holywell Hospital and are waiting for Homefirst Community Trust to fund their community care packages. The Trust's care management budget is at present totally committed and these patients are unable to be discharged until funding becomes available.

The Trust must work within the resources available to it and I am in no doubt that more new money is needed to ensure essential improvements to community care services. I have been making a strong case to my Executive colleagues for further resources to fund these and other necessary Health and Social Services.

Faoi láthair, tá seachtar daoine ann atá folláin go leor le scaoileadh amach as Otharlann Tobernaveen, Holywell agus atá ag fanacht ar Iontaobhas Pobail Homefirst a bpacáistí cúraim phobail a mhaoiniú. Tá an buiséad do bhainistíocht chúraim an Iontaobhais curtha ar fáil go hiomlán i láthair na huaire agus ní féidir na hothair seo a scaoileadh amach go mbeidh maoiniú ar fáil.

Ní mór don Iontaobhas feidhmiú laistigh de na hacmhainní atá ar fáil dó agus níl amhras ar bith agam go bhfuil níos mó airgid nua de dhíth le cinntiú go gcuirfear feabhsuithe riachtanacha ar na seirbhísí cúraim phobail. Bhí mé ag iarraidh go tréan ar mo chomhghleacaithe san Fheidhmeannas tuilleadh airgid a thabhairt leis na seirbhísí seo agus le Seirbhísí riachtanacha eile Sláinte agus Sóisialta a mhaoiniú.

Counselling as a Result of Sexual Abuse

Mr J Shannon asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the number of people who are receiving counselling as a result of sexual abuse in each of the Health Boards for each of the last three years and to make it her policy that the treatment of sexual abuse will be a strategic priority.

(AQW 688/01)

Ms de Brún: Information on the numbers of people receiving counselling as a result of sexual abuse is not available.

Considerable emphasis is already given to work in that area. As part of their child protection procedures the Health & Social Services Boards and Trusts provide counselling in several specialist centres for children who have suffered sexual abuse. Each child who is placed on the Child Protection Register under the category of sexual abuse is the subject of a Child Protection Plan. Depending on the individual child's circumstances, the Plan will include an element of counselling and therapeutic intervention.

Adults who have mental health problems resulting from child sexual abuse are treated within the HSS Trusts' Mental Health Programmes. Adult survivors of child sexual abuse may be offered counselling by staff in Community Mental Health Teams. Others may be referred for specialist counselling to voluntary organisations such as the Nexus Institute and the Rape Crisis Centre. Survivors can also self-refer to these organisations.

With regard to priorities for the future, a review of all counselling services here is being carried out and its findings will be published shortly. I will, of course, examine the review in due course and consider its recommendations.

Níl eolas ar líon na ndaoine atá ag fáil comhairle, de thoradh ar íde gnéis, ar fáil.

Tá béim ar leith tugtha ar obair san achar seo. Mar chuid dá modhanna cosaint páistí cuireann na Boird Shláinte agus Sheirbhísí Sóisialta agus na hIontaobhais comhairle ar fáil i roinnt sainionad do pháistí a d'fhulaing íde gnéis. Bíonn Plean Cosaint Páiste ag gach páiste a chuirtear ar Chlár Cosaint Páistí faoi chatagóir íde gnéis. Ag brath ar chúinsí gach páiste aonair, is éard a bheidh mar chuid den phlean comhairle agus idirghabháil theiripeach.

Déantar cóireáil ar dhaoine fásta a bhfuil fadhbanna sláinte meabhrach acu mar thoradh ar íde gnéis páiste faoi Clár Shláinte Meabhrach na nIontaobhas SSS. Is féidir go dtabharfaidh Foirne Pobail Sláinte Meabhrach comhairle domharthanóirí aosacha a d'fhulaing íde gnéis páiste. Is féidir go n-atreorófar daoine eile chuig sainchomhailiú ag eagraíochtaí deonacha amhail Nexus Institute agus Rape Crisis Centre. Is féidir le marthanóirí iad féin a atreorú chuig na heagraíochtaí seo.

Maidir le tosaíochtaí amach anseo, tá athbhreithniú á dhéanamh ar gach seirbhís chomhairlithe anseo agus foilseofar a thorthaí gan mhoill. Iniúchfaidh mé, ar ndóigh, an t-athbhreithniú i gceann na haimsire agus déanfaidh mé mo mhachnamh ar a mholtaí.

Funding for Treatment and Counselling: Sexual Abuse

Mr Shannon asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail, by Health Board, the level of funding set aside for the treatment and counselling of those who have suffered sexual abuse in each of the last three years.

(AQW 689/01)

Ms de Brún: The level of funding for treatment and counselling of those who have suffered sexual abuse cannot be separately identified. In all Board areas, Mental Health services, covering all areas of emotional and psychological distress including that caused to child and adult survivors of sexual abuse, are delivered in a variety of settings and are funded under the one heading.

The Nexus Institute which provides specialist counselling services for adults who have been subject to child sexual abuse received £281,000 from the four Boards in 2000-01.

My Department also provides funding to organisations which offer counselling and treatment programmes to survivors of sexual abuse. These include

the Nexus Institute, the Rape Crisis Centre, The Northern Ireland Women's Aid Federation, Childline and the Parent's Advice Centre who between them received a total of £473,000 in 2000-01.

Ní féidir an leibhéal maoinithe don chóireáil agus don chomhairliú díobh siúd a d'fhluaing íde gnéis a aimsiú ar bhonn aonair. I limistéar gach Bord, ag clúdach gach achar d'anacair shíceolaíoch agus mhothúcháinach chomh maith leis an anacair a bhain do mharthanóirí íde gnéis idir pháiste agus dhaoine fásta, cuirtear seirbhísí Sláinte Meabhrach ar fáil ar shuímh éagsúlachta agus tugtar maoiniú dóibh faoi aon teideal amháin.

Fuair an Nexus Institute a sholáthraíonn sainchomhairliú do dhaoine fásta a d'fhulaingt íde gnéis, £281,000 ó na ceithre Bhord i 2000/2001.

Soláthraíonn an Roinn s'agam maoiniú d'eagraíochtaí a thairgeann clár chomhairlithe agus cóireála do mharthanóirí íde gnéis. San áireamh tá: Nexus Institute, The Rape Crisis Centre, The Northern Ireland Women's Aid Federation, Childline agus Parent's Advice Centre, a fuair eatharthu £473,000 san iomlán i 2000-01.

Professions Allied to Medicine

Mr C Murphy asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to give her assessment of the value of the Professionals Associated to Medicine (PAM) Commissioner posts in the Northern, Eastern and Western Health and Social Services Board areas.

(AQW 746/01)

Ms de Brún: The Commissioning posts for the Professions Allied to Medicine within the Northern and Eastern Boards are assisting in the assessment of need and commissioning decisions in their areas.

Earlier this year the Western Board altered its arrangements for commissioning PAMs services and seconded a PAMs Officer specifically for this task. The early indicators are that that arrangement is also benefiting the Board in undertaking its assessment of need and commissioning responsibilities. I understand that the Western Board are currently considering how to strengthen this arrangement.

Tá poist an Choimisiúin do Lucht Gairmeacha Bainteach le Leigheas laistigh de Bhord an Tuaiscirt agus an Oirthir ag cúnaimh chun riachtanais a mheas agus le cinní coimisinthe ina gceantair.

Níos luaithe i mbliana d'athraigh Bord an Iathair a shocrúithe chun seirbhísí LGBL a choimisiniú agus thug siad Oifigeach LGBL ar iasacht ar mhaithe leis an tasc seo amháin. Tá cuma ar na luathchomharthaí go bhfuil an Bord ag baint tairbhe as na socruithe agus é ag tabhairt faoi mheasúnú riachtanas agus ag coimisiniú freagrachtaí. Is eol dom go bhfuil Bord an

Iarthair ag déanamh machnaimh ar an dóigh chun an socrú seo a dhaingniú.

Residential Care: Costs

Mr Beggs asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the weekly costs of providing (a) a place in a nursing home (b) a place in a residential home and (c) a bed in an acute hospital.

(AQW 756/01)

Ms de Brún: A place in a nursing home typically costs £350 per week, although places for some residents (depending on the nature of their condition) can cost almost £400 per week. The weekly costs of a place in a residential home are in the range £230-£320 (again depending on the needs of the individual resident). The cost of a bed in an acute hospital is much more difficult to specify because of the wide variation in the nature and severity of the conditions treated and the nature of the treatments provided. Inclusive of all overhead costs, these can range from £570 per week (in a geriatric ward, of which £175 would be in respect of medical and diagnostic costs not incurred in a residential or nursing home) to some £9,000 (for an intensive care bed in the Royal Victoria Hospital).

Cosnaíonn áit i dteach altrachta £350 in aghaidh na seachtaine de ghnáth, cé gur féidir go gcosnódh áiteanna beagnach agus £400 in aghaidh na seachtaine do roinnt cónaitheoirí (ag brath ar a gcineál reachta). Bíonn na costais sheachtainiúla d'áit i dteach cónaithe sa réimse ó £230-320 (arís ag brath ar riachtanais an chónaitheora aonair). Tá sé níos deacra costas leapa i ngéarotharlann a mheas mar gheall ar an éagsúlacht leathan i gcineál agus i ngéire na riochtaí cóireáilte agus mar gheall ar an chineál cóireála soláthraithe. Leis na costais uile san áireamh, is féidir leosan bheith sa réimse ó £570 in aghaidh na seachtaine (i mbarda seanliach), a mbainfeadh £175 díobh le costais mhíochaine agus dhiagnóiseacha nár tarraingíodh orthu i dteach cónaithe nó altrachta, go tuairim is £9,000 (do leaba dhianchúraim in Otharlann Ríoga Vichteoiria).

Funding for Home Start and Sure Start Schemes

Mr Beggs asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to list (a) the Home Start and Sure Start Schemes that are funded by Community Health Trusts (b) the amount of financial support for each scheme and (c) the schemes which have not received funding through the Community Health Trusts and to advise which Trusts these were.

(AQW 757/01)

Ms de Brún: Health and Social Services Trusts do not fund Sure Start schemes. The Department provides

funding for Sure Start to the four Childcare Partnerships through the appropriate Health and Social Services Board.

Details of the level of funding provided for Home-Start schemes by Community Health and Social Services Trusts are provided in the table below. A Home-Start scheme does not operate in the Foyle HSS Trust area.

Home-Start scheme	H&SS Trust	Funding provided by HSS Trust (1/4/2000 -31/3/2001)
East Belfast	South & East Belfast	£42,308
North Belfast	North & West Belfast	£34,933
North Down & Ards	Ulster Community & Hospitals	£46,407
Ards Peninsula & Comber	Ulster Community & Hospitals	£12,000
Newry & Mourne (includes Kilkeel)	Newry & Mourne	£46,733
Causeway	Causeway	£39,891
Colin	Down Lisburn	£36,000
Lisburn	Down Lisburn	£1,000
Down District (includes Newcastle & Ballynahinch)	Down Lisburn	£44,000
Armagh & Dungannon	Armagh & Dungannon	£38,950
West Tyrone	Sperrin Lakeland	£21,000
Lakeland	Sperrin Lakeland	£10,000
Antrim District	Homefirst	£42,308
Carrickfergus	Homefirst	£15,000
Craigavon	Craigavon & Banbridge	£11,000

Ní mhaoiníonn Iontaobhais Sláinte agus Seirbhísí Sóisialta scéimeanna Sure Start.

Soláthraíonn an Roinn maoiniú do Sure Start do na 4 Comhpháirtíocht Cúram Leanaí tríd an mBord Sláinte agus Seirbhísí Sóisialta cuí.

Solathraítear sonraí faoin leibhéal maoinithe a sholáthraíonn Iontaobhais Sláinte agus Seirbhísí Sóisialta do scéimeanna Home-Start sa tábla thíos. Ní fheidhmíonn scéim Home-Start i limistéar Iontaobhas HSS Fheabhail.

Scéim Home-Start	Iontaobhas H&SS	Maoiniú arna sholáthar ag Iontaobhas HSS (1/4/2000 -31/3/2001)
Béal Feirste Thoir	Béal Feirste Theas & Thoir	£42,308
Béal Feirste Thuaidh	Béal Feirste Thuaidh & Thiar	£34,933

Scéim Home-Start	Iontaobhas H&SS	Maoiniú arna sholáthar ag Iontaobhas HSS (1/4/2000 -31/3/2001)
An Dún Thuaidh & Ards	Pobal Uladh & Ospidéal	£46,407
Leithinis & Comber	Pobal Uladh & Ospidéal	£12,000
An tIúr & Mórna (Cill Chaoil san áireamh)	An tIúr & Mórna	£46,733
Clochán an Aifir	Clochán an Aifir	£39,891
Colin	Dún Lios na gCearrbhach	£36,000
Lios na gCearrbhach	Dún Lios na gCearrbhach	£1,000
Ceantar an Dúin (An Caisleán Nua & Baile na nInse san áireamh)	Dún Lios na gCearrbhach	£44,000
Ard Mhacha & Dún Geanainn	Ard Mhacha & Dún Geanainn	£38,950
Tír Eoghain Thiar	Sliabh Speirín & Tír na Lochanna	£21,000
Lakeland	Sliabh Speirín & Tír na Lochanna	£10,000
Ceantar Aontroma	Homefirst	£42,308
Carraig Fhearghais	Homefirst	£15,000
Craigavon	Craigavon & Droichead na Banna	£11,000

Contingency Plans

Mr K Robinson asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what is the proposed timetable for the completion of evaluation reports into financial contingency plans for Trusts, and to make a statement on the content of each individual plan.

(AQW 876/01)

Ms de Brún: The contingency plans have already been evaluated and are being implemented.

(1) Altnagelvin Hospitals HSS Trust

That contingency plan set out proposals to address a forecast overcommitment of around £2 million in 2001-02. My Department has evaluated the plan and has accepted proposals of £1.73 million. Additional funding has been provided to address specific needs and the Trust is expected to break even by the end of the year.

(2) Armagh and Dungannon HSS Trust

That contingency plan set out proposals to address a forecast overcommitment of £1.29 million in 2001-02. My Department has evaluated the plan and accepted

proposals of £655,000. Additional funding has been provided to address specific needs and the Trust is expected to break even by the end of the year.

(3) Belfast City Hospital HSS Trust

That contingency plan set out proposals to address a forecast overcommitment of £2.1 million in 2001-02. My Department has evaluated the plan and accepted its proposals.

The contingency plan also contained measures to address a potential GP Fundholder income shortfall of £600,000. The Trust has been informed that to the extent that this shortfall cannot be addressed through its negotiations with the fundholders, it should constrain activity to fundholders to the level that is affordable within the current hospital and community health service budget – unless fundholders themselves agree to meet the costs of additional activity from within their total baseline funding.

(4) Craigavon and Banbridge Community HSS Trust

That contingency plan set out proposals to address a forecast overcommitment of £1.388 million in 2001-02. My Department has evaluated the plan and accepted proposals of £1.017 million. Additional funding has been provided to address specific needs and the Trust is expected to break even by the end of the year.

(5) Down Lisburn HSS Trust

That contingency plan set out proposals to address a forecast overcommitment of £2.064 million in 2000-01. My Department has evaluated the plan and has accepted proposals of £1.639 million. Additional funding has been provided to address specific needs and the Trust is expected to break even by the end of the year.

There is also a potential GP Fundholder income shortfall of £300,000. The Trust has been informed that to the extent that this shortfall cannot be addressed through its negotiations with the fundholders, it should constrain activity to fundholders to the level that is affordable within the current hospital and community health service budget – unless fundholders themselves agree to meet the costs of additional activity from within their total baseline funding.

(6) Green Park HSS Trust

That contingency plan set out proposals to address a forecast overcommitment of £719,000 in relation to a potential GP Fundholder income shortfall in 2001-02. My Department has evaluated the plan and accepted proposals of £450,000. The Trust has been informed that to the extent that the residual shortfall cannot be addressed through its negotiations with the Fundholders, it should constrain activity to fundholders to the level that is affordable within the current hospital and community health service budget – unless fund-

holders themselves agree to meet the costs of additional activity from within their total baseline funding.

(7) Homefirst Community HSS Trust

That contingency plan set out proposals to address a forecast overcommitment of £1.64 million in 2001-02. My Department has evaluated the plan and accepted proposals of £1.356 million. Additional funding has been provided to address specific needs and the Trust is expected to break even by the end of the year.

(8) Mater Infirmorum HSS Trust

That contingency plan set out proposals to address a forecast overcommitment of £180,000 in relation to a potential GP Fundholder income shortfall in 2001-02. My Department has evaluated the plan and has advised the Trust that to the extent that this shortfall cannot be addressed through its negotiations with the fundholders, it should constrain activity to fundholders to the level that is affordable within the current hospital and community health service budget – unless fundholders themselves agree to meet the costs of additional activity from within their total baseline funding.

(9) Newry and Mourne HSS Trust

That contingency plan set out proposals to address a forecast overcommitment of £2.1million in 2001-02. My Department has evaluated the plan and accepted proposals of £1,017,000. Additional funding has been provided to address specific needs and the Trust is expected to break even by the end of the year.

(10) Royal Group of Hospitals HSS Trust

This contingency plan set out proposals to address a forecast overcommitment of £4 million in 2001-02. My Department has evaluated the plan and accepted proposals of £2.07 million. Additional funding has been provided to address specific needs and the Trust is expected to break even by the end of the year.

The Trust has also produced proposals to address a potential shortfall in GP fundholders income of £3.6 million. The Trust has been informed that to the extent that this shortfall cannot be addressed through its negotiations with the fundholders, it should constrain activity to fundholders to the level that is affordable within the current hospital and community health service budget – unless fundholders themselves agree to meet the costs of additional activity from within their total baseline funding.

(11) Ulster Community and Hospital HSS Trust

That contingency plan set out proposals to address a forecast overcommitment of £1.819 million in 2001/02. My Department has evaluated the plan and accepted proposals of £1.032 million. Additional funding has been provided to address specific needs and the Trust is expected to break even by the end of the year.

The contingency plan contained measures to address a potential shortfall in GP fundholders income of £300,000. The Trust has been informed that to the extent that this shortfall cannot be addressed through its negotiations with the fundholders, it should constrain activity to fundholders to the level that is affordable within the current hospital and community health service budget – unless fundholders themselves agree to meet the costs of additional activity from within their total baseline funding.

(12) United Hospitals HSS Trust

That contingency plan set out proposals to address a forecast overcommitment of £252,000 in 2001-02. My Department has evaluated the plan and accepted proposals of £58,000. Additional funding has been provided to address specific needs and the Trust is expected to break even by the end of the year.

The contingency plan contained measures to address a potential shortfall in GP fundholders income of around £350,000. The Trust has been informed that to the extent that this shortfall cannot be addressed through its negotiations with the fundholders, it should constrain activity to fundholders to the level that is affordable within the current hospital and community health service budget – unless fundholders themselves agree to meet the costs of additional activity from within their total baseline funding.

Tá measúnú déanta cheana féin ar na pleananna teagmhásacha agus táthar á gcur i bhfeidhm.

(1) Iontaobhas SSS Otharlanna Alt na nGealbhan

Leag an plean teagmhásach moltaí amach moltaí le tabhairt faoin réamh-mheas iomarcach go dtabharfaí £2 milliún i 2001-02. Rinne an Roinn s'agamsa measúnú ar an phlean agus ghlac sí le moltaí gur chóir go dtabharfaí £1.73 milliún. Soláthraíodh maoiniú breise le dul i ngleic le sianriachtanais agus táthar ag dúil go mbeidh an tIontaobhas meá ar mheá faoi dheireadh na bliana.

(2) Iontaobhas SSS Ard Mhacha & Dhún Geanainn

Leag an plean teagmhásach moltaí amach moltaí le tabhairt faoin réamh-mheas iomarcach go dtabharfaí £1.2 milliún i 2001-02. Rinne an Roinn s'agamsa measúnú ar an phlean agus ghlac sí le moltaí gur chóir go dtabharfaí £655,000. Soláthraíodh maoiniú breise le dul i ngleic le sianriachtanais agus táthar ag dúil go mbeidh an tIontaobhas meá ar mheá faoi dheireadh na bliana.

(3) Iontaobhas SSS Otharlann Chathair Bhéal Feirste

Leagann an plean teagmhásach seo amach moltaí le tabhairt faoin réamh-mheas iomarcach go dtabharfaí £2.1 milliún i 2001-02. Rinne an Roinn s'agamsa measúnú ar an phlean agus ghlac sí lena mholtaí.

Sa phlean teagmhásach fosta bhí bearta le tabhairt faoin easnamh ionchasach £600k in ioncam Shealbhóra Chiste Ghnáthdhochtúirí. Cuireadh in iúl don Iontaobhas mar nach féidir leis tabhairt faoin easnamh seo trína idirbheartaíochtaí leis na sealbhóirí ciste, ba chóir dó srian a chur ar a ghníomhaíochtaí le sealbhóirí ciste ar leibhéal atá ar a acmhainn laistigh den bhuiséad otharlainne agus seirbhíse sláinte pobail faoi láthair – mura n-aontaíonn sealbhóirí ciste iad féin costais ghníomhaíochtaí breise a sheasamh ó laistigh dá mbunmhaoiniú iomlán féin.

(4) Iontaobhas SSS Phobal Craigavon & Dhroichead na Banna

Leag an plean teagmhásach moltaí amach moltaí le tabhairt faoin réamh-mheas iomarcach go dtabharfaí £1.388 milliún i 2001-02. Rinne an Roinn s'agamsa measúnú ar an phlean agus ghlac sí le moltaí gur chóir go dtabharfaí £1.017 milliún. Soláthraíodh maoiniú breise le dul i ngleic le sianriachtanais agus táthar ag dúil go mbeidh an tIontaobhas meá ar mheá faoi dheireadh na bliana.

(5) Iontaobhas SSS An Dúin/Lios na gCearrbhach

Leagann an plean teagmhásach seo amach moltaí le tabhairt faoin réamh-mheas iomarcach go dtabharfaí £2.064 milliún i 2000-01. Rinne an Roinn s'agamsa measúnú ar an phlean agus ghlac sí le moltaí gur chóir go dtabharfaí £1.639 milliún. Soláthraíodh maoiniú breise le dul i ngleic le sianriachtanais agus táthar ag dúil go mbeidh an tIontaobhas meá ar mheá faoi dheireadh na bliana.

Tá easnamh ionchasach £300,000 ann fosta in ioncam Shealbhóra Chiste Ghnáthdhochtúirí. Cuireadh in iúl don Iontaobhas mar nach féidir leis tabhairt faoin easnamh seo trína idirbheartaíochtaí leis na sealbhóirí ciste, ba chóir dó srian a chur ar a ghníomhaíochtaí le sealbhóirí ciste ar leibhéal atá ar a acmhainn laistigh den bhuiséad otharlainne agus seirbhíse sláinte pobail faoi láthair – mura n-aontaíonn sealbhóirí ciste iad féin costais ghníomhaíochtaí breise a sheasamh ó laistigh dá mbunmhaoiniú iomlán féin.

(6) Iontaobhas SSS na Páirce Glaise

Leagann an plean teagmhásach seo amach moltaí le tabhairt faoin réamh-mheas iomarcach go dtabharfaí £719,000 i dtaca le heasnamh ionchasach in ioncam Shealbhóra Chiste Ghnáthdhochtúirí i 2001-02. Rinne an Roinn s'agamsa measúnú ar an phlean agus ghlac sí le moltaí gur chóir go dtabharfaí £450,000. Cuireadh in iúl don Iontaobhas mar nach féidir leis tabhairt faoi fhuilleach an easnaimh seo trína idirbheartaíochtaí leis na sealbhóirí ciste, ba chóir dó srian a chur ar a ghníomhaíochtaí le sealbhóirí ciste ar leibhéal atá ar a acmhainn laistigh den bhuiséad otharlainne agus seirbhíse sláinte pobail faoi láthair – mura n-aontaíonn

sealbhóirí ciste iad féin costais ghníomhaíochtaí breise a sheasamh ó laistigh dá mbunmhaoiniú iomlán féin.

(7) Iontaobhas SSS Phobal Homefirst

Leag an plean teagmhasach moltaí amach moltaí le tabhairt faoin réamh-mheas iomarcach go dtabharfaí £1.64 milliún i 2001-02. Rinne an Roinn s'agamsa measúnú ar an phlean agus ghlac sí le moltaí gur chóir go dtabharfaí £1.356 milliún. Soláthraíodh maoiniú breise le dul i ngleic le sianriachtanais agus táthar ag dúil go mbeidh an tIontaobhas meá ar mheá faoi dheireadh na bliana.

(8) Iontaobhas SSS an Mater Infirmorum

Leagann an plean teagmhasach seo amach moltaí le tabhairt faoin réamh-mheas iomarcach go dtabharfaí £180,000 i dtaca le heasnamh ionchasach in ioncam Shealbhóra Chiste Ghnáthdhochtúirí i 2001-02. Rinne an Roinn s'agamsa measúnú ar an phlean agus chuir sí in iúl don Iontaobhas mar nach féidir tabhairt faoin easnamh seo trína idirbheartaíochtaí leis na sealbhóirí ciste, ba chóir dó srian a chur ar a ghníomhaíochtaí le sealbhóirí ciste ar leibhéal atá ar a acmhainn laistigh den bhuiséad otharlainne agus seirbhíse sláinte pobail faoi láthair – mura n-aontaíonn sealbhóirí ciste iad féin costais ghníomhaíochtaí breise a sheasamh ó laistigh dá mbunmhaoiniú iomlán féin.

(9) Iontaobhas SSS an Iúir & Mhúrn

Leag an plean teagmhasach moltaí amach moltaí le tabhairt faoin réamh-mheas iomarcach go dtabharfaí £2.1 milliún i 2001-02. Rinne an Roinn s'agamsa measúnú ar an phlean agus ghlac sí le moltaí gur chóir go dtabharfaí £1,017,000. Soláthraíodh maoiniú breise le dul i ngleic le sianriachtanais agus táthar ag dúil go mbeidh an tIontaobhas meá ar mheá faoi dheireadh na bliana.

(10) Iontaobhas SSS Ghrúpa Ríoga na nOtharlann

Leagann an plean teagmhasach seo amach moltaí le tabhairt faoin réamh-mheas iomarcach go dtabharfaí £4 milliún i 2001-02. Rinne an Roinn s'agamsa measúnú ar an phlean agus ghlac sí le moltaí gur chóir go dtabharfaí £2.07 milliún. Soláthraíodh maoiniú breise le dul i ngleic le sianriachtanais agus táthar ag go mbeidh an tIontaobhas meá ar mheá faoi dheireadh na bliana.

Rinne an tIontaobhas a mholtaí féin fosta le tabhairt faoin easnamh ionchasach £3.6 milliún in ioncam Shealbhóra Chiste Ghnáthdhochtúirí. Cuireadh in iúl don Iontaobhas mar nach féidir leis tabhairt faoin easnamh seo trína idirbheartaíochtaí leis na sealbhóirí ciste, ba chóir dó srian a chur ar a ghníomhaíochtaí le sealbhóirí ciste ar leibhéal atá ar a acmhainn laistigh den bhuiséad otharlainne agus seirbhíse sláinte pobail faoi láthair – mura n-aontaíonn sealbhóirí ciste iad féin costais ghníomhaíochtaí breise a sheasamh ó laistigh dá mbunmhaoiniú iomlán féin.

(11) Iontaobhas SSS Phobal agus Otharlann Uladh

Leagann an plean teagmhasach seo amach moltaí le tabhairt faoin réamh-mheas iomarcach go dtabharfaí £1.819 milliún i 2001-02. Rinne an Roinn s'agamsa measúnú ar an phlean agus ghlac sí le moltaí gur chóir go dtabharfaí £1.032 milliún. Soláthraíodh maoiniú breise le dul i ngleic le sianriachtanais agus táthar ag dúil go mbeidh an tIontaobhas meá ar mheá faoi dheireadh na bliana.

Sa phlean teagmhasach fosta bhí bearta le tabhairt faoin easnamh ionchasach £300k in ioncam **Shealbhóra Chiste Ghnáthdhochtúirí**. Cuireadh in iúl don Iontaobhas mar nach féidir leis tabhairt faoin easnamh seo trína idirbheartaíochtaí leis na sealbhóirí ciste, ba chóir dó srian a chur ar a ghníomhaíochtaí le sealbhóirí ciste ar leibhéal atá ar a acmhainn laistigh den bhuiséad otharlainne agus seirbhíse sláinte pobail faoi láthair – mura n-aontaíonn sealbhóirí ciste iad féin costais ghníomhaíochtaí breise a sheasamh ó laistigh dá mbunmhaoiniú iomlán féin.

(12) Iontaobhas SSS na nOtharlann Aontaithe

Leagann an plean teagmhasach seo amach moltaí le tabhairt faoin réamh-mheas iomarcach go dtabharfaí £252,000 i 2001-02. Rinne an Roinn s'agamsa measúnú ar an phlean agus ghlac sí le moltaí gur chóir go dtabharfaí £58,000. Soláthraíodh maoiniú breise le dul i ngleic le sianriachtanais agus táthar ag go mbeidh an tIontaobhas meá ar mheá faoi dheireadh na bliana.

Sa phlean teagmhasach fosta bhí bearta le tabhairt faoin easnamh ionchasach timpeall is £350,000 in ioncam Shealbhóra Chiste Ghnáthdhochtúirí. Cuireadh in iúl don Iontaobhas mar nach féidir leis tabhairt faoin easnamh seo trína idirbheartaíochtaí leis na sealbhóirí ciste, ba chóir dó srian a chur ar a ghníomhaíochtaí le sealbhóirí ciste ar leibhéal atá ar a acmhainn laistigh den bhuiséad otharlainne agus seirbhíse sláinte pobail faoi láthair – mura n-aontaíonn sealbhóirí ciste iad féin costais ghníomhaíochtaí breise a sheasamh ó laistigh dá mbunmhaoiniú iomlán féin.

Tackling Poverty and Social Disadvantage: North Belfast

Mr K Robinson asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what steps will be taken to deal with the physical and psychological effects suffered by residents in areas of multiple deprivation and who are under threat from neighbouring communities especially in the north of the city of Belfast.

(AQW 949/01)

Ms de Brún: New Targeting Social Need (TSN) is one of the Executive's key policies for tackling poverty and social disadvantage in areas of multiple deprivation by targeting efforts and available resources

on those who are most deprived. My Department's New TSN Action Plan contains some 60 targets aimed at improving the health and social needs of disadvantaged people.

In North Belfast a number of measures have been taken to address the psychological effects suffered by residents in this area. Those include the establishment of an outreach clinic in Lincoln Avenue by the regional Family Trauma Centre, a half-day clinic at the Survivors of Trauma, Cliftonville Road; and the appointment of a Trauma Co-ordinator at the Everton Centre to identify needs and develop long-term strategic plans to meet local needs. The Department has also bid for an immediate £104,000 from OFMDFM to meet the immediate needs for additional counselling and support.

Is é Aimsiú Riachtanais Sóisialta Nua (ARS Nua) ceann d'eochairpholaisithe an Fheidhmeannais chun dul i ngleic le bochtanas agus míbhuntáiste sóisialta i gceantair ildhiolta trí iarrachtaí agus acmhainní ar fáil a dhíriú orthu siúd is mó faoi míbhuntáiste. Tá 60 sprioc i bPlean Gníomhaíochta ARS Nua na Roinne s'agam dírithe ar shláinte agus riachtanais shóisialta daoine faoi míbhuntáiste a fheabhsú.

Tá roinnt beart déanta i mBéal Feirste Thuaidh le dul i ngleic leis na torthaí síceolaíocha a d'fhulaing cónathóirí sa cheantar seo. I measc na mbeart bhunaigh an tIonad Tráma Teaghlaigh reigiúnach clinic for-rochtana in Ascaill Lincoln, clinic leathlae ag Marthanóirí Tráma, Bóthar Cliftonville; agus ceapadh Chomhordaitheoir Tráma ag Ionad Everton chun riachtanais agus pleananna fadtéarmacha straitéiseacha a fhorbairt le freastal ar riachtanais aitiúla. Rinne an Roinn tairiscint faoi choinne £104,000 láithreach ar OPALP le freastal ar na riachtanais láithreacha le haghaidh chomhairlithe agus tacaíochta breise.

Heart Operations: West Tyrone Constituency

Mr Gibson asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the number of heart operations carried out on individuals residing in the West Tyrone constituency in the last 12 months; and to make a statement. (AQW 951/01)

Ms de Brún: In the financial year 2000-01, 514 heart operations were carried out on individuals resident in the West Tyrone constituency.

In the light of increased numbers of patients having to wait for cardiac surgery, I asked the Chief Medical Officer to review the position and the report of that review was finalised in September last year. Public consultation on a joint action plan for the implementation of the recommendations made by the Cardiac Surgery Review and the Review of Cardiology Services ended on 4 January.

Sa bhliain airgeadais 2000/01, rinneadh 514 obráid chroí ar dhaoine atá ina gcónaí i ndáilcheantar Thír Eoghain Thiar.

Toise líon méadaithe na n-othar a mbíonn orthu fanacht ar mháinliacht chairdiach, d'iarr mé ar an Phríomh-Oifigeach Míochaine an riocht a athbhreithniú agus cuireadh dlaoi mhullaigh ar thuairisc an athbhreithnithe i Meán Fómhair anuraidh. Cuireadh deireadh leis an chomhairliú poiblí ar an chomhphlean gníomhaíochta ar chur i bhfeidhm na moltaí a rinne an tAthbhreithniú ar Máinliacht Chairdiach agus Athbhreithniú ar Sheirbhísí Cairdeolaíochta ar 4 Eanáir.

Recruitment and Retention of Doctors and Nurses

Mr Gibson asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety if she will make a statement on recruitment and retention of doctors and nurses in the Health Service. (AQW 952/01)

Ms de Brún: In order to address recruitment and retention issues throughout the HPSS, a workforce planning initiative has been launched that will produce detailed plans for each of the main health and personal social services groups. Those plans will assist me on decisions on future student intake levels.

Currently, the specialist medical workforce is reviewed annually and numbers in training adjusted, resources permitting, to take account of the changing situation. In recognition of the current staffing position for consultant medical staff the number of medical students was increased in 2001 by 8.5% from 166 to 180.

There are no reported difficulties in filling GP principal posts and applications to vocational training in general practice have averaged 60 against an intake of 42.

As already indicated in my response to AQW 514/01, a number of initiatives have been taken to enhance the supply of qualified nurses, including free training for nurses and midwives returning to practice, as well as an expansion in the number of available student nurse places.

In response to identified training needs and to ease retention difficulties, my Department continues to allocate significant resources, in excess of £9m annually, to support the continued professional development of qualified nursing staff.

Le tabhairt faoi cheisteanna earcaíochta agus coinneála ar fud na SSSP, lainseáladh scéim phleanáil mheithle oibre a chumfaidh mionphleananna do gach príomhghrúpa sláinte agus seirbhísí sóisialta pearsanta. Cuideoidh na pleananna seo liomsa bearta a dhéanamh ar leibhéal an ghlacadh isteach mac léinn sa todhchaí.

Faoi láthair, déantar athbhreithniú ar an tsainmheitheal mhíochaine gach bliain agus socraítear na líonta in oiliúint, de réir na n-acmhainní ar fáil, chun an riocht athraithe a chur san áireamh. Mar aitheantas ar riocht reatha na foirne i dtaca leis an fhoireann chomhairleach míochaine, tháinig méadú 8.5% i líon na mac léinn míochaine i 2001, sin ó 166 go 180 mac léinn.

Níor tuairiscíodh deacracht ar bith i líonadh na bpríomhphost Gnáthdhochtúra agus ba é 60 iarratas meánlíon na n-iarratas ar oiliúint ghairmiúil i ngnáthdhochtúireacht in éadan ghlacadh isteach de 42 duine.

Mar atá curtha in iúl agam cheana féin in AQW 514/01, cuireadh tús le roinnt scéimeanna chun cur le líon na n-altraí cáilithe, ina measc bhí oiliúint shaor d'altraí agus do mhná cabhrach ag dochtúireacht arís, chomh maith le méadú i líon na n-áiteanna ar fáil d'ábhar altraí.

Mar fheagairt ar riachtanais aitheanta oiliúna agus chun deacrachtaí coinneála a mhaolú, leanann an Roinn s'agamsa ar aghaidh acmhainní riachtanacha a thabhairt, breis agus £9m in aghaidh na bliana, chun tacú le forbairt leanúnach ghairmiúil na foirne altrachta cáilithe.

Bed Blocking

Mr M Robinson asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail (a) her plans to address the problem of bed blocking in hospitals; and (b) the resources she can make available to help alleviate the problem. (AQW 959/01)

Ms de Brún: Although there is still considerable work to be done before I settle the detailed deployment of my budget for next year, I am committed to funding an extra 1,000 care packages over the course of 2002-03, targeted mainly at older people. Not only will this impact on waiting lists in the community, it should also relieve pressures on hospital beds, by allowing for more timely discharge from hospital and by reducing the number of hospital admissions.

Cé go bhfuil i bhfad níos mó oibre le déanamh go fóill sula ndéanfaidh mé socrú ar mhiondealú chaiteachas mo bhuiséid don bhliain seo chugainn, tá mé geallta do mhaoiniú 1,000 pacáiste breise cúraim le linn 2002/03, leis an chuid is mó díobh do sheandaoine go príomha. Ní bheidh tionchar aige seo ar liostaí feithimh sa phobal amháin, ach ba chóir dó brúnna feithimh ar leapacha otharlainne a mhaolú fosta, trí éascú scaoileadh amach níos tráthúla as otharlanna, agus trí laghdú i líon an ghlacadh isteach in otharlanna.

Monitoring of Drugs in Hospitals

Mr M Robinson asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what monitoring her

Department undertakes for the use of antibiotics in hospitals. (AQW 960/01)

Ms de Brún: Monitoring of drug use in hospitals, including antibiotics, is the responsibility of Boards and Trusts. They are required by the Department to develop, implement and review, at least annually, policies and guidelines on the management of infections, and the appropriate use of antimicrobial drugs.

An antimicrobial resistance action plan working group set up by my Department will shortly be publishing its report and it will contain recommendations in the area of both antibiotic prescribing and monitoring in hospitals and in primary care.

Boird agus Iontaobhais atá freagrach as monatóireacht a dhéanamh ar úsáid drugaí in otharlanna, úsáid frithbheathach san áireamh. Iarrann an Roinn orthu polasaithe agus treoirlínte ar láimhseáil infhabhtuithe agus ar úsáid chuí drugaí frithmhiocróbacha a fhorbairt, a chur i bhfeidhm agus a athbhreithniú go bliantúil ar a laghad.

Foilseoidh an grúpa oibre um plean gníomhaíochta ar fhríotaíocht fhrithmhiocróbach, bunaithe ag an Roinn s'agamsa, a thuairisc gan mhoill, agus istigh inti, beidh moltaí ar ordú agus ar mhonatóireacht fhrithbheathach in otharlanna agus i bpríomhchúram.

Waiting Time: A&E Departments

Mr M Robinson asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail (a) the current average waiting time for treatment at A&E Departments in (i) Belfast City Hospital and (ii) Royal Victoria Hospital; and (b) how these figures compare with other hospitals in Northern Ireland. (AQW 961/01)

Ms de Brún: The information requested is not available.

Níl fáil ar an eolas a iarradh.

Home-Start

Mr Hilditch asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to give her assessment of the value of Homestart to the community and to social services. (AQW 966/01)

Ms de Brún: Home-Start is a valuable, non-stigmatising form of support which provides practical help and friendship to young families under stress in their own homes. The work carried out by Home-Start volunteers helps to prevent family breakdown and enhance the quality of family life.

Is saghas tacaíochta fiúntaí í Home Start nach náiríonn duine ar bith agus a thugann cuidiú praiticiúil

do theaghlaigh óga faoi strus agus a dhéanann cairdeas leo ina dtithe féin. Cuidíonn an obair a dhéanann saorálaithe Home Start le stad a chur le cliseadh teaghlaigh agus le cur le cáilíocht shaol an teaghlaigh.

Anorexia Nervosa and Bulimia Nervosa: Treatment

Mrs I Robinson asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what treatment and care is available for sufferers of anorexia nervosa and bulimia nervosa who live outside the Belfast area, and how does she intend to increase this support.

(AQW 971/01)

Ms de Brún: Sufferers of anorexia nervosa and bulimia nervosa who live outside the Belfast area may be treated within their local Community Mental Health Teams. Patients requiring psychiatric admission are admitted to local acute psychiatric units. Patients requiring highly specialist treatment are transferred to Specialist Eating Disorder Units in England and Scotland.

I will continue to bid for additional resources to establish a regional Eating Disorder Service to provide a specialist day hospital, outpatient and community service, linked with and supported by existing mental health services and primary care professionals.

Is féidir leo siúd atá ag fulaingt anaireicse néarógach agus craosach néarógach a bhfuil cónaí orthu taobh amuigh de cheantar Bhéal Feirste cóireáil a fháil laistigh dá gceantar Fhoirne Áitiúla Pobail Sláinte Meabhrach. Glactar isteach le hothair is gá a ghlacadh isteach i ngéarionaid áitiúla síciatracha. Aistrítear othair a bhfuil sainchóireáil ard de dhíth orthu go Sainionaid Neamhord Ite i Sasana agus in Albain.

Leanfaidh mé ar aghaidh ag iarraidh ar acmhainní breise a fháil chun Seirbhís réigiúnach Neamhord Ite a chur ar bun a sholáthróidh sainsheirbhís otharlainne lae, éisothair agus phobail, agus í bainteach leis agus tacaíthe ag na seirbhísí sláinte meabhrach atá ann faoi láthair agus ag gairmithe príomhchúraim.

Anorexia Nervosa and Bulimia Nervosa: Support

Mrs I Robinson asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail (a) the assistance which is currently available for sufferers of anorexia nervosa and bulimia nervosa; and (b) what services are there for family members who struggle to cope with the illnesses.

(AQW 972/01)

Ms de Brún: Within the Belfast area there is a small specialist service, which can provide a range of treatment modalities to patients at an outpatient level. That specialist service provides support and training to

the voluntary organisations involved with patients and their families. Sufferers from outside the Belfast area may be treated within their local Community Mental Health Teams. Patients requiring psychiatric admission are admitted to local acute psychiatric units. Patients requiring highly specialist treatment are transferred to Specialist Eating Disorder Units in England and Scotland.

Family members who struggle to cope with the illness have a right to an assessment of their ability to continue caring. That assessment is taken into account in deciding the type and level of community care services to be provided to the person being cared for. The Personal Social Services (Amendment) Bill, which had its second reading in the Assembly on 4 December, seeks to enable Health and Social Services Boards and Trusts to offer new support to carers to help them to maintain their own health and wellbeing.

Laistigh de cheantar Bhéal Feirste tá sainsheirbhís bheag a sholáthraíonn réimse módúlachtaí cóireála d'othair ar leibhéal éisothair. Tugann an tsainsheirbhís seo tacaíocht agus oiliúint do na heagrais dheonacha a bhfuil baint acu le hothair agus lena dteaghlaigh. Is féidir le fulangaithe ón taobh amuigh de cheantar Bhéal Feirste cóireál a fháil laistigh dá gceantar Fhoirne áitiúla Pobail Sláinte Meabhrach. Glactar isteach le hothair is gá a ghlacadh isteach i ngéarionaid áitiúla síciatracha. Aistrítear othair a bhfuil sainchóireáil ard de dhíth orthu go Sainionaid Neamhord Ite i Sasana agus in Albain.

Tá ceart ag baill teaghlaigh atá ag streachailt le déileáil leis an tinneas, iarraidh ar mheasúnú ar a gcumas le bheith i bhfeighil duine go fóill. Cuirtear an measúnú seo san áireamh nuair a dhéantar cinneadh ar shórt agus ar leibhéal na seirbhísí cúraim phobail atá le soláthar don duine a bhfuil feighil á déanamh air/uirthi. Is é is aidhm leis an Bhille (Leasaithe) Seirbhísí Sóisialta Pearsanta, a cuireadh faoi bhráid an Tionóil den dara huair ar 4 Nollaig, cur ar chumas Bhoird agus Iontaobhais Shláinte agus Sheirbhísí Sóisialta tacaíocht nua a thairiscint d'fheighlithe chun cuidiú leo coimhead a dhéanamh ar a sláinte agus ar a ndea-bhail féin.

Anorexia Nervosa and Bulimia Nervosa: Treatment

Mrs I Robinson asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the number of people currently receiving treatment for (a) anorexia nervosa; and (b) bulimia nervosa.

(AQW 973/01)

Ms de Brún: The latest figures available indicate that in 1998-99 there were 51 people treated in hospitals for the primary diagnoses of anorexia nervosa, and 10 people treated in hospitals for primary diagnoses of bulimia nervosa.

Léiríonn na figiúirí is déanaí atá ar fáil gur cóireáladh 51 duine a fáthmheasadh ar dtús go raibh anaireicse néarógach orthu in otharlanna agus gur cóireáladh 10 duine a fáthmheasadh ar dtús go raibh an galar craosach néarógach orthu in otharlanna.

Delivery of Services to Elderly People

Mr M Robinson asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what assessment she has made on the likely impact that the shortage of nurses may have on the delivery of services of (a) care for elderly people; and (b) home health care services for elderly people. (AQW 983/01)

Ms de Brún: I am determined to ensure the continued effective delivery of services to elderly people. My Department has significantly increased the number of pre registration nurse education places this year. That should assist in ensuring more qualified nurses are trained for working with a variety of client groups, including older people.

My Department has engaged consultants to carry out a regional review of the nursing workforce, consulting service providers, education establishments, statutory, voluntary and private sector organisations. Their report will identify age profile, workload pressures, pressures in service provision, present and future health and social care needs of our population of older people, training and education needs of nurses working with older people, including the shape, nature and size of the nursing workforce that will be required to deliver care to older people in the future.

The report will be completed shortly and should identify gaps and areas for improvement and should detail specific action that is required by my Department.

Tá mé geallta chun soláthar leanúnach éifeachtach seirbhísí do sheandaoine a chinntiú. Mhéadaigh an Roinn s'agamsa líon na n-áiteanna in oideachas réamhchláraithe altránais go mór i mbliana. Ba chóir don méid seo cuidiú le cinntiú go n-oilfí níos mó altraí cáilithe le hobair a dhéanamh le dreamanna éagsúla cliant, mar aon le seandaoine.

D'iarr an Roinn s'agamsa ar lianna comhairleacha athbhreithniú réigiúnach a dhéanamh ar an mheitheal altránais, ar sholáthraithe seirbhíse comhairleacha, ar institiúidí oideachais agus ar eagraíochtaí earnála reachtúla, deonaí, agus príobháidí. Aimseoidh a dtuairisc próifíl aoise, brúnna an ualaigh oibre, brúnna ar sholáthar seirbhísí, riachtanais shláinte agus chúram sóisialta ár seandaoine faoi láthair agus sa todhchaí, riachtanais oiliúna agus oideachais na n-altraí ag obair le seandaoine, mar aon le cosúlacht, sórt agus le líon na meithle altránais a bheidh de dhíth le cúram a sholáthar do sheandaoine sa todhchaí.

Críochnófar an tuairisc ar ball agus ba chóir di bearna agus réimsí a aimsiú le haghaidh feabhsaithe agus ba chóir di mionchuntas a thabhairt ar ghníomh ar leith atá iarrtha ag an Roinn s'agamsa.

Radiotherapists

Mr M Robinson asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail (a) the number of radiotherapists per head of population and (b) how this compares with the figure in each of the past 3 years. (AQW 984/01)

Ms de Brún: The information requested is detailed in the table below.

RADIOTHERAPISTS PER 10,000 POPULATION – SEPTEMBER OF EACH YEAR.

Year	Headcount	WTE ¹
2001	0.31	0.29
2000	0.26	0.25
1999	0.25	0.22
1998	0.23	0.21

¹ WTE – Whole Time Equivalent

Tá an t-eolas a iarradh léirithe sa tábla thíos.

RAIDITEIRIPITHE AN 10,000 DUINE – MEÁN FÓMHAIR GACH BLIAIN.

Bliain	Cuntas daoine	CAI ¹
2001	0.31	0.29
2000	0.26	0.25
1999	0.25	0.22
1998	0.23	0.21

¹ CAI - Coibhéis Ama Iomlán

Free Nursing Care for the Elderly

Mr Shannon asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety if she has committed funding for free nursing care for the elderly in her budget for the financial year beginning April 2002. (AQW 989/01)

Ms de Brún: As I have previously announced, I intend to introduce free nursing care in nursing homes from October 2002, subject to the completion of the passage of the necessary legislation through the Assembly. To facilitate introduction from next October, I have committed £4.5 million of the departmental budget for the financial year 2002 - 03.

Mar a d'fhógair mé cheana, is é mo rún altranas saor in aisce a thabhairt isteach i dtithe altránais anseo ó Dheireadh Fómhair 2002, ag brath ar phasáiste na reachtaíochta cuí tríd an Tionól. Lena éascú seo ó Mhéan Fómhair seo chugainn, gheall mé £4.5 milliún ó bhuiséad na Roinne don bhliain airgeadais 2002-03.

Fire Service: Newtownards

Mr Shannon asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what steps are being taken to provide a full time Fire Service for Newtownards.

(AQW 992/01)

Ms de Brún: The Fire Brigade are currently finalising a major report on the provision of fire cover. The report is due to be presented to the Fire Authority in March 2002 and may recommend changes to the current fire cover.

The Chief Fire Officer has advised that no decision will be made about the future provision of fire cover in Newtownards until the above report has been finalised and approved.

Tá an Bhriogáid Dóiteáin ag cur dlaoi mhullaigh faoi láthair ar thuairisc bharrthábhachach ar sholáthar árachais dóiteáin. Tá an tuairisc le cur faoi bhráid an Údaráis Dóiteáin i Márta 2002 agus is féidir go molfaidh sé athruithe ar an árachas reatha dóiteáin.

Chuir an Príomh-Oifigeach Dóiteáin in iúl nach ndéanfar cinneadh ar bith ar sholáthar árachais dóiteáin i mBaile Nua na hArda sa toadhchaí go gcuirfear an dlaoi mhullaigh ar an tuairisc thuasluaite agus go gceadófar í.

Hospital Service Levels

Mr Gibson asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what steps are being taken to ensure that the level of service is maintained during the process of organisational change at (a) Tyrone County Hospital and (b) Sperrin Lakeland Trust.

(AQW 993/01)

Ms de Brún: I have made clear that, until longer-term decisions on the future of our hospital services are made, I expect every effort to be made to maintain existing services at local hospitals, including Tyrone County Hospital. My officials are in frequent contact with Health and Social Services Boards and HSS Trusts to address any problems which arise.

Rinne mé go soiléir é, go dtí go ndéantar cinní níos fadtéarmaí ar thodhchaí ár n-otharlann, tá mé ag súil go ndéanfar gach iarracht seirbhísí faoi láthair a chothabháil ag otharlanna áitiúla, Otharlann Thír Eoghain san áireamh. Is minic m'oifigh i dteagmháil le Boird Shláinte agus Sheirbhísí Sóisialta agus le hIontaobhais SSS le dul i ngleic le fadhbanna a thagann aníos.

Fire Fighters: Conditions of Service

Mr Shannon asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to outline the current retirement age for fire fighters and if this is in line with the current equality legislation regarding ageism.

(AQW 1005/01)

Ms de Brún: The terms and conditions under which fire fighters are employed here are set out in the Scheme of Conditions of Service of the National Joint Council for Local Authorities. Under that scheme all fire fighters whose terms include a liability to engage in firefighting are required to retire at age 55. For those at Assistant Divisional Officer rank and above the age of retirement is 60. However, the Fire Authority may grant an extension of up to 6 months to the date of retirement in the interests of efficiency.

The Firemen's Pension Scheme Order (Northern Ireland) 1973 allows a fire fighter to retire voluntarily at 50 years providing that he or she has completed 25 years service.

Within the Authority's Equality Scheme there is a commitment to carry out an Equality Impact Assessment on employee resourcing and the age of retirement will be considered during this study, due to be completed in 2002.

Tá na téarmaí agus coinníollacha faoina bhfuil comhraiceoirí dóiteáin anseo fostaithe leagtha amach i Scéim Choinníollacha Seirbhíse den Chomhchomhairle Náisiúnta um Údaráis Áitiúla. Faoin scéim seo is gá do gach comhraiceoir dóiteáin, a bhfuil dliteanas aige le bheith páirteach i gcomhrac dóiteáin mar chuid dá théarmaí, éirí as an obair agus iad 55 bliain d'aois. Dóibh siúd atá ar chéim Oifigeach Cúnta Roinne agus níos airde is é 60 bliain an aois scoir. Is féidir, áfach, go dtabharfaidh an tÚdarás Dóiteáin sinéir ama 6 mí ar a mhéad a fhad leis an dáta scoir ar mhaithe le héifeachtúlacht.

Ligeann Ordú Scéim Phinsin Comhraiceoirí Dóiteáin (Tuaisceart Éireann) 1973 do chomhraiceoir dóiteáin éirí as an obair go deonach ag 50 bliain d'aois a fhad is atá 25 bliain de sheirbhís déanta aige/aici.

Laistigh de Scéim Chomhionannais an Údaráis tá geallanas ann chun Measúnú Tionchair ar Comhionannas a dhéanamh ar aimsiú fostaithe agus déanfar machnamh agus ar an aois scoir le linn an stáidéir seo, atá le bheith críochnaithe i 2002.

National Institute for Clinical Excellence: Anti-Psychotic Drugs

Mr Gibson asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety when she expects the National Institute for Clinical Excellence to publish its recommendations on the prescribing of the atypical anti-psychotic medicines for schizophrenia. (AQW 1006/01)

Ms de Brún: I understand that the National Institute for Clinical Excellence is aiming to publish its recommendations on the prescribing of these drugs in March 2002.

Tuigim go bhfuil sé d'aidhm ag an Institiúid Náisiúnta um Fheabhas Cliniciúil a cuid moltaí ar ordú na ndrugaí seo a fhoilsiú i Márta 2002.

Development of Cancer Services

Mrs I Robinson asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what action she is taking to improve services for cancer patients.

(AQW 1008/01)

Ms de Brún: This year an additional £3m has been made available for the development of cancer services. These resources have facilitated the development of oncology services at the four cancer units, with over 50% of day-patient chemotherapy now provided outside of the Cancer Centre in Belfast. So far, two additional consultant oncologists and 70 nurses have been appointed to the Cancer Centre and cancer units, bringing the total staff involved in the provision of radiotherapy and chemotherapy services to approximately 500. In addition, I recently announced that £4m was being made available for the development of a new day hospital and outpatients suite as part of the first phase of the new Cancer Centre at the Belfast City Hospital.

I have also approved the acquisition of two additional linear accelerators with two bunkers at Belvoir Park Hospital at a capital cost of £3.8m. My decision to provide two machines will secure the future of services at the hospital, pending the opening of the new Cancer Centre at the Belfast City Hospital. I have also recently approved a list of further urgent remedial work costing about £550,000 – to immediately fund repairs to the building infrastructure and equipment aimed at enhancing current services.

Cuireadh £3m breise ar fáil i mbliana chun seirbhísí ailse a fhorbairt. Chuidigh na hacmhainní seo le seirbhísí oinceolaíochta a fhorbairt sna ceithre ionad ailse, agus breis agus 50% de cheimiteiripe othair lae soláthraithe anois taobh amuigh den Ionad Ailse i mBéal Feirste an toradh a tháinig as. Go dtí seo, ceapadh beirt oinceolaithe comhairleacha breise agus 70 altra anois don Ionad Ailse agus d'ionaid eile ailse, sin timpeall is 500 duine ar an fhoireann san iomlán a sholáthraíonn seirbhísí raiditeiripe agus ceimiteiripe. Ina theannta sin, d'fhógair mé ar na mallaibh go raibh £4m á chur ar fáil chun otharlann nua lae agus sraith seomraí d'othair a chóiriú mar chuid den chéad chéim den Ionad nua Ailse in Otharlann Chathair Bhéal Feirste.

Cheadaigh mé fosta go gceannófaí dhá luasaire líneacha breise le dhá bhuncaer in Otharlann Pháirc Belvoir ar chostas chaiptil de £3.8m. Cinnteoidh mo chinneadh chun dhá inneall a sholáthar todhchaí na seirbhísí san otharlann, go dtí go n-osclofar an tIonad nua Ailse in Otharlann Chathair Bhéal Feirste. Ar na mallaibh cheadaigh mé liosta d'obair bhreise phráinneach

leasúcháin a mbeidh thart faoi £550,000 uirthi – chun deisiúcháin bhonneagar an fhoirgnimh agus chun trealamh a chuirfidh feabhas ar na seirbhísí mar atá a mhaoiniú láithreach.

Confidential Enquiry on Stillbirths and Deaths in Infancy

Mr Shannon asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what steps she is taking to develop a Child Death Review Team for Northern Ireland.

(AQW 1009/01)

Ms de Brún: Under the current arrangements here, as in England and Wales, the deaths of all babies from 20 weeks gestation to 1 year are notified to the Confidential Enquiry on Stillbirths and Deaths in Infancy (CESDI). Each year a particular subset of these deaths is investigated by CESDI. In the case of children from 1 to 15 any deaths which are unexplained or occur as the result of an accident are notified to the coroner and will then be subject to a coroner's enquiry.

In England and Wales, consideration is being given to a proposal to combine CESDI with the Confidential Enquiry into Maternal Deaths and to extend it to cover children up to 16 years old. My officials will be watching developments in this matter.

Faoi réir na socruithe reatha anseo, cosúil leo siúd i Sasana agus sa Bhreatain Bheag, cuirtear bás gach uile leanbh ó thréimhse iompair 20 seachtain go 1 bliain in iúl don Fhiosrúchán Rúnda ar Mharbh-bhreitheanna agus ar Bhásanna Páistí (FRMBP). Gach bliain, déanann FRMBP fiosrúchán ar chuid ar leith de na básanna seo. Maidir le páistí idir 1 bliain agus 15 bliain d'aois, cuirtear bás ar bith gan mhíniú nó a tharla de dheasca timpiste in iúl don chróinéir, agus ansin, beidh sé faoi réir fhiosrúchán an chróinéara.

I Sasana agus sa Bhreatain Bheag, tá machnamh á dhéanamh ar mholadh chun FRMBP a chónasc leis an Fhiosrúchán Rúnda ar Bhásanna Mháthartha, a chlúdódh páistí suas go 16 bliain d'aois. Beidh mo chuid oifigeach ag faire ar chúrsaí maidir leis an cheist seo.

Orthopaedic Appointments: Ulster Community & Hospital HSS Trust

Mr Shannon asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety, pursuant to AQW 728/01, in relation to the Framework for Action on Waiting Lists, to outline (a) the most recent orthopaedic appointment survey including start date and completion date; and (b) if a criteria is used to prioritise appointments at the Ulster Community and Hospital HSS Trust.

(AQW 1010/01)

Ms de Brún: I am not aware of any recent orthopaedic appointment survey at the Ulster Community and Hospital Health and Social Services Trust.

With regard to criteria used to prioritise appointments at the Ulster Community and Hospital Health and Social Services Trust, I am advised that the Consultants prioritise the new appointments on the basis of clinical urgency.

Níl suirbhé ar bith ar choinní ortaipéideacha déanta ar na mallabha in Iontaobhas Sláinte agus Seirbhísí Sóisialta Phobal agus Otharlann Uladh ar eolas agam.

Maidir leis na critéir úsáidte le tosaíocht a thabhairt do choinní in Iontaobhas Sláinte agus Seirbhísí Sóisialta Phobal agus Otharlann Uladh, cuireadh in iúl dom gur thug na Lianna Comhairleacha tosaíocht do na coinní nua ar bhonn práinne cliniciúla.

Local Health and Social Care Groups

Mr Gibson asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what plans she has to involve district nurses in profiling the health needs of their community. (AQW 1014/01)

Ms de Brún: The new Local Health and Social Care Groups (LHSCGs), which are being established from 1 April 2002, will create a mechanism for primary care professionals to play an effective role in the commissioning of services for the communities they serve. Assessing local health and social care needs is integral to the commissioning process and, with the multidisciplinary partnership approach envisaged, I expect that district nurses and other community nurses will be closely involved in profiling the health needs of their community.

Cruthóidh na Grúpaí nua Áitiúla Sláinte agus Cúraim Shóisialta (GÁSCSÍ), a bhunófar ar 1 Aibreán 2002, cruthóidh siad meicníocht lenar féidir le gairmithe príomhchúraim ról éifeachtach bheith acu i gcoimisiúnú seirbhísí do na pobail ar a riarann siad. Tá measúnú ar riachtanais áitiúla shláinte agus chúraim shóisialta riachtanach don phróiseas choimisiúnaithe agus, le cur chuige na páirtíochta ildhisciplíní measta, tá mé ag súil leis go mbeidh altraí ceantair agus altraí pobail eile páirteach go dlúth i gcur in iúl riachtanas áitiúil sláinte a bpobail.

National Care Standards

Mr Gibson asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety how the national care standards for residential care homes reflect the treatment needs of those with drug and alcohol problems. (AQW 1015/01)

Ms de Brún: National Care Standards are part of the new regulatory framework for care homes and other care services currently being established under

the Regulation of Care (Scotland) Act. These include standards for care homes for people with drug and alcohol problems. The Department of Health in England and the National Assembly in Wales are also working on National Minimum Standards for such services under their Care Standards Act.

I outlined my plans for improving and extending the regulation of care services here in the consultation document Best Practice - Best Care issued in April 2001. The proposals set out in that document include the development of standards for a range of care services including residential care homes in consultation with interested parties.

Tá na Caighdeáin Chúram Náisiúnta mar pháirt den chreatlach nua rialúcháin do thithe cúraim agus do sheirbhísí cúraim eile atáthar á mbunú faoi Acht Rialú Cúraim (Albain). Clúdaíonn seo caighdeáin do thithe cúraim do dhaoine le fadhbanna drugaí agus alcóil. Tá An Roinn Sláinte i Sasana agus an Tionól Náisiúnta sa Bhreatain Bheag ag obair chomh maith ar Íoschaighdeáin Náisiúnta dá leithéid de sheirbhísí faoina nAcht Caighdeáin Chúraim.

Bhreac mé síos mo chuid pleananna faoi shíniú agus fheabhsú rialú na seirbhísí cúraim anseo sa doiciméad comhairlithe ‘Sárchleachtadh - Sárchúram’ a eisíodh in Aibreán 2001. Is atá san áireamh leis na moltaí sa doiciméad sin ná forbairt caighdeán ar sheirbhísí cúraim chomh maith le réimse seirbhísí tithe cúraim i gcomhairle le páirtí leasmhara.

Sourcing Treatment Outside NI

Mr Gibson asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail her policy on sending patients for treatment to hospitals outside Northern Ireland. (AQW 1016/01)

Ms de Brún: I am happy, in principle, to draw on hospital services available elsewhere in the interests of patients. The health and social services already make very good use of services in Glasgow, London, Dublin and other centres, as part of the overall services available to patients. In doing so, of course, there is the issue of how that impacts on the overall financial resources available to services here. There needs to be an appropriate balance to ensure that services which people need are accessible and readily available.

Tá mé sásta, i bprionsabal, seirbhísí otharlainne ar fáil in áiteanna eile a úsáid do leas othar. Baineann na seirbhísí sláinte agus sóisialta úsáid an-mhaith cheana féin as seirbhísí i nGlaschú, Londain, i mBaile Átha Cliath agus in áiteanna eile, mar chuid de na seirbhísí iomlána ar fáil d’othair. Leoga, leis seo a dhéanamh ní mór an cheist faoin dóigh a bhfuil tionchar aici seo ar na hacmhainní iomlána airgeadais ar fáil abhus anseo a scrúdú. Is gá cothromas cuí a bheith ann le cinntiú

go bhfuil na seirbhísí atá de dhíth ar dhaoine ar fáil go réidh agus go bhfuil siad infhaighte.

Hospital-Acquired Infections

Mr M Robinson asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what steps she is taking to protect cancer patients from hospital-acquired infections. (AQW 1027/01)

Ms de Brún: I am concerned that all patients, including cancer patients, should be protected as far as possible from hospital-acquired infections.

The Health and Social Services Boards have been working with Trusts to implement a programme of action to strengthen the prevention and control of infections in hospitals. In June 2001 the Department issued guidance to Hospital Trusts on the standards of cleanliness against which they were to benchmark their facilities. Reports from Trusts have been received and are under consideration by my officials.

The Department is currently preparing an Antimicrobial Resistance Action Plan which will be launched early in the New Year. Among other things, the Plan will be aiming to ensure the introduction of measures in hospitals to combat the emergence of antimicrobial resistances and to manage infection.

Tá mé inníoch gur chóir na hothair go léir, othair a bhfuil ailse orthu san áireamh, a chosaint a mhéad agus is féidir ó ghalruithe otharlainne.

Bhí na Boird Shláinte agus Sheirbhísí Sóisialta ag obair le hÍontaobhais chun clár gnímh a chur i bhfeidhm a d'fhéadfadh cosc agus rialú galruithe in otharlanna a neartú. I Meitheamh 2001, thug an Roinn treoir d'Íontaobhais Otharlainne ar chaighdeán ghlaimeachta ar a raibh siad a n-áiseanna a mheas. Fuarthas tuairiscí ó Íontaobhais agus tá mo chuid oifigeach a meas.

Tá an Roinn ag ullmhú Plean Gníomhaíochta ar Fhrithbheart Frithmhicróbach i láthair na huaire a lainseálfar go luath sa Bhliain Úr. I measc rudaí eile, beidh sé de chuspóir ag an Phlean a chinntiú go dtabharfaí bearta isteach in otharlanna le tabhairt faoi theacht chun cinn frithbheart frithmhicróbach agus le déileáil le galruithe.

Prostate Cancer: Number Diagnosed

Mr M Robinson asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety how many men were diagnosed with prostate cancer in each year since 1995. (AQW 1028/01)

Ms de Brún: I refer the Member to my answer to AQW 3245/00.

Treoraím an Ball do mo fhreagra a thug mé ar AQW 3245/00.

Waiting Lists

Mr M Robinson asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what steps are being taken to shorten waiting lists in the Health Service, particularly in the areas of heart disease and cancer. (AQW 1029/01)

Ms de Brún: In line with the Framework for Action on Waiting Lists, which I issued in September 2000, a long-term programme of work is under way to tackle waiting lists.

With regard to heart disease, my Department has developed a joint action plan for the implementation of the recommendations made by the Cardiac Surgery review and the Review of Cardiology Services. The Action Plan, was issued for a period of public consultation which ended on 4 January 2002, sets out a range of recommendations aimed at reducing the waiting list and waiting times for surgery.

In the meantime, a number of immediate steps are being taken, including the purchase of cardiac surgery at units elsewhere for some patients who are able and willing to travel, and action to improve the recruitment and training of specialist staff.

In terms of cancer services, I introduced a two week outpatient appointments target last year for people with suspected breast cancer.

In radiotherapy, I have recently approved the acquisition of two additional linear accelerators at Belvoir Park Hospital at a capital cost of £3.8m. The provision of this new equipment should improve the waiting time for radiotherapy significantly.

Ag teacht le *Creatlach le hAghaidh Gnímh ar Liostaí Feithimh*, a d'eisigh mé i Meán Fómhair 2000, táthar ag tabhairt faoi chlár oibre fadtéarmach le dul i ngleic le liostaí feithimh.

I dtaca le galar croí, d'fhorbair an Roinn s'agam comhphlean gníomhaíochta chun moltaí a chur i gcrích a rinne an t-athbhreithniú ar Mháinliacht Chairdiach agus Athbhreithniú Seirbhísí Cairdeolaíochta. Leagann an Plean Gníomhaíochta, a eisíodh faoi choinne tréimhse comhairlithe phoiblí a chríochnaigh ar 4 Eanáir 2002, réimse moltaí ag díriú ar liosta feithimh agus agat feithimh faoi choinne máinliachta a laghdú.

Idir an dá linn, táthar ag tabhairt roinnt céimeanna, ina measc tá ceannacht máinliachta cairdeolaíoch ag aonaid in áiteanna eile do roinnt othar atá ábalta agus toilteanach taisteal, agus táthar i mbun gnímh earcú agus oiliúint sainfhoirne a fheabhsú.

I dtaca le seirbhísí ailse, anuraidh thug mé isteach sprioc coicíse le haghaidh coinne othar seachtrach do dhaoine faoina bhfuil amhras go bhfuil ailse orthu.

I raiditeiripe, cheadaigh mé dhá luasaire líneacha a fháil d'Otharlann Belvoir ar na mallaibh ar chostas caipitil £3.8m. Ba chóir go bhfeabhsófaí soláthar an trealamh seo agá feithimh do raiditeiripe ar bhonn suntasach.

Cardiology Consultations

Mr M Robinson asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the number of cardiology consultations in each Health Board area. (AQW 1030/01)

Ms de Brún: Information is available on the number of attendances at consultant outpatient clinics in the Cardiology specialty in local hospitals for 2000-01, and is detailed in the table below.

ATTENDANCES AT CONSULTANT OUTPATIENT CLINICS IN THE CARDIOLOGY SPECIALTY BY BOARD OF TREATMENT, 2000/01

EHSSB	28,173
NHSSB	7,826
WHSSB	5,777
SHSSB	3,459
Total	45,235

Tá eolas ar fáil ar líon na ndaoine a d'fhreastail ar chlinicí comhairleacha éisothair i speisialtóireacht na Cairdeolaíochta in otharlanna áitiúla don bhliain 2000-01, agus mionléirítear sa tábla thíos é.

AN FREASTAL AR CHLINICÍ COMHAIRLEACHA ÉISOTHAIR I SPEISIALTÓIREACHT NA CAIRDEOLAÍOCHTA DE RÉIR AN BHOIRD A CHÓIREÁIL, 2000/01

BSSSO	28,173
BSSST	7,826
BSSSI	5,777
BSSSD	3,459
Iomlán	45,235

Waiting Lists for Angiograms

Mr M Robinson asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what are the average length of waiting lists for angiograms in each Health Board area. (AQW 1031/01)

Ms de Brún: That information is not available.

Níl an t-eolas seo ar fáil.

Waiting Time for Wheelchairs

Mr O'Neill asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the average length of time those eligible for wheelchairs must wait. (AQW 1032/01)

Ms de Brún: The information requested is not available. The time required to provide an appropriate wheelchair depends on a number of factors, including the type of chair recommended by an occupational therapist, whether modifications are needed to meet the user's assessed needs and whether the equipment is available from the Health Service contract or has to be obtained from another supplier.

Níl an t-eolas a iarradh ar fáil. Braitheann an t-am a ghlacann sé le cathaoir rothaí chuí a sholáthar ar roinnt fachtóirí, ina measc, an cineál cathaoireach a mhol teiripí saothair, cé acu a bhíonn mionathruithe de dhíth le freastal ar riachtanais mheasta an úsáideora agus cé acu atá an trealamh ar fáil ó chonradh na Seirbhíse Sláinte nó an gá é a fháil ó sholáthraí eile.

Wheelchair Service: Funding

Mr O'Neill asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety if she has any plans to increase funding for the purchase of wheelchairs. (AQW 1033/01)

Ms de Brún: My Department is currently examining the funding of the wheelchair service to determine what further resources might be needed to meet current demand. Meanwhile, I have recently provided an additional £300,000 to help address in-year pressures.

Tá an Roinn s'agam ag scrúdú mhaoiniú sheirbhís na cathaoireach rothaí le cinntiú cad iad na hacmhainní is dócha a bheadh de dhíth le freastal ar an éileamh láithreach. Idir an dá linn, sholáthair mé £300,000 breise le gairid le cuidiú le dul i ngleic le brúnna inbhliana.

Psychiatric Services

Mr Berry asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to outline her strategy for psychiatric services. (AQW 1034/01)

Ms de Brún: My strategy for psychiatric services, as outlined in the Programme for Government, is to support people with mental health difficulties at home or in their own community unless their needs require hospital care.

Is í an straitéis s'agam faoi choinne seirbhísí síciatracha, mar atá breactha síos sa Chlár um Rialtas, tacú le daoine a bhfuil deacrachtaí sláinte meabhrach acu sa bhaile nó ina bpobal féin ach má bhíonn gá acu le cúram otharlainne.

'Living and Working Conditions for Doctors in Training in Northern Ireland'

Mr Berry asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to publicise the circular 'Living and Working Conditions for Doctors in Training in Northern Ireland'. (AQW 1035/01)

Ms de Brún: The circular in question will be issued to Trusts and Boards in the near future. The latest draft of the circular has been sent to the Housing Executive for comment and advice on the relevant provisions relating to standards of accommodation and housing legislation. When that advice is received the circular will be finalised and issued.

Tabharfar an imlitir atá i gceist d'Iontaobhais agus do Bhoird ar ball. Cuireadh an dréacht is déanaí den imlitir chuig an Fheidhmeannas Tithíochta le haghaidh tráchta agus comhairle ar na forálacha cuí a bhaineann le caighdeáin chóiríochta agus le reachtaíocht tithíochta. Nuair atá an chomhairle seo faighte cuirfear an dlaoi mhullaigh ar an imlitir agus ansin eiseofar í.

Junior Doctors: Working Hours

Mr Berry asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the total sum of penalty payments paid by Trusts as a result of junior doctors working excessive hours. (AQW 1036/01)

Ms de Brún: The information requested could not be obtained without disproportionate effort.

Ní féidir an t-eolas a iarradh a fháil ach ar iarracht dhíréireach.

Junior Doctors: Working Hours

Mr Berry asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the hospitals that have made the necessary arrangements to enable a reduction in the working hours for junior doctors. (AQW 1037/01)

Ms de Brún: All Trusts are working hard to improve that situation. Since the establishment of the Improving Junior Doctors Working Lives Implementation Support Group (ISG) in August 2001, all Trusts have been visited and advised on how to improve their compliance with the hours and rest requirements of the New Deal. Trusts are now submitting modified work patterns for assessment by the ISG against the New Deal standards and, when agreed, these will be implemented as soon as possible.

Tá na hIontaobhais uile áfach ag obair go crua leis an scéal seo a fheabhsú. Ó bunaíodh Grúpa Feidhmithe Tacaíochta um Shaol Oibre Dochtúirí Sóisearacha a Fheabhsú (GFT) i Lúnasa, tugadh cuairt ar gach Iontaobhas agus tugadh comhairle dóibh ar conas is

féidir cloí le huaireanta agus/nó riachtanais scíste an New Deal/tSocraithe Nua. Tá Iontaobhais ag tabhairt isteach patrúin oibre nua-athruithe agus measúnóidh an GFT iad i dtaobh chaighdeáin an tSocraithe Nua, agus nuair a chomhaontaítear iad, cuirfear i bhfeidhm iad a luaithe is féidir.

European Working Time Directive

Mr Berry asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety if the hospital rota system will be seriously affected by the implementation of the European Working Time Directive (EWTD), and what strategy has her Department adopted in this regard. (AQW 1038/01)

Ms de Brún: The implementation of the European Working Time Directive in relation to junior doctors will mean that significant changes to junior doctors' current working patterns will have to be implemented. In particular, meeting the rest requirements of the EWTD will mean much greater use of shift working as opposed to the current on-call arrangements.

My Department has established an Improving Junior Doctors' Working lives Implementation Support Group in partnership with the BMA Junior Doctors' Committee to provide support to HSS Trusts in meeting fully the targets in relation to the working hours and rest requirements set out in the EWTD.

The four Health Departments have also begun technical discussions with the Department of Trade and Industry (the lead Government Department on the EWTD) on the legal steps they will need to make on our behalf in order to retain maximum flexibility for employers in the way they deploy staff within the Directive's provisions. It is possible to derogate by regulation from various of the Directive's provisions in order to give extra flexibility to employers in planning work rotas and managing services. Negotiations will then need to be undertaken with the BMA to agree alternative arrangements regarding minimum rest periods and the amount and timing of compensatory rest. Those arrangements will, nevertheless, be expected to fully safeguard the health and safety of junior doctors and their patients.

Ciallóidh cur i bhfeidhm Treoir Eorpach Am Oibre maidir le dochtúirí sóisearacha nach mór athruithe suntasacha i bpatrúin láithreacha oibre na ndochtúirí sóisearacha a chur i bhfeidhm. Ciallóidh comhall riachtanais scíste TEAO go háirithe gur mó an úsáid a bheidh le sealobair seachas na socruithe láithreacha agus dochtúirí ar dualgas.

Bhunaigh mo Roinn Grúpa Feidhmithe Tacaíochta um Shaol Oibre Dochtúirí Sóisearacha a Fheabhsú i gcomhar le Coiste Dochtúirí Sóisearacha an CMB

chun tacú le hIontaobhais SSS na spriocanna maidir le huaireanta oibre agus riachtanais scíste a bhaint amach go hiomlán mar atá leagtha amach sa TEAO.

Thosaigh na ceithre Roinn Sláinte ar phlé teicniúil leis an Roinn Trádála agus Tionscadail (an phríomh-Roinn Rialtais ar an TEAO) ar na céimeanna dlíthiúil is gá dóibh a thabhairt thar ár gceann sa dóigh go gcoinneofar uas-solúbthacht d'fhostóirí ar an dóigh a n-implonáítear an fhoireann laistigh d'fhorálacha na Treorach. Is féidir forálacha éagsúla na Treorach a mhaolú trí reachtaíocht sa dóigh go dtabhfar solúbthacht bhreise d'fhostóirí chun rótaí a phleanáil agus seirbhísí a bhainistiú. Ní mór ina dhiaidh sin tabhairt faoi idirbheartaíocht leis an CMB chun teacht ar shocruithe malartacha maidir le íostréimhsí scíste agus fad agus uainiú an scíste chúitigh. Beifear ag dúil, mar sin féin, go gcosnóidh na socruithe seo sláinte agus sábháilteacht na ndochtúirí sóisearacha agus a n-othar.

Maintaining Standards and Skills: Doctors

Mr M Robinson asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what plans are in place to ensure that every doctor undertakes regular vocational and educational training in order to maintain standards and skills. (AQW 1058/01)

Ms de Brún: There has always been a professional obligation on doctors to maintain skills to an acceptable standard. There is now a formal contractual obligation on Consultants to have annual appraisals which review progress against development needs thus ensuring maintenance of standards and skills. Work is ongoing on the introduction of a similar obligation to other medical staff.

Bhíodh dualgas gairmiúil ar dhochtúirí i gcónaí chun scileanna a chothabháil ar chaighdeán inghlactha. Tá dualgas foirmiúil conartha anois ar Lianna Comhairleacha go ndéantar breithmheas orthu go bliantúil a athbhreithníonn dul chun cinn in aice le riachtanais forbartha ag cinntiú mar sin go gcothabháiltear caighdeán agus scileanna. Tá obair idir lámha ar thabhairt isteach dualgas den chineál céanna faoi choinne foireann mhíochaine eile.

Radiographers, Radiologist and Specialist Cancer Nurses: Vacancies

Mr M Robinson asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail, by Health Board, the number of current vacancies for (a) radiographers; (b) radiologists; and (c) specialist cancer nurses. (AQW 1059/01)

Ms de Brún: The information requested is detailed in the table below.

CURRENT VACANCIES BY HEALTH BOARD AREA – DECEMBER 2001

Health Board	Eastern	Northern	Western	Southern
Radiographers	25	4	2	6
Radiologists	4	3	2	3
Specialist cancer nurses	10	2	0	3

Tá an t-eolas a iarradh léirithe sa tábla thíos.

FOLÚNTAIS FAOI LÁTHAIR DE RÉIR CEANTAR BOIRD SLÁINTE – NOLLAIG 2001

Bord Sláinte	An tOirthear	An Tuaisceart	An tIarthar	An Deisceart
Raideagrafaithe	25	4	2	6
Raideolaithe	4	3	2	3
Saintraí Ailse	10	2	0	3

Cancer Screening Programmes: Ovarian Cancer

Mr M Robinson asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what measures are in place to ensure that cancer screening programmes are accurate and effective in the early diagnosis of ovarian cancer. (AQW 1060/01)

Ms de Brún: There are no screening programmes for the detection and diagnosis of ovarian cancer here or in Great Britain at present.

Níl cláir scagthástála ann d'aimsíú agus do dhiagnóis ailse ubhagánaí anseo nó sa Bhreatain Mhór faoi láthair.

Hospitality: December 2001

Mr Hilditch asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail (a) the cost of and (b) to whom she is providing hospitality during the month of December 2001. (AQW 1065/01)

Ms de Brún: During December 2001, I jointly hosted, with the Departmental Board, a Christmas reception for DHSSPS senior management on 17 December. This included a light lunch and refreshments and the cost to my hospitality budget amounted to £268.

Le linn na Nollag 2001, reáchtáil mé, i gcomhar le Bord na Roinne, ócáid Nollag faoi choinne bainisteoirí sinsearach na RSSSP ar 17 Nollag. Mar chuid de bhí lón éadrom ann agus sólaistí agus ba é £268 costas a gearradh ar an bhuiséad flaithiúlachta s'agam.

Counselling Services: North Belfast

Mr G Kelly asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to consider (a) extending the counselling service through the Family Trauma Centre in Wellington Park which is supporting the families in crisis in North Belfast; and (b) putting extra resources into the area. (AQW 1070/01)

Ms de Brún: I have already taken a number of measures to address the psychological effects suffered by residents of North Belfast. These include the establishment of an outreach clinic in Lincoln Avenue by the regional Family Trauma Centre, a half-day clinic at the Survivors of Trauma, Cliftonville Road and the appointment of a Trauma Co-ordinator at the Everton Centre to identify needs and develop long-term strategic plans to meet those needs. I have recently secured £104,000 from OFMDFM to meet the needs for additional counselling and support.

Tá roinnt socruithe déanta agam cheana le dul i ngleic leis na torthaí síceolaíocha a d'fhulaing conaitheoirí Bhéal Feirste Thuaidh. Ina measc seo bhí bunú clinic for-rochtana in Ascaill Lincoln ag Ionad Tráma Teaghlaigh reigiúnach, clinic leath lae ag Marthanóirí Tráma, Bóthar Cliftonville agus ceapachán Comhordaitheoir Tráma ag Ionad Everton chun riachtanais a aimsiú agus pleananna fadtéarmacha a fhorbairt le freastal ar na riachtanais siúd. Le deireannas d'aimsigh mé £104,000 ar OCALCA le freastal ar riachtanais le haghaidh chomhairlithe agus tacaíochta breise.

Review of Mental Health Legislation

Mr Maskey asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to outline progress on the review of Mental Health Legislation. (AQW 1072/01)

Ms de Brún: The Programme for Government target is to initiate a review of mental health legislation by March 2002. Preliminary fact finding has taken place and the views of relevant professional bodies have been obtained on how the review should be undertaken. A dedicated project team is currently being set up to take the work forward.

Is é sprioc an Chláir um Rialtas athbhreithniú ar reachtaíocht sláinte meabhrach a thionscnamh roimh Mhárta 2002. Rinneadh réamhfhisrú faisnéise agus fuarthas tuairimí comhlachtaí gairmiúla bainteacha faoin dóigh ar chóir tabhairt faoin athbhreithniú. Táthar ag cur foireann tionscadail dhílis le chéile leis an obair a thabhairt chun tosaigh.

TNF - Alpha Blockade

Mr Gibson asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety if she will make a statement

on variations in practice relating to the prescription of TNF - alpha blockade. (AQW 1075/01)

Ms de Brún: Those drugs are prescribed in accordance with the guidelines set by the British Society for Rheumatology Protocol for Biologic Therapy in Adults, ensuring consistency of clinical approach in all areas.

However, the Regional Medical Services Consortium, which commissions services on behalf of the four Health and Social Services Boards, has established a working group to review all implementation issues surrounding these drugs, including equity of access.

Ordaítear na drugaí seo de réir na dtreoirilínte leagtha amach ag an Chumann Briotanach um Prótacal Réamaiteolaíochta um Theiripe Bhitheolaíoch i nDaoine Fásta, ag cinntiú cur chuige comhsheasmhach i ngach achar.

Bíodh sin mar atá, bhunaigh an Consóirtiam Seirbhísí Réigiúnacha Leighis, a choimisiúnaíonn seirbhísí ar son na gceithre Bhord Sláinte agus Seirbhísí Sóisialta, grúpa oibre chun gach ceist ar chur i bhfeidhm bainteach leis na drugaí seo, comhionannas rochtana san áireamh.

Residential Bed Allocation: West Tyrone

Mr Gibson asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety how many beds were allocated to elderly care homes in West Tyrone during (a) 1997 and (b) the last year for which figures are available. (AQW 1076/01)

Ms de Brún: At 31 March 2001, there were 289 available places in residential accommodation for elderly people in Sperrin Lakeland Trust. The equivalent figure for 31 March 1997 was 204.

Ar 31 Márta 2001, bhí 289 áit ar fáil i gcóiríocht chónaithe do sheandaoine in Iontaobhas Shliabh Speirín agus Thír na Lochanna. 204 áit ba ea an figiúr ar 31 Márta 1997.

Cancer Treatment

Mr Gibson asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what recent progress has been made on improvement of diagnosis and treatment for cancer patients in the health service. (AQW 1078/01)

Ms de Brún: Significant progress has been made in recent years in the diagnosis and treatment of cancer. My Department actively encourages people to participate in cancer screening programmes. For example, three new leaflets on cervical screening were issued in November this year.

Patients with cancer are now managed by multi-disciplinary cancer teams, and specialist staffing has been increased with two additional oncologists and 70 additional nurses. Specialisation in site-specific cancers has also started, with the identification of lead clinicians in a range of conditions, such as breast, lung and colo-rectal cancers.

One-stop breast cancer clinics have been established, and a two-week outpatient appointment target has been introduced for breast cancer patients.

More than half of all day-patient chemotherapy is now provided from local cancer units, thus providing better access for many cancer patients. Better treatment can be provided by new chemotherapeutic drugs which contain or eradicate systemic disease so that, where the disease is diagnosed at an earlier stage, there is much better chance of cure.

A new day hospital and outpatients suite has already opened as part of the first phase of the new Cancer Centre at the Belfast City Hospital. Another recent major development will be the provision of MRI scanners for each of the cancer units. The installation of a MRI scanner for the Belfast City Hospital and a replacement MRI for the Royal Group of Hospitals will also make an important contribution to cancer care. Two new linear accelerators will become operational by June 2003 at Belvoir Park Hospital, where patients will also benefit from an allocation of £550,000 to fund repairs to the building infrastructure and equipment aimed at enhancing current services.

Rinneadh dul chun cinn mór le blianta déanacha anuas i bhfáthmheas agus i gcóireáil ailse. Spreagann an Roinn s'agamsa daoine go gníomhach páirt a ghlacadh i gcláir scrúdú ailse. Mar shampla, eisíodh trí bhileog nua breise eolais ar scrúdú ceirbheacsach i Samhain na bliana seo a chuaigh thart.

Déileálann foirne ildhisciplíneacha ailse le hothair a bhfuil ailse orthu, agus tháinig méadú ar an tsainfhoireann le ceapadh beirt oinceolaithe agus 70 altra breise. Thosaigh speisialtóireacht in ailsí bainteach le baill ar leith fosta, le haimsiú príomhdhochtúirí i réimse riochtaí amhail ailsí cíche, na scámhóg agus colaidriseacháin.

Bunaíodh clinicí ailse cíche stop amháin, agus leagadh sprioc dhá seachtaine síos le coinní éisoithair a shocrú d'othair a bhfuil ailse chíce orthu.

Soláthraítear níos mó ná leath de cheimiteiripe lae iomláin d'othair in ionaid áitiúla ailse, mar sin de, ag cruthú infhaighteachta níos fearr do chuid mhór othar a bhfuil ailse orthu. Is féidir le drugaí nua ceimiteiripeacha a chuireann srian ar nó a scriosann galar córasach níos fearr cóireála a sholáthar, sa dóigh go mbeidh seans níos fearr go leigheasfar é má fháthmheasfar go luath é.

Osclaíodh otharlann nua lae agus sraith seomraí d'othair mar chuid den chéad chéim den Ionad nua

Ailse in Otharlann Chathair Bhéal Feirste. Casadh eile is ea soláthar scanóirí MRI do gach ionad ailse. Cuirfidh suiteáil scanóra MRI in Otharlann Chathair Bhéal Feirste agus scanóra nua MRI in Otharlanna an Ghrúpa Ríoga go mór le cúram ailse. Beidh dhá luasaire nua líneacha ag feidhmiú faoi Mheitheamh 2003 in Otharlann Pháirc Belvoir, áit a mbainfidh othair tairbhe as an £550,000 le díol as cóirithe ar infrastruchtúr foirgneamh agus trealaimh is aidhm dóibh feabhas a chur ar sheirbhísí reatha.

Improving Junior Doctors' Working Lives

Mr M Robinson asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what plans she has to reduce junior doctors' hours and improve their working conditions. (AQW 1079/01)

Ms de Brún: My Department established an Improving Junior Doctors' Working Lives Implementation Support Group (ISG) in August 2001. Since then the ISG has been working with Trusts and Boards to deliver the New Deal on Junior Doctors' hours and improve accommodation and catering standards.

The ISG is currently engaging with Trusts to identify problems and will help Trusts by spreading good practice, facilitating changes in doctors' working patterns and practices and instituting skill mix initiatives where appropriate. Guidance on new standards of accommodation and catering in junior doctors' accommodation will be issued shortly.

Bhunaigh mo Roinn Grúpa Feidhmithe Tacaíochta um Shaol Oibre Dochtúirí Sóisearacha a Fheabhsú (GFT) i Lúnasa 2001. Ó shin i leith bhí an GFT ag obair le hIonntaobhais agus Boird leis an Socrú Nua ar uaireanta Dochtúirí Sóisearacha a sholáthar agus caighdeán lóistín agus lónadóireachta a fheabhsú.

Faoi láthair tá an GFT ag plé le hIonntaobhais chun fadhbanna a aimsiú agus cuideoidh sé le hIonntaobhais trí dhea-chleachtas a scaipeadh, ag éascú athruithe i bpatrúin agus i gcleachtadh oibre dochtúirí agus cuirfidh sé tús le tionscnaimh le scileanna a mheascadh nuair is cuí. Eiseofar treoir ar na caighdeán nua lóistín agus lónadóireachta i dtaca le lóistín dochtúirí sóisearacha go luath.

Breast Cancer Service

Mr M Robinson asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what improvements are being made in breast cancer care. (AQW 1082/01)

Ms de Brún: In line with the Campbell Report, most of the features of a good breast cancer service are in place, including one stop clinics, timely admission for surgery, multi-disciplinary team working, specialist

breast care nurse teams and close links to oncology. Last year I asked the health and social services to implement two week outpatient appointment times for people with suspected breast cancer. A comprehensive Breast Screening Programme is also in place.

Breast cancer is now diagnosed earlier and surgical techniques, such as radical mastectomy, have greatly declined. Patients are mostly treated by lumpectomy or segmentectomy, which are much better for the psychological wellbeing of patients. Treatment by new chemotherapeutic drugs is also available to contain or eradicate systemic disease so that, where the disease is diagnosed at an earlier stage, there is much better chance of cure.

De réir Thuairisc Campbell, tá formhór na ngnéithe atá mar chuid de sheirbhís mhaith ailse cíche i bhfeidhm, clinici stop amháin, glacadh isteach tráthúil le haghaidh máinliachta, obair ildhisCIPLíneach fhoirne, sainfhoirne altrachta ailse cíche agus dlúthnaisc le hoinceolaíocht san áireamh. Anuraidh, d'iarr mé ar na seirbhísí sláinte agus sóisialta amanna choinní éisothar dhá seachtaine a chur i bhfeidhm d'othair a mheastar a bhfuil ailse cíche orthu. Tá Clár cuimsitheach Scrúdú Cíche i bhfeidhm fosta.

Fáthmheastar ailse cíche níos luaithe anois agus is mór an maolú a tháinig ar theicnící máinliachta, amhail maisteachtóime radacach. Cóireáiltear othair trí shiadhachtóime nó theascánachtóime de ghnáth, atá níos fearr do dhea-bhail shíceolaíoch othar. Tá cóireáil trí dhrugaí ceimiteiripeacha ar fáil fosta chun srian a chur ar ghalar córasach nó é a scrios sa dóigh go mbeidh seans níos fearr go leigheasfar é má fháthmheasfar go luath é.

Research Into Breast Cancer

Mr M Robinson asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail how much has been spent on research into breast cancer in the last 3 years. (AQW 1083/01)

Ms de Brún: Since 1998 the Research and Development Office for the HPSS has received only one research proposal specifically relating to Breast Cancer. This three-year project commenced in October 2001 and has been allocated a total budget of £47,000.

In 2000-01 the R&D Office established a (non-specific) Cancer Recognised Research Group (Cancer RRG) with a £3 million peer reviewed five-year research programme. The Cancer RRG led by Professor Patrick Johnston comprises 13 research programmes and aims to create new avenues for the prevention, diagnosis and treatment of cancers through exploration and study of novel clinical scientific ideas using an interdisciplinary approach to the development of core research programmes.

Funding for research into breast cancer may be available from sources outside the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety, for example the Medical Research Council.

Ó 1998, ní bhfuair Oifig Thaighde agus Fhorbartha na SSSP ach moladh taighde amháin bainteach go díreach le hAilse Chíche. Thosaigh an scéim trí bliana seo i mí Dheireadh Fómhair 2001 agus dáileadh buiséad de £47,000 san iomlán uirthi.

I 2000/01, chuir an Oifig T&F Grúpa Taighde (neamhshainiúil) ar Aimsiú Ailsí (GTAA) ar bun agus thug sí £3 milliún di le haghaidh cláir thaighde cúig bliana ar a ndéanfar athbhreithniú rialta. Tá 13 clár taighde ag an GTAA a bhfuil an tOllamh Patrick Johnston i gceannas air agus tá sé d'aidhm aige dóigheanna nua a aimsiú chun ailsí a chosc, a fháthmheas agus a chóireáil trí scrúdú agus staidéar a dhéanamh ar smaointe nua cliniciúla eolaíochta, ag úsáid cur chuige idirdhisCIPLínigh d'fhorbairt chroíchláir thaighde.

Is féidir go mbeidh maoiniú do thaighde ar ailse cíche ar fáil ó fhoinsí taobh amuigh den Roinn Sláinte, Seirbhísí Sóisialta agus Sábháilteachta Poiblí, mar shampla, ón Chomhairle Thaighde Míochaine.

Nursing Vacancies

Mr M Robinson asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail in each of the last 3 years the number of nursing vacancies (a) in each Health Board Area; and (b) which were vacant for 3 or more months. (AQW 1087/01)

Ms de Brún: Information in the form requested is not held centrally and could only be obtained at disproportionate cost.

Ní choinnítear an t-eolas go lárnach ar an dóigh a iarradh é agus ní féidir é a fháil ach ar chostas díreireach.

Free Nursing Care

Mr Ford asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail (a) the annual cost of providing free personal care to residents of registered nursing and care homes and (b) the annual cost of providing free nursing care under current proposals. (AQW 1090/01)

Ms de Brún:

- (a) The annual cost of providing free personal care to residents of nursing and residential care homes here has been previously estimated by my Department to be in the region of £25 million. However, the inter-departmental group on personal care which is to advise on the costs and implications of providing

free personal care is expected to refine that estimate as part of its work.

- (b) The cost of providing nursing care free to residents of care homes who at present meet these costs from their own resources is estimated to amount to £4.5 million in 2002-03 (reflecting introduction from October 2002) and £9.225 million in 2003-04.
- (a) Mheas an Roinn s'agam cheana gur timpeall ar £25 milliún an costas bliantúil chun cúram pearsanta saor in aisce a sholáthar do chónaitheoirí tithe altranais agus cónaithe abhus anseo. Bíodh sin mar atá, táthar ag súil go bhfeabhsóidh an grúpa idir- rannóige ar chúram pearsanta, atá le comhairle a thabhairt ar chostais agus ar impleachtaí de sholáthar cúram pearsanta saor in aisce, an meastachán seo a bheachtú mar chuid dá chuid oibre.
- (b) Meastar ar £4.5 milliún san iomlán i 2002-03 (ag léiriú a thabhairt isteach ó Dheireadh Fómhair 2002) agus ar £9.225 milliún san iomlán i 2003-04 an costas le cúram saor altranais a sholáthar do chónaitheoirí thithe cúraim a sheasann na costais seo óna n-acmhainní féin.

Waiting Times: A&E Departments

Mr K Robinson asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail (a) the current average waiting time for treatment in the A&E Departments in (i) Whiteabbey Hospital; (ii) the Mater Infirmorum Hospital; and (iii) Antrim Hospital; and (b) how these figures compare with other hospitals in the Belfast metropolitan area. (AQW 1111/01)

Ms de Brún: The information requested is not available.

Níl an t-eolas a iarradh ar fáil.

REGIONAL DEVELOPMENT

Rural Transport Services

Mr Gibson asked the Minister for Regional Development what measures he is taking to improve rural bus services. (AQW 883/01)

The Minister for Regional Development (Mr P Robinson): The Rural Transport Fund administered by my Department supports 38 subsidised bus routes, which help to enhance the social, domestic and commercial lives of those living in rural areas. These routes have augmented the established network operated by Translink. Additionally, the Fund has supported improvements to public transport information with the

erection of 127 Passenger Information Points along Ulsterbus routes.

My Department also provides financial support to 16 Rural Community Transport Partnerships, which provide a range of transport services to those living in the rural community and complement the provision from Translink. In the longer term, increasing support for public transport services in rural areas is being considered within the development of the 10-year Regional Transportation Strategy.

Public Liability Claims

Mr M Robinson asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail (a) how much has Roads Service paid out in public liability claims over the past three years; and (b) what steps are being taken to reduce this figure. (AQW 941/01)

Mr P Robinson: The total compensation expenditure by the Department's Roads Service on public liability claims over the past three years is as follows:

2000/01	£2,150,000
1999/00	£2,943,251
1998/99	£3,379,106

The robust action of creating a Central Claims Unit and introducing improved road maintenance systems has significantly contributed to the reduction in the amount paid out on public liability claims.

The structural integrity of the road network is the top priority of Roads Service. In support of that objective, Roads Service undertakes a programme of structural maintenance which comprises good value planned activities, such as resurfacing and surface dressing as well as reactive patching which is essential to protect my Department against public liability claims.

During 2000-01, as part of the Roads Service Continuous Improvement Programme, new road maintenance standards were introduced. These standards, which take into account varying circumstances (eg the severity of defect and pedestrian and traffic volumes), resulted in quicker response times for repairing road defects thus reducing the potential for public liability claims.

In addition, I will of course continue to press for additional funds for road maintenance to further reduce the potential for public liability claims.

Sewerage Infrastructure Bernish Avenue/Crescent, Cloughogue

Mr McNamee asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail the costs incurred by the Water Service engaging contractors to remove sewage from

Bernish Avenue/Crescent, Cloughogue, Newry in the last 12 months. (AQW 987/01)

Mr P Robinson: Bernish Avenue/Crescent is a privately owned housing development. The sewerage infrastructure, which includes a pumping station, was not built to the agreed standards. In these circumstances, it has not been adopted by Water Service.

In order to prevent major sewage pollution within the development, Water Service deployed tankers to empty the sump of the pumping station and has carried out other emergency work. The costs involved are estimated to be £1,100, of which some £400 was paid to a contractor. All of these costs were incurred in the September to December 2001 period.

Water Service is making arrangements to have the sewerage infrastructure upgraded to the necessary adoption standards. It is expected that this work will be completed by the end of January 2002 and that the infrastructure will then be adopted. The cost of this work will be recovered from the bond which the developer has lodged with the Department.

Attacks on Translink Employees

Mr Hilditch asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail the number of Translink employees injured as a result of being attacked at work in each of the past three years. (AQW 1018/01)

Mr P Robinson: Translink has advised that some 81, 49 and 65 Translink employees were reported as being injured as a result of being attacked at work during 1999, 2000 and up to end-November 2001 respectively. Translink has indicated that while the actual number of incidents may be less now than in 1999, assaults are becoming more vicious with, for example, knives being used with increasing frequency.

Attacks on Translink Property and Vehicles: East Antrim

Mr Hilditch asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail the number of attacks carried out on Translink property and vehicles in the last 12 months in the constituency of East Antrim. (AQW 1019/01)

Mr P Robinson: Translink has advised that during the past 12 months there were 35 attacks on vehicles operating from its Larne depot and 1 attack on the depot itself and there were 51 attacks on vehicles operating from its Carrickfergus depot. In addition there were 105 attacks on vehicles operating from its Newtownabbey depot which, although outside the constituency of East Antrim, provides services within the constituency. The damage to vehicles relates largely to broken windows and broken seats.

Kerb Replacement: A8

Mr Hilditch asked the Minister for Regional Development to give his assessment of kerb replacement work on the A8 between Millbrook and Ballynure, considering the proposed major works planned for this road.

(AQW 1020/01)

Mr P Robinson: My Department's Roads Service does not carry out kerb replacement schemes in isolation. However, kerbs are lifted and relaid or replaced as part of any carriageway resurfacing scheme, with the associated costs included in the overall scheme cost.

During the past 10 years three such resurfacing schemes have been completed between Millbrook and Ballynure as follows:

1996	Moss Road to Ballybracken Road resurfacing scheme - cost £150,000
1996	Ballynure to Ballybracken resurfacing scheme - cost £130,000
1999	Loughside Quarry to Ballygowan Road resurfacing scheme - cost £150,000

In addition, Roads Service is currently carrying out a resurfacing scheme between Moss Road and Ballygowan Road at an estimated cost of £153,000.

The Ballynure to Ballybracken section of road will be affected by a proposed new climbing lane included in the proposed package of major improvement works announced for the A8 Belfast to Larne road. Although the scheme was carried out prior to the development of the package of improvements, it should be possible to reuse a substantial number of the existing kerbs during construction of the new climbing lane.

Kerb Replacement: A8

Mr Hilditch asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail the cost of kerb replacement schemes on the A8 between Millbrook and Ballynure in each of the last 10 years. (AQW 1021/01)

Mr P Robinson: My Department's Roads Service does not carry out kerb replacement schemes in isolation. However, kerbs are lifted and relaid or replaced as part of any carriageway resurfacing scheme, with the associated costs included in the overall scheme cost.

During the past 10 years three such resurfacing schemes have been completed between Millbrook and Ballynure as follows:

1996	Moss Road to Ballybracken Road resurfacing scheme - cost £150,000
1996	Ballynure to Ballybracken resurfacing scheme - cost £130,000
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Kerb Replacement: A8

Mr Hilditch asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail the number of kerb replacement schemes on the A8 between Millbrook and Ballynure for the past five years. (AQW 1022/01)

Mr P Robinson: My Department's Roads Service does not carry out kerb replacement schemes in isolation. However, kerbs are lifted and relaid or replaced as part of any carriageway resurfacing scheme, with the associated costs included in the overall scheme cost.

During the past 10 years three such resurfacing schemes have been completed between Millbrook and Ballynure as follows:

1996	Moss Road to Ballybracken Road resurfacing scheme - cost £150,000
1996	Ballynure to Ballybracken resurfacing scheme - cost £130,000
1999	Loughside Quarry to Ballygowan Road resurfacing scheme - cost £150,000

In addition, Roads Service is currently carrying out a resurfacing scheme between Moss Road and Ballygowan Road at an estimated cost of £153,000.

The Ballynure to Ballybracken section of road will be affected by a proposed new climbing lane included in the proposed package of major improvement works announced for the A8 Belfast to Larne road. Although the scheme was carried out prior to the development of the package of improvements, it should be possible to reuse a substantial number of the existing kerbs during construction of the new climbing lane.

SOCIAL DEVELOPMENT

Benefit Fraud Prosecutions

Mr Gibson asked the Minister for Social Development what targets he has set for benefit fraud prosecutions for 2001-02. (AQW 953/01)

The Minister for Social Development (Mr Dodds):

The Social Security Agency has a comprehensive fraud strategy based on a systematic, risk based approach to achieving a secure, accurate and timely benefit administration. The strategy has been designed to prevent fraud and error from entering into systems from the outset of claims as well as tackling fraud and error where it already exists.

As part of that strategy I have set a strategic target to "reduce losses from fraud and error in Income Support, Jobseekers Allowance, Disability Living Allowance and Incapacity Benefit by 5% for the year 2001-02".

The Chief Executive of the Social Security Agency has also set a number of other key targets, one of which is "to refer 650 cases for prosecution". By the end of November 2001, 525 cases have been referred for prosecution.

Warm Homes and Energy Conservation Act

Mr Hussey asked the Minister for Social Development to make a statement on the Warm Homes and Energy Conservation Act. (AQW 954/01)

Mr Dodds: The Warm Homes and Energy Conservation Act 2000 applies to England and Wales only. The Act requires Government to draw up and implement a strategy to eradicate fuel poverty in England and Wales within a period of 15 years. A Fuel Poverty Strategy for the whole of the UK was published in November 2001 and includes contributions from relevant Northern Ireland Departments. In addition, the Programme for Government sets out targets for addressing fuel poverty in Northern Ireland.

Standard Assessment Procedure

Mr Hussey asked the Minister for Social Development to detail the Housing Executive's progress towards achieving its target of 34% improvement in energy efficiency in the domestic sector since 1996. (AQW 955/01)

Mr Dodds: The Standard Assessment Procedure (SAP) is the means for measuring the energy efficiency of buildings. The higher the rating, the more energy efficient the building. The average SAP rating for the domestic sector in Northern Ireland has increased from 43 in 1996 to 54 in 2000. In terms of energy consumption this equates to an energy efficiency improvement of 13%.

Home Energy Conservation Strategy

Mr Hussey asked the Minister for Social Development to detail the percentage improvement in energy

efficiency in the domestic sector since 1996 in each Housing Executive district. (AQW 956/01)

Mr Dodds: That information is not available in the format requested. However, the Housing Executive in its 2001 progress report on the Home Energy Conservation Strategy indicated that there has been a 13% saving in domestic energy consumption in Northern Ireland since 1996.

Fuel Poverty

Mr Hussey asked the Minister for Social Development what plans he has to increase the number of fuel poverty projects. (AQW 957/01)

Mr Dodds: My Department and other key agencies concerned with energy efficiency continually search out new projects to tackle the problem of fuel poverty. However, the principal measure, the new Warm Homes Scheme, launched on 2 July 2001, provides a comprehensive package of heating and insulation measures for owner-occupiers and private sector tenants. Disabled people and families with young children receive insulation in their homes if they are in receipt of certain benefits. Over 60s who receive certain income-based benefits are also entitled to free central heating systems. The scheme operates across the whole of Northern Ireland and replaces the small-scale, geographically based pilots that had been running previously. The Northern Ireland Housing Executive's heating replacement scheme will alleviate fuel poverty amongst social sector tenants. Together the measures provide an effective programme to address the needs of the fuel poor.

Economy 7

Mr Hussey asked the Minister for Social Development to detail progress on the Economy 7 replacement programme. (AQW 958/01)

Mr Dodds: Economy 7 heating systems are being replaced as part of the Housing Executive's overall programme to upgrade heating systems. It is therefore not possible to report separately on progress with Economy 7 heating systems. The replacement is progressing satisfactorily and this year a total of some 8800 heating systems will be upgraded.

Heat Smart

Mr Hussey asked the Minister for Social Development to detail, by constituency, the distribution of the 11,224 tenants assisted by home visits through the 'Heat Smart' service administered by Bryson House on behalf of the Housing Executive since April 1999. (AQW 977/01)

Mr Dodds: This information is not available in the format requested. However, the figures can be broken down on the basis of the areas covered by the three Energy Efficiency Advice Centres (EEACs).

The 11,224 home visits were made in 2000/01 and the breakdown was:

Belfast EEAC (County Antrim and Down)	7,857
Enniskillen EEAC (County Fermanagh, Armagh and most of Tyrone)	1,796
Foyle EEAC (County Londonderry and Strabane)	1,571
Total	11,224

Cavity Wall Insulation

Mr Hussey asked the Minister for Social Development to detail, by constituency, the distribution of the 430 dwellings with renovation grants which included cavity wall insulation since 1 April 1998.

(AQW 978/01)

Mr Dodds: This information is not available in the format requested. However, the table below records, by District Council, the percentage distribution of dwellings with renovation grants which included cavity wall insulation since 1 April 1998.

District Council	Cavity Wall Insulation Renovation Schedules %
Antrim	0.2%
Ards	2.8%
Armagh	1.9%
Ballymena	0.0%
Ballymoney	0.0%
Banbridge	0.0%
Belfast	21.5%
Carrickfergus	0.0%
Castlereagh	4.2%
Coleraine	0.5%
Cookstown	8.4%
Craigavon	1.9%
Derry	0.9%
Down	1.4%
Dungannon	20.3%
Fermanagh	8.9%
Larne	0.5%
Limavady	0.5%
Lisburn	0.7%
Magherafelt	0.2%
Moyle	0.0%

District Council	Cavity Wall Insulation Renovation Schedules %
Newry & Mourne	0.0%
Newtownabbey	1.2%
North Down	4.0%
Omagh	18.9%
Strabane	1.2%
Total	100.0%

District Council	Replacement Grants Approved %
Newry & Mourne	9.7%
Newtownabbey	0.4%
North Down	0.0%
Omagh	6.4%
Strabane	3.1%
Total	100.0%

Replacement Grant Scheme

Mr Hussey asked the Minister for Social Development to detail, by constituency, the distribution of the 1,811 new dwellings built to current energy efficiency standards which replaced old, unfit properties under the Replacement Grant Scheme since April 1996.

(AQW 979/01)

Mr Dodds: That information is not available in the format requested. However, the table below records, by District Council Area, the percentage distribution of new dwellings built to current energy efficiency standards which replaced old, unfit properties under the Replacement Grant Scheme since April 1996.

District Council	Replacement Grants Approved %
Antrim	1.1%
Ards	0.8%
Armagh	11.4%
Ballymena	1.5%
Ballymoney	0.8%
Banbridge	2.8%
Belfast	0.4%
Carrickfergus	0.5%
Castlereagh	0.1%
Coleraine	0.6%
Cookstown	3.8%
Craigavon	4.2%
Derry	1.3%
Down	5.3%
Dungannon	7.5%
Fermanagh	28.2%
Larne	1.3%
Limavady	1.7%
Lisburn	2.7%
Magherafelt	3.0%
Moyle	1.3%

Disabled Facilities Grant

Mr Hussey asked the Minister for Social Development to detail, by constituency, the distribution of the 1,862 private houses which had fully controlled oil or natural gas heating systems installed, under the Disabled Facilities Grant since April 1996. (AQW 980/01)

Mr Dodds: That information is not available in the format requested. However, the table below records, by District Council Area, the percentage distribution of private houses which had fully controlled oil or natural gas heating systems installed under the Disabled Facilities Grant since April 1996.

District Council	Disabled Facilities Grants Oil/Gas heating included
Antrim	2.4%
Ards	3.0%
Armagh	1.9%
Ballymena	2.5%
Ballymoney	0.9%
Banbridge	0.8%
Belfast	27.5%
Carrickfergus	4.1%
Castlereagh	4.9%
Coleraine	2.0%
Cookstown	2.1%
Craigavon	2.3%
Derry	6.4%
Down	2.3%
Dungannon	2.8%
Fermanagh	4.4%
Larne	1.8%
Limavady	1.4%
Lisburn	3.7%
Magherafelt	1.1%
Moyle	1.4%
Newry & Mourne	9.2%
Newtownabbey	6.2%

District Council	Disabled Facilities Grants Oil/Gas heating included
North Down	1.9%
Omagh	1.3%
Strabane	1.6%
Total	100.0%

Cavity Wall Insulation

Mr Hussey asked the Minister for Social Development to detail, by constituency, the distribution of the 1,262 homeowners who had cavity wall insulation installed under the Energy Saving Trust UK-wide Warmth Programme in 2000-01. (AQW 981/01)

Mr Dodds: That information is not available in the format requested, however, the table below records the number of installations by Northern Ireland postcode.

Postcode	Number of Cavity Wall Installations	Postcode	Number of Cavity Wall Installations
BT1	-	BT41	22
BT2	-	BT42	25
BT3	-	BT43	12
BT4	20	BT44	9
BT5	96	BT45	8
BT6	45	BT46	6
BT7	3	BT47	11
BT8	33	BT48	1
BT9	15	BT49	3
BT10	20	BT50	-
BT11	32	BT51	12
BT12	7	BT52	10
BT13	7	BT53	11
BT14	35	BT54	2
BT15	22	BT55	5
BT16	58	BT56	1
BT17	32	BT57	2
BT18	18	BT58	-
BT19	24	BT59	-
BT20	31	BT60	11
BT21	1	BT61	4
BT22	9	BT62	17
BT23	34	BT63	7
BT24	28	BT64	-
BT25	14	BT65	5
BT26	6	BT66	31
BT27	24	BT67	14

Postcode	Number of Cavity Wall Installations	Postcode	Number of Cavity Wall Installations
BT28	37	BT68	-
BT29	8	BT69	-
BT30	43	BT70	-
BT31	11	BT71	5
BT32	19	BT72	1
BT33	14	BT73	-
BT34	44	BT74	2
BT35	10	BT75	-
BT36	79	BT76	-
BT37	41	BT77	-
BT38	44	BT78	-
BT39	23	BT79	1
BT40	28	BT80	5
BT81	2	BT88	-
BT82	2	BT89	-
BT83	-	BT90	-
BT84	-	BT91	-
BT85	-	BT92	-
BT86	-	BT93	-
BT87	-	BT94	0
Total			1262

Temporary Hostel Accommodation

Mr Shannon asked the Minister for Social Development if there is a maximum time for staying in temporary hostel accommodation prior to a move to Housing Executive accommodation. (AQW 988/01)

Mr Dodds: No. The average waiting time spent in temporary accommodation is 113 days but this can vary from a few days to many months depending on the applicant's area of choice for permanent accommodation. The more popular areas tend to have longer waiting times.

Urban Regeneration: West Tyrone

Mr Gibson asked the Minister for Social Development what steps he is taking to encourage urban regeneration in the West Tyrone area. (AQW 996/01)

Mr Dodds: My Department, in partnership with the International Fund for Ireland (IFI), has been working closely with community groups in West Tyrone to regenerate disadvantaged small towns and villages through the Community Regeneration and Improvement Special Programme (CRISP). To date £12 million has been invested in 12 CRISP schemes throughout West

Tyrone. Costs are shared equally between my Department and the IFI. Three further schemes are being developed for Sion Mills, Artigarvan and Castlederg.

My Department is also involved in supporting the regeneration of the two larger towns within the constituency, Omagh and Strabane.

In Omagh, an official from my Department sits on the Omagh Taskforce 2010. This group was set up to implement Omagh 2010, an economic and social plan for the town. It incorporates an inspiring and challenging vision of where Omagh will be in the year 2010, key actions to achieve the vision with benchmarks and targets to measure progress. In addition to offering advice the Department is committed to assisting with the running costs of the Taskforce and will contribute up to £75,000 per annum for three years. During the past three years my Department has been implementing an Environmental Improvement scheme in the Churches area of the town at a total cost of £372,000. There are also plans, subject to budget availability, for a further Environmental Improvement scheme in the town centre, starting, at the earliest, in the 2002-03 financial year.

In Strabane my Department is preparing an Environmental Improvement scheme for John Wesley Street and other areas in Strabane. It is anticipated that the scheme will cost in the region of £100,000 and will be completed by April 2002. My Department has also participated and contributed financially in the Strabane 2000 group. This group is made up of Council and Business people from Strabane. They have developed a strategy document for the town and my Department will continue to advise on the implementation of their proposals.

Under Peace II my Department will shortly be inviting bids from Councils for assistance towards the preparation of plans for the reinvigoration of town centres. Criteria will be based on the need to demonstrate that proposals address the legacy of the conflict and are taking the opportunities arising from peace. Both Omagh and Strabane District Councils will be eligible to apply for funding.

The Housing Executive has also carried out housing and regeneration studies in Strabane and Omagh. The intention of these studies is to identify potential sites for town centre living and provide information for District Councils' regeneration strategies. In addition, areas identified as the most disadvantaged are being targeted by the Housing Executive for neighbourhood renewal programmes.

Installation of Heating Controls

Mr Hussey asked the Minister for Social Development to detail, by constituency, from 1998, the distribution of the 1,205 installations of heating controls through

the Housing Executive and Northern Ireland Electricity heating control cashback schemes. (AQW 1001/01)

Mr Dodds: That information is not available in the format requested and could only be obtained at disproportionate cost.

Energy-Efficient Boilers

Mr Hussey asked the Minister for Social Development to detail, by constituency, to the end of June 2001, the distribution of the 1,200 owner-occupiers who have availed of schemes to help meet the costs of energy-efficient boilers. (AQW 1002/01)

Mr Dodds: That information is not available in the format requested. However, given that the scheme was designed to provide an incentive to owner occupiers interested in switching to natural gas heating, the only householders who availed of the scheme were within the natural gas licence area of Greater Belfast.

Domestic Energy Efficiency Scheme

Mr Hussey asked the Minister for Social Development to detail, by constituency, to the end of June 2001, the distribution of 2,020 owner-occupiers who have availed of loft insulation under the DEES grant or upgraded to the current accepted standard. (AQW 1003/01)

Mr Dodds: That information is not held in precisely the form requested. Work under the DEES grant was categorised by postal code areas. However, the table below shows the numbers of loft insulation jobs in each constituency.

Constituency	No of Households
Belfast East	88
Belfast North	242
Belfast South	135
Belfast West	166
East Antrim	121
East Londonderry	109
Fermanagh & South Tyrone	174
Foyle	62
Lagan Valley	50
Mid Ulster	97
Newry and Armagh	205
North Antrim	93
North Down	71
South Antrim	150
South Down	74
Strangford	65

Constituency	No of Households
Upper Bann	59
West Tyrone	59

Domestic Energy Efficiency Scheme

Mr Hussey asked the Minister for Social Development to detail, by constituency, the number of Housing Executive properties upgraded to full double glazing standards through availing of the DEES grant during 2000-01. (AQW 1004/01)

Mr Dodds: The Domestic Energy Efficiency Scheme did not provide for double glazing and consequently no Northern Ireland Housing Executive houses were upgraded to full double-glazing standards under the scheme during 2001. However, the Housing Executive does install double-glazing in its own stock under various improvement schemes.

Social Security Budget

Mr Shannon asked the Minister for Social Development what assessment he has made in respect of the impact that the transfer of £19 million from the social security budget will have upon the services offered by the Agency. (AQW 1007/01)

Mr Dodds: The transfer of £19m from the Social Security budget will have no impact on the services offered by the Agency. The transfer, effective from April 2002, relates to a transfer of Programme Funding from the Social Security Programme Budget to the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety due to the new arrangements in the way in which residents of residential homes will be funded from April 2002. There will be no reduction in the administration costs of the Agency.

Marine Guest House, Carrickfergus

Mr Neeson asked the Minister for Social Development to detail any plans he has to develop the former Marine Guest House in Carrickfergus as a facility for the homeless. (AQW 1024/01)

Mr Dodds: The Housing Executive has confirmed that there is a need for temporary accommodation for the homeless in the Carrickfergus area and is considering the former Marine Guest House as a possible facility in this respect. The Housing Executive has commenced a feasibility study which it expects to complete around April this year and should the outcome of the study recommend its use as temporary accommodation, proposals including costings will be put to the Board later in the year.

Ligoniel Village Regeneration Partnership

Mr G Kelly asked the Minister for Social Development if he has any plans to develop a new village centre in Ligoniel on the old Hick Bullocks factory site, including a bridge below the centre linking the proposed new housing to the existing village. (AQW 1039/01)

Mr Dodds: Officials from the Department for Social Development are scheduled to meet with representatives of the Ligoniel Village Regeneration Partnership on 9 January 2002, to discuss the Ligoniel Village Centre proposal. Following the meeting, my Department will be better placed to decide on whether it wishes to support the proposals.

Habinteg Special Needs Housing Association

Mr G Kelly asked the Minister for Social Development to outline the amount of money allocated for the construction of developments in Bryanswell Road, Glenbank and Springbank as part of the Habinteg Special Needs Housing Association and also Habinteg developments in Holywood and Bangor. (AQW 1055/01)

Mr Dodds: The information requested is contained in the table below. The construction cost figure excludes the cost of land.

Location	No. of Houses	Date of Completion	Construction Costs
Valentine Court, Bangor	14	Feb '82	£306k
Sullivan Close, Holywood	29	Jun '83	£776k
Springbank Ph 1	59	Apr '83	£1,539k
Springbank Ph 2	32	Apr '85	£817k
Glenbank	44	Jun '87	£1,274k
Brianswell Road	51	May '01	£2,239k

Glenbank and Springbank Developments

Mr G Kelly asked the Minister for Social Development to outline the amount of money allocated for maintenance programmes for Glenbank and Springbank developments. (AQW 1056/01)

Mr Dodds: The information requested is set out in the table below. The expenditure covers the five-year period 1997-98 to 2001-02.

			Major Repairs	
Location	Maintenance	Adaptations	Cost	Completion
Springbank Ph 1 & 2	£107k	£57k	£1,772k	est. May '02
Glenbank	£91k	£34k	-	-

Note: Springbank major repair expenditure relates to 77 houses, the remainder having been sold since the original schemes completed. Habinteg now has 38 dwellings at Glenbank.

Maintenance expenditure refers to the day-to-day cyclical maintenance required to keep the property operational. Adaptations are works carried out to meet the specific needs of tenants with a physical disability. Major repairs are those works required when elements of a property have come to the end of their useful life.

In the past two years Habinteg has commenced a major programme of work to refurbish the properties in its oldest schemes. Work at Valentine Court, Bangor and Sullivan Close, Holywood is already complete and the work at Springbank, which started in January 2001, is due to complete in May 2002.

At all three locations the works include upgrading of heating systems and replacement of windows and doors. Internally, new kitchens and sanitary equipment has been installed. Work has also been carried out to install smoke detectors and extractor fans. Other miscellaneous works have also been carried out. When Springbank is complete, all the refurbished properties will have been brought up to modern day standards.

Glenbank and Springbank Developments

Mr G Kelly asked the Minister for Social Development to outline what money has been allocated on an ongoing basis for Glenbank and Springbank developments. (AQW 1057/01)

Mr Dodds: The Glenbank scheme was built to a higher specification than Springbank and it already has double glazed UPVC windows, better quality bathrooms and kitchens etc. Of the 38 dwellings still in Habinteg's ownership 22 have been converted to oil fired central heating as and when required by tenants. No full-scale major repairs programme is envisaged but upgrading work will be carried out on an incremental basis as required. The major refurbishment at Springbank is nearing completion. It is therefore envisaged that only routine maintenance and adaptations will be required at these estates and the properties will be assessed continually by Habinteg to determine what works if any are needed. Any necessary work will be funded as required from the Association's maintenance budget.

Belfast Regeneration Office: Expenditure

Mr G Kelly asked the Minister for Social Development to give a breakdown of the expenditure for the Belfast Regeneration Office for the 2001 financial year. (AQW 1061/01)

Mr Dodds: The table below gives a breakdown of the expenditure by the Belfast Regeneration Office from 1 April 2001 to date.

Branch	Amount £
BRO North Team	87,547.07
BRO South & East Team	443,169.74
BRO Inner West Team	874,881.76
BRO Outer West Team	505,391.53
BRO Centre	33,497.69
BRO Citywide	87,815.50
BRO Policy & Research	49,301.33
BRO Action Plan	1,680,439.41
BRO Action Plan EI Schemes	86,634.30
BRO Urban Development	2,825,000.00
BRO Comprehensive Development	1,142,000.00
Action Plan - Departments	
Department of Education	2,342,000.00
Department of Employment & Learning	52,000.00
DETI	30,000.00
DHSS&PS	1,231,000.00
DRD	261,000.00
NIO	360,000.00
Total	12,891,678.33

Special Purchase of Evacuated Dwellings

Mr Maskey asked the Minister for Social Development to list, by constituency, the number of houses purchased by the Housing Executive under the Special Purchase of Evacuated Dwellings during the past 2 years. (AQW 1071/01)

Mr Dodds: The information is not available by constituency. The purchases by Housing Executive District Office for the 12 month period 1 December to 30 November in each of the last 2 years are as follows:

Housing Executive District Office	Dec 99–Nov 00	Dec 00–Nov 01
Belfast 1	-	-
Belfast 2	-	1
Belfast 3	-	1
Belfast 4	4	6
Belfast 5	3	8
Belfast 6	3	16
Belfast 7	2	5
Bangor	4	5
N'ards	2	2
Castlereagh	4	4
Lisburn	4	2
Downpatrick	-	1
Banbridge	1	4
Newry	-	1
Armagh	3	6

Housing Executive District Office	Dec 99–Nov 00	Dec 00–Nov 01
Lurgan/Brownlow	3	1
Portadown	4	4
Dungannon	-	1
Fermanagh	2	-
Ballymena	5	9
Antrim	9	6
N'abbey 1	4	3
N'abbey 2	1	5
Carrickfergus	10	12
Larne	7	8
Ballycastle	-	1
Ballymoney	1	-
Coleraine	2	3
L'derry 2	-	5
Limavady	-	1
Omagh	-	4
Cookstown	1	-
Total	79	125

Retirement Pension

Mr Fee asked the Minister for Social Development to detail, for each of the past five years (a) how many women and (b) how many men, failed to claim their retirement pension when they reached pension age. (AQW 1085/01)

Mr Dodds: It is not known how many people failed to claim their Retirement Pension when they reached pension age (65 for men, 60 for women).

Retirement Pension: Notification of Entitlement

Mr Fee asked the Minister for Social Development to detail for each of the past five years (a) the percentage of women and (b) the percentage of men, approaching pension age who were notified of their entitlement to retirement pension. (AQW 1086/01)

Mr Dodds: The Agency does not hold figures on the percentage of women and men approaching pension age who were notified of their entitlement to Retirement Pension over the past five years.

Benefit Uptake

Mr Fee asked the Minister for Social Development how Social Security Agency staff ensure that claimants receive their full entitlement to all benefits. (AQW 1089/01)

Mr Dodds: Front-line staff in the Social Security Agency are trained to provide information, advice and assistance to customers across a wide range of benefits. They also have Information Technology support in the form of the Integrated Benefit Information System (IBIS), an up to date reference library of all social security benefits.

Housing Executive Houses

Mr Shannon asked the Minister for Social Development to detail the number of houses owned by the Housing Executive, by district council area, in the year 2001. (AQW 1129/01)

Mr Dodds: The current stock by District Council area at 30 November 2001 is as follows:

Council Area	Number
Antrim	3,300
Ards	4,910
Armagh	2,546
Ballymena	3,943
Ballymoney	1,811
Banbridge	2,292
Bangor	3,460
Belfast	29,939
Carrickfergus	2,707
Castlereagh	4,850
Coleraine	3,891
Cookstown	1,418
Craigavon	5,601
Downpatrick	3,196
Dungannon	2,341
Fermanagh	2,693
Larne	2,096
Limavady	1,865
Lisburn	8,259
Londonderry	9,460
Magherafelt	1,739
Moyle	1,056
Newry	4,242
Newtownabbey	5,678

Council Area	Number
Omagh	2,362
Strabane	2,904
Total	118,559

Allocation of Social Housing Tenancies

Mr Hilditch asked the Minister for Social Development to give his assessment of the new points system for the allocation of public housing by the Housing Executive. (AQW 1136/01)

Mr Dodds: Since November 2000, allocations of all social housing tenancies have been made from a common waiting list and a Common Selection Scheme operated by the Housing Executive and housing associations. The scheme provides for the award of points to applicants for housing need factors such as

insecurity of tenure, housing conditions, and health/ social well being, with the overall accumulation of points determining the position and ranking of an applicant on the waiting list.

The aim of the new scheme is to ensure that the allocation of all social housing is made on a fair and equitable basis, with housing more closely matched to the needs of applicants. There are no indications that the scheme is failing to deliver this, however, prior to implementation of the scheme, it was recognised that after a reasonable period of operation, an evaluation would be necessary, to confirm if the new scheme was fully meeting its aim. The early stages of that evaluation commenced in December 2001. Its administration will involve the Housing Executive, the housing association movement and the Department. It is envisaged that the findings of the evaluation will be summarised and circulated for wide consultation during April/ May 2002.

NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

Friday 18 January 2002

Written Answers to Questions

AGRICULTURE AND RURAL DEVELOPMENT

Brucellosis: Claims

Mr McHugh asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to detail (a) the number of claims for Brucellosis in the last 5 years; and (b) how many of these claims were found to be fraudulent.

(AQW 1192/01)

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development (Ms Rodgers):

- (a) In the last five years the number of Brucellosis cases were as follows:

1997	29
1998	62
1999	155
2000	210
2001	187

- (b) No prosecutions have been undertaken to date but a number of cases are currently being investigated and compensation is being withheld in 9 cases where irregularities have been identified.

Genetically Modified Food

Mr Shannon asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to outline (a) how many genetically modified food experiments have taken place in the last 2 years; and (b) the impact on surrounding farmland.

(AQW 1202/01)

Ms Rodgers: There have been no genetically modified food experiments carried out in the last two years in Northern Ireland.

As no genetically modified food experiments have been carried out in the last two years in Northern Ireland there has, as a consequence, been no impact on farmland or the environment.

Rural Development Programme for 2001-2006

Mr Weir asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to detail what current and future measures are available for the Unionist community to participate in rural development projects. (AQW 1222/01)

Ms Rodgers: All measures of the Rural Development Programme for 2001-2006 are, and will continue to be available for the entire rural population, irrespective of community background.

The Programme will endeavour to promote equality of opportunity within the section 75 categories. The promotion of equality and inclusion are guiding principles of the Programme and for this reason a commitment to equality will be a key criteria for selection of all projects.

The capacity building element of the Programme aims to strengthen areas of weak community infrastructure and to develop diverse and representative community-based organisations in rural areas. This will include a PEACE II measure focused on isolated, minority communities along both sides of the border to involve them in rural regeneration activities.

Payment of Lights Dues

Mrs I Robinson asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to detail what plans she has to abolish the payment of Light Dues. (AQW 1224/01)

Ms Rodgers: Responsibility for policy relating to the payment of lights dues lies with the Department of Transport, Local Government and the Regions (DTLR) in London.

While I remain fully committed to obtaining the reduction or removal of the payment of lights dues for Northern Ireland fishermen, the policy in the UK is that any removal or reduction of lights dues would be contrary to the "user pays" principle and that, as users of aids to navigation, lights dues are a proper charge against fishermen.

However a review of the current structure of UK lights dues is due to be carried out by DTLR in early 2002 and the views of the maritime industry on the current charging regime will be sought. At that stage I will take the opportunity to request that the current economic circumstances of the fishing industry are taken into account when determining the outcome of the review.

NI Fishery Harbour Authority: Development Projects

Mrs I Robinson asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to outline (a) her commitment to grant aid the Northern Ireland Fishery Harbour Authority for capital works; and (b) the timescale for the completion of these works; and to make a statement.

(AQW 1237/01)

Ms Rodgers: In addition to the Kilkeel Integrated Development Plan, the Northern Ireland Fishery Harbour Authority have put forward a number of additional development projects at Portavogie, Ardglass and Kilkeel. Currently discussions are taking place with the Harbour Authority on these additional projects in relation to their funding and prioritisation and timescale.

Plankton

Mrs I Robinson asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to detail (a) the fall in plankton in the Irish Sea over the past 5 years; and (b) the emergence of new forms of copepods off the south coast of Ireland, and in the Bristol and English Channels.

(AQW 1238/01)

Ms Rodgers: I am not aware of any decrease in the amount of plankton in the Irish Sea over the past 5 years. Information available would confirm, at least in the English Channel, the appearance of new species of copepods in the English Channel over the last few years.

Larne Harbour Ltd

Mr Beggs asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development, pursuant to AQW 1050/01, what advice she has given to Larne Harbour Ltd to reopen the pedestrian gate at Chainé Memorial Road, Larne, following the review carried out on 3 December 2001.

(AQW 1253/01)

Ms Rodgers: In March 2001, as a result of the outbreak of Foot and Mouth Disease, my Department asked for the pedestrian gate at Chainé Memorial Road, Larne, to be closed as a FMD precaution. In early December 2001 we further advised Larne Harbour Ltd that, as the FMD situation had improved, we would be content for this gate to be re-opened.

Fishing Vessel Decommissioning Scheme

Mr Shannon asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to outline any financial help for the fishing industry in light of new fishing quotas set by the European Union.

(AQW 1300/01)

Ms Rodgers: To assist the industry I announced a Fishing Vessel Decommissioning Scheme in October last year and Letters of Offer have now issued to the owners of 34 fishing vessels. More recently I announced the opening of grant applications for schemes aimed at the Improvement of Facilities at Northern Ireland Fishing Ports, Aquaculture, Processing and Marketing of Freshwater and Marine Products and Promotion of Fishery Productions.

I would add that at Council increases above last year's levels were obtained in the Total Allowable Catches for such stocks as Irish Sea cod, Irish Sea plaice and hake. Moreover whilst there was some reduction in the Total Allowable Catch for the important nephrops stocks, this has to be set against the initial Commission's proposal for a 25% reduction in their reticence for any increase because of their view that the by catch in this fishery includes stocks under threat, for example cod and whiting. The agreed nephrops TAC of 17,790 tonnes still gives the UK a quota which exceeds 2000 landing and likely landings in 2001.

CULTURE, ARTS AND LEISURE

Hospitality: December 2001

Mr Hilditch asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to detail (a) the cost of and (b) to whom he is providing hospitality during the month of December 2001.

(AQW 1107/01)

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure (Mr McGimpsey): The estimated cost of hospitality during December 2001 was £1,018.23. This figure is broken down as follows:

£575.20	meetings/lunches with Department officials and local representatives.
£443.03	DCAL reception.

Interpretative Facilities: East Londonderry

Mr McClarty asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure what plans he has to improve cultural interpretative facilities within East Londonderry.

(AQW 1125/01)

Mr McGimpsey: I have no direct responsibility for the quality of cultural interpretative facilities. However, my Department seeks to work, mainly through the Northern Ireland Museums Council, with local councils, which provide most such facilities, and with others, to ensure that they receive the advice and support they need in carrying out their responsibilities in this regard.

My Department has established a Cultural Forum to bring together local councils with a range of other relevant public bodies; this has already provided guidance to councils in the preparation of their cultural strategies. In addition, the Local Museum and Heritage Review will provide another, complementary context for addressing the issue of cultural interpretative facilities.

Northern Ireland Human Rights Commission

Mr Shannon asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure what steps is he taking to promote Ulster-Scots representation within the Northern Ireland Human Rights Commission. (AQW 1126/01)

Mr McGimpsey: My Department has no role in making appointments to the Commission, which are a matter for the Secretary of State. The Northern Ireland Act states that as far as practicable, the Commissioners, as a group, should be representative of the community in Northern Ireland.

Waterways Ireland

Mr Hilditch asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to detail the cost of the consultancy work contracted to manage the recruitment process of the administration and technical posts at Waterways Ireland. (AQW 1203/01)

Mr McGimpsey: The issue referred to by the Member is now a matter for Waterways Ireland, the North/South Implementation Body for Inland Waterways. Waterways Ireland has the functions of management, maintenance, development and restoration of certain inland navigable waterway systems throughout the island, principally for recreational purposes.

I understand from Waterways Ireland that two separate recruitment consultancy contracts have been awarded; one for filling outstanding administration and technical posts up to Director level and the other for filling four Director posts. As both these contracts are still in progress, no consultancy costs are yet available.

50 - Metre Swimming Pool: University of Ulster, Jordanstown

Mr K Robinson asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure, pursuant to AQO 449/01, what steps he will take to ensure that a 50 metre swimming pool will form the core of the proposed Centre of Excellence at the University of Ulster, Jordanstown, and act as a magnet for prestige international sporting events. (AQW 1259/01)

Mr McGimpsey: As I explained in my answer to AQO 449/01, current plans are to provide a 50 metre

swimming pool at the University of Ulster, Jordanstown for the training of international performers as part of the Sports Institute for Northern Ireland (SINI). This will allow for high level training and low level gala promotions. While no spectator provision is specifically included, there will be the potential for a 200-300 temporary seating arrangement for low key events. This satisfies the requirements of the SINI and is expected to cost in the region of £3-4m.

I understand the additional cost of upgrading the proposed facility to a 50 metre competition pool, with 8 lanes, boom and spectator accommodation for a minimum of 500 would be at least £3m.

Apart from the cost consideration, the need/demand and location for such a facility would have to be carefully assessed and this would be a matter in the first instance for the Sports Council, possibly in partnership with a district council.

50 - Metre Swimming Pool: University of Ulster, Jordanstown

Mr K Robinson asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure, pursuant to AQO 449/01, what steps he will take to encourage the inclusion of adequate spectator accommodation in any scheme for a 50 metre pool in the proposed Centre of Excellence at the University of Ulster, Jordanstown. (AQW 1260/01)

Mr McGimpsey: As I explained in my answer to AQO 449/01, current plans are to provide a 50 metre swimming pool at the University of Ulster, Jordanstown for the training of international performers as part of the Sports Institute for Northern Ireland (SINI). This will allow for high level training and low level gala promotions. While no spectator provision is specifically included, there will be the potential for a 200-300 temporary seating arrangement for low key events. This satisfies the requirements of the SINI and is expected to cost in the region of £3-4m.

I understand the additional cost of upgrading the proposed facility to a 50 metre competition pool, with 8 lanes, boom and spectator accommodation for a minimum of 500 would be at least £3m.

Apart from the cost consideration, the need/demand and location for such a facility would have to be carefully assessed and this would be a matter in the first instance for the Sports Council, possibly in partnership with a district council.

Money Allocated for Gaelic Games

Mr Weir asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure how much money was allocated for Gaelic games in each of the last three years. (AQW 1338/01)

Mr McGimpsey: The position is as follows:

	1998/99 £	1999/00 £	2000/01 £
Lottery Capital	3.160m	1.380m	1.657m
Lottery Revenue	-	-	0.062m
Exchequer	0.028m	0.055m	0.040m
Safe Sports Grounds	N/A	N/A	1.028m

EDUCATION

Action on Autism

Mrs I Robinson asked the Minister of Education to indicate (a) when will the new Centre of Excellence for Action on Autism be completed; and (b) how much funding is being set aside for this project.

(AQW 1119/01)

The Minister of Education (Mr M McGuinness): It is not planned that the proposed Centre of Excellence for the education of children with Autistic Spectrum Disorders will require a new building. Existing premises are being considered for purchase, subject to satisfactory surveys and the subsequent successful conclusion of negotiations with the current owners.

My Department made a successful bid to the Executive Programme Funds for additional funding of £110k in 2002/03 and £1.61m in 2003/04 to take forward this project on a North-South basis. The allocation is subject to DFP clearance of an appropriate economic appraisal.

As soon as the economic appraisal is cleared, and my Department and the Department of Education and Science have concluded negotiations, I will be in a position to give full details of the location of the Centre and plans for its use.

Action on Autism

Mrs I Robinson asked the Minister of Education to indicate (a) when building will commence on the new Centre of Excellence for Action on Autism; and (b) where this Centre will be based.

(AQW 1120/01)

Mr M McGuinness: It is not planned that the proposed Centre of Excellence for the education of children with Autistic Spectrum Disorders will require a new building. Existing premises are being considered for purchase, subject to satisfactory surveys and the subsequent successful conclusion of negotiations with the current owners.

My Department made a successful bid to the Executive Programme Funds for additional funding of

£110k in 2002/03 and £1.61m in 2003/04 to take forward this project on a North-South basis. The allocation is subject to DFP clearance of an appropriate economic appraisal.

As soon as the economic appraisal is cleared, and my Department and the Department of Education and Science have concluded negotiations, I will be in a position to give full details of the location of the Centre and plans for its use.

School Closure

Mr M Robinson asked the Minister of Education to list, by name and location, those schools that were closed in each of the past 5 years. (AQW 1150/01)

Mr M McGuinness: The following schools were closed or amalgamated in the last 5 years. Those which were amalgamated, are denoted with an asterisk.

Name Of School	Location
School Year 2001/02	
Ballymena Academy Prep Department	Ballymena
*Cambridge House Boys' Grammar	Ballymena
*Cambridge House Girls' Grammar	Ballymena
Cavanacaw Primary	Omagh
*Coleraine Boys' High	Coleraine
*Coleraine Girls' High	Coleraine
Jaffe Special	Belfast
Glenagorland Primary	Strabane
St Anthony's Primary	Belfast
*St Mary's Boys' Primary	Newcastle
*St Mary's Girls' Primary	Newcastle
*St Michael's Primary	Enniskillen
*St Theresa's Primary	Enniskillen
School Year 2000/01	
*Croreagh Primary	near Rathfriland
*Edendale Primary	near Rathfriland
*Glaskermore Primary	near Rathfriland
*Holy Trinity Boys' Primary	Belfast
*Holy Trinity Girls' Primary	Belfast
Rainey Endowed Prep Department	Magherafelt
Sacred Heart Primary	Lurgan
*St Mary's Primary	Belfast
*St Paul's Primary	Belfast
*Gransha Boys' High	Bangor
*Bangor Girls' High	Bangor
St Joseph's Centre	Middletown
St Stephen's Centre	Belfast
School Year 1999/2000	

Name Of School	Location
*Ballyward Primary	near Banbridge
*Ballyrone Primary	near Banbridge
*Katesbridge Primary	near Banbridge
*Cargycroy Primary	near Lisburn
*Legacurry Primary	near Lisburn
*Magheraknock Primary	near Lisburn
*Ravarnette	near Lisburn
Dunamuggy Primary	Ballyclare
*Glassdrummond Primary	Middletown
*Middletown Primary	Middletown
*St Louis Primary	Middletown
Larne Grammar Prep Department	Larne
Millbrook Primary	Larne
Royal School Dungannon Prep Department	Dungannon
*St Comgall's Primary	Divis Street, Belfast
*St Joseph's Primary	Divis Street, Belfast
*St Mary's Primary	Divis Street, Belfast
*St Peter's Primary	Divis Street, Belfast
School Year 1998/99	
*Antrim High	Antrim
*Ardnaveigh High	Antrim
Ballyclare Grammar Prep Department	Ballyclare
*Fernhill Primary	Belfast
*Glencairn Primary	Belfast
Killyrammer Primary	Ballymoney
*Lurganachone Primary	Rathfriland
*St Colman's Primary	Drumgreenagh
Scrabo High	Newtownards
Star of the Sea Primary	Kilkeel
*St Clare's Primary	Keady
*St Mary's Primary	Keady
St Oliver Plunkett Boys' Primary	Belfast
*St Oliver Plunkett Girls' Primary	Belfast
*Tullymore Primary	Armagh
*Tullysaran Primary	Armagh
School Year 1997/98	
*Carnew Primary	Dromore
*Gransha Primary	Dromore
*Kinallen Primary	Dromore

Transformation of Schools

Mr K Robinson asked the Minister of Education to detail the benefits in (a) staffing complement; (b) staffing

costs; (c) capital costs; (d) maintenance costs; and (e) education provision, for schools seeking to change their status from controlled to maintained integrated status; and to make a statement. (AQW 1236/01)

Mr M McGuinness: As with all schools funded under Local Management of Schools (LMS) arrangements the funding made available to a Grant Maintained Integrated (GMI) school is unhypothecated and thus it is a matter for the Board of Governors of each school to determine how much it spends on staffing, maintenance etc.. GMI schools have additional responsibilities compared to their counterparts in the controlled and maintained sectors and these result in higher costs. The funding arrangements include additional resources to enable them to meet these additional responsibilities. Schools may also transform to Controlled Integrated (CI) status. Insofar as LMS is concerned, controlled integrated schools are treated exactly the same as other controlled or maintained schools.

There would be no material benefit as far as capital costs are concerned for controlled schools which transform to either CI or GMI status. Arrangements for capital costs for CI schools would remain unchanged, whereas the only change for GMI schools would be that responsibility for expenditure of a capital nature would transfer from the education and library board to the trustees or Board of Governors of the new GMI school. Any such expenditure that is approved by the Department of Education would be eligible for capital grant at 100%

All grant-aided schools are required to follow the statutory curricular and other educational requirements.

Finally, since 1997/98 a small amount of funding has been secured annually to assist schools with the additional requirements that the transformation process produces.

Healthier Menus

Mr M Robinson asked the Minister of Education to detail the timescale and costs associated with his plans to introduce healthier menus in schools. (AQW 1246/01)

Mr M McGuinness: I launched a consultation document on the introduction of new compulsory standards for school meals on 12 December 2001. The consultation period ends on 8 February 2002. The document envisages that the new standards and good practice guidance will be implemented from 1 September 2002, but views have been sought as to whether this timetable is reasonable.

It will be essential that catering staff are trained to ensure successful implementation of the standards. I have therefore earmarked a budget of £250k to assist with the training of catering staff. I do not anticipate any

addition to the cost of a school meal as a direct result of the implementation of healthier menus.

Applications for Enrolment

Lord Kilclooney asked the Minister of Education to detail the number of applications that were (a) received; and (b) not accepted for enrolment in first year in September 2001, in each of the following schools (i) Down High School; (ii) Saintfield High School; and (iii) Regent House Grammar School. (AQW 1285/01)

Mr M McGuinness: The information requested is as follows:

School	Applications to Form 1 September 2001	Applications not accepted
Down High School	149	20
Saintfield High School	87	22
Regent House Grammar School	239	27

School Enrolment: Strangford Constituency

Lord Kilclooney asked the Minister of Education how many pupils were enrolled at each secondary and grammar school in the Strangford Constituency for the academic years beginning (i) September 2001; and (ii) September 1996. (AQW 1286/01)

Mr M McGuinness: The number of pupils enrolled at each secondary and grammar school in the Strangford Constituency in the school years 2001/02 and 1996/97 were as follows:

School Name:	Enrolment	
	2001/02	1996/97
Comber High School	361	416
Dundonald High School	607	609
Glastry College,	586	531
Lagan College	1013	948
Movilla High School,	873	858
Saintfield High School	336	326
St Columba's High School, Portaferry	280	345
Strangford Integrated College	416	N/A
Scrabo High School	N/A	283
Regent House Grammar School,	1449	1441

School Enrolment: Strangford Constituency

Lord Kilclooney asked the Minister of Education how many pupils were enrolled at each primary school

in the Strangford Constituency for the academic years beginning (i) September 2001; and (ii) September 1996. (AQW 1287/01)

Mr M McGuinness: The number of pupils enrolled at each primary school in the Strangford Constituency in the school years 2001/02 and 1996/97 were as follows:

School Name:	Enrolment	
	2001/02	1996/97
Abbey Primary School, Newtownards	584	603
Alexander Dickson Primary School, Ballygowan	194	219
Andrews Memorial Primary School, Comber	436	522
Ballycloughan Primary School, Saintfield	68	84
Ballykeigle Primary School, Comber	44	53
Ballywalter Primary School	178	165
Brooklands Primary School, Dundonald	602	583
Carrickmannon Primary School, Ballygowan	94	80
Carrowdore Primary School	150	137
Carryduff Primary School	257	315
Castle Gardens Primary School, Newtownards	357	419
Comber Primary School	340	388
Darragh Cross Primary School, Saintfield	91	86
Derryboy Primary School, Crossgar	60	81
Dundonald Primary School	603	587
Greyabbey Primary School	73	69
Killinchy Primary School	255	240
Killyleagh Primary School	116	140
Kircubbin Integrated Primary School	107	79
Kirkistown Primary School	60	58
Londonderry Primary School, Newtownards	280	305
Loughries Primary School, Newtownards	81	83
Moneyrea Primary School	140	143
Newtownards Model Primary School	391	400
O'Neill Memorial Primary School, Belfast	24	43
Portaferry Integrated Primary School	87	48
Portavogie Primary School	134	133
Regent House Preparatory Department	159	161
St Finian's Primary School, Newtownards	117	144
St Joseph's Primary School, Carryduff	773	653
St Mary's Primary School, Comber	36	31
St Mary's Primary School, Ballygowan	30	50
St Mary's Primary School, Killyleagh	134	137
St Mary's Primary School, Kircubbin	158	211
St Mary's Primary School, Portaferry	246	277
St Patrick's Primary School, Ballygalget	108	112
Victoria Primary School, Newtownards	559	572
Victoria Primary School, Ballyhalbert	119	101
West Winds Primary School, Newtownards	156	167

Enrolment at Primary Schools: South Eastern Education and Library Board

Lord Kilclooney asked the Minister of Education to outline (a) the five primary schools in the South Eastern Education and Library Board area which had the smallest enrolment totals at the beginning of the academic year September 2001; and (b) the enrolment totals of each of these primary schools. (AQW 1288/01)

Mr M McGuinness: The five primary schools in the South-Eastern Education and Library Board area with the smallest enrolment totals in the 2001/02 school year are:

School Name:	Enrolment @ October 2001
Drumbo Primary School, Lisburn	22
Downshire Primary School, Dundrum	23
O'Neill Memorial Primary School, Belfast	24
Groomsport Primary School, Bangor	24
Guinness Primary School, Ballynahinch	27

Standards in Education

Mr M Robinson asked the Minister of Education how he plans to use information on examination performance to improve standards in education. (AQW 1290/01)

Mr M McGuinness: The setting of targets at individual school level is an important part of the strategy to raise standards and improve school performance. All schools are required to set targets annually in certain key areas, including examination performance, and to monitor progress towards them. To assist them in this process, my Department provides schools, each year, with aggregated data on performance to enable them to compare their own performance with that of other, similar schools.

Performance in Mathematics

Mr K Robinson asked the Minister of Education if he has any plans to improve pupil performances in mathematics at secondary school level; and to make a statement. (AQW 1333/01)

Mr M McGuinness: The strategy for the promotion of numeracy provides the focus for driving up further the standards being achieved by pupils in all schools. A review of the strategy, and how it can be strengthened and developed further, is being carried out by my officials, in consultation with the Boards and CCMS.

Threshold Assessment

Mr Hamilton asked the Minister of Education to outline (a) the procedures which are in place for

assessing teachers' threshold pay; (b) the systems in place to ensure parity of treatment; and (c) any variation in these procedures or systems for assessing teachers' threshold pay. (AQW 1335/01)

Mr M McGuinness:

- All applications for threshold assessment are assessed by the school Principal and validated by independent external assessors to ensure fairness and consistency in the treatment of all applications. Unsuccessful applicants have a right of appeal.
- All Principals are trained by the Regional Training Unit, which also trains and accredits the external assessors. The assessors' work is subject to moderation by their Lead Assessors and the Regional Manager, and to monitoring and evaluation by a Quality Assurance Team.
- These procedures are applied consistently across all schools. For a small number of teachers employed in non-school settings, their line manager completes the assessments, which are then validated by the external assessors.

Burns Report

Mr Hamilton asked the Minister of Education, pursuant to AQW 1284/01, to detail (a) the name of the working groups which are to be established; (b) the number of officials for each working group; (c) the remit of each working group; (d) the date on which they are to be established; and (e) to identify any external advisers who are to be co-opted or consulted within these working groups. (AQW 1444/01)

Mr M McGuinness: The arrangements for the establishment of working groups are still under consideration. No decisions have yet been taken on the remit of each working group or the number of officials who will be involved. There are no plans at present to co-opt or consult with any external advisers.

Classroom Assistants

Mr Dallat asked the Minister of Education to outline his policies for the enhancement of classroom assistants in terms of (a) salary; (b) training; and (c) status within the education system. (AQO 568/01)

Mr M McGuinness: I fully recognise and value the important contribution classroom assistants make to children's education. However, the terms and conditions of service of classroom assistants are a matter for the employing authorities.

Neutrality of Schools

Ms Armitage asked the Minister of Education what measures he is taking to ensure places of education are seen as neutral. (AQO 577/01)

Mr M McGuinness: Schools should be seen by the community as being above political or sectarian controversy. They should be havens where all our young people can feel safe, confident, and able to concentrate on their education. I have missed no opportunity to convey this message in response to the all too many attacks on schools and children in the past year.

Child Protection Joint Working Group

Ms Ramsey asked the Minister of Education, pursuant to the meeting of the North-South Ministerial Council in education sectoral format, what measures will be put in place to improve the provision of child protection. (AQO 585/01)

Mr M McGuinness: The Child Protection Joint Working Group established under the auspices of the North-South Ministerial Council has the remit of developing proposals, in consultation as necessary with other British and Irish Government Departments, to establish a confidential mechanism across both islands for the reciprocal identification of people who are considered to be unsuitable to work with children and young people. Therefore, any proposals we might bring forward, in due course, will require separate but complementary legislation North and South.

Text Books

Mr Poots asked the Minister of Education to detail those text books that have been added to the history curriculum in this academic year. (AQO 561/01)

Mr M McGuinness: My Department does not specify particular text books or resources for use in schools in delivering the curriculum. The choice of books and teaching resources is a matter for the Principal and the Board of Governors of each individual school.

Noise Pollution: Effects on Educational Attainment

Mr C Murphy asked the Minister of Education if he will take account of recent findings on the impact of chronic aircraft noise on pupil attainment as outlined in a report by Mary Haines entitled 'Follow-up study of effects of chronic aircraft noise exposure on child stress responses and cognitions'. (AQO 594/01)

Mr M McGuinness: This study, carried out in West London schools, was one of a series conducted by a team from the University of London about the effects of chronic high levels of noise around international airports. It found that greater aircraft noise exposure produced higher levels of annoyance among pupils and was associated with poorer reading performance on difficult items on a standard reading test. While

none of our schools would be exposed to aircraft noise levels similar to those of Heathrow, I will be taking this research into account in any future decisions about the siting of new schools in proximity to airports.

Statements of Special Educational Needs

Ms Lewsley asked the Minister of Education what measures he will put in place to ease the transition from primary to post-primary schools for those children who have been statemented. (AQO 559/01)

Mr M McGuinness: At transfer age children with statements of special educational needs must have their statements amended to specify the secondary school to be attended. The choice of school is discussed with the parents at the annual review meeting which takes place around the same time as those with parents of other children of transfer age. Updated advice is obtained in order to assist the discussion. Where parents disagree with an Education and Library Board's final decision, they can appeal to the local Special Educational Needs Tribunal. I am not aware of any particular problems associated with this procedure.

Schools Curriculum

Mr J Kelly asked the Minister of Education what protocol his Department applies to the vetting of methodologies and resources used with children, particularly special needs children and other vulnerable groups; and to make a statement. (AQO 573/01)

Mr M McGuinness: The Council for the Curriculum, Examinations and Assessment is responsible for devising the curriculum schools should follow. Schools themselves are responsible for deciding the teaching methods used to deliver the curriculum. My Department's Inspectorate assesses the effectiveness of the teaching methods used in schools through the inspection process. In recent years inspections have included an evaluation of the effectiveness and quality of provision for children with special educational needs.

Post Primary Education

Mr McHugh asked the Minister of Education how he proposes to address a form of selection at 11 years of age which would avoid the same weaknesses that exist in the current system. [R] (AQO 592/01)

Mr M McGuinness: The weaknesses in the current arrangements for post-primary education are unacceptable and cannot be resolved by any other form of academic selection. The Burns Report has been published for consultation and I encourage everyone to consider it carefully and to submit their views on its proposals, or to identify alternative approaches. I will consider

carefully all the comments submitted and in making decisions about the future arrangements my focus will be on ensuring fairness for all children, raising standards and creating a modern education system for a modern age.

Re-employment of Retired Teachers

Mr K Robinson asked the Minister of Education, pursuant to AQW 651/01, why it has been necessary to employ 1,334 retired teachers in primary and post-primary schools in the 2000-01 school year.

(AQO 556/01)

Mr M McGuinness: The Department does not hold details of the reasons why retired teachers are employed nor is the information collated by the Education and Library Boards.

Programmes of Study for Technology and Design at Key Stage 3

Mr Armstrong asked the Minister of Education what measures he proposes to take to develop engineering as a subject in secondary schools. (AQO 564/01)

Mr M McGuinness: The current curriculum contains basic elements of engineering in the compulsory Programmes of Study for Technology and Design at Key Stage 3 and for Science at Key Stages 3 and 4. My Department's most recent approval of qualifications circular also offers schools the opportunity to prepare pupils for a Part One GNVQ in Engineering and in addition, the Northern Ireland Business Education Partnership is also promoting engineering through its sponsorship of a number of programmes.

The current review of the Curriculum includes a proposal to provide a specific programme for Employability as a statutory requirement for all young people in Key Stages 3 and 4. One of the objectives of the review is to encourage pupils to develop the skills and qualities which they will need for work. There has been (and will continue to be) widespread consultation with employers to ensure that their needs are taken into account in a revised curriculum.

EMPLOYMENT AND LEARNING

Student Enrolments

Dr Birnie asked the Minister for Employment and Learning to provide a breakdown of student enrolments in each further and higher education institute by (a)

age; (b) gender; (c) religious background; and (d) other section 75 categories, in each of the last 5 years.

(AQW 1153/01)

The Minister for Employment and Learning (Ms Hanna): Information regarding student enrolments for the 2001/02 academic year will not be available until April 2002. I have arranged for tables detailing a breakdown of student enrolments in further & higher education in each given academic year from the 1996/97 – 2000/01 academic years to be placed in the Assembly library for your information. Information on political opinion and sexual orientation is not collected for either higher or further education students; information on marital status or dependants is not collected at present for higher education students.

Student Support

Dr Birnie asked the Minister for Employment and Learning to detail any correspondence received in relation to the decision to retain the current system of student tuition fees as outlined in the recent review of student finance. (AQW 1154/01)

Ms Hanna: As Minister, I receive considerable correspondence in respect of student support, mainly seeking information. In relation to the current system of student tuition fees I have received petitions from two Student Unions and a small number of individual comments.

Student Enrolments

Dr Birnie asked the Minister for Employment and Learning to detail the number of student enrolments in each further and higher education institute, on a full-time and part-time basis, for undergraduate and postgraduate courses, in each of the last 3 years. (AQW 1155/01)

Ms Hanna: Information regarding student enrolments for the 2001-02 academic year will not be available until April 2002. The following tables set out the information requested in each academic year from 1998/99 – 2000/01.

ENROLMENTS ON HIGHER EDUCATION COURSES AT NI HIGHER EDUCATION INSTITUTIONS BY MODE OF STUDY AND LEVEL OF STUDY 1998-99 TO 2000-01

		2000-01	1999-00	1998-99
Undergraduate				
QUB	Full-time	11,529	11,175	11,543
	Part-time	4,960	5,190	5,698
UU	Full-time	12,624	12,399	12,096
	Part-time	3,279	3,247	3,174
St Mary's	Full-time	732	629	580
	Part-time	61	62	0
Stranmillis	Full-time	787	703	633
	Part-time	248	248	171

		2000-01	1999-00	1998-99
Undergraduate				
Total		34,220	33,653	33,895
Postgraduate				
QUB	Full-time	1,943	1,855	2,032
	Part-time	1,712	1,968	1,748
UU	Full-time	1,642	1,491	1,368
	Part-time	2,961	3,000	2,841
St Mary's	Full-time	10	13	29
	Part-time	146	145	75
Stranmillis	Full-time	37	17	35
	Part-time	121	114	111
Total		8,572	8,603	8,239
Table Total		42,792	42,256	42,134

**ENROLMENTS ON HIGHER EDUCATION COURSES, BY
MODE OF ATTENDANCE AT NI FURTHER EDUCATION
COLLEGES 2000-01.**

	Postgraduate		Undergraduate	
College	Part-Time	Full-Time	Part-Time	Table Total
Armagh			66	66
BIFHE	11	1,398	2,789	4,198
Castlereagh			237	237
Causeway			154	154
East Antrim		40	449	489
East Down		17	258	275
East Tyrone			304	304
Fermanagh		144	505	649
Limavady			127	127
Lisburn		60	504	564
NEIFHE		180	450	630
Newry	18	212	595	825
NIHCC		201	11	212
North Down & Ards	4	447	581	1,032
NWIFHE	45	686	493	1,224
Omagh		6	263	269
Upper Bann	14	185	566	765
Table Total	92	3,576	8,352	12,020

Note: figures relate to a snapshot of enrolments at 1st November 2000.

**ENROLMENTS ON HIGHER EDUCATION COURSES, BY
MODE OF ATTENDANCE AT NI FURTHER EDUCATION
COLLEGES 1999-00.**

	Postgraduate		Undergraduate	
College	Part-Time	Full-Time	Part-Time	Table Total
Armagh			58	58
BIFHE	22	1,374	2,677	4,073
Castlereagh			124	124
Causeway			129	129
East Antrim		40	348	388
East Down		11	320	331
East Tyrone			253	253

	Postgraduate		Undergraduate	
College	Part-Time	Full-Time	Part-Time	Table Total
Fermanagh		128	494	622
Limavady			83	83
Lisburn		61	520	581
NEIFHE		184	426	610
Newry	18	170	549	737
NIHCC		204	16	220
North Down & Ards	6	407	543	956
NWIFHE	51	673	559	1,283
Omagh			267	267
Upper Bann	11	157	500	668
Table Total	108	3,409	7,866	11,383

Note: figures relate to a snapshot of enrolments at 1st November 1999.

**ENROLMENTS ON HIGHER EDUCATION COURSES, BY
MODE OF ATTENDANCE AT NI FURTHER EDUCATION
COLLEGES 1998-99.**

	Postgraduate		Undergraduate	
College	Part-Time	Full-Time	Part-Time	Table Total
Armagh	12	1,301	2,362	3,675
BIFHE	38	684	410	1,132
Castlereagh		112	370	482
Causeway			63	63
East Antrim			228	228
East Down		204	18	222
East Tyrone			103	103
Fermanagh		178	415	593
Limavady		38	201	239
Lisburn		68	416	484
NEIFHE			135	135
Newry		375	298	673
NIHCC		1	221	222
North Down & Ards		30	24	54
NWIFHE			226	226
Omagh	19	134	586	739
Upper Bann	14	133	462	609
Table Total	83	3,258	6,538	9,879

Note: figures relate to a snapshot of enrolments at 1st November 1998.

Participation Rates in Further and Higher Education

Dr Birnie asked the Minister for Employment and Learning if she will be producing a response to the University of Ulster report 'Participation Rates in Further and Higher Education'. (AQW 1282/01)

Ms Hanna: I do not propose to produce a response to the University of Ulster report. It will be considered in conjunction with other sources of relevant information.

Interface Europe Ltd

Dr O'Hagan asked the Minister for Employment and Learning to detail any funding made available to Interface Europe Ltd, Craigavon for training purposes over the past two years. (AQW 1355/01)

Ms Hanna: Interface Europe Ltd has not received any funding for training through DEL's Jobskills, New Deal or Worktrack programmes.

ENTERPRISE, TRADE AND INVESTMENT

Unemployment Statistics: Limavady

Mr McClarty asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to detail the unemployment figures for Limavady over the last 3 years and what assessment he has made in respect of these figures. (AQW 1171/01)

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment (Sir Reg Empey): Unemployment statistics at District Council level are only available from the claimant count.

Details of claimant count unemployment in Limavady Borough Council and a comparison with Northern Ireland as a whole can be found in Table 1 overleaf.

The unemployment figure for Limavady, whilst higher than for Northern Ireland as a whole, has fallen at a similar rate.

My Department, through IDB and LEDU, and, when it is established, the new economic development agency Invest Northern Ireland, will continue to work with companies and with the Borough Council and local enterprise agencies to promote further economic activity and employment in the area.

TABLE 1 NUMBER AND RATE OF CLAIMANT COUNT UNEMPLOYED IN LIMAVADY BOROUGH COUNCIL AND NORTHERN IRELAND.

Date	Numbers Unemployed		% of the Workforce	
	Limavady	Northern Ireland	Limavady	Northern Ireland
December 1998	1,207	53,952	10.9	6.8
December 1999	893	42,465	7.4	5.4
December 2000	934	39,964	7.8	5.1
December 2001	819	36,587	6.9	4.6

Critical Care Register

Mrs I Robinson asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to detail (a) the number of

consumers who are on NIE's Medical Care Register; (b) the number of generators supplied by NIE; and (c) contingency plans in place where demand outstrips the supply of generators to individuals on the Medical Care Register. (AQW 1211/01)

Sir Reg Empey: NIE has advised that there are currently some 3,000 customers on the company's Critical Care Register. NIE uses the Register to maintain regular contact with Critical Care customers affected by planned and unplanned power outages. The main aim of the scheme, which operates 24 hours a day 365 days a year, is to provide customers with accurate and timely information about the causes of power interruptions and the likely restoration times and to discuss action which may be required to enable customers to cope with the effects of the disruptions. The vast majority of power interruptions can be managed effectively by this close personal liaison between individual customers and NIE.

On occasions NIE, following discussions with the local health agencies, may agree with customers that further assistance in the form of priority restoration action or the provision of small mobile generators is required. A total of 45 portable generators held at the 13 Customer Service Centres across Northern Ireland is available for immediate deployment which are supplemented, when required, by a further stock of 40 generators held and managed centrally. For very severe weather events contingency agreements are in place with local and national suppliers for the provision of additional generators on a hire basis. In an average week, NIE supply 5-15 generators across Northern Ireland for typically 3-6 hours duration.

ENVIRONMENT

Planning Policy Statement 6 (PPS6)

Mr McClarty asked the Minister of the Environment if he has any plans to encourage the renovation and conversion of existing buildings within East Londonderry as opposed to new build. (AQW 1092/01)

The Minister of the Environment (Mr Foster): My Department's Planning Policy Statement 6 (PPS6) entitled 'Planning, Archaeology and the Built Heritage' provides guidance on this matter. Policy BH 15 of PPS6 states that the Department wishes to encourage the re-use of existing buildings by sympathetic renovation or conversion for a range of appropriate uses, including tourism or recreation, small scale employment or new rural enterprises.

The policy has general application throughout Northern Ireland, and is not specific to one particular locality, such as East Londonderry.

The Regional Development Strategy for Northern Ireland 2025, recently formulated by the Department for Regional Development, supports at Strategic Planning Guideline (ENV 3.5) the retention of groups of traditional buildings in the landscape and the restoration and continued use of vernacular houses. The Department for Regional Development will be preparing a Planning Policy Statement on the Countryside. This will translate this policy guidance into operational planning policy which will form the basis of consideration of relevant planning applications.

Planning (General Development) Order 1993

Mr M Robinson asked the Minister of the Environment what advice he issues to district councils on the structure of public consultation regarding planning applications for (a) waste management facilities; and (b) recycling facilities. (AQW 1161/01)

Mr Foster: Under Article 15 of the Planning (General Development) Order 1993, the Department is required to consult with relevant district councils on planning applications in their area, and take into account representations made by that council. However, the councils do not have a direct role in consulting the public on such matters. The Department does this directly through advertisement in local newspapers and by neighbour notification.

Planning Applications: Small Extensions

Mr Shannon asked the Minister of the Environment how many planning applications for small extensions to houses have been received for each of the last 3 years. (AQW 1165/01)

Mr Foster: Domestic extensions in Planning Service's database include Domestic Garages and Domestic Out-buildings, which include pigeon lofts.

Based on this definition, details of the number of 'Domestic Extensions' over the last 3 years are set out below:

Year	Extensions
1999	5,323
2000	4,853
2001	5,424
Total	15,600

Areas of Townscape Character

Mr McClarty asked the Minister of the Environment what steps he is taking to encourage the use of period detailing in the design of (i) new buildings and

(ii) replacement buildings in areas of unique townscape character. (AQW 1170/01)

Mr Foster: 'Areas of Townscape Character' are designated because they have an identifiable character which is distinguishable from surrounding development through a combination of historical context, urban grain, street pattern, building blocks, height and massing, architectural style, building lines, views, public space, patterns of movement, landscape, topography and the nature of uses and activities.

Architectural style is only one of the range of criteria associated with such designations. Therefore, the use of period detailing in a new proposal may not necessarily address the identified character of an Area of Townscape Character. It is also important to leave room for individual creative expression, and to address contemporary concerns in architecture.

While my Department does not wish to be too prescriptive about 'period detailing' in new and replacement proposals, it will continue to ensure that whatever particular character is identified in an Area of Townscape Character, will be reflected and enhanced in the consideration of development proposals.

High Visibility Sites

Mr McClarty asked the Minister of the Environment what plans he has to limit development and exploitation on high visibility sites in scenic locations. (AQW 1173/01)

Mr Foster: My Department is aware of the importance of protecting our scenic areas from inappropriate development, including visually prominent buildings, and has a number of policies in place to control such development and to protect such areas

'A Planning Strategy for Rural Northern Ireland' (PSRNI) is the main Policy Document for the control of development in the countryside. Policy DES 4, which relates to Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONBs), states that such areas are not only of high scenic quality but often of wildlife importance and rich in both cultural and architectural heritage. The objectives of an AONB designation are to conserve/enhance the natural beauty or amenity of the area and its wildlife, while ensuring that public access is provided. Countryside Assessments, which are produced as part of my Department's Development Plan process, assist in the consideration of each designated AONB to identify distinctive local landscape character types and their potential for protection, enhancement or limited development.

My Department has published the Northern Ireland Landscape Character Assessment 2000 which identified 130 landscape character areas throughout the region.

This document provides a valuable database to inform the development of planning policies in development plans.

Policy DES 5 of the PSRNI stipulates that planning permission will be granted for the erection of a building on a site which can be visually integrated into the landscape ensuring that it does not spoil any scenic aspect or detract from the visual appearance of the countryside. The policy does go on to state that a new building will not be acceptable if, when viewed from surrounding vantage points, it occupies a prominent, skyline or, top of slope/ridge location.

Vernacular Architecture: East Londonderry

Mr McClarty asked the Minister of the Environment what plans he has to promote vernacular architecture for tourism development within East Londonderry. (AQW 1174/01)

Mr Foster: Design principles for all types of development, including tourism-related developments, are set out in "A Planning Strategy for Rural Northern Ireland". This guidance relates to developments both in urban or rural settings. In the countryside generally and particularly in designated Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty, developers and architects are encouraged to design new buildings that respect, and where appropriate, reflect, the traditional architectural styles.

In addition, where appropriate, in towns, villages and the open countryside, my Department positively encourages the re-use of vernacular buildings for appropriate purposes, including those related to tourism, as a means of contributing to sustainable development and encouraging social and economic regeneration. Such buildings contribute directly to tourism, as they are suitable for renovation to self catering accommodation. Guidance on this matter is contained in Chapter 9 of Planning Policy Statement 6 'Planning and the Built Heritage'.

My Department's Environment and Heritage Service co-ordinates European Heritage Open Days – a Council of Europe initiative, which increases appreciation, and understanding of the built heritage through free-access visits to historic monuments and buildings throughout Northern Ireland. This has wide appeal for locals and tourists alike. As part of the programme for European Heritage Open Days 2002, the Environment and Heritage Service will be working with the Foyle Civic Trust to increase visitation to vernacular buildings within the East Londonderry area.

The Member will be aware that my Department has recently commenced work on the preparation of the Northern Area Plan. Any need to enhance existing policies, in response to particular local needs in the Plan Area, can be considered in the context of the new Plan.

Knockagh Road, Carrickfergus

Mr Hilditch asked the Minister of the Environment, pursuant to AQW 3034/00 and AQW 3035/00, to detail what progress has been made to stop illegal dumping on the Knockagh Road, Carrickfergus. (AQW 1198/01)

Mr Foster: Further to my previous replies, I can confirm that Planning officials have now sought the advice of the Environment & Heritage Service's Water Quality Unit, and the Department for Regional Development's Roads Service, in relation to the illegal dumping being carried out at the Knockagh Road, Carrickfergus.

Investigations have also been undertaken to establish the ownership of the land in question, and the whereabouts of the landowners.

Attempts to resolve the matter by negotiation and agreement have proved unsuccessful, and formal enforcement notices will be served on the landowners this week, requiring the removal of waste materials and the restoration of the site.

Cavehill Bowling and Lawn Tennis Club

Mr G Kelly asked the Minister of the Environment to detail any plans to erect a telecommunications mast on the grounds of Cavehill Bowling and Lawn Tennis Club, on the North Circular Road and 642-644 Antrim Road. (AQW 1207/01)

Mr Foster: My Department received an application for 'Prior Approval' determination on behalf of Hutchinson 3G UK Ltd on 2 November 2001, in respect of the erection of telecommunication apparatus at the Cavehill Bowling and Lawn Tennis Club. Prior approval was refused on 14 December 2001. My Department has received no further applications to date.

As regards 642-644 Antrim Road, Belfast, my Department received an application for 'Prior Approval' determination on behalf of BT Cellnet Ltd on 6 September 2001. My Department confirmed 'Prior approval' on 1 November 2001. My Department has received no further applications to date.

Special Protection Area

Mr K Robinson asked the Minister of the Environment if he has any plans to convene a meeting with interested groups around Larne Lough to review and discuss the future of its special protection areas (SPA); and to make a statement. (AQW 1208/01)

Mr Foster: I have no current plans to meet with interested groups concerning Larne Lough's designation as a Special Protection Area. I am aware that there has been a number of contacts in recent years between my

officials in Environment and Heritage Service and local groups including the Friends of Larne Lough, concerning a range of environmental matters.

I understand that my officials have found these meetings to be positive and helpful in fostering an awareness of the importance of the conservation interests at Larne Lough.

Badger Sett, Cloughey

Mrs I Robinson asked the Minister of the Environment, pursuant to AQW 866/01 and AQW 867/01, to detail how the Environment and Heritage Service intends to protect the badger sett. (AQW 1256/01)

Mr Foster: The badger sett on the development site at Cloughey is protected by Article 10 of the Wildlife (Northern Ireland) Order 1985. Under that Article, it is an offence to kill or injure a badger, or to disturb a badger whilst it is in its sett, or to damage, destroy or obstruct access to a badger sett.

Officials of the Environment and Heritage Service have informed the developer of his legal obligations and have suggested measures that he should take in order to comply with the law. These measures include the construction of a reinforced concrete deck which completely bridges the badger sett and is designed to carry all access traffic and services into the site. The measures also include a requirement that no development or disturbance of the ground surface take place within 25 metres of the badger sett entrances and that any fencing on site allows for passage of the badgers to and from their foraging areas.

EHS will monitor the development, but enforcement would be a matter for the Police Service.

Disposal of Cars

Mrs I Robinson asked the Minister of the Environment to detail (a) the relevant European legislation which will apply to the disposal of cars after 1 April 2002; and (b) any financial assistance available for local district councils to implement the new legislation. (AQW 1274/01)

Mr Foster: In relation to (a), the relevant European legislation is the EC End of Life Vehicles (ELV) Directive (2000/53/EC). The Directive aims to reduce the amount of waste arising from scrapped vehicles. All Member States are required to transpose the Directive into national legislation by 21 April 2002.

It is unlikely that the UK will be in a position to introduce legislation implementing the Directive by the due date. However, a public consultation has already taken place in Northern Ireland as part of the UK exercise carried out in August 2001.

In light of the responses to the consultation document, discussions are continuing within Whitehall, led by the Department of Trade and Industry, to determine the best legislative and implementation options. My officials are closely involved in those discussions, including the costs in implementing the Directive.

In relation to (b), I have no plans at present to provide any additional financial assistance to local district councils for this purpose. It is not expected that implementation of the Directive will impose any new obligations on District Councils. However, concerns have been expressed that, depending on final decisions on implementation, there could be an increase in abandoned cars that could lead to additional costs for Councils. It is also likely that the costs of disposal will increase. I will bear the funding issue in mind as implementation options and associated costs become clearer.

Disposal of Cars

Mrs I Robinson asked the Minister of the Environment to detail, by district council area, the number of cars which have been disposed of by local district councils in each year of the past 5 years. (AQW 1275/01)

Mr Foster: The information sought is not held centrally by my Department and therefore I am unable to provide the information requested.

Disposal of Abandoned Cars

Mrs I Robinson asked the Minister of the Environment to detail (a) the cost per unit that local district councils presently incur through the disposal of abandoned cars; and (b) the estimated future cost per unit following the implementation of new legislation on 1 April 2002. (AQW 1276/01)

Mr Foster: The information sought at (a) is not held centrally by my Department and therefore I am unable to provide the information requested.

In relation to (b), I refer the Member to the answer to AQW 1274/01. The future cost of disposal is unknown but it is likely to increase in relation to existing costs.

The legislation to implement the Directive will be subject to public consultation; this will include publication of a regulatory impact assessment that will address associated costs.

Disposal of Fridges and Freezers

Mrs I Robinson asked the Minister of the Environment, pursuant to AQWs 928/01, 929/01 and 930/01, to detail (a) the timescale for the publication of guidelines on the disposal of fridges and freezers for local district

councils in light of EC Regulations 2037/2000; and (b) if financial assistance will be provided to local district councils to comply with these regulations.

(AQW 1277/01)

Mr Foster:

- (a) My officials have prepared draft guidance on the storage of waste refrigeration units awaiting disposal. This guidance has now been issued to all Councils for consideration.
- (b) I am aware of the difficulties caused by the EC decision to extend the Regulation on Ozone Depleting Substances to the disposal of domestic refrigeration equipment.

I also appreciate that the necessary technology to deal with disposal, in line with the requirements of the Regulation, is not presently available anywhere in the UK or the Republic of Ireland. Storage is therefore the only short-term option. I am also aware that storage and disposal of these units will have operational and cost implications for District Councils.

My officials have been working to estimate the quantity of fridges involved and identify the likely additional financial burden which might be faced by the local authorities.

At this preliminary stage it is estimated that the number of units likely to be dealt with in Northern Ireland may be in the range of 60,000/80,000 per annum. This figure may change when more detailed information becomes available.

Unfortunately there are no specific funds earmarked for this purpose in the DOE budgets for this year or next. However I shall do all that I can to secure some financial assistance for Councils, bidding to DFP as necessary and taking account of the levels of assistance being made available in GB.

FINANCE AND PERSONNEL

Hospitality: December 2001

Mr Hilditch asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel to detail (a) the cost of and (b) to whom he is providing hospitality during the month of December 2001. (AQW 1066/01)

The Minister of Finance and Personnel (Dr Farren): A Christmas reception was hosted by the Minister of Finance and Personnel for Departmental officials and the invitation was extended to the Committee for Finance and Personnel. The total cost of the event was £735.

PEACE II Operational Programme

Mr Hussey asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel to detail the areas of responsibility for each of the Peace II intermediary funding bodies.

(AQW 1206/01)

Dr Farren: Under the PEACE II Operational Programme, 13 areas of activity in Northern Ireland and 3 areas of cross-border activity in Northern Ireland and the Border Region of Ireland have been identified for administration/management by IFBs. Overall IFBs will be responsible for almost £120 million of Programme funds.

The attached table details the Areas of Activity under the PEACE II Programme designated for delivery by IFBs, the amounts of money involved, and the organisations/consortia successful in the open tendering exercise.

Area of Activity	Indicative Budget (£m)	Organisation/Consortium
(A) Northern Ireland		
1. Childcare and Family Support	9.1	Northern Ireland and Pre-school Playgroups Association (NIPPA)
2. Victims and Survivors of Violence	6.7	Northern Ireland Voluntary Trust (NIVT), consortium with ICTU, Community Relations Council, Eastern, Southern, Western and Northern Health Board Trauma Advisory Panels
3. Educational Activities	15.0	Southern Education and Library Board, consortium with Youthnet, BELB, Council for Catholic Maintained Schools, Comhairle Na Gaelscolaíochta, Governing Bodies Association, NEELB, Northern Ireland Council for Integrated Education, NI Youth Forum, SEELB, WELB and Youth Council for Northern Ireland
4. Pathways to Inclusion, Integration and Reconciliation including groups or areas emerging from the conflict	6.0	Northern Ireland Voluntary Trust (NIVT), consortium with ICTU, Community Relations Training and Learning Consortium and Social Economy Agency
5. Developing Community Infrastructure	6.2	Northern Ireland Voluntary Trust (NIVT), consortium with Youthnet and Community Technical Aid
6. Promoting Active Citizenship	1.7	Northern Ireland Voluntary Trust (NIVT), consortium with Youthnet and Volunteer Development Agency
7. Women entering or progressing in the Labour Market	4.3	Training for Women Network

Area of Activity	Indicative Budget (£m)	Organisation/Consortium
8. Creating New Skills in the Modern Economy	5.2	PROTEUS
9. Bringing Self-sufficiency to the Playclub Initiative	3.0	Playboard
10. Adult Literacy and Numeracy; Pre-vocational and Early Vocational Training Activity	5.2	Educational Guidance Service for Adults
11. Innovative Vocational Training Activity for Disadvantaged Groups	0.9	PROTEUS
12. Rural Development	5.2	Rural Development Council, consortium with Rural Community Network
13. Reconciliation for Sustainable Peace	9.0	Community Relations Council
(B) Cross Border		
1. Increasing Cross-Border Economic Development Opportunities	13.6	Co-operation Ireland
2. Developing Cross-Border Reconciliation and Understanding	9.3	Combat Poverty Agency, consortium with NIVT, Area Development Management and Co-operation Ireland
3. Promoting Joint Approaches to Social, Education, Training and Human Resource Development	18.1	Area Development Management, consortium with Co-operation Ireland, Combat Poverty Agency and NIVT

Review of Government Office Accommodation

Mrs I Robinson asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel when he expects to receive the final report on the review of government office accommodation. (AQO 542/01)

Dr Farren: It is anticipated that the Consultant's Final Report will be submitted to the Department by the end of April 2002.

Public Accounts Committee/Comptroller and Auditor General

Mr Hamilton asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel if he has had occasion to request a Department to comply more fully with recommendations from the Public Accounts Committee or the Comptroller and Auditor General. (AQO 563/01)

Dr Farren: I can confirm that neither I or my predecessor has had to make such a request. My Officials work closely with those Departments that are the subject of PAC Reports to produce Memoranda of Reply. As part of that process they will have had occasion to request that Departments comply more fully with PAC recommendations than may have been envisaged. My Department will continue to ensure that PAC recommendations are addressed as fully as possible.

Needs and Effectiveness Review

Mr McMenamin asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel what progress has been made on the Needs and Effectiveness Review; and to make a statement. (AQO 582/01)

Dr Farren: The Executive agreed five evaluations for the review of expenditure covering the areas of Health and Personal Social Services, Education, Housing, Training and Vocational Education, and Financial Assistance to Industry. An additional needs and effectiveness evaluation covering the programmes of the Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure has also been initiated. My officials continue to work with colleagues in the Economic Policy Unit (OFMDFM) and relevant departments to examine needs and expenditure in Northern Ireland and the extent to which current policies are being delivered effectively. Final reports on the effectiveness evaluations are due by the end of May 2002.

HEALTH, SOCIAL SERVICES AND PUBLIC SAFETY

Food Standards Agency

Mrs I Robinson asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety, in relation to the Food Standards Agency tests on scallop fisheries for amnesic and diarrhetic shellfish poisoning, what assessment can she make in comparing her tests with those carried out in the UK and Europe. (AQW 1103/01)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety (Ms de Brún): The reference laboratory for marine biotoxins, the Fisheries Research Services (FRS) in Aberdeen, organises regular meetings of all laboratories

in Great Britain and here which undertake statutory testing for amnesic and diarrhetic shellfish poisoning. Part of the purpose of such meetings is to discuss the toxin test methods used, with the aim being to ensure a consistent approach to testing in Great Britain and here. As part of its duties, FRS also takes part in discussions on methodology at a European level.

Eagraíonn an tsaotharlann tagartha le haghaidh bitocsainí mara, na Seirbhísí Taighde Iascaigh STI in Obar Dheathain cruinnithe rialta gach saotharlainne sa Bhreatain Mhór agus anseo a thugann faoi tástáil reachtúil ar nimhiú aimnéiseach agus buinní iasc sliogach. Cuid de chuspóir na gcrúinnithe seo is ea modhanna tastála tocsaine a úsáidtear, a bhfuil sé mar aidhm acu chur chuige seasmhach i dtaobh tástála sa Bhreatain Mhór agus anseo. Mar chuid dá dhualgais glacann STI páirt i bplé ar mhodheolaíocht ar leibhéal Eorpach.

Ratio of Doctors per 100 Hospital Beds

Mr M Robinson asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what is the current ratio of doctors per 100 beds in NHS hospitals in each Health Board area. (AQW 1114/01)

Ms de Brún: The information requested is detailed in the table below.

RATIO OF DOCTORS¹ PER 100 HOSPITAL BEDS – MARCH 2001

Health Board	Doctors per 100 beds ²
Eastern	30.9
Northern	20.1
Southern	21.4
Western	20.6

¹ Figures include doctors working in Dental departments but exclude doctors working in the community.

² Total beds include beds in wards open overnight and beds reserved for day case admissions.

Tá an t-eolas a iarradh léirithe sa tábla thíos.

CÓIMHEAS DE DHOCHTÚIRÍ DE RÉIR 100 LEABA OTHARLAINNE – MÁRTA 2001

Bord Sláinte	Doctúirí an 100 leaba ²
Oirthear	30.9
Tuaisceart	20.1
Deisceart	21.4
Iarthar	20.6

¹ Clúdaíonn figiúirí doctúirí ag obair i rannóga déidliachta ach ní chlúdaíonn siad doctúirí ag obair sa phobal.

² Clúdaíonn leapacha san iomlán, leapacha i mbardaí oscailte thar oíche agus leapacha in áirithe d'iontrálacha lae.

Consultant Medical Workforce

Mr M Robinson asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what assessment she

has made in relation to the number of doctors training to meet future needs. (AQW 1116/01)

Ms de Brún: The Consultant medical workforce, across all hospital based specialties, is reviewed on an annual basis, which informs decisions on the numbers in training. The GP workforce has also been reviewed twice in the last five years.

Work is about to commence on a more comprehensive review of future medical workforce requirements. This review is expected to be completed this summer and will include an assessment of the training places required to meet service needs.

Déantar athbhreithniú ar bhonn bliantúil ar an mheitheal oibre míochaine Comhairleach, ar fud gach speisialtachta otharlannbhunaithe, a bhfuil tionchar aige ar chinní maidir leis an líon faoi oiliúint. Rinneadh athbhreithniú ar an mheitheal oibre GD dhá uair le cúig bliana anuas.

Táthar réidh le tús a chur le hathbhreithniú níos cuimsithí ar riachtanais mheitheal oibre míochaine ó seo amach. Táthar ag súil go mbeidh deireadh leis an athbhreithniú an samhradh seo agus mar chuid de déanfar measúnú ar áiteanna cuí oiliúna a bheidh de dhíth le freastal ar riachtanais sheirbhísí.

Residential Care Places

Mr M Robinson asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to outline (a) if there is a shortfall in the number of residential care places currently available for the elderly; and (b) if she plans to make additional resources available for more residential places. (AQW 1118/01)

Ms de Brún: I am advised that in overall terms there does not appear to be a shortfall in the number of residential places available for the elderly but I am aware that there are difficulties in some Board areas.

I know that care providers are under financial pressure and I have already indicated that I am sympathetic to the case made for increased funding. My Department is currently exploring ways in which this issue can be effectively addressed.

Cuireadh in iúl dom nár léir go raibh laghdú, i dtéarmaí iomlána, i líon na n-áiteanna cónaithe ar fáil do sheandaoine, ach tá a fhios agam go bhfuil deacrachtaí ann i roinnt ceantar Boird.

Tá a fhios agam go bhfuil soláthraithe cúraim faoi bhrú airgeadais agus chuir mé in iúl cheana fein go raibh mé báúil leis an iarracht chun níos mó maoinithe a fháil dóibh. Tá an Roinn s'agamsa ag scrúdú dóigheanna i láthair na huair lenar féidir tabhairt faoin cheist seo go héifeachtach.

A&E, Belfast City Hospital

Mr Hilditch asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to give her assessment of the A&E department at Belfast City Hospital in light of recent comments in the press. (AQW 1137/01)

Ms de Brún: I fully appreciate the recent serious pressures faced by the Accident and Emergency department of the Belfast City Hospital. These pressures are a reflection of the high levels of demand on health and social services at present.

Many of our hospitals find it very difficult to deal with peaks in demand because of the serious underfunding of health and social services over recent years.

Against this background, I expect Boards and Trusts to collaborate to ensure the safe and effective delivery of services and I know that the staff at Belfast City Hospital are working hard to achieve this.

Is maith a thuigim na brúnna tromchúiseacha le déanaí ar an roinn Timpistí agus Éigeandála in Otharlann Chathair Bhéal Feirste. Léiríonn na brúnna na hardleibhéil éilimh ar na seirbhísí sláinte agus sóisialta faoi láthair.

Tá deacracht ag cuid mhaith dár n-otharlanna deileáil le barr-éilimh mar gheall ar thearcmhaoiniú suntasach na seirbhísí sláinte agus sóisialta le blianta beaga anuas.

Sa chomhthéacs seo, tá mé ag dúil go gcomhoibreoidh Boird agus Iontaobhais le soláthar sabháilte agus éifeachtach seirbhísí a chinntiú agus tá a fhios agam go bhfuil an fhoireann in Otharlann Chathair Bhéal Feirste ag obair go dian leis seo a bhaint amach.

Young Peoples Centre

Mr M Robinson asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what specialist provision exists for the hospitalisation of young people experiencing mental health problems. (AQW 1149/01)

Ms de Brún: The Young Peoples Centre currently provides specialist provision for adolescents experiencing mental health problems. Young people can also be admitted to general adult psychiatric beds, based on clinical need.

Cuireann Ionad na nÓgánach soláthar ar leith d'ógánaigh ar fáil atá faoi thionchar fadhbanna sláinte meabhrach. Bunaithe ar riachtanas cliniciúil, is féidir le hógánaigh a ghlacadh isteach chuig leapacha síciatracha ginearálta aosacha.

Hearing Research

Mr Hussey asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety, pursuant to AQW 2520/00,

what assessment has she made in respect of the interim report on the trial in 20 hospital audiology departments in England on the provision of digital hearing aids by the Health Service. (AQW 1162/01)

Ms de Brún: Interim evaluation reports from the Institute of Hearing Research on the provision of digital hearing aids show that, based on small samples, people with digital hearing aids are reporting improvements in hearing, and that people with digital aids are wearing them more. This is encouraging news.

Taispeánann tuairiscí measúnaithe eatramhacha ón Institiúid um Thaidghe Éisteachta ar sholáthar áiseanna digiteacha éisteachta, bunaithe ar shamplaí beaga, go dtuairiscíonn daoine a chaitheann áiseanna éisteachta go bhfuil feabhas tagtha ar an éisteacht, agus go gcaitheann daoine, a bhfuil áiseanna digiteacha acu, níos minice iad. Is scéala spreagtha seo.

Free Nursing Care

Mr Shannon asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety if she has any plans to implement free nursing and personal care in line with that provided by the Scottish Executive. (AQW 1166/01)

Ms de Brún: As I have announced, it is my intention to introduce free nursing care in nursing homes here from October 2002, subject to the passage of the necessary legislation through the Assembly. In relation to personal care, the Executive has requested that an interdepartmental group be set up to examine the implications and costs of introducing free personal care here, taking account of the Scottish Care Development Group's report, which was published in September. The interdepartmental group will ensure a detailed and considered examination of this issue is undertaken, before fully informed decisions can be made.

Mar a d'fhógair mé, is é mo rún altranas saor in aisce a thabhairt isteach i dtithe altranais anseo ó Dheireadh Fómhair 2002, ag brath ar phasáiste reachtaíochta cuí tríd an Tionól. I dtaca le cúram phearsanta, d'iarr an Feidhmeannas go nbunófaí grúpa idir-roinne chun impleachtaí agus costais theacht isteach cúraim phearsanta atá saor in aisce anseo a scrúdú, ag cur san áireamh tuairisc Ghrúpa Forbartha Cúraim na hAlban, a foilsíodh i Mí Mhéan an Fhómhair. Cinnteoidh an Grúpa idir-roinne, go ndéanfar mionscrúdú agus mionmhacnamh ar an cheist, sular féidir cinní atá eolach go hiomlán a dhéanamh.

Winter Pressures

Mr Shannon asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what funding will be made

available to the Ulster Community and Hospitals HSS Trust to deal with winter pressures. (AQW 1167/01)

Ms de Brún: A total of £1.18 million has been allocated in the current financial year to the Ulster Community Hospitals Trust to help deal with winter pressures and strengthen community services.

Dáileadh suim £1.18 milliun sa bhliain airgeadais seo ar Iontaobhas Otharlanna Pobail Uladh le cuidiú leo deileáil le brúnna geimhrimh agus le seirbhísí pobail a neartú.

Analogue Hearing Aids

Mr Hussey asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety, pursuant to AQW 816/01, to indicate the types and cost per type of analogue hearing aids currently approved for provision by the Health Service. (AQW 1175/01)

Ms de Brún: There are 52 different types of analogue hearing aid currently available through the Health Service. The type of hearing aid provided depends on whether a person has a mild/moderate, moderate/severe, or severe/profound hearing loss. The cost per type of hearing aid ranges between £36.50 to £140.79.

Tá 52 sórt éagsúil áise analóige éisteachta ar fáil faoi láthair ar an tSeirbhís Sláinte. Braitheann an áis éisteachta a sholáthraítear ar cé acu atá lag-éisteacht éadrom/ mheasartha, mheasartha/ghéar, nó ghéar/iomlán ag duine nó nach bhfuil. Tá costas an sórt áise éisteachta sa réimse ó £36.50 go £140.79.

Healthy Lifestyles

Mr M Robinson asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety how she intends to promote healthy lifestyles to improve the future health of young people. (AQW 1196/01)

Ms de Brún: My Department will promote healthy lifestyles through the Executive's "Investing for Health" strategy which will be published shortly.

Within the "Investing for Health" framework, my Department will produce an action plan on tobacco and strategies on promoting mental health and teenage pregnancy and parenthood. It will also review current strategies on food and nutrition and physical activity and promote existing strategies on alcohol and drug misuse.

Cuirfidh an Roinn s'agam stíleanna maireachtála sláintiúla chun cinn trí straitéis an Fheidhmeannais "Infheistíocht sa tSláinte" a foilseofar gan mhoill.

Laistigh den chreatlach "Infheistíocht sa tSláinte" soláthróidh an Roinn s'agam plean gníomhaíochta ar thobac agus ar straitéisí ar shláinte meabhrach agus toircheas i ndéagóirí agus tuismíocht a chur chun cinn.

Déanfaidh sé athbhreithniú ar straitéisí faoi láthair ar bhia agus chothú agus ar ghníomhaíocht fhisiceach agus straitéisí faoi láthair ar alchól agus mí-úsáid drugaí a chur chun cinn.

Nursing Home Care: West Tyrone

Mr Hussey asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to make a statement in relation to the discharge of patients from hospital to nursing home care in West Tyrone. (AQW 1216/01)

Ms de Brún: I am advised that the Sperrin Lakeland Health and Social Services Trust, which covers West Tyrone, has experienced few problems placing people in nursing homes following their discharge from hospital. At present there are 2 patients in Tyrone County Hospital awaiting discharge and placement and the Trust is confident that these placements can be arranged.

Tugadh comhairle dom gur tearc fadhb a bhí ag Iontaobhas Sláinte agus Seirbhísí Sóisialta Thír Lochanna Speirín, a chlúdaíonn Tír Eoghain Thiar, ag fáil áiteanna do dhaoine i dtithe altranais a fháil i ndiaidh dóibh a scaoileadh amach ón otharlann. Faoi láthair tá 2 othar in Otharlann Thír Eoghain ag fanacht le scaoileadh amach agus áit a fháil agus tá an tIontaobhas muiníneach gur féidir na háiteanna a shocrú.

Referred Cancer Patients

Mr Hussey asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the percentage of referred cancer patients seen within 14 days in Northern Ireland in relation to Government targets.

(AQW 1217/01)

Ms de Brún: The targets referred to in this question relate only to breast cancer waiting times for urgent referrals by GPs for specialist outpatient appointments. During the quarter ending 20 September 2001, 95.9% of patients with suspected breast cancer were seen by a specialist in 14 days or less.

Ní bhaineann na spriocanna a ndéantar tagairt dóibh sa cheist seo ach le hamanna feithimh ailse cíche d'atreoruithe práinneacha ó Ghnáthdhochtúirí le haghaidh coinní speisialtóireachta éisoithair. Le linn na ráithe ag críochnú 20 Meán Fómhair 2001, chuaigh 95.9% d'othair a measadh go raibh ailse chíce orthu chuig saineolaí taobh istigh de 14 lá nó níos luaithe ná sin.

Private Nursing Home Care: West Tyrone

Mr Hussey asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what assessment she has made in relation to private nursing home care in West Tyrone. (AQW 1218/01)

Ms de Brún: At present there are 8 registered nursing homes in the Omagh and West Tyrone area. Most of these homes provide general nursing beds and 2 homes make provision for elderly mentally infirm residents. The Sperrin Lakeland Health and Social Services Trust has found this level of provision to be sufficient to deal with the present demand and has experienced no problems in relation to places for people with specific care needs.

Tá 8 teach altránais chláráithe i gceantar na hOmaí agus Thír Eoghain Thiar. Soláthraíonn an chuid is mó de na tithe seo leapacha ginearálta altránais agus cuireann 2 teach áiteanna do sheandhaoine a bhfuil tinneas meabhreach orthu ar fáil. Is leor leibhéil an tsoláthair seo de réir Iontaobhas Seirbhísí Sóisialta Thír Lochanna Speirín le deileáil leis an éileamh faoi láthair agus níor mhothaigh siad go raibh fadhbanna ann maidir le háiteanna do dhaoine le riachtanais chúraim ar leith.

Complaints: Clinical Treatment

Mr M Robinson asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail in each of the last 3 years (a) how many written complaints have been received in respect of clinical treatment in hospitals; and (b) how much has been paid out in settlements for clinical negligence claims by the health service.

(AQW 1226/01)

Ms de Brún:

(a) This information is detailed in the table below.

WRITTEN COMPLAINTS IN REGARD TO CLINICAL TREATMENT ⁽¹⁾ 1998/99 - 2000/01

1998/99	976
1999/00	1,029
2000/01	1,035

⁽¹⁾ These figures refer to complaints regarding clinical diagnosis, treatment and care (quality) and treatment and care (quantity).

(b) This information is detailed in the table below.

AMOUNTS PAID IN SETTLEMENTS FOR CLINICAL NEGLIGENCE CLAIMS, 1998/99 - 2000/01

1998/99	£12,286,000
1999/00	£4,859,000
2000/01	£9,409,000

It should be noted that not all written complaints in regard to clinical treatment, as defined here, will lead to claims for compensation, nor will all claims for compensation have been preceded by a written complaint.

(a) Tá an t-eolas seo léirithe sa tábla thíos.

GEARÁIN SCRÍOFA MAIDIR LE CÓIREÁIL CHLINICIÚIL ⁽¹⁾ 1998/99 - 2000/01

1998/99	976
1999/00	1,029
2000/01	1,035

⁽¹⁾ Tagraíonn na figiúirí seo do ghearáin maidir le diagnóis, cóireáil agus cúram (cáilíocht) agus cóireáil agus cúram (cainníocht) cliniciúil.

(b) Tá an t-eolas seo léirithe sa tábla thíos.

SUIMEANNA ÍOCTHA I SOCruithe FAOI CHOINNE ÉILIMH MAIDIR LE FAILLÍ CLINICIÚLA, 1998/99 - 2000/01

1998/99	£12,286,000
1999/00	£4,859,000
2000/01	£9,409,000

Ba chóir tabhairt faoi deara nach dtiontódh gach gearán scríofa maidir le cóireáil chliniciúil, mar atá curtha síos anseo, ina éileamh cúitimh, nó ní fíor le rá go dtiocfaidh gearán scríofa roimh gach éileamh cúitimh.

Lung Cancer

Mr M Robinson asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail how many people have contracted lung cancer through smoking in the last year for which figures are available.

(AQW 1227/01)

Ms de Brún: Information for the calendar year 1996 indicates that 850 people were diagnosed with lung cancer here. Information was available on the smoking habits of 586 of these people, and of these 552 (94.2%) were current or ex-smokers.

Tugann an t-eolas don bhliain iomlán 1996 le fios gur diagnósíodh 850 duine le hailse scamhóige anseo. Bhí eolas ar fáil ar nósanna caite tobac 586 de na daoine seo, agus orthu siúd ba chaiteoirí nó b'iarchaiteoirí tobac 552 (94.2%) iad.

Screening For Prostate Cancer

Mr M Robinson asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to outline (a) if she has any plans to introduce widespread screening for prostate cancer; and (b) the age screening would begin.

(AQW 1229/01)

Ms de Brún: I refer the member to my answer to AQW 2344/00.

Treoraím an ball do mo fhreagra ar AQW 2344/00.

Waiting Time: Lung Cancer Surgery

Mr M Robinson asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what is the average waiting time for lung cancer surgery in each HSS Trust.

(AQW 1230/01)

Ms de Brún: Currently the Royal Group of Hospitals Trust is the only Trust here which carries out lung cancer surgery. Waiting time for surgery ranges from 4 to 8 weeks.

Is é Iontaobhas an Ghrúpa Ríoga Otharlann an t-aon Iontaobhas anseo faoi láthair a dhéanann máinliacht ar ailse scamhóige. Bíonn agaí feithimh faoi choinne máinliachta idir 4 agus 8 seachtain.

Private Health Care Providers

Mr Hussey asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the role of private health care providers in the Health Service.

(AQW 1231/01)

Ms de Brún: The major role for private health care providers in the health service is currently in the provision of private nursing home facilities. There are 266 private nursing homes, providing almost 9400 places for HPSS users. Just under 90% of those focus on general nursing care for the elderly. The remainder meet more specific needs for groups such as the elderly mentally infirm or those with learning disabilities.

In terms of hospital services, the local private sector is very small but, in working to reduce waiting lists, the HPSS makes good use of private capacity here and in other centres such as Glasgow and Dublin. There is a need, however, to consider the impact of this on the overall resources available.

Is é an ról mór atá ag soláthraithe cúram sláinte faoi láthair sa tseirbhís sláinte ná an ról i soláthar áiseanna tithe altranais príobháideacha. Tá 266 teach altranais príobháideach a chuireann 9400 áit ar fáil d'úsáideoirí SSSP. Tá ag tarraingt ar 90% acu siúd ag díriú ar chúram ginearálta altranais do sheandaoine. Tá sainriachtanais ar an fhuilleach amhail seandaoine a bhfuil tinneas meabhrach orthu nó na daoine sin atá faoi mhíchumas foghlama.

Maidir le seirbhísí otharlainne, tá an earraí phríobháideach áitiúil iontach beag, ach tríd an obair chun liostaí feithimh a laghdú baineann na SSSP úsáid mhaith as acmhainn phríobháideach anseo agus in ionaid eile amhail Glaschú agus Baile Átha Cliath. Tá gá ann áfach leis an tionchar seo a mheas ar na háiseanna ar fad atá ar fáil.

Central Register: Recording Assaults

Mr Davis asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety if she would consider keeping a

central register to record assaults and injuries sustained by staff which are not recorded by the NI Police Service in (a) A&E Departments; and (b) children's homes.

(AQW 1242/01)

Ms de Brún: There are no plans for introducing a central register for recording assaults on and injuries sustained by staff in the HPSS. Each employing authority already has mechanisms in place for the recording of accidents and untoward incidents, including assaults on staff, which may or may not result in personal injury.

All such records in children's homes are subject to monitoring and inspection by the independent visitor appointed by the authority responsible for the home and by the relevant Health and Social Services Board's Registration and Inspection Unit.

Níl sé beartaithe clár lárnach do chlárú ionsaithe agus gortuithe ar fhoireann na SSSP a thabhairt isteach. Tá gnáthaimh i bhfeidhm ag gach údarás fostaíochta cheana féin do chlárú timpistí agus timpistí as an tslí, chomh maith le hionsaithe ar an fhoireann, ar féidir gortú pearsanta teacht astu nó nach féidir.

Tá a leithéid de chlár go léir i dtithe páistí faoi réir monatóireachta agus cigireachta ag an chuairteoir neamhspleách ceaptha ag an údarás atá freagrach as an teach agus ag Ionad Cláraithe agus Cigireachta an Bhoird chuí Shláinte agus Sheirbhísí Sóisialta.

Royal Victoria Hospital General Fund

Rev Robert Coulter asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to confirm (a) the current position and purpose of the Royal Victoria Hospital Endowment Fund; and (b) that the fund will finance research fellowships.

(AQW 1243/01)

Ms de Brún: The Royal Victoria Hospital General Fund was established to enhance patient welfare and to provide for clinical research.

The balance of the fund at the close of the last financial year was £1,932,047. The fund has been used to support research fellowships and will continue to do so.

Bunaíodh Ciste Ginearálta Otharlann Ríoga Vichteoiria le feabhas a chur ar leas an othair agus le taighde cliniciúil a sholáthar.

Is é fuilleach an chiste ag deireadh na bliana airgeadais anuraidh ná £1,932,047. Baineadh úsáid as an chiste chun tacú le comhaltachtaí taighde agus leanfar leis seo.

Cancer Services: Belfast City Hospital

Mr Weir asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety when the new unit for cancer

services in the Belfast City Hospital will be complete and operational. (AQW 1244/01)

Ms de Brún: The completion and operational dates cannot be specified at this time. The business case for the Regional Cancer Centre has recently been approved by the Department of Finance and Personnel. My officials are working closely with the Belfast City Hospital Trust to conclude the PPP process and determine the funding and timetable of the project.

Ní féidir dátaí críochnaithe agus dátaí oibríochtúla a léiriú ag an am seo. Cheadaigh An Roinn Airgeadais agus Pearsanra cás gnó an Ionaid Ailse Reigiúnaigh ar na mallaibh. Tá m'oifigigh ag obair go dlúth leis an Iontaobhas Otharlann Chathair Bhéal Feirste le deireadh a chur leis an phróiseas PPP agus maoiniú agus clár ama an tionscadail a chinntiú.

Nursing Careers

Mr M Robinson asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the steps which she has taken to make nursing a more attractive career option. (AQW 1247/01)

Ms de Brún: The level of interest in nursing as a career option has remained consistently high over a number of years. Queen's University received a total of 1588 requests for application packs for the September 2001 intake of student nurses. 1362 applications were returned for the 372 places available. 186 offers have already been made for the March 2002 intake of 200 students. The University of Ulster received 347 applications for the September 2001 student intake, 260 applicants met the minimum entry criteria and the commissioned intake of 150 places was met in full.

From 1 April 2002 nursing staff in general will receive a pay increase of at least 3.6%. For Nursing Auxiliaries pay will be increased by up to 4.3% with further incentives to achieve NVQ qualifications and progress their careers. For Nurse Consultants increases worth up to 6.6% will be made to reflect their new responsibilities. In addition, stand-by and on-call allowances will be increased by 50% with Psychiatric Lead and Regional Secure Allowances increasing by 32%.

There are significant opportunities for continuing professional development and extension of roles for nurses within the HPSS and my Department provides substantial funding to support them.

Bhí an leibhéal suime in altranais mar shlí bheatha ard go seasta thar tréimhse roinnt blianta. Fuair Ollscoil na Banríona 1588 iarratas san iomlán le haghaidh pacáistí iarratais do ghlacadh isteach ábhar altraí i Meán Fómhair 2001. Fuarthas 1362 iarratas ar ais do na 372 áit ar fáil. Tairgeadh 186 áit cheana féin den ghlacadh isteach 200 mac léinn i Márta 2002. Fuair Ollscoil Uladh 347 iarratas do ghlacadh isteach mac

léinn i Meán Fómhair 2001, chomhlíon 260 iarrthóir na híoschritéir iontrála agus líonadh go hiomlán an glacadh isteach coimisiúnaithe de 150 áit do mhic léinn.

Ó 1 Aibreán 2002, tiocfaidh méadú 3.6% ar a laghad ar phá na foirne altrachta i gcoitinne. Tiocfaidh méadú 4.3% ar phá Chúntóirí Altrachta, agus spreagar iad a thuilleadh chun cáilíochtaí NVQ a bhaint amach agus chun a slite beatha a chur chun cinn. Tiocfaidh méadú suas go 6.6% ar phá Chomhairleoirí Altrachta de réir a bhfreagrachtaí nua. Ina theannta sin, tiocfaidh méadú 50% ar liúntais na foirne ar aire agus ar dualgas agus méadófar Liúntais na Sábháilteachta Réigiúnaí agus Priomhliúntais Shíciatrachta faoi 32%.

Tá deiseanna maithe ann anois le haghaidh forbartha leanúnaí gairmiúla agus do mhéadú i rólanna altraí laistigh de na SSSP, agus tugann an Roinn s'agamsa maoiniú tábhachtach chun tacú leo.

Numbers of Residential and Nursing Homes

Mr M Robinson asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the number of (a) private residential homes; (b) private nursing homes; and (c) local authority residential homes, in each Trust area. (AQW 1249/01)

Ms de Brún: This information is detailed in the table below. These figures are also published in the annual Community Statistics publication, which is available in the Assembly Library and on my Department's website.

NUMBERS OF RESIDENTIAL AND NURSING HOMES BY TRUST, AT 31 MARCH 2001

	Private ⁽¹⁾ residential homes ⁽²⁾	Private Nursing homes ⁽²⁾	Statutory residential homes
Trust			
Armagh & Dungannon	33	19	2
Causeway	26	13	4
Craigavon & Banbridge	18	14	7
Down Lisburn	33	29	16
Foyle	18	18	12
Homefirst	42	53	19
Newry & Mourne	15	15	6
North & West Belfast	12	24	11
South & East Belfast	33	30	15
Sperrin Lakeland	43	20	9
Ulster Community & Hospitals	31	31	9
Total	304	266	110

⁽¹⁾ Includes voluntary, private and dual registered homes

⁽²⁾ Dual registered homes will be included in the totals for both private residential and

Tá an t-eolas seo léirithe sa tábla thíos. Foilsíodh na figiúirí san fhoilseachán bliantúil Staitisticí Pobail, atá

ar fáil i Leabharlann an Tionóil agus ar líonláithreán na Roinne s'agam.

LÍON TITHE CÓNAITHE AGUS ALTRANAIS DE RÉIR IONTAOBHAIS, AG 31 MÁRTA 2001

	Cónaithe ⁽¹⁾ príobháideach tithe ⁽²⁾	Altranais Príobháideach tithe ⁽²⁾	Reachtúil Tithe cónaithe
Iontaobhas			
Ard Mhacha & Dún Geanainn	33	19	2
An Clochán	26	13	4
Craigavon & Droichead na Banna	18	14	7
An Dún/Lios na gCearrbhach	33	29	16
An Feabhal	18	18	12
Homefirst	42	53	19
An tIúr agus an Mhúrn	15	15	6
Béal Feirste Thuaidh & Thiar	12	24	11
Béal Feirste Theas & Thoir	33	30	15
Speirín Tír na Lochanna	43	20	9
Pobal Uladh & Otharlanna	31	31	9
Iomlán	304	266	110

⁽¹⁾ Tithe deonacha, tithe príobháideacha agus tithe déchláraithe san áireamh

⁽²⁾ Cuirfear tithe déchláraithe san áireamh sna hiomláin do thithe cónaithe príobháideacha agus do thithe altranais príobháideacha araon.

PAM Commissioning Officer: SHSSB

Mr Berry asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what plans are in place to provide a full-time PAM (Professions Allies to Medicine) Commissioner for the Southern Health Board.

(AQW 1270/01)

Ms de Brún: The Southern Health and Social Services Board are planning to appoint a part-time PAM Commissioning Officer. It is intended that this post will be filled by seconding a part-time officer to work at the Board 3 days a week. The Board consider that a part-time appointment will be appropriate. This secondment is due to be advertised within the next few weeks.

Tá Bord Sláinte agus Seirbhísí Sóisialta an Deiscirt ag pleanáil Oifigeach Coimisiúnaithe GBM a cheapadh. Tá sé beartaithe an post seo a líonadh trí oifigeach páirtaimseartha a fháil ar iasacht chun obair ag an

Bhord 3 lá sa tseachtain. Is é barúil an Bhoird gur cuí ceapachán páirtaimseartha. Tá an post le fógartar taobh istigh den chéad chúpla seachtain eile.

Personal and Nursing Care

Mr McCarthy asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety, in light of the Minister of Finance and Personnel's statement of 3 December 2001, to outline her Department's definition of 'personal care' and 'nursing care'. (AQO 555/01)

Ms de Brún: It is intended that 'nursing care' for the purpose of free nursing care will be defined in the draft legislation making provision for it. The English, Scottish and Welsh Acts provide that care delivered by a by a registered nurse will be paid for by the health service. Provision is also made that the cost of planning, supervising or delegating of care tasks to other care staff, by a registered nurse qualify for payment by the health service.

There is not at present a standard definition of 'personal care'. The inter-departmental group on personal care, which has been established at the request of the Executive to examine the costs and implications of introducing free personal care, will need to define 'personal care' for this purpose.

Tá sé i gceist go sainmhíneofar 'cúram altranais' le haghaidh chúram altranais saor in aisce sa dréacht-reachtaíocht a dhéanfaidh foráil dó. Forálann Achtanna Shasana, na hAlban agus na Breataine Bige go n-íocann an tseirbhís sláinte as cúram a sholáthraíonn altra cláraithe. Tá foráil ann fosta go n-íocann an tseirbhís sláinte as costas pleanála, maoirseachta agus tarmligeán tascanna cúraim chuig foireann cúraim eile ag altra cláraithe.

Níl sainmhíniú caighdeánach ann faoi láthair ar cad is 'cúram pearsanta' ann. Caithfidh an grúpa idir-rannach ar chúram pearsanta, grúpa a bunaíodh ar iarratas ón Choiste Feidhmiúcháin le costais agus impleachtaí thabhairt isteach cúraim phearsanta a iniúchadh, 'cúram pearsanta' a shainmhíniú chun na críche seo.

Additional Resources

Mr Shannon asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety, taking into consideration the additional funding provided to the Health Service, to give her assessment as to whether this will enable existing waiting lists to be eradicated. (AQO 580/01)

Ms de Brún: The additional resources earmarked for health and social services are very welcome and will help to address some of the most pressing, immediate difficulties facing the service. However, the underlying problem is one of service capacity and it will require a

sustained increase in funding over a number of years to resolve the waiting problem.

Fáiltítear roimh na hacmhainní breise a cuireadh in áirithe do shláinte agus do sheirbhísí sóisialta agus cuideoidh siad le aghaidh a thabhairt ar na deacrachtaí is práinní atá ag an tseirbhís. Is í an fhadhb bhunúsach, áfach, ná cumas na seirbhíse, agus caithfear an maoiniú a ardú go marthanach thar roinnt blianta leis an liostaí feithimh a laghdú.

Domestic Violence

Mr K Robinson asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety how much money has been allocated by her department to tackle the problems associated with domestic violence; and to make a statement. (AQO 545/01)

Ms de Brún: Domestic violence and its consequences are catered for through a range of health and social services provision and it is not possible to identify the costs separately. My Department also supports the work of the Women's Aid Federation on an annual basis. In 2001/02, this support will amount to £181,306 for the work being done by the Women's Aid Federation to assist women and children who are sufferers of domestic violence.

Soláthraítear don fhoréigean baile agus a iarmhairtí trí réimse de sheirbhísí sláinte agus sóisialta agus ní féidir na costais a shainiú ar leithligh. Tacaíonn mo Roinn fosta leis an Women's Aid Federation ar bhonn bliantúil. In 2001/2002 gheobhaidh an Women's Aid Federation tacaíocht de £181,306 (céad ochtó is a haon míle, trí chéad is a sé) phunta don obair a dhéanann siad le cuidiú le mná agus páistí a fhulaingíonn foréigean baile.

Additional Money

Mr Davis asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what steps is she taking to ensure that the additional money she has received in the pre-budget statement will be used directly on patient care and not on administration. (AQO 565/01)

Ms de Brún: I have already indicated where, in broad terms, that money will be going and some elements have been reflected in the new Programme for Government: the detailed allocation will be fully spelt out in my Priorities for Action in 2002-03 within the next couple of months. I can assure the Member that all the money will be directed to those areas where, in my judgement, it can be of most benefit to service users.

Chuir mé síos tríd is tríd ar cá rachaidh an t-airgead sin agus tá codanna de le léamh sa Chlár nua do Rialtas: déanfar na sonraí leithdháilte a leagan amach go hiomlán i mo Thosaíochtaí do Ghníomhaíocht in

2002-03 faoi cheann cúpla mí. Dearbhaím don Chomhalta go ndíreofar an t-airgead uilig ar na réimsí sin is dóigh liomsa is fearr a rachaidh chun leasa úsáideoirí seirbhíse.

Quality and Fairness - A Health System For You

Mr McElduff asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what assessment has she made on the extent of proposed north-south co-operation outlined in the Department of Health and Children report entitled 'Quality and Fairness - A Health System For You'. (AQO 584/01)

Ms de Brún: I welcome the recognition in the document of the all-Ireland dimension for tackling ill-health and specifically for improving co-operation in the areas identified under the Good Friday Agreement and as outlined in my statement to the Assembly, on 3rd December 2001, following the recent NSMC meeting on Food Safety and Health. I very much look forward to developing joint working in these areas, and to considering other areas where co-operation could yield mutual benefits for the people of Ireland, North and South.

Is maith liom go n-aithnítear sa cháipéis go bhfuil gné uile-Éireann ann i dtabhairt faoi dhrochshláinte agus go háirithe ar feabhas a chur ar an chomhoibriú sna réimsí a sainíodh i gComhaontú Aoine an Chéasta agus mar a leagadh amach i mo ráiteas don Tionól an 3 Nollaig 2001 i ndiaidh chruinniú na Comhairle Aireachta Thuaidh/Theas le gairid ar Shábháilteacht Bia agus Sláinte. Tá mé ag dúil go mór le comhoibriú a fhorbairt sna réimsí sin agus le féachaint ar réimsí eile ina rachadh comhoibriú chun comhthairbhe do mhuintir na hÉireann, Thuaidh agus Theas.

Increase in Resources

Mr A Maginness asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the total increase in resources she has received since 1999. (AQO 587/01)

Ms de Brún: I inherited a baseline for the 2000-01 financial year of £2,031 million. As a result of allocations in successive Monitoring rounds, through the Agenda for Government, and from the Chancellor's March 2000 Budget, my Department's control total eventually reached £2,157 million.

The baseline for the current financial year was set, on the new resource basis, at £2,294 million. As a result of the June and September Monitoring decisions, allocations from the Executive Programme Funds and an in-year addition of £8 million announced in the Revised Budget debate, my Department has received

an additional £72 million, bringing the total 2001-02 provision up to some £2,366 million.

My Department's indicative baseline for 2002-03 was £2,456 million. The Revised Budget will increase that to £2,527.7 million. This uplift of £72 million contrasts sharply, however, with the bid for an additional £128 million which I put forward for 2002-03.

In considering all these figures, it is worth remembering that in-year additions, welcome as they are, are no substitute for longer term baseline provision against which the Service can plan with assurance.

Fuair mé le hoidhreacht bonnlíne de £2,031 (dhá mhíle tríocha is a haon mhíliún) don bhliain airgeadais 2000-01. De bharr leithdháilte i mbabhtáí Monatóireachta leanúnacha, shroich bonnlíne rialaithe mo Roinne tríd an Chlár Oibre do Rialtas agus ó Bhuiséad Mháirta 2000 an tSainsilára iomlán de £2,157 (dhá mhíle céad caoga is a seacht) milliún.

Leagadh amach an bhonnlíne don bhliain airgeadais reatha, ar an bhonn acmhainne nua, ag £2,294 (dhá mhíle dhá chéad nócha is a ceithre) mhíliún. De thoradh chinntí Monatóireachta an Mheithimh agus Mheán Fómhair, leithdháilte ó Chistí Chlár an Choiste Feidhmiúcháin agus breis inbhliana de £8 milliún a fógraíodh sa díospóireacht ar an Bhuiséad Athbheithnithe, fuair mo Roinn £72 (seachtó is a dó) mhíliún breise, a d'ardaigh soláthar iomlán na bliana 2001-02 go £2,366 (dhá mhíle trí chéad seasca is a sé) mhíliún.

Ba £2,456 (dhá mhíle ceithre chéad caoga is a sé) mhíliún bonnlíne tháscach mo Roinne do 2002-03. Ardóidh an Buiséad Athbheithnithe é sin go £2,527.7 (dhá mhíle cúig chéad fiche is a seacht pointe a seacht) milliún. Is géar an chodarsnacht áfach idir an t-ardú sin de £72 (seachtó is a dó) mhíliún agus an tairiscint ar £128 (céad fiche is a hocht) milliún breise a rinne mé do 2002-03.

Agus na figiúirí sin uilig á mbreithniú, is fiú cuimhneamh nach ionann breiseanna inbhliana, siúd is go bhfáiltítear rompu, agus soláthar bonnlíne do théarma níos faide lenar féidir leis an tSeirbhís pleanáil go muiníneach ina choinne.

Fire Fighters: Part-Time to Full-Time

Mr Dallat asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to state the number of part-time fire fighters who have transferred successfully to full-time posts in the last 5 years. (AQO 567/01)

Ms de Brún: It is not possible for part-time fire fighters to transfer directly into the full time ranks, as this would contravene fair employment legislation. Part time firefighters wishing to become full time must

therefore follow the same selection procedure as any other person applying to join the fire service.

Over the past five years, 30 part time fire fighters were successful in their applications to become full time fire fighters and this represents over a quarter of the total number of full time fire fighters appointed.

Ní féidir le trodaithe dóiteáin páirtaimseartha aistriú go díreach isteach sna haicmí lánaimseartha, mar go sáródh sé sin an reachtaíocht fostaíochta cothroime. Caithfidh trodaithe dóiteáin páirtaimseartha mar sin ar mian leo obair go lánaimseartha an nós imeachta roghnaithe céanna a leanúint agus a leanann aon duine eile a chuireann iarratas isteach chuig an tSeirbhís Dóiteáin.

Le cúig bliana anuas, d'éirigh le 30 trodaí dóiteáin ina n-iarratais le bheith ina dtrodaithe dóiteáin lánaimseartha agus is ionann sin agus breis is an ceathrú cuid de líon iomlán na dtrodaithe dóiteáin lánaimseartha a ceapadh.

Relocation Payments: Consultants

Mr A Doherty asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety if any relocation payment would be made to consultants, should services they provide be moved to a different hospital. (AQO 576/01)

Ms de Brún: Arrangements exist which require employers to provide assistance with removal and other expenses where employees are required to transfer to a new headquarters. Should a consultant have to travel a greater distance or move house as a result of services being moved to another hospital, then the employing Trust or Board would be required to provide assistance with travel or removal expenses.

Tá socruithe i bhfeidhm a éilíonn ar fhostóirí cúnamh a sholáthar le haistriú agus le costais eile i gcás ina mbíonn ar fhostaithe aistriú go ceannáras nua. I gcás ina mbíonn ar shainchomhairleoir taisteal níos faide nó teach a athrú de bharr seirbhísí a bheith á n-aistriú go hospidéal eile ansin bheadh ar an Iontaobhas nó ar an Bhord fostaíochta cúnamh a sholáthar le costais taistil nó aistrithe.

European Working Time Directive

Mr McFarland asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what steps she is taking to implement the European Working Time Directive in relation to junior doctors. (AQO 578/01)

Ms de Brún: The provisions of the European Working Time Directive in relation to junior doctors are to be implemented in a series of phased stages between 18 May 2000 and 18 May 2009, with possible extensions being available to May 2012. My Department has established an Implementation Support Group on

Improving Junior Doctors' Working Lives in partnership with the BMA Junior Doctors' Committee, to assist HSS Trusts in meeting the targets of the Directive.

In the early years of implementation, the Directive closely matches the provisions of the New Deal on Junior Doctors' Hours which was introduced by my Department in 1991. The initial targets, which meet fully the transpositional phases of the Directive, have been established as follows:

- (i) To ensure that all Pre-Registration House Officer posts are fully compliant with the interim hours (maximum 56 actual hours per week) and rest requirements of the New Deal by August 2002; and
- (ii) To ensure that all other junior doctor posts are fully compliant with their targets by August 2003.

Feidhmeofar forálacha na Treorach Eorpaí um Uaire Oibre maidir le dochtúirí sóisearacha i sraith céimeanna céimithe idir 18 Bealtaine 2000 agus 18 Bealtaine 2009, agus d'fhéadfadh síniú a bheith ar fáil go Bealtaine 2012. Bhunaigh mo Roinn Grúpa Taca Feidhmithe ar Fheabhas a Chur ar Shaol Oibre Dochtúirí Sóisearacha i gcomhar le Coiste na nDochtúirí Sóisearacha de chuid an BMA le cuidiú le hIontaobhais SSS le spriocanna na Treorach a chomhlíonadh.

I mblianta tosaigh an fheidhmithe tagann an Treoir go dlúth le forálacha an tSocraithe Nua d'Uaire Dochtúirí Sóisearacha a thug mo Roinnse isteach i 1991. Tá na chéad spriocanna, a chomhlíonann go hiomlán céimeanna aistrithe na Treorach bunaithe, mar seo a leanas:

- (i) lena chinntiú go gcomhlíonann gach post Oifigeach Tí RéamhChláráithe go hiomlán uaire idirthréimhseach (uasmhéid 56 uair sa tseachtain) agus riachtanais scíthe an tSocraithe Nua faoi Lúnasa 2002; agus
- (ii) lena chinntiú go bhfuil gach post eile dochtúir shóisearaigh ag comhlíonadh a spriocanna faoi Lúnasa 2003.

Prescription Drugs

Mr McMenamin asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what proportion of her budget is spent on prescription drugs.

(AQO 579/01)

Ms de Brún: The amount earmarked to be spent on prescription drugs in primary care in the financial year 2001/02 is £264 million, which represents 11.2% of my total budget.

Is é £264 (dhá chéad seasca is a ceithre) mhilliún an méid a cuireadh in áirithe le caitheamh ar dhrugaí oidis sa phríomhchúram sa bhliain airgeadais 2001/02; is ionann sin agus 11.2% (aon déag pointe is a dó faoin chéad) de mo bhuiséadsa.

Pre-Employment Consultancy Service

Ms Lewsley asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to provide an update on steps she is taking to promote the use of the Pre-Employment Consultancy Service (PECS).

(AQO 557/01)

Ms de Brún: My Department has written to every existing user of the Pre-Employment Consultancy Service reminding them of the need to refer to the Department the names of all individuals who are considered unsuitable to work with children, and who meet the criteria for inclusion on the PECS register.

In addition a PECS Working Group has been established to develop an awareness raising strategy which will be aimed at users of PECS, but also at parents and children themselves. The Working Group includes representatives from Education, Social Services, NIO, NSPCC and Barnardos. The awareness strategy will, of course, need to take account of developments in relation to the Protection of Children & Vulnerable Adults Bill which is due to be introduced in the Assembly during this Session.

A review of the guidelines and documentation which underpin PECS is also being carried out. The aim of the review is to establish if the system can be simplified in any way to make it easier to use.

Scríobh mo Roinn chuig gach úsáideoir den tSeirbhís Chomhairliúcháin Réamhfhostaíochta ag cur i gcuimhne dóibh gur gá cur chuig an Roinn ainmneacha na ndaoine sin uilig a mheastar a bheith mí-oiriúnach le hobair le páistí agus a chomhlíonann na critéir le háireamh ar Chlár PECS.

Lena chois sin, bunaíodh Grúpa Oibre PECS le straitéis ardaithe feasachta a fhorbairt a bheidh dírithe ar úsáideoirí PECS agus ar pháistí agus ar thuismitheoirí fosta. Sa Ghrúpa Oibre tá iondaithe ó Oideachas, Seirbhísí Sóisialta, Oifig Thuaisceart Éireann, NSPCC agus Bernados. Ar ndóigh, tabharfaidh an straitéis feasachta aird ar fhorbairtí maidir leis an Bhille um Chosaint Leanaí agus Aosach Leochaileach atá le tabhairt os comhair an Tionóil le linn an tSeisiúin seo.

Tá athbhreithniú á dhéanamh fosta ar na treoirlínte agus ar an cháipéiseacht is bonn le PECS. Is é aidhm an athbhreithnithe féachaint an bhféadfaí an córas a shimpliú in aon tslí a dhéanadh níos fusa é ó thaobh úsáide.

Treatment of Road Accident Casualties

Mrs Nelis asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the costs to the health

service of the treatment of road accident casualties over the past three years; and to make a statement.

(AQO 544/01)

Ms de Brún: The information requested is not available.

Níl fáil ar an eolas a iarradh.

Executive Projects: Increase Funding

Mr M Murphy asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety if funding was diverted from the Southern Board to increase spending on Executive projects and away from mainstream services.

(AQO 574/01)

Ms de Brún: Executive Programme Funds allocations are additional to the funding provided under the standard budgetary procedures. There is no question of the Southern, or any other Area Board, being required to divert resources in order to take forward EPF projects.

Tá Cistí Chlár an Choiste Feidhmiúcháin sa bhreis ar an mhaoiniú a sholáthraítear faoi na nósanna imeachta caighdeánacha buiséid. Níl sé i gceist ar chor ar bith go mbeadh ar Bhord an Deiscirt ná ar aon Bhord Ceantair eile acmhainní a aistriú le tionscadail an Chláir a chur chun cinn.

Distribution of Health Resources

Mr O'Neill asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety how she will ensure that the distribution of health resources will be on the basis of need rather than in relation to which Trust has the largest deficit from the previous year. (AQO 591/01)

Ms de Brún: The Department allocates funding to the Health and Social Services Boards using a capitation formula which is designed to allocate resources fairly between Boards taking account of differential need. Boards are then responsible for funding Trusts to meet the costs of the services they provide. In fulfilling that responsibility they endeavour to ensure, as far as possible, that their resources are deployed equitably across the populations.

Under the revised resource accounting and budgeting regime all Trusts have to break even in year, and to take steps, where costs are forecast to exceed income, to achieve financial balance. At the end of the last financial year the Assembly provided on a one off basis, additional monies to address the historic deficits that had arisen due to the inadequate funding made available to the HPSS under previous administrations. These have now been effectively addressed and robust financial monitoring arrangements have been put in place to ensure as far as possible that Trusts live within the resources available.

Leithdháileann an Roinn maoiniú do Bhoird Sláinte agus Seirbhísí Sóisialta trí foirmle caipitíochta a ceapadh le hacmhainní a leithdháileadh go cothrom ar Bhoird, ag cur riachtanas difreálach san áireamh. Tá na Boird freagrach ansin as maoiniú a dhéanamh ar Iontaobhais le freastal ar chostais na seirbhísí a sholáthraíonn siad. Agus iad ag comhlíonadh na bhfreagrachtaí sin, déanfaidh siad a ndícheall le cinntiú go n-imscartar a gcuid acmhainní go cothrom thar daonraí.

Faoi na chéad athbhreithnithe cuntasáíochta acmhainní agus buiséid caithfidh gach Iontaobhas a bheith ar chóimheá sa bhliain agus céimeanna a ghlacadh má deirtear roimh ré go rachaidh costais thar ioncam le cóimheá airgeadais a bhaint amach. Ag deireadh na bliana deiridh airgeadais sholáthair an Tionól ar bhonn aon uaine breis airgeadais le aghaidh a thabhairt ar na heasnamh stairiúla a bhí ann cionnas nár cuireadh go leor maoiniú ar fáil do SSSP faoi riaracháin roimhe seo. Tá aghaidh anois tugtha orthu sin, agus cuireadh socruithe airgeadais láidre i bhfeidhm lena chinntiú go mairfidh Iontaobhais chomh fada agus is féidir laistigh de na hacmhainní atá ar fáil.

Reviews

Mr Bradley asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail (a) the number of reviews that have been initiated by her Department or its agencies since devolution; and (b) the number that were ongoing when she took office. (AQO 575/01)

Ms de Brún: Since the establishment of the Executive in December 1999 I have initiated 6 major reviews. My department has also initiated a further 15 professional reviews/studies. Some 23 reviews/studies have been initiated by HSS Boards, Trusts and Agencies. 14 reviews, of which 12 were departmental, were ongoing at December 1999.

Ó bunaíodh an Coiste Feidhmiúcháin i Nollaig 1999 chuir mé sé mhórathbhreithniú ar bun. Tá 15 athbhreithniú/staidéar eile ar bun ag mo Roinn. Tá thart ar 23 athbhreithniú/staidéar ar bun ag Boird, Iontaobhais agus Gníomhaireachtaí SSS. Bhí 14 athbhreithniú, ar bhain 12 acu leis an Roinn, ar bun faoi Nollaig 1999.

REGIONAL DEVELOPMENT

Signage

Mr McClarty asked the Minister for Regional Development if he will undertake to introduce cultural and informational signage (a) within Coleraine town centre; and (b) on roads approaching Coleraine, including the A26. (AQW 1094/01)

The Minister for Regional Development (Mr Robinson): My Department's policy in respect of the provision and extent of tourist, cultural and information signing (ie "brown signs") in Northern Ireland has been agreed by Roads Service and the Northern Ireland Tourist Board. The policy requires that applications for signing to tourist attractions or facilities must first be endorsed by the Tourist Board. Thereafter, Roads Service is responsible for the design, extent and siting of the signs. The operator of the attraction or facility is liable for the costs involved in any agreed signing provision.

I should add that the policy provides that such signing will be the minimum required to provide clear guidance to the attraction for visitors. Where clear guidance is given by existing direction signage, brown signs are not considered necessary until the general area of the attraction is reached.

In this context I understand that all relevant tourist attractions along the Antrim Coast Road, within Coleraine town centre and on the roads approaching them are currently signed, where applications have been made to and approved by the Tourist Board. However, if you believe there are omissions, you may wish to contact the Tourist Board directly.

Signage

Mr McClarty asked the Minister for Regional Development if he will undertake to introduce information tourist signage on the A2 Antrim Coast Road.
(AQW 1095/01)

Mr P Robinson: My Department's policy in respect of the provision and extent of tourist, cultural and information signing (ie "brown signs") in Northern Ireland has been agreed by Roads Service and the Northern Ireland Tourist Board. The policy requires that applications for signing to tourist attractions or facilities must first be endorsed by the Tourist Board. Thereafter, Roads Service is responsible for the design, extent and siting of the signs. The operator of the attraction or facility is liable for the costs involved in any agreed signing provision.

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Upgrading of Street Furniture

Mr McClarty asked the Minister for Regional Development what plans he has to upgrade street furniture, in particular, signage, street lamps and waste bins in small towns and villages within East Londonderry.
(AQW 1124/01)

Mr P Robinson: Whilst my Department's Roads Service is responsible for the provision of road traffic signage and street lighting, the provision of waste bins within the East Londonderry constituency is the responsibility of Coleraine and Limavady Borough Councils

Subject to the availability of the necessary funding, Roads Service hopes to carry out the following street lighting improvements within East Londonderry by the end of the 2002/2003 financial year:

Coleraine Borough Council Area	
Garvagh Main Street	Upgrading
Rosemary Place and Willow Drive, Coleraine	Upgrading
Pates Lane (at Norris Bros), Coleraine	Additional
Kinora Terrace, Portstewart	Upgrading
Drumeen Drive/Glebeview, Garvagh	Additional
Bridge Street, Kilrea	Upgrading
Damhead Road, Fishloughan	Additional
Mark Street, Portrush	Upgrading
Ramore Head Car Park, Portrush	Additional
Ardina Road, Articlave (extend lighting to speed limit)	Additional
Limavady Borough Council Area	
Feeny (extend lighting on main road to speed limits)	Additional
Gorteen Crescent, Limavady (rear no. 24)	Additional
Drumachose Park, Limavady (front nos. 116 – 120)	Additional
Edenmore Park, Limavady	Upgrading
Drumachose Park, Limavady (rear adopted paths)	Additional

A review of signing on the approaches to and from Limavady is currently underway to meet the changes that will result from the construction of the Limavady Bypass.

In addition to the above, Roads Service undertakes, as necessary, response maintenance of road traffic signage and street lighting items as a result of faults identified during routine inspections and those reported by members of the public.

Telecommunications Masts: A1 & A2

Mr Bradley asked the Minister for Regional Development if he was consulted in relation to the erection of telecommunication masts on the roadside verges of the

A1 and A2, and if he gave approval for the land to be utilised in this way. (AQW 1157/01)

Mr P Robinson: My Department's Roads Service was consulted by the Department of Environment's Planning Service in respect of planning applications for the erection of 2 telecommunication masts to the rear of the footway on the A2 Newry Road, at the following locations:

30 metres west of the entrance to Warrenpoint Docks, and

200 metres north west of Gilbert Ash, Warrenpoint.

In addition Roads Service received 2 informal enquiries about land ownership in respect of the possible erection of masts along the A1 Belfast Road at the Corgary Road and Glenn Road junctions.

I understand that these are the 4 locations about which you recently contacted Roads Service directly.

I should explain that the telecommunications companies involved are licensed by the Department of Trade and Industry under the Telecommunications Act 1984 and have a statutory right to place apparatus within the public road boundary in accordance with the Telecommunications Code and the Telecommunications (Street Works) NI Order 1984.

In assessing the planning applications, Roads Service can only consider matters that affect the safety and convenience of road users. As the proposed positioning of the masts in question satisfy its requirements, Roads Service offered no objections to the applications.

In respect of the 2 informal enquiries, Roads Service has not been consulted about any planning applications lodged for the erection of masts at these sites.

Sewerage Problems: Warrenpoint Road, Rostrevor

Mr Bradley asked the Minister for Regional Development how he intends to address the sewerage problems in the area of Warrenpoint Road, Rostrevor. (AQW 1158/01)

Mr P Robinson: A recent closed circuit television survey revealed a blockage in the sewer in Warrenpoint Road, Rostrevor. This has been cleared. A further survey will be carried out on the foreshore section of the sewer to establish if any remedial work is required on that section.

The sewers will be replaced as part of a major scheme to upgrade the sewerage network in Rostrevor. This is due to start in the Autumn of this year at a cost of £500,000.

Traffic Volumes: A2

Mr K Robinson asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail the traffic volumes on the A2 Shore Road at the following locations (a) Shore Road - Whiteabbey Station Road junction; (b) Shore Road - Jordanstown Road junction; (c) Greenisland Station Road - Shore Road junction; and (d) Trooperslane Road - Shore Road junction. (AQW 1187/01)

Mr P Robinson: My Department's Roads Service does not have details of traffic volumes at the junctions specified in the question. However, average two-way weekday traffic flows are available for the following locations on the A2 Shore Road:

A2 Shore Road, just south of Jordanstown	31,611 vehicles per day
A2 Shore Road between Trooperslane and Carrickfergus (near the Marine Business Park)	27,078 vehicles per day

These figures, taken in 2001, are the most up to date counts available.

Belfast to Larne Railway

Mr K Robinson asked the Minister for Regional Development what steps he will take to encourage a greater use of the rail facilities between Belfast and Larne; and to make a statement. (AQW 1188/01)

Mr P Robinson: Translink is seeking to encourage greater use of the Belfast to Larne railway line by improving the infrastructure and by promotional activity. The recently completed refurbishment of Carrickfergus station has increased its attractiveness for passengers and the planned renewal of the track between Whitehead and the Bleach Green Junction should provide faster and more comfortable journeys. Translink is also seeking to provide more park and ride facilities along the line to encourage greater use by car drivers. As part of a generic campaign for the whole railway network, Translink operates a range of special fares on the Larne line, including unlimited day travel and two for one promotions. Translink will continue to consider appropriate opportunities to market this line so as to encourage its greater use.

Traffic Volumes

Mr K Robinson asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail the traffic volume on the B90 at its junctions with the (a) A80 Larne Road; (b) Carntall Road; (c) Doagh Road at Mossley Bridge; (d) Monks-town Road; and to make a statement. (AQW 1191/01)

Mr P Robinson: My Department's Roads Service does not have details of traffic volumes at the road

junctions specified in the questions. However, average two-way weekday traffic flows are available for the following locations on the B90 road:

B90 Old Carrick Road, south of its junction with Monkstown Road	11,969 vehicles per day
B90 Old Carrick Road, north of its junction with Monkstown Road	11,969 vehicles per day
B90 Upper Greenisland Road, south of its junction with Woodburn Road	10,398 vehicles per day

The first three junctions listed in your Question No. AQW 1191/01 (ie, junctions with the A8 Larne Road, Carntall Road, and the Doagh Road at Mossley Bridge) are on the B59 Doagh Road. The only available traffic volume information for the B59 Doagh Road is east of Carntall Road, where the average two-way weekday traffic flow is 11,632 vehicles per day.

These traffic volumes, taken in 2001, are the most up to date counts available.

Road Maintenance

Mr Hussey asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail how the methodology of allocation of roads maintenance funding addresses the issue of allocating a transport infrastructure per capita figure of 27.4 metres per person in rural areas compared to 3.9 metres per person in the Belfast Metropolitan Area and 5.5 metres per person in other urban areas.

(AQW 1199/01)

Mr P Robinson: As my predecessor advised in answer to your earlier Written Assembly Question (AQW 158/01) on 15 October 2001, the funds available for road maintenance are allocated by my Department's Roads Service across district council areas using a range of weighed indicators of need tailored to each of the 13 road maintenance activities (eg, resurfacing of motorways and trunk roads, resurfacing of non-trunk roads, carriage-way patching, surface dressing, winter service, etc).

The methodology used does not directly take account of the length per person of the transportation infrastructure in any particular area. Typical indicators used to allocate funds for maintenance purposes include, however, the carriageway area and the condition and amount of travel on the network.

Traffic Volume

Mr K Robinson asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail the traffic volumes on the B90 at its junctions with (a) Greenisland Station Road; (b) Trooperslane Road; (c) Woodburn Road; (d) Prospect Road - New Line; (e) North Road, Carrickfergus; and to make a statement.

(AQW 1204/01)

Mr P Robinson: My Department's Roads Service does not have details of traffic volumes at the road junctions specified in the questions. However, average two-way weekday traffic flows are available for the following locations on the B90 road:

B90 Old Carrick Road, south of its junction with Monkstown Road	11,969 vehicles per day
B90 Old Carrick Road, north of its junction with Monkstown Road	11,969 vehicles per day
B90 Upper Greenisland Road, south of its junction with Woodburn Road	10,398 vehicles per day

The first three junctions listed in your Question No. AQW 1191/01 (ie, junctions with the A8 Larne Road, Carntall Road, and the Doagh Road at Mossley Bridge) are on the B59 Doagh Road. The only available traffic volume information for the B59 Doagh Road is east of Carntall Road, where the average two-way weekday traffic flow is 11,632 vehicles per day.

These traffic volumes, taken in 2001, are the most up to date counts available.

Watermain: Island Road, Attical, Kilkeel

Mr M Murphy asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail (a) when the Water Service will replace sections of water mains along Island Road, Attical, Kilkeel BT34 4ST; and (b) the commencement date of this work.

(AQW 1212/01)

Mr P Robinson: Water Service proposes to replace the watermain at Island Road, Attical Bog Road and Attical Road, Kilkeel at an estimated cost of £225,000. Work is scheduled to start towards the end of next month and the Island Road part of the scheme should be complete by the end of May.

Signage

Mr K Robinson asked the Minister for Regional Development what assessment he has made in relation to (a) the current signage; and (b) the introduction of further signage to highlight the location of the Borough of Newtownabbey.

(AQW 1234/01)

Mr P Robinson: My Department's Roads Service provides direction signs to a number of distinct destinations within the Borough of Newtownabbey, such as Whiteabbey, Ballyclare and Glengormley.

I would, however, refer the Member to the response given to him, on 29 September 2000, by my predecessor, Mr Gregory Campbell, regarding a similar Written Assembly Question [AQW 106/00]. As Mr Campbell explained at that time, the provision of signing to identify the Borough Council's boundaries is a matter for the Council, subject to planning and safety needs being met.

Signage: Loughshore Park, Jordanstown

Mr K Robinson asked the Minister for Regional Development to outline steps he will take to introduce internationally recognised signage for the Caravan Park at Loughshore Park, Jordanstown. (AQW 1235/01)

Mr P Robinson: My Department's policy in respect of the provision and extent of tourist, cultural and information signing (ie "brown signs") in Northern Ireland has been agreed jointly between Roads Service and the Northern Ireland Tourist Board. The current policy limits the provision of tourist signing to visitor accommodation, including caravan parking, outside built-up areas where the national speed limits apply. Signing to individual premises within towns and villages is not permitted.

The caravan park at Loughshore Park does not meet the requirements for tourist signing and there are no exceptional circumstances in terms of traffic management problems to justify such signing. I understand, however, that the caravan park is owned and operated by Newtownabbey Borough Council and that the Council's existing sign at the entrance to the Park does not indicate the availability of the caravan park. The Council might, therefore, wish to investigate the possibility of erecting a sign within their property, indicating the presence of the facility. The sign, which may be subject to planning approval, would be readily visible from the adjacent A2 Shore Road.

Rural Transport Funded Bus

Mr Beggs asked the Minister for Regional Development, pursuant to AQW 3152/00, to advise when the Rural Transport Funded bus service from Carrickfergus to Antrim Hospital will commence. (AQW 1251/01)

Mr P Robinson: I have been informed by Translink that following the successful recruitment of a driver, the new service which will operate between Carrickfergus and Ballyclare will commence on 4th February 2002 and link in with the existing Larne to Antrim Hospital service.

Speed Restrictions: Larne/Belfast Railway

Mr Beggs asked the Minister for Regional Development, pursuant to AQW 690/01, to outline when the installation of new rail track will commence on the Larne to Belfast railway line, which will improve the journey time between East Antrim and Belfast. (AQW 1252/01)

Mr P Robinson: The section of track between Yorkgate station and Bleach Green Junction was renewed as part of the scheme to re-open the Belfast to Antrim

line via Bleach Green. The section between Bleach Green and Whitehead is due to be renewed. However, I cannot give any firm indication of when the work will start until I receive Translink's Corporate Plan for the period 2002 to 2005. Currently there are no plans to renew the section between Whitehead and Larne Harbour as the Assembly has not yet allocated any funds for such work.

SOCIAL DEVELOPMENT

Energy Efficiency Programme

Mr Hussey asked the Minister for Social Development to detail by constituency the distribution of funds within the Housing Executive 2000-01 Energy Efficiency Programme. (AQW 1100/01)

The Minister for Social Development (Mr Dodds): This information is not readily available because the Housing Executive does not have a specific "Energy Efficiency Programme" for its stock. Energy efficiency measures are included in Heating Replacement Schemes, External Cyclical Maintenance Schemes and Multi Element Improvement Schemes, where appropriate, and the information could therefore only be obtained at disproportionate cost.

Domestic Energy Efficiency Scheme

Mr Hussey asked the Minister for Social Development to detail by constituency and tenure group (a) the distribution of Domestic Energy Efficiency Scheme (DEES) funds; and (b) the distribution of recipients of DEES funding, in 2000-01. (AQW 1101/01)

Mr Dodds: This information is not available in the format requested. However the attached table records by postcode the distribution of Domestic Energy Efficiency Scheme (DEES) funds; and (b) the distribution of recipients of DEES funding, in 2000/01, by tenure.

Postcode	Tenure	Allocation Amount £
BT1	4	195.00
Total		195.00
BT2	1	258.83
	2	120.70
	3	384.68
Total		764.21
BT4	1	18,677.58
	2	8,903.05
	3	14,704.03
	4	1,953.32

Postcode	Tenure	Allocation Amount £
Total		44,237.98
BT5	1	37,868.11
	2	12,183.04
	3	42,889.00
	4	7,256.40
Total		100,196.55
BT6	1	43,150.48
	2	10,748.41
	3	26,530.48
	4	5,676.34
Total		86,105.71
BT7	1	15,267.08
	2	2,868.93
	3	38,981.77
	4	1,100.00
Total		58,217.78
BT8	1	11,669.50
	2	518.70
	3	1,118.50
	4	2,751.63
Total		16,058.33
BT9	1	5,579.88
	2	953.77
	3	2,201.91
	4	1,855.24
Total		10,590.80
BT10	1	7,122.63
	3	1,018.16
	4	1,429.05
Total		9,569.84
BT11	1	72,472.68
	2	12,242.17
	3	51,881.42
	4	2,289.41
	5	145.17
Total		139,030.85
BT12	1	54,490.82
	2	7,551.31
	3	84,420.06
	4	2,354.97
Total		148,817.16
BT13	1	31,500.48
	2	11,289.79
	3	75,178.24
	4	21,219.26
Total		139,187.77
BT14	1	48,372.24
	2	19,501.81
	3	35,575.76
	4	10,697.37
Total		114,147.18

Postcode	Tenure	Allocation Amount £
BT15	1	44,602.91
	2	8,435.58
	3	44,592.82
	4	8,003.35
Total		105,634.66
BT16	1	9,112.60
	2	2,180.10
	3	7,762.10
	4	1,519.75
Total		20,574.55
BT17	1	35,544.24
	2	843.50
	3	63,960.98
	4	8,068.97
Total		108,417.69
BT18	1	7,309.55
	2	229.05
	3	8,905.79
	4	107.90
Total		16,552.29
BT19	1	13,961.59
	2	1,316.00
	3	25,766.67
	4	1,826.55
	5	295.95
Total		43,166.76
BT20	1	18,662.98
	2	4,042.92
	3	4,243.50
	4	95.20
Total		27,044.60
BT21	1	1,182.72
	2	315.00
	3	4,928.08
	4	201.25
Total		6,627.05
BT22	1	10,958.83
	2	672.70
	3	13,981.07
Total		25,612.60
BT23	1	21,566.74
	2	1,857.54
	3	23,690.56
	4	4,604.48
Total		51,719.32
BT24	1	6,125.20
	2	315.00
	3	2,417.20
	4	115.70
Total		8,973.10
BT25	1	3,897.00
	3	2,188.70
Total		6,085.70

Postcode	Tenure	Allocation Amount £
BT26	1	2,133.40
	2	130.00
	3	5,813.50
Total		8,076.90
BT27	1	9,796.80
	2	315.00
	3	9,266.30
Total		19,378.10
BT28	1	11,233.88
	2	661.30
	3	17,498.70
Total		29,393.88
BT29	1	3,702.46
	2	315.00
	3	729.38
Total		4,746.84
BT30	1	18,114.86
	2	1,564.56
	3	5,644.05
	4	1,012.00
	5	104.04
Total		26,439.51
BT31	1	2,100.10
	3	1,121.50
Total		3,221.60
BT32	1	5,407.90
	3	5,064.40
Total		10,472.30
BT33	1	9,186.00
	2	372.00
	3	2,022.26
	4	528.00
Total		12,108.26
BT34	1	13,159.85
	2	315.00
	3	130.00
Total		13,604.85
BT35	1	8,503.82
	2	121.00
	3	618.61
Total		9,243.43
BT36	1	36,501.59
	2	4,415.79
	3	16,266.01
	4	2,271.56
Total		59,454.95
BT37	1	15,798.89
	2	2,035.32
	3	25,545.24
	4	368.22
Total		43,747.67

Postcode	Tenure	Allocation Amount £
BT38	1	30,824.16
	2	3,112.50
	3	6,560.24
	4	5,051.67
Total		45,548.57
BT39	1	7,561.86
	2	1,572.02
	3	7,191.51
	4	6,945.98
Total		23,271.37
BT40	1	13,998.08
	2	4,540.92
	3	4,684.87
	4	7,761.45
Total		30,985.32
BT41	1	34,097.94
	2	7,306.90
	3	28,973.15
	4	649.00
Total		71,026.99
BT42	1	13,774.63
	2	1,038.44
	3	5,572.11
Total		20,385.18
BT43	1	6,290.96
	2	1,511.20
	3	3,742.08
	4	990.00
Total		12,534.24
BT44	1	15,520.87
	2	3,164.07
	3	14,534.22
	4	1,439.79
Total		34,658.95
BT45	1	31,426.82
	2	4,250.24
	3	15,121.43
	4	298.00
	5	332.00
Total		51,428.49
BT46	1	11,818.76
	2	545.13
	3	4,214.70
	4	236.73
Total		16,815.32
BT47	1	54,022.43
	2	12,691.62
	3	49,150.27
	4	3,144.46
Total		119,008.78

Postcode	Tenure	Allocation Amount £
BT48	1	79,982.53
	2	13,103.34
	3	104,705.82
	4	26,149.66
	5	298.33
Total		224,239.68
BT49	1	18,182.57
	2	2,764.76
	3	19,560.96
	4	7,847.17
Total		48,355.46
BT51	1	23,377.87
	2	745.50
	3	11,553.33
	4	1,415.79
Total		37,092.49
BT52	1	14,037.63
	2	1,068.91
	3	37,963.09
	4	2,457.76
Total		55,527.39
BT53	1	11,419.61
	2	1,383.87
	3	24,942.45
	4	2,927.64
	5	84.00
Total		40,757.57
BT54	1	2,144.47
	2	1,107.36
	3	10,128.61
	5	224.00
Total		13,604.44
BT55	1	3,083.13
	2	261.20
	3	4,765.19
Total		8,109.52
BT56	1	5,376.26
	2	5,657.83
	3	8,593.79
	4	773.73
Total		20,401.61
BT57	1	1,974.61
	2	315.00
	3	2,716.11
Total		5,005.72
BT60	1	36,476.06
	2	4,697.63
	3	26,442.84
	4	1,314.99
Total		68,931.52
BT61	1	7,316.20
	2	816.19
	3	4,258.33
	4	1,919.68

Postcode	Tenure	Allocation Amount £
Total		14,310.40
BT62	1	29,166.85
	2	7,989.10
	3	13,642.13
	4	1,264.41
Total		52,062.49
BT63	1	15,865.77
	2	2,201.23
	3	6,153.79
	4	447.84
Total		24,668.63
BT64	1	326.91
	3	823.62
Total		1,150.53
BT65	1	18,405.78
	2	3,931.81
	3	18,672.95
	4	138.50
Total		41,149.04
BT66	1	44,149.68
	2	4,897.62
	3	10,318.60
	4	3,599.23
	5	2,111.20
Total		65,076.33
BT67	1	43,180.69
	2	5,753.71
	3	6,964.18
	4	3,305.64
	5	291.00
Total		59,495.22
BT68	1	274.50
	3	3,312.90
Total		3,587.40
BT69	1	1,288.78
	3	356.03
	4	788.09
Total		2,432.90
BT70	1	7,714.95
	2	1,669.45
	3	4,064.54
	4	1,389.36
	5	118.20
Total		14,956.50
BT71	1	18,311.37
	2	2,854.09
	3	17,802.82
	4	1,988.21
Total		40,956.49
BT74	1	25,500.27
	2	1,064.40
	3	9,160.78
	4	3,581.46

Postcode	Tenure	Allocation Amount £
Total		39,306.91
BT75	1	853.75
	2	95.56
	3	126.80
Total		1,076.11
BT76	1	361.50
Total		361.50
BT77	1	1,999.70
	2	315.00
	3	118.60
Total		2,433.30
BT78	1	20,917.81
	2	3,244.28
	3	4,055.41
	4	6,522.10
Total		34,739.60
BT79	1	15,277.89
	2	3,833.03
	3	12,465.38
	5	101.60
Total		31,677.90
BT80	1	13,864.79
	2	2,547.33
	3	10,518.46
	4	950.98
Total		27,881.56
BT81	1	2,033.25
	2	390.39
	3	2,533.41
	4	965.24
Total		5,922.29
BT82	1	11,224.65
	2	891.54
	3	7,840.50
	4	1,439.58
Total		21,396.27
BT92	1	12,746.01
	2	1,185.66
	3	5,281.81
	4	238.07
	5	315.00
Total		19,766.55
BT93	1	49,769.75
	2	692.40
	3	1,937.56
Total		52,399.71
BT94	1	30,009.75
	2	610.34
	3	5,288.81
	4	84.39
Total		35,993.29
Grand Total		3,067,905.30

Summary		
Tenure		Value
1	Owner Occupier	1,440,946.07
2	Private Rented	233,155.61
3	NIHE	1,203,855.61
4	Housing Association	185,527.52
5	Other	1,669.29
	Not shown as any tenure	2,751.20
Total		3,067,905.30

Home Energy Survey Reports

Mr Hussey asked the Minister for Social Development to detail by constituency the distribution of the Home Energy Survey Reports prepared by the three Energy Efficiency Advice Centres for 2000-01. (AQW 1102/01)

Mr Dodds: This information is not available in the format requested. However, the table below records the number of Home Energy Survey Reports prepared by the 3 Energy Efficiency Advice Centres for 2000-01 by District Council area:

Antrim	282
Ards	537
Armagh	540
Ballymena	229
Ballymoney	198
Banbridge	210
Belfast	5513
Carrickfergus	319
Castlereagh	679
Coleraine	814
Cookstown	670
Craigavon	666
Derry	2899
Down	975
Dungannon	1104
Fermanagh	2332
Larne	305
Limavady	420
Lisburn	480
Magherafelt	425
Moyle	113
Newry & Mourne	526
Newtownabbey	343
North Down	640
Omagh	1049
Strabane	941

Hospitality: December 2001

Mr Hilditch asked the Minister for Social Development to detail (a) the cost of and (b) to whom he is providing hospitality during the month of December 2001. (AQW 1106/01)

Mr Dodds: In December 2001, my hospitality costs for a number of lunchtime business meetings with officials and a reception for customers and representative Department staff amounted to £688.84.

Smoke Alarms

Mr K Robinson asked the Minister for Social Development what plans he has to (a) fit smoke alarms to all Housing Executive properties; and (b) encourage all private landlords to fit smoke alarms to their properties. (AQW 1113/01)

Mr Dodds: With regard to the fitting of smoke alarms to all Housing Executive properties, I refer the Member to the reply given to him in relation to Assembly Question 2,756 on 11 May 2001.

With regard to private landlords, the Housing Executive does encourage the installation of smoke alarms. To date 1,156 have been installed as a result of grants paid to landlords.

Maintenance Expenditure

Mr Shannon asked the Minister for Social Development to detail the level of maintenance expenditure within the Housing Executive budget, in each of the last 3 years. (AQW 1127/01)

Mr Dodds: The information is as follows:

	1998/99 £m	1999/2000 £m	2000/2001 £m
Response Maintenance	33.458	34.990	37.443
Planned Maintenance	69.336	67.618	61.904
General Maintenance	4.309	4.708	5.256
Grounds Maintenance	5.887	6.315	6.697
Total	112.990	113.631	111.300

Budget Allocation

Mr Shannon asked the Minister for Social Development to detail the Housing Executive's budget allocation, by district council area, in the year 2001. (AQW 1128/01)

Mr Dodds: This information is not available in the format requested. However the table below details the

budget allocation for the financial year 2001/02 for the five Housing Executive Areas.

Area	Belfast £m	S East £m	South £m	N East £m	West £m	Total £m
Capital Improvements	9.835	14.135	9.935	18.555	10.790	63.250
Planned Maintenance	16.405	11.195	9.640	11.110	8.235	56.585
Response Maintenance	9.985	6.875	5.529	8.180	5.715	36.284
Private Sector Grants	10.000	4.360	11.750	5.140	9.650	40.900
Group Repair	0.695	0.355	0.000	0.025	0.025	1.100
Total Budget Allocation	46.920	36.920	36.854	43.010	34.415	198.119

Combined Heat and Power

Mr Neeson asked the Minister for Social Development to make a statement on the micro Combined Heat and Power (CHP) trials targeted at 6,000 fuel poor homes in Great Britain and to outline any plans he has to introduce such a programme to Northern Ireland. (AQW 1135/01)

Mr Dodds: The micro Combined Heat and Power (CHP) trials in Great Britain are at an early stage and it is premature to make assessments of their effectiveness. The Housing Executive has, however, indicated that it is interested in participating in a pilot scheme in the future, when the technology relating to (CHP) had been fully explored and developed. Currently, discussions are taking place between my Department and the Housing Executive to take this forward.

Home Energy Conservation Authority

Mr Hussey asked the Minister for Social Development to give his assessment of the effectiveness of the £317,000 spent by the Housing Executive in 2000-01 on the promotion of energy efficiency within the domestic sector. (AQW 1159/01)

Mr Dodds: The Housing Executive is the Home Energy Conservation Authority (HECA) for Northern Ireland and reports annually to me on progress in meeting its target to improve energy efficiency in the domestic sector. The Housing Executive reports a 13% improvement within the last 5 years, which compares favourably with the average 6.2% achieved by HECA Authorities in Great Britain.

In 2000/01 the Housing Executive spent £317,000 on providing funding for voluntary bodies, developing financial incentives for owner-occupiers who do not qualify for grant schemes and for advertising. This

funding has helped contribute to the improvements in energy efficiency in the domestic sector.

Home Energy Checks

Mr Hussey asked the Minister for Social Development to detail, by constituency (a) the distribution of the 688 home energy surveys generated as a result of the Housing Executive's 2000-01 mobile advice campaign on energy conservation; and (b) to list the 24 district towns and villages visited. (AQW 1176/01)

Mr Dodds: Information as to the distribution of the 688 home energy surveys is not available by constituency. However, the table below records the towns in which Home Energy Checks were generated during the 2000-01 mobile advice campaign and the dates on which the towns were visited.

Town	Date Visited
Ballycastle	30 May 2000
Newtownards	31 May 2000
Cookstown	1 June 2000
Londonderry	8 June 2000
Strabane	15 June 2000
Larne	21 June 2000
Ballymena	23 October 2000
Newcastle	21 October 2000
Newry	28 October 2000
Bangor	1 November 2000
Newtownards	17 November 2000
Carrickfergus	23 November 2000
Downpatrick	25 November 2000
Coleraine	2 December 2000
Craigavon	14 December 2000
Dungannon	20 December 2000
Armagh	11 January 2001
Omagh	18 January 2001
Limavady	26 January 2001
Ballyclare	5 February 2001
Lisburn	10 January 2001
Banbridge	15 February 2001
Enniskillen	22 February 2001
Antrim	23 February 2001

Energy Efficiency Advice Centres

Mr Hussey asked the Minister for Social Development to detail, by constituency, the distribution of the 782 home energy surveys generated as a result of the

Housing Executive's 2000-01 television advertising campaign on energy conservation. (AQW 1177/01)

Mr Dodds: This information is not available in the format requested. However, the home energy surveys are recorded by the 3 Energy Efficiency Advice Centres (EEACs) as follows:

Belfast EEAC (Co Antrim and Down)	594
Foyle EEAC (Co Londonderry and Strabane District Council Area)	110
Enniskillen EEAC (Co Armagh, Fermanagh and Tyrone (excluding Strabane))	78
Total	782

Fuel Poverty

Mr Weir asked the Minister for Social Development what plans he has to tackle the problem of fuel poverty. (AQW 1182/01)

Mr Dodds: The principal measure to tackle fuel poverty, the new Warm Homes Scheme, launched on 2 July 2001, provides a comprehensive package of heating and insulation measures for owner-occupiers and private sector tenants. For example, disabled people and families with young children receive insulation if they are in receipt of certain benefits and over 60s on income based benefits are entitled to free central heating systems. In addition, the Northern Ireland Housing Executive's heating replacement and improvement schemes together with the Housing Associations' new build programme will help alleviate fuel poverty amongst social sector tenants. The Programme for Government recognises the problem of fuel poverty and includes a commitment to assist 20,000 households by December 2004.

Urban Regeneration: Larne

Mr K Robinson asked the Minister for Social Development what steps he will take to encourage urban regeneration in Larne; and to make a statement. (AQW 1189/01)

Mr Dodds: Officials from my Department have been working with representatives from other Departments to draw up proposals for the reinvigoration of town centres throughout Northern Ireland. A draft strategy is being considered by relevant Ministers and will be presented to the Executive in the early part of this year. In addition to any specific proposals, my Department will provide general guidelines for the reinvigoration of town centres. These guidelines will of course recognise the need to allow local people

flexibility to adopt policies, which best meet the needs of individual towns.

Local Councils and other local interests are increasingly bringing forward their own local regeneration strategies and my Department is providing advice and guidance as and when this is requested. An official from my Department has been working closely with the local enterprise agency in Larne on regeneration issues and will continue to work with the group for as long as required.

In particular, an official from my Department, in partnership with the International Fund for Ireland (IFI), has been working closely with community groups and the local enterprise agency to bring forward a community based economic project for the town. Consultants have been commissioned to complete an economic appraisal and are expected to report on options this month.

In relation to the physical appearance of the town, my Department recently completed an Environmental Improvement scheme for the Broadway/Main Street area in Larne. The scheme cost £350,000 and has improved the general appearance of this part of the town centre.

DSD is also responsible for the allocation of European funds under the Special European Programme for Peace and Reconciliation. Under the Urban Regeneration Sub-Programme of PEACE 1, a grant of £122,600 was paid towards the provision of 6 new business units offering over 15,000 square feet of accommodation for letting. The project is an extension of an existing business park at Bank Road, Larne. The units are fully occupied and have created 16 jobs.

Under Peace II, Measure 2.11 – Area Based Regeneration, my Department will shortly be inviting bids from local Councils for assistance towards the preparation of plans for the reinvigoration of town centres. Criteria will be based on the need to demonstrate that proposals address the legacy of the conflict and are taking the opportunities arising from peace. Larne Borough Council will be eligible to apply for funding under this measure.

The Housing Executive is responsible for the assessment of housing need, and its assessment is, that need in the Larne area is largely met. The number of new dwellings being provided by the private sector has increased and this, together with the static nature of the overall population of Larne, has contributed to the increase in voids of Housing Executive property. The Housing Executive is taking steps to address this issue in a number of ways including the proposed demolition of empty properties particularly in Seacourt and Ramore Green.

In addition, the Creating Common Ground consortium, a partnership of key statutory and voluntary agencies, including the Housing Executive and my Department,

is developing a regeneration programme targeted at the most disadvantaged communities throughout the Housing Executive's stock. The consortium has identified the Seacourt estate in Larne for a significant regeneration initiative. This initiative will address issues including environmental regeneration, community infrastructure, community relations and community safety in a strategic and coordinated manner. It is hoped that Seacourt residents can be assisted in renewing the area and creating a cohesive community. The consortium will encourage other key local organisations to join with it in developing this initiative with the community.

Other strategic proposals for Craigiehill, Shane House, Sallagh Park, Doric Way, and Fairways are being developed with community involvement.

Monkstown Phase 3 Improvement Contract

Mr K Robinson asked the Minister for Social Development to detail the steps he has taken to ensure that Phase 3 of the Monkstown Estate Upgrade Scheme is completed as quickly as possible. (AQW 1190/01)

Mr Dodds: The Monkstown Phase 3 Improvement Contract which started in January 2000 was stopped following the murder of a workman on site. The Housing Executive released the original contractor from his obligations because of difficulties in retaining a labour force. This necessitated retendering to secure the completion of the contract and it is anticipated that work will restart within the next few weeks.

Means Testing: Disabled Facilities Grant

Mr McClarty asked the Minister for Social Development if he has any plans to stop means testing in respect of the Disabled Facilities Grant. (AQW 1299/01)

Mr Dodds: At present, I have no such plans, however, I have asked officials to review the means test element of Disabled Facilities Grant generally, and to provide advice on the potential for change, and the implications from equality and other perspectives. This may take time, since the views of other agencies will need to be sought. I will respond more fully when considerations are complete.

Disability Living Allowance: Appeal Process

Mr Hilditch asked the Minister for Social Development to outline if he has any plans to review the Disability Living Allowance appeal process. (AQW 1302/01)

Mr Dodds: The current appeal process is set to meet the requirements of the legislation as introduced

through the Decision Making and Appeals Order and Regulations. There are no plans for any major change to the Disability Living Allowance appeal process.

House Sales Scheme

Mr Bradley asked the Minister for Social Development if tenants renting their dwellings from local authorities qualify to purchase their homes under the House Sales Scheme. (AQW 1313/01)

Mr Dodds: The House Sales schemes operated by the Housing Executive and housing associations apply only to their own properties and not those of other local authorities. Within the schemes, periods of tenancy with local authorities in Great Britain or local councils in Northern Ireland, can count towards the discount available for the purchase of Housing Executive or housing association homes.

Cost of Benefits Hearings

Mr Hilditch asked the Minister for Social Development to detail the cost of (a) a Disability Living Allowance oral hearing; (b) an Incapacity Benefit oral hearing; and (c) a Social Security oral hearing. (AQW 1328/01)

Mr Dodds: The average cost to the Social Security Agency of an oral appeal hearing for; Disability Living Allowance is £190.50, Incapacity Benefit is £69; and Income Support and Jobseekers Allowance is £78.

The cost of the different categories of benefit hearings to The Appeals Service is not readily available and could only be obtained at disproportionate cost. However, for the 9 months ended 31 December 2001 the running costs for the Appeals Service totalled £2.7 million and 17,376 appeals were heard.

Disability Living Allowance: Oral Hearing

Mr Hilditch asked the Minister for Social Development to detail the current number of applications for leave to appeal to the Commissioner regarding Disability Living Allowance oral hearings. (AQW 1329/01)

Mr Dodds: There are currently 49 applications for leave to appeal to the Social Security Commissioner with the Appeals Service (NI) against a decision made by the Appeals Tribunal at a Disability Living Allowance oral hearing.

Disability Living Allowance: Oral Hearings

Mr Hilditch asked the Minister for Social Development to detail the current number and length of time

taken for a Disability Living Allowance oral hearing appeal tribunal. (AQW 1330/01)

Mr Dodds: There are currently 1151 oral Disability Living Allowance appeals with The Appeals Service (NI) awaiting a first hearing date. There are a further 567 appeals with Disability Living Allowance Branch to be submitted to The Appeals Service.

It is taking Disability Living Allowance Branch approximately 11 weeks from the date the appeal request is received to the date the case is submitted to The Appeals Service to arrange the appeal hearing. Upon receipt of the submission it is taking The Appeals Service approximately 20 weeks to arrange an oral hearing.

Disability Living Allowance: Form DLA 370

Mr Hilditch asked the Minister for Social Development what assessment he has made of the information value contained in the Disability Living Allowance 370 (Mob) and 370 (Care) form. (AQW 1331/01)

Mr Dodds: The 2 Forms have been combined as DLA 370 (Mob/Care). This is one of the factual reports issued to General Practitioners to gain further evidence when deciding a claim for Disability Living Allowance. In the current financial year, almost 74% of new claims to Disability Living Allowance have been determined using this factual report as the main source of evidence. It is therefore clear that factual reports completed by General Practitioners are a substantial and very valuable source of evidence when deciding a customer's entitlement to Disability Living Allowance.

ASSEMBLY COMMISSION

Constituency Offices

Mr Ford asked the Assembly Commission how many Members declared the use of Constituency Offices for electoral purposes this year on the basis of the circular issued by the Assembly Finance Office. (AQW 1183/01)

Mr Fee (Assembly Commission): The number of Members who declared the use of their constituency offices for electoral purposes was 19.

Rules Regarding Free Postage

Mr David Ford asked the Assembly Commission to detail (a) the number of Members found to be in breach of the rules regarding free postage on (i) one; (ii) two; or (iii) three or more occasions; and (b) the sum of money repaid in each case. (AQW 1184/01)

Mr Fee:

- (a) The number of Members in breach of the rules on:
- (i) one occasion was 11;
 - (ii) two occasions was 5; and
 - (iii) on three or more occasions was 3.
- (b) The amounts repaid were £105.00, £17.60, £18.00, £5.70, £7.50, £12.00, £27.90, £83.70, £60.00, £8.70, £85.80, £3.00, £128.00, £17.40 and £3.60.

With regard to (b) above I would advise that in a number of cases the Members concerned declared the use of one envelope only. In these cases the collection of the amount involved was deemed to be uneconomic. A letter cautioning against future misuse was issued. In other cases a single payment was made to cover the costs incurred by several Members from the same party.

Constituency Offices

Mr Ford asked the Assembly Commission if it monitored the use of Constituency Offices for electoral purposes this year and what plans it has to do so in future. (AQW 1185/01)

Mr Fee: You will be aware that, the Assembly Finance Office issued guidance to all Members on 2 February 2001 and 12 March 2001 setting out the rules to be followed with regard to the use of Assembly resources during the General Election campaign (copies have been placed in the Assembly Library). This advised Members that it was for them to declare any use of their constituency office for the purposes of the General Election.

The number of Members declaring the use their constituency offices for electoral purposes was 19. The Assembly Finance Office retains records of any such self-declarations, which are reported to the Assembly Commission.

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