



Northern Ireland
Assembly

OFFICIAL REPORT

(Hansard)

Volume 15

(4 March 2002 to 28 April 2002)

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Volume 15

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ASSEMBLY MEMBERS

(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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Attwood, Alex (SDLP) (West Belfast)
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Bell, Mrs Eileen (A) (North Down)
Berry, Paul (DUP) (Newry and Armagh)
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Roche, Patrick (NIUP) (Lagan Valley)
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Shannon, Jim (DUP) (Strangford)
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Tierney, John (SDLP) (Foyle)
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Wilson, Jim (UUP) (South Antrim)
Wilson, Sammy (DUP) (East Belfast)

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<i>Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure</i>	Michael McGimpsey
<i>Minister of Education</i>	Martin McGuinness
<i>Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment</i>	Sir Reg Empey
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<i>Minister for Regional Development</i>	Peter Robinson
<i>Minister for Social Development</i>	Nigel Dodds

JUNIOR MINISTERS OF THE ASSEMBLY

<i>Office of the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister</i>	Denis Haughey James Leslie
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<i>Deputy Speakers</i>	Donovan McClelland Ms Jane Morrice Jim Wilson
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<i>Information Officer</i>	Patrick Price

NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

Monday 4 March 2002

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

Members observed two minutes' silence.

ASSEMBLY BUSINESS

Mr Speaker: I wish to inform the House that I have received a requisition, signed by 30 Members, calling for an urgent meeting of the Assembly to debate and vote on a motion for exclusion from ministerial office of one of the parties in the Assembly. Thirty Members have signed the requisition. These procedures can be found in Standing Order 11(1).

I have considered the various aspects of the question and have decided to summon a meeting of the Assembly for the morning of Wednesday 6 March, at 10.30 am. I will discuss the details of how that will be conducted with the Business Committee in the usual way.

The First Minister (Mr Trimble): On a point of order, Mr Speaker, I would like to enquire about the timing of this motion. It is remarkable that it should come in on the day when the front-page story in the 'News Letter' predicts a further act of decommissioning. It also comes at the beginning of a week that, co-incidentally, ends with the annual general meeting of my party. I want to know if any indication was given to you, Mr Speaker, as to the reason for the timing of the motion. Was anything said that would give one reason to suspect that it is a stunt and is not serious, taking into account the annual general meeting of the Ulster Unionist Party? If the people who tabled the motion were serious, they would not be sharing power with Sinn Féin. They would not be in Government with Sinn Féin. If they had any integrity — *[Interruption]*.

Mr Speaker: Order.

I have given substantial thought to the question, because it does seem to me that it has a series of implications. The first question is the basis on which such a sitting can be called and such a motion debated.

First, the signatures of 30 Members are required. That is the requirement for a petition of concern in strand one, paragraph 5(d) of the agreement, which it describes as a "significant minority". In section 30(5) of the Northern Ireland Act 1998, a notice for such a motion of exclusion

is specifically authorised if "supported by at least 30 members". Under section 42(1) of the 1998 Act, a petition of concern must also be signed by 30 Members expressing their concern. In Standing Order 11(1) the provision is made that "the Speaker shall" — not may — "as soon as may be, summon the Assembly to meet" if notice is given by the First and Deputy First Ministers or "not less than 30 Members".

It seems to me that the level of 30 Members is, for more than one reason, identified in the agreement, the 1998 Act and Standing Orders as "a significant minority". Of course, the provisions are established as safeguards. They are described in the agreement as a list of safeguards for the protection of minorities — not of any one minority, but of any minority that amounts to at least 30 Members.

The second question is whether the Speaker has leeway to judge a matter on the basis of whether there is "urgent public importance". Those are the words used in Standing Orders. A point of order was raised on that question on 10 April 2001 by Mr Eddie McGrady, who put it to the Deputy Speaker, Jane Morrice, that the matter under consideration was not a matter of urgent public importance. The Deputy Speaker ruled that if 30 Members regarded it as a matter of urgent public importance, there was little alternative but to treat it as such, since 30 Members are regarded in all these circumstances as a significant minority.

I have given consideration to the Deputy Speaker's ruling in this regard. I think that she is right. It seems to me that the alternatives are even more serious. They are to suggest either that one deals with some minorities differently from others — not a position, I believe, that the Chair can adopt — or that if the Speaker felt it possible to overrule the belief of 30 Members that a matter was of urgent public importance, then, since the same paragraph refers to the right of the First and Deputy First Ministers to call a sitting, it would potentially put the Speaker at odds with the First and Deputy First Ministers over whether a matter was of importance. I do not believe that that would be a proper thing to do. Indeed, I see that the Member does not believe that that would be a proper issue.

The First Minister: I am disagreeing with you.

Mr Speaker: I would perhaps be less keen on that than the First Minister would be. However, it is a matter of substantial difficulty. If, of course, such a procedure were to be used repeatedly, it could potentially bring the Assembly into disarray. However, the purpose in the agreement was to ensure that if any minority of 30 Members felt that they were not content to proceed with the operations of the Assembly, they were in a position to frustrate it. That was the intention behind the inclusion of this procedure. It seems to me that it would be difficult on any legal, or other, grounds for the Speaker to rule that a matter was not of urgent public importance simply

because the Speaker was uncertain about it, even though 30 Members took the view that it was.

However, I was struck by the fact that the particulars of the urgency are identified in the requisition. The resolution refers to Sinn Féin, but the requisition for the meeting refers clearly to urgency, since it identifies that it wishes the meeting to be held before 9 March — *[Interruption]*. It seems to me that those who requisitioned the meeting felt that the urgency was occasioned, in some fashion, by the significance of that date. I cannot judge otherwise.

If the Assembly were to come to the conclusion that any of its procedures were being used to frustrate its proper wishes, it would be open to the Assembly — through the Committee on Procedures or otherwise — to make changes to Standing Orders so as to protect itself against any perceived abuse. As long as those were not contrary to the Belfast Agreement or to the Northern Ireland Act 1998, which set up the Assembly, there is no reason why they should not be passed by cross-community support. In those circumstances, it is possible that the authority of the Speaker might be more fully clarified on that particular issue. The Committee on Procedures is perfectly at liberty to do that. In the absence of such a specific clarification, I believe that I have no alternative but to proceed with the sitting in the way that I have described.

The First Minister: Further to that point of order, Mr Speaker. It is clear from what you have said that the people who have tabled the motion have identified that it is 9 March that is important to them. The Standing Orders refer to urgency. It is clear that the element of urgency has nothing to do with the substantive motion. It has nothing to do with Sinn Féin. The urgency is simply in regard to the annual general meeting of the Ulster Unionist Council. It is perfectly clear that this is a stunt. It is not meant seriously.

There is no urgency with regard to Sinn Féin, only with regard to the Ulster Unionist Council's annual general meeting. I suggest that that is an abuse of procedure. I would have thought that it is an accepted principle that procedures cannot be used in that way for an ulterior purpose. Therefore, the decision to sit on Wednesday should be reconsidered. Indeed, it should be left to those who sit in the DUP corner to show that they really mean this by ceasing to share power with Sinn Féin and by ceasing to sit in the Assembly. If they had any guts, they would resign and walk out.

Mr Speaker: I find myself in something of a dilemma, because in other circumstances I find myself focusing on clarifying the motives and motivations of those with whom I work. In this circumstance, I must often caution myself against looking at those motives and motivations and stick to the Standing Orders, which it is my responsibility to maintain. I think that, within the substance of

the Belfast Agreement and the Northern Ireland Act 1998, it is entirely possible for a minority of 30 Members to frustrate the activities of the Assembly. If there is a wish to guard against abuse — I do not necessarily rule what the First Minister has said “out of court” — it is a matter for Standing Orders.

It is my job to uphold Standing Orders. If the Assembly believes that a Standing Order should be changed in order to ensure that Members use Standing Orders differently, it is for the Assembly to make that change. It is my responsibility to fulfil the Standing Orders only as they are. As I have said already, if Standing Orders are to be changed, they must be changed only in the spirit of the Belfast Agreement and the word of the 1998 Act. Standing Orders cannot go against the 1998 Act. I have already made that clear.

Mr Paisley Jnr: Before the First Minister busts a blood vessel, Mr Speaker, can you confirm that, in tabling the motion, the parties that have signed it and brought it before the House have played by the rules that were established both by the House and by the UUP, which is protesting too much this morning?

Furthermore, Mr Speaker, given that you have made several indications about motivation this morning, can you indicate that — from the First Minister's comments — his motivation in protesting so loudly is that he has not got the guts to oppose Sinn Féin's continuing in the Government of Northern Ireland and that because he wants to stay in Government, he refuses to oppose Sinn Féin?

12.15 pm

Mr Speaker: Order. First, I am sure that the First Minister will be appreciative of the Member's obvious concern for his well-being. I suggest that there have been excessive medical references, perhaps because I am in the Chair today, to psychological well-being and motivations and, indeed, to blood vessels and guts. It might be best to stick to politics, rather than medicine.

As far as the Member's point of order is concerned, I confirm — and I am sure that he will be much relieved — that what has been done is entirely in conformity with Standing Orders. Had it been otherwise, I would not have permitted it. I am content to clarify that.

Lord Kilclooney: On a point of order, Mr Speaker. Mr Paisley Jnr mentioned not having the guts to oppose Sinn Féin. My gut reaction is that this is an absolute stunt. *[Interruption]*.

Mr Speaker: Order.

Lord Kilclooney: I want a ruling on one issue.

Mr P Robinson: Where's the letter about the police?

Lord Kilclooney: The letter about the police has been shown to the appropriate people, of whom Mr Peter Robinson is not one. Let us stick to the subject. *[Interruption.]*

Mr Speaker: Order.

Lord Kilclooney: First, 9 March has been stated to be a date of great urgency by the DUP and, of course, Mr Peter Weir, who always supports the DUP. Have you, Mr Speaker, decided why 9 March is of great urgency? Was any explanation given of why that date was selected by the DUP, or is having the debate prior to the annual meeting of the Ulster Unionist Council simply a stunt?

Secondly, I require a ruling because Committees of the House are meeting on Wednesday, as is the Northern Ireland Policing Board, on which many Members are represented. Are those meetings to be cancelled, or will they run concurrently with the Assembly sitting?

Mr Speaker: Far be it from me to suggest that 9 March and the meetings that I understand will be held on that date are matters of great moment and importance, requiring advertisement and so on, or otherwise. That is not a matter for me; nor is it for me to judge why the date was identified. It is identified in the requisition, and that, as far as I am concerned, is that.

On the point of order about whether or not other meetings should be cancelled so that a plenary meeting may proceed, the fact is that it is quite common — sometimes to my regret, I have to say — that even on stated plenary meeting days, Committees and, indeed, the Northern Ireland Policing Board are content to meet. I see no particular reason for requesting the cancellation of any meetings so that a plenary meeting may proceed. Of course, it is a matter for others if, knowing that there is to be a plenary meeting, they choose to rearrange their meetings. I would certainly not give any such direction from the Chair. If I may say in passing, it is a bit regrettable if, on stated plenary meeting dates, there are repeated meetings of a non-urgent kind, but that is wholly another matter.

Mr C Wilson: On a point of order, Mr Speaker. It is interesting to see the tussle that has developed between the First Minister and the DUP and, indeed, Mr Trimble's finger-pointing at the DUP and accusing it of being involved in institutions that are linked to, and compel them to take the Pledge of Office to work under, the terms of the Belfast Agreement. The Unionist electorate will be rather baffled as to why any Unionist in the Assembly sits on an Executive with Sinn Féin when he clearly has no mandate to do so.

Mr Speaker: Order.

Mr C Wilson: And I mean any Unionist, whether from the DUP or the Ulster Unionist Party —

Mr Speaker: Order.

Mr C Wilson: Both parties told the electorate that they would not participate in Government with Sinn Féin.

Mr Speaker: Order. I called the Member on a point of order. I am not clear that there was a point of order at all in what he said.

Mr P Robinson: Would you like to answer him?

Mr Speaker: It is not a matter of answering him. If the Member has a point of order, I permit him to make it — but only if it is a point of order.

Mr C Wilson: It was lest you had any doubt, Mr Speaker — you were questioning the reason for calling the special motion.

Mr Speaker: Order.

Mr C Wilson: It was to say that, from my point of view, I have no qualms about telling you —

Mr Speaker: Order.

Mr C Wilson: It was to point the finger at Mr Trimble —

Mr Speaker: Order. The Member will resume his seat.

I was not questioning motivation at all. I was making it clear that it was not my responsibility, or even appropriate for me, to proceed in that way.

Mr P Robinson: On a point of order, Mr Speaker. I am sure you will be pleased that at least the electorate in Strangford were not baffled on the issues at the last election. As one of those involved with the requisition, I want to make it clear that, as far as the Democratic Unionist Party is concerned, the decision was made with regard to the diaries of those who were going to the United States and to other places over Easter. It was recognised that to get the best attendance for the debate —

A Member: Junkets.

Mr P Robinson: If they are junkets, it is principally your party that goes on them. I am pleased to hear that dealings with the President and others are regarded by the Ulster Unionists as junkets.

As far as my party is concerned, the date was chosen to maximise the possible attendance at the debate. However, this is typical of the First Minister, who thinks that all life revolves around him and the Ulster Unionist Party. He should have learnt by now that less of the electorate is concerned about what the Ulster Unionist Party wants.

Mr Speaker: I trust that the proper matters of order have been sufficiently aired and addressed for the House to know that I have given them the fullest consideration that I can. I feel that in the present circumstances I have no alternative but to allow things to proceed under the Standing Orders. If others wish to change the Standing Orders, or the House wishes to change them, that is a matter for the House, and I will seek to implement whatever Standing Orders are in place at any particular time.

PUBLIC PETITION

Mobile Phone Mast at McCracken Memorial Church, Belfast

Mr Speaker: Ms Monica McWilliams has begged leave to present a public petition in accordance with Standing Order 22.

Ms McWilliams: I beg leave to present a petition from residents of the Malone area of south Belfast. It refers to the proposed erection of telecommunications apparatus, consisting of internally mounted dual polar antennae, in an existing church tower. That will require external alterations to a listed building, with equipment and cabin to the rear of the McCracken Memorial Presbyterian Church, 161 Malone Road, Belfast. The petition has over 1,200 signatures from residents of the area who are strongly opposed to the development. Not only will the mobile phone mast destroy the character of the listed building, but conclusive evidence on the safety of the radiation emitted from such masts has yet to be produced. They are understandably concerned at the long-term effects on their community, and ask that you accept this petition.

Ms McWilliams moved forward and laid the petition on the Table.

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

ASSEMBLY BUSINESS

Suspension of Standing Orders

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved (with cross-community support):

That Standing Orders 10(2) and 10(6) be suspended for Monday 4 March 2002. — [*Minister of Finance and Personnel.*]

2002 BUDGET TIMETABLE

Mr Speaker: I have received notice from the Minister of Finance and Personnel that he wishes to make a statement on the 2002 Budget timetable.

The Minister of Finance and Personnel (Dr Farren): I would like to make a statement on behalf of the Executive, setting out our proposed timetable for the key planning and financial events between now and December, when the Budget for 2003-04 must be agreed.

This year the cycle will cover the period 2003-04 to 2005-06, as the Executive makes plans for the three-year period covered by the Treasury's spending review. The Budget and the processes surrounding it are evolving.

In presenting last year's Budget, the Executive endeavoured to build on and refine the processes that were put in place during the first Budget. I intend to continue that process in drawing up this year's Budget.

(Mr Deputy Speaker [Mr J Wilson] in the Chair)

I have carefully considered many of the comments and suggestions about the process, and, where possible, I have tried to take those into account in this year's timetable. Last year, the Executive committed themselves to ensuring that they presented the draft Budget as soon as possible after the summer recess. That was intended to facilitate greater consultation on the draft Budget. The Executive found that additional consultation important in finalising the Budget, and we intend to work again towards presenting this year's draft Budget as soon as possible after the summer recess.

This year is important in budgetary terms, because a UK spending review will take place. In July, the Chancellor will announce the financial envelope for the next three years for all Whitehall Departments and the three devolved Administrations, including Northern Ireland. Thus, we will know the total level of resources that Northern Ireland can expect to receive for the years 2003-04, 2004-05 and 2005-06. To avoid confusion, I intend to use the terms "spending review" or "SR 2002" to refer to the UK-wide exercise, and the term "Budget 2002" to refer to our own exercise.

At this stage, the Executive do not know what outcome to expect from SR 2002. The current signals from the Treasury are not encouraging. However, the Executive are determined to make the strongest possible case, and they must plan in a realistic but flexible manner.

In setting out the first two Budgets, the Executive concentrated primarily on the following financial year and included only broadly indicative figures for subsequent years. That does not secure a satisfactory planning position for public services, because a Department's financial position is not confirmed until the finalisation of the relevant Budget in December. Many aspects of our key

services, such as capital projects and the education system, do not run on a financial-year basis, and we must make the transition from year to year as smooth as possible.

This year, the Executive will seek to establish, in the circumstances, the firmest possible three-year planning position. Therefore, in drawing up this year's Budget, we aim to set out our expenditure proposals for the next three years. That will help Departments to make more long-term plans, because they should have firm figures for 2003-04 and indicative allocations for 2004-05 and 2005-06. The Executive intend to revisit those allocations in the Budget exercises in 2003 and 2004. If the Assembly achieves a better strategic plan for the Programme for Government and the Budget this year, there should be no need to have such a fundamental review of the spending plans in 2003 or 2004 as is envisaged for this year.

The process of preparing the new Budget runs from now until December. In December, the Executive will seek to settle an agreed Budget in line with the revised Programme for Government that will form the basis of spending plans for all Departments and other public sector bodies.

I remind Members of the need to complete work on the spending allocations for the financial year 2002-03. The Budget Bill was passed last week. It covers the Vote on Account for 2002-03 and is intended to enable expenditure to proceed until the Main Estimates are agreed and the related Budget (No 2) Bill is passed.

We intend to present the Main Estimates and introduce the relevant Supply resolution in late May or early June.

12.30 pm

This year's Budget timetable will be very demanding. It must be managed carefully if Members' and Committee's expectations for consultation are to be met, and if we are to meet our section 75 obligations. The position is complicated by the fact that the Chancellor will not announce the outcome of the UK spending review until the third week of July. We will not know until then what resources are available to us for the next three years. Nevertheless, the Executive wish to begin now to examine the strategic inter- and intradepartmental issues and priorities that they will face.

The next few months will be very important for the Executive as regards assessing priorities and drawing up a strategic framework for use once the outcome of the spending review 2002 is known. We need to complete the budgetary process before Christmas. With that in mind, the approach that I am setting out today will ensure that the Assembly has as much time as possible to consider the Budget proposals contained in the draft Budget 2002, in the context set by the Programme for Government. That will ensure that the spending proposals can be approved by December, after an acceptable period of scrutiny. This step should be seen as the main authorisation

of spending plans. It follows that we should provide the best possible procedures for that purpose.

The proposals set out in the indicative timetable allow for much earlier involvement of the Assembly Committees in the budgetary process than was possible last year. Today's statement marks the start of that process, although Committees are free to scrutinise financial performance and budgetary issues at any time.

I draw Members' attention to the third item from the bottom of page 13. The item refers to the first consideration of the draft Programme for Government and the draft Budget by the Executive, which should be done by 5 September 2002. That item is included incorrectly on that page. The entry can be found in its proper place at the top of page 15. Members may ignore the entry on page 13.

To set the process in motion, guidance is being issued which requires all Departments to submit a position report, providing a broad analysis of current performance in delivering the Executive's priorities. Position reports will provide each Department with an opportunity to set out its overall purpose and strategy, identify its role in delivering the Executive's priorities and set out its financial situations. The reports will also identify areas where Departments anticipate reduced requirements or expect to make savings which will allow for the redeployment of resources.

Clear links between the Programme for Government and public service agreements will be drawn out, and the focus will be on the assessment of output and outcomes. Equality and social need input will also be considered as central issues in the Budget cycle.

As before, the Executive will consult on the implications for equality and new TSN needs of the draft Budget in the autumn. However, to ensure that the draft Budget fulfils our determination to promote equality of opportunity and new TSN, those issues will need attention at every stage of the process in Departments and during the consideration of the issues by Committees.

The guidance states clearly that Committees should have a proper opportunity to scrutinise their Departments' position reports before they are submitted to my Department and the Economic Policy Unit. That meets a concern expressed by Committees last year that they wished to be involved in the process at an earlier stage in the cycle than was possible last year.

In providing this opportunity for earlier engagement and scrutiny, I hope that Committees will view their Departments' position in the widest possible context and consider the level of resources that are likely to be available. I also urge Committees not to lose sight of the full range of issues that all public services are faced with, or to become preoccupied with any bids for additional resources that may emerge. At this stage we must focus on determining what our strategic priorities should be. It

is for that reason that we decided to produce a position report early in the financial planning cycle.

We must form a more strategic view of Departments' overall spending. If we are to make a substantial difference to spending patterns, we must examine what is being secured for the large amounts of spending on mainstream public services. We are working on several means to help with this process — for example, the public service agreement targets set out in the Programme for Government provide a good basis for some inquiries. The needs and effectiveness evaluations will provide a more systematic analysis of the issues in six major sectors.

Those tools do not provide multiple-choice answers that we can simply mark with a tick or a cross. They can inform our judgements, but those judgements must be made first by the Executive, in their preparation of the draft Budget, and then by the Assembly. In doing so, Committees may wish to consider departmental plans and the public service agreement targets set out in the Programme for Government. Committees must also consider how priorities set out in the Programme for Government may be refined and developed in the light of experience in the last year.

It is important that Committees also consider the implications for equality and new targeting social need and that they should be informed by the scrutiny of other material available to them. In that way, we can ensure effective examination and identification of changing financial priorities at departmental level and at a wider strategic level.

To put that into context, it is worth remembering that we will not know the implications of the 2002 spending review until the Chancellor's announcement in late July, although current signals from the Treasury suggest that this will be a tough spending review. We will make our case to the Treasury in the coming months, but we must be realistic about the possible outcome. That is why the Executive established indicative minima for Departments when preparing for this year's Budget. By doing so, we were able to set aside an allocation of £125 million, to be known as the Executive spending review allocation. We will have to make decisions about this allocation, regardless of the outcome of this year's spending review. Our decision to hold back the allocation represents a prudent approach to financial management, as well as being a clear signal of our determination to look for change in the way that spending is allocated. We must recognise that this allocation of £125 million, plus the consequences of any allocations made by the Chancellor in his April 2002 Budget, and any reduced requirements declared by Departments, could be the main resources available for allocation. I therefore emphasise the need for realism in our approach to the task ahead.

Of course, before then we will need to conclude our consideration of the Barnett mechanism. Over recent

months we have been undertaking a detailed and, indeed, rigorous scrutiny of the Barnett formula, looking carefully to see whether it meets our needs sufficiently now and, more importantly, whether it will meet them in the future. We cannot accept a situation in which priority services provision here, such as health, education and transport, is clearly less favourable than in England, which appears to be the consequence of Barnett. I am sure that Members will accept that now is not the time to state publicly all that we have in mind for the negotiations that are about to begin, but I can assure the Assembly that we are determined to seek an appropriate and fair outcome to this year's spending review and that the case will be pressed at the highest levels.

Challenging Barnett is not something we will undertake lightly, and it is not, as I have said before, a "no risk" option. We can be sure that any challenge will lead to strong pressure from the Treasury that we should pay our own way more fully, and I do not have to remind Members that this will mean looking hard at the rates and at the financing of water and sewerage services. This will apply especially if the Chancellor increases taxation to finance health spending.

In the months ahead we will also be assessing the outcome of the six needs and effectiveness evaluations before the summer, covering health and social care, education, training, housing, selective financial assistance and culture, arts and leisure, which cover some 75% of our total expenditure. We will also be considering a number of other strategic issues including the Burns Report, the Hayes and acute hospitals review, the regional transportation strategy, the task force on long-term unemployment, the interdepartmental work on research and development, proposals in relation to the Water Service and the rural visioning report.

These are all complex pieces of work, which will provide us with a good deal of information about what we are achieving with what we are spending and will serve to inform future expenditure decisions. However, we do not expect the evaluations to provide us with easy answers. They are more likely to identify areas where we will need to review our policies and what we are doing. Nevertheless, they will provide a valuable analysis of what we are achieving with current expenditure and valuable information that will inform future spending decisions.

Clearly, we all face an intensive period of work, which will culminate in the presentation of the Executive's position report to the Assembly in late May. It is important that we conclude this work as soon as possible before the summer, so that the Executive's conclusions about the key issues facing the Administration are understood and can be the subject of debate in the Assembly and between Departments and Assembly Committees.

It is likely that the publication of the position report in late May will coincide with Assembly business on the

Main Estimates for 2002-03. I want to make it clear that these are two distinct processes, and I hope that the timing of the business can be managed in a way that helps to mark that distinction. In brief, we will need to debate and vote on the main motion seeking approval of the Main Estimates for 2002-03 and then consider the stages of the Budget (No 2) Bill.

The key point is that those relate to 2002-03. The Budget process that is set out in the timetable that I am announcing today begins the cycle for 2003-04.

12.45 pm

The Committee for Finance and Personnel will have an important role to play throughout the next phase, and it may be able to assist by drawing together the key themes and conclusions of each Committee. I will welcome, therefore, the advice and assistance of that Committee throughout the process, especially at several key stages, and I will be discussing that in detail with it.

Once the position report has been published the Committees will have until August to consult on, and consider, the departmental proposals. Obviously, we want to achieve as much as possible before the recess so that the Executive will be properly informed during the summer, when it considers the revision of the Programme for Government and begins to construct a draft Budget. The Committee for Finance and Personnel will again play a key role in co-ordinating any views expressed during that period. I look forward to receiving any comments or conclusions before the end of August, when we will prepare the updated Programme for Government and the draft Budget.

Last year we used the period between the end of August and mid-September to develop and refine proposals for the Programme for Government and the draft Budget before introducing the drafts to the Assembly in late September. We propose to follow a similar process this autumn. The Executive found the debate on the draft Budget on foot of a motion from the Committee for Finance and Personnel to be a helpful opportunity to hear Members' concerns. That debate will supplement the work of the Committee for Finance and Personnel, which, in parallel, will take evidence on the draft Budget from other Statutory Committees during the autumn.

Consultation on equality implications will take place in October or early November, when Committees will also consider the revised Programme for Government and the public service agreements (PSAs). I hope that the Committee for Finance and Personnel will be able to report to me its views on the draft Budget as early as possible in November. That would allow me to ensure that that Committee's views will be taken into account in the drawing up of a paper on the revised Budget, for consideration by the Executive in mid-November. We are working towards making a Budget statement in early

December, with an Assembly debate and vote to take place by 10 December.

In preparing our Budget 2002-03, we will also have to take account of the final stage of the implementation of resource budgeting in the 2002 Budget. That will involve several changes to the budgeting regime of Departments, including the movement of a significant element of non-cash costs — appreciation, cost of capital, management of assets and provisions — from the annually managed expenditure to the departmental expenditure limit. In addition, capital grants from central Government to the private sector will score as resource rather than capital expenditure — that will have a profound effect on the management of our resources. As a result of those changes, the Assembly will receive better-focused information about how resources are used to meet objectives and on whether taxpayers are receiving value for money. That will result in enhanced accountability to the Assembly.

I am aware, however, that the move to resource budgeting has been seen to complicate some of our financial processes. It will take time for us to become familiar with the new concepts and presentations of information and figures. I want to work with the Assembly to help it to get to grips with that change. My officials have already held two seminars on some aspects of that work, and it will hold more in the coming months. I urge Members to become as familiar as possible with the issues.

The preparation of the annual Budget is usually a complex and challenging exercise. This year will be especially difficult. We will be seeking to put a three-year budgetary framework in place, and we will need to take account of the needs and effectiveness evaluations and consider how best to address the issues they will raise. We will also be considering how to deal with the increasing difficulties associated with the Barnett formula. However, we must be realistic about the signals emerging from the Treasury, and we must prepare ourselves for a situation where we do not have sufficient resources to fund all the activities that we would wish to fund.

I ask for the Assembly's and the Committees' forbearance in this process. There will be limited time available at each stage during the first part of the year. All those stages are, in practice, preparations for the main statutory stage of Assembly involvement in the autumn. Hence, we do not need the final views of Committees in the constrained periods for input into the position reports from Departments in April and in response to the overall position report in the late spring and early summer. At both stages, Departments and the Executive will have to move on at, or close to, the stated times.

It may appear that the stages are rushed — but they are not the decision-making stages. If there were one point that I would emphasise most strongly, it would be

the value and necessity of the Committees providing clear views on priorities, so that the Committee for Finance and Personnel can advise me on those by mid-August. That will mean that when the Executive address the issues of allocations within the departmental expenditure limit in early September, we can reflect on the views of the Assembly.

Even if that, in practice, means completing the work before the summer recess, clearly there is substantial time before then for it to happen. All other stages should serve, rather than obscure, that key point.

The main events associated with the preparation of the Programme for Government and the Budget 2002 include Departments preparing position reports setting out the main issues they will face in the three years from 2003-04 and the presentation of the Executive's position report in late May. That will then be available to the Committee for Finance and Personnel, other departmental Committees and the wider community. I will seek the views of the Committee for Finance and Personnel by the end of August on its consultations with other Committees. The outcome of the six needs and effectiveness evaluations will be carefully considered in drawing up the Programme for Government and the draft Budget.

The Executive will develop and consider the Programme for Government and the draft Budget, which will seek to put in place a financial framework for the next three years, in early September. An updated version of the Programme for Government and the draft Budget will be introduced to the Assembly in late September. Following this the Committee for Finance and Personnel will take evidence from the Department of Finance and Personnel and other Statutory Committees on the draft Budget.

The Executive would again welcome a further debate on the Budget should the Committee for Finance and Personnel decide to introduce this. There will be consultation on the equality implications of the Programme for Government and the draft Budget. Concurrently, Committee consideration will be taking place on the revised Programme for Government and public service agreements, reporting back on those to the Office of the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister.

Our aim is that the revised Budget will be announced to the Assembly in early December and debated and voted on a week thereafter. I trust that Members will find this somewhat lengthy explanation of the intended procedures and timetable helpful in preparing for the work of the coming months.

The Chairperson of the Committee for Finance and Personnel (Mr Molloy): Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I welcome the new Deputy Speaker to the Chair. I thank the Minister for his detailed statement on the 2002 Budget at this early stage of the year. The Committee for Finance and Personnel advised the Department that the Budget cycle and the timetable

employed last year was an improvement on previous years, but that small improvements could be made, and I welcome that these have been taken on board and have been pointed out in the statement.

Will the Minister confirm what assistance Committees will be receiving when deliberating on the departmental position reports? Will they receive the detailed guidance that Departments receive — a copy of the commissioning letter for explanation? How does the Minister foresee Committees gaining a full knowledge of their role in the process considering that the Budget is covering a three-year expenditure plan? Does he agree that information seminars could benefit Committees involved in the Budget process? Would his officials be willing to participate and guide Committee members through their role? The Minister has mentioned seminars. Seminars on the spending review and the Budget 2002 would be helpful.

Is the Minister satisfied that withholding the £125 million allocation referred to in the Executive spending review allocation will not prejudice his negotiating position with the Treasury in the run-up to the 2002 spending review? Is there any danger that the Treasury will penalise us for not having allocated that money, and in those circumstances would it not have been better to have allocated the money to priority areas such as health, education and infrastructure?

Dr Farren: I thank the Chairperson for his comments and questions. I assure him, and Members, that my statement places significant importance on the contributions that Committees can make to the process.

In several statements and comments I have been urging Committees to involve themselves now in the planning process through their interrogation of the Departments. Detailed guidance concerning position reports will be issued later this week. As I have already said, officials will be available to provide information and guidance to Members on resource accounting and budgeting in the most appropriate format, whether it be at Committees, or in some other format suggested, on all issues related to new approaches to budgeting. We could link the spending review process with that.

The £125 million, described as the Executive's allocation, is related to our key priorities — health, education and transport. The Chairperson of the Committee for Finance and Personnel has been pointing to fears about how that might be viewed by the Treasury, but I do not have any such fears. I said in my statement that it was a prudent move on the Executive's part to acquire authority for the £125 million so that we could signal to ourselves and in general terms the priority we attach to these three key areas of spending.

1.00 pm

Dr Birnie: I wish you well in your new post, Mr Deputy Speaker.

The Minister's detailed statement was a very useful introduction to what will be a critical spending review. I hope that there will not be too much blood spilt on the carpet as the various Departments argue over the size of their allocations.

The Minister mentioned various tools that can be used to design the outcome. In particular, reference is made to the needs and effectiveness evaluations. As I understand them, these monitor the level of per capita spending in policy areas here relative to Great Britain and the effectiveness of outputs gained from that spending. Can the Minister tell the House when the outcomes of those six needs and effectiveness evaluations will be available to the Committees? Those evaluations have a strategic role in informing how the money should be divided up between and within Departments.

The Minister referred to the Economic Policy Unit (EPU). Can he expand on the role of the EPU as regards his Department in this Budget cycle?

Dr Farren: Six needs and effectiveness evaluations are currently under way, and each is scheduled to produce a final report by May 2002. I said earlier that the studies are particularly complex, especially with regard to the attempt to measure effectiveness in a manner that will enable us to make useful comparisons. It is much easier to identify our needs and then to establish the levels of available expenditure in comparison with those available to others. However, the measurement of effectiveness is a much more complex exercise.

Although I have said that a final report should be available by May, Committee members will have the opportunity to interrogate the Departments on their work with regard to needs and effectiveness measurement.

The role of the EPU, which is part of the Office of the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister, is one of close collaboration with officials from my Department, particularly in respect of overall strategic matters and most notably reflected in the work that produced the Programme for Government and its subsequent revisions.

Mr McMenamin: I welcome you to the Chair, Mr Deputy Speaker, and wish you well in your endeavours.

The Minister outlined a plan for financial growth until December 2002, which is welcome. What flexibility exists in the Budget timetable?

Dr Farren: I thank the Member for his expression of an expectation of continued economic growth. I trust that all that we will do will support in positive ways the economic growth and development that has been happening in Northern Ireland recently. On flexibility, close examination of the timetable shows that it is a fairly tight one, but it is comprehensive, and it is intended to alert Members to key stages and developments in the whole process through to the Christmas recess. We will

present and vote on our Budget in mid-December. Any flexibility will be limited.

We are presenting the timetable much earlier than was possible for my predecessor. We are doing so to put Members on notice about the kind of commitment that we want to see from Committees and the work that they can, and should, become involved in with the Departments and the Committee for Finance and Personnel — and, through that Committee, the Department of Finance and Personnel. The process is taking place in a critical year as far as our spending planning is concerned.

Mr Close: Like other Members, I congratulate you on your elevation, Mr Deputy Speaker, and I wish you well in your new position. I would also like to thank the Minister for his comprehensive statement on the Budget timetable for 2002. Does he agree that we are attempting a mission impossible, given that we are in an important year in budgetary terms? We are expecting the spending review results but will not have them until July. The Minister said that the Executive want to establish the firmest possible three-year planning position.

As Dr Birnie said, we will not have the results of the needs and effectiveness evaluations until May. When will the Finance and Personnel Committee know the outcome of the consideration that the Executive have been giving to the Barnett formula and its implications for rates, water and sewerage? Other reviews are ongoing, and they should all be dovetailed into the exercise.

What provision of staff and time does the Minister intend to make to enable Committees to meet, as per his schedule, during the summer recess? If they are not meeting during that time, I fail to understand when and how the work will be done. Am I right that it is anticipated that during July and August the Committee for Finance and Personnel will be discussing the Executive position report, which we do not yet have? It will also be receiving preliminary responses from other Committees on the Executive position reports, which the other Committees have not yet seen, and which, therefore, will have to come during July and August. This will all have to be dovetailed into the outcome of the spending review 2002, which is coming in July.

I said that it was a mission impossible. If a job is worth doing, it is worth doing well. The necessary time needs to be allocated to the respective Committees to enable them to perform the scrutiny role. It strikes me that scrutiny is being stretched to breaking point yet again.

Dr Farren: If it is a mission impossible, then I am not sure what the Member and I are doing here. Nonetheless, it is our responsibility to turn what he describes as a mission impossible into a mission possible. We have the means, and we will make sure that we have as much time as possible. However, I cannot stretch the days and months, desirable as that may be.

I will speak to the Finance and Personnel Committee soon about our approach to the Barnett formula and outline what the Executive have determined in that respect. We all know that the final reports on the needs and effectiveness evaluations will not be available until May, and I want to emphasise that Committees can get involved with their Departments in matters related to the needs and effectiveness exercise and, indeed, on all other matters, particularly strategic planning. In recent weeks I have been urging Committees to begin the process of engagement; perhaps they already have. I am not privy to the details of every Committee's engagement with its relevant Department. Nonetheless, I am sure that Members appreciate the need for that to be under way.

We shall be making a vigorous approach to the Treasury to convince it of the scale of our needs and the deficits in investment in various forms of infrastructure, including water and sewerage. We shall address our revenue streams with regard to their effectiveness in meeting some of those needs. We shall adopt a vigorous approach, and I assure Mr Close that time will be made available — certainly on my part — to engage with Committees. If Committees face particular difficulties, they should itemise them and note the support they need to engage meaningfully in this exercise. As Minister of Finance and Personnel, the amount of time that I will have for vacations over the summer will not be great. However, if my officials and I are to be involved, I am sure that Committees will make a considerable investment in assisting us through what will be a challenging period to ensure that we make available spending resources commensurate with our needs.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Members will have noted that a gremlin has come with me to the Speaker's Chair and has visited our clocks. We shall do our best to continue without the technology.

Mr McHugh: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I welcome you to your new position. It is not a simple task, as you will have noticed this morning.

I welcome the Minister's statement and the issues that it covered. Scrutiny is of particular importance to the Committee for Agriculture and Rural Development, as is the need to cover all these issues due to their financial implications.

1.15 pm

I note the significance of areas such as health, education and unemployment in the six needs and effectiveness evaluations. What relevance will be given to the objectives and actions necessary for the implementation of initiatives such as the vision report in the years ahead?

Dr Farren: The fact that a number of these key issues have been identified in the report indicates that the Executive place a significant emphasis upon them.

My statement today shows that I share that approach. The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development is in the process of developing action plans associated with the vision report. The associated costings will be brought to the Executive in due course and given considerable attention. A first presentation on some of the key issues in the vision report was given at the last Executive meeting. However, we await the costings associated with the action plans that the Minister intends to formulate as a result of that important piece of work. Our approach to the spending plans for the coming years will take that into consideration.

Without stepping into my Colleague's shoes, allow me to say that it is an important report, eagerly awaited by the farming and rural community. The report has considerable relevance for future planning.

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

Mr Deputy Speaker, I also congratulate you on your new position and hope that you have a long and happy time in it.

I am alarmed at the picture painted by the Minister of how the Government plan their finances. In regard to proper planning, it is ridiculous that our Departments will know the details of their spending allocations only in December. I appreciate the Minister's efforts to minimise these difficulties.

The Department of Agriculture and Rural Development has come through a difficult time, with efforts being made to eliminate diseases such as BSE, brucellosis and botulism. The efforts to eliminate these diseases through R&D, especially in animals, need to be 100%, because we are an exporting country. Will the Minister assure us that his Department will do everything it can to assist the R&D focused on these problems?

Dr Farren: I assure the Member that the programme, as set out, is intended to provide maximum opportunity for Members to become involved with us in the whole planning process, both in the Assembly and through their Committees. The Chancellor's spending review will not be completed until mid-July. Therefore, we cannot plan our Budget in any detail until then. However, a great deal of preparatory work can be undertaken. The Member can be assured that the Executive and my Department are conscious of the needs of agriculture and rural development. As far as possible, resources will be made available to deal with the problems the Member identified in relation to animal disease control and elimination.

Mr O'Neill: I welcome you, Mr Deputy Speaker, and I wish you all the best.

The Minister has outlined a timetable for the 2002 spending review. As has been said already, the outcome of that review will be known around mid-July. Can the

Minister confirm that the Barnett formula will be subjected to rigorous challenge as part of his efforts to secure a positive outcome for Northern Ireland in the spending review?

Dr Farren: As I attempted to say in my statement, I assure the Member and the House that a close and rigorous examination of the Barnett formula is already under way. It is the responsibility of the Executive, and of the Department of Finance and Personnel in particular, to ensure that we carry out a detailed analysis of the resource implications of the working of Barnett; to challenge any perceived weaknesses that can be identified in the manner of Barnett's operation in our regard; to build up our case, especially that which is based on our assessment of needs; and, allied with that assessment, to evaluate the effectiveness with which our resources are expended.

That will ensure that we have satisfied ourselves initially that we have not ignored any aspect of the way in which the resources that are allocated under Barnett are made available. It will also ensure that we can answer any questions put to us by the Treasury, advance strongly our case for essential resources for the delivery of services and infrastructure and make good the deficits that currently exist in those services.

NORTH/SOUTH MINISTERIAL COUNCIL

Special EU Programmes

Mr Deputy Speaker: I have received notice from the Minister of Finance and Personnel that he wishes to make a statement on the North/South Ministerial Council sectoral meeting on special EU programmes held on 20 February 2002 in Ballymena.

The Minister of Finance and Personnel (Dr Farren): Before I make my statement on the Council meeting, I wish to correct an omission from the opening of my previous statement. I wish to join other Members in welcoming you, Mr Deputy Speaker, to the Chair, and I extend to you my good wishes on your new position.

The sixth meeting of the North/South Ministerial Council in sectoral format on special EU programmes was held in Ballymena on Wednesday 20 February 2002. Mr Dermot Nesbitt and I attended that meeting, and this report has been approved by Mr Nesbitt and is made also on his behalf. Mr Charlie McCreevy TD, Minister for Finance, represented the Irish Government. This meeting of the North/South Ministerial Council in this sector was my first as Minister of Finance and Personnel. I was pleased to host the meeting in Ballymena. A substantial range of business was covered at the meeting, reflecting the statutory and corporate responsibilities of the Special EU Programmes Body.

The chief executive of the body gave an oral report to the Council on the developments since the last meeting in this sector on 30 October 2001. The report covered a range of topics, including the progress made in implementing the Peace II and INTERREG III programmes, and the LEADER+, URBAN II and EQUAL community initiatives, all of which have an important impact on local communities and help to promote social inclusion and cross-border co-operation. The chief executive advised that the closure of the Peace I and INTERREG II programmes was progressing well and that the final reports for both programmes would be forwarded to the Finance Departments for submission to the European Commission by the required date of June 2002. The chief executive also advised the Council of the progress made on several corporate issues, including the final stages of the recruitment process for permanent staff and relocation of the headquarters to new premises in Belfast.

The Council emphasised the importance of the work of the body in implementing the new programmes, welcomed the progress made since the last meeting on several important issues, such as developing the network of channels through which European Union funds support individual projects, and highlighted the importance of those projects in building bridges of peace and reconciliation

across communities and maximising the social and economic benefits on the island, especially in border areas.

In accordance with the statutory requirements of the North/South Co-operation (Implementation Bodies) (Northern Ireland) Order 1999, the Special EU Programmes Body submitted to the Council the annual report and accounts for the period ending 31 December 2000. These were the first annual report and accounts produced by the body and covered the 13-month period from December 1999 to December 2000. The Comptrollers and Auditors General in the North and in the South have audited the accounts. I am pleased to report that they were certified without qualification. The Council approved the annual report and accounts and agreed to have them laid before the Assembly and both Houses of the Oireachtas.

The Council considered and approved the corporate plan for the body for 2002-04 and the business plan for 2002. It was the second corporate plan that had been submitted to the Council since the establishment of the body, the first having been approved by the North/South Ministerial Council at the sectoral meeting in this format in November 2000. The corporate plan detailed the strategic objectives for the body with regard to each of its functional areas. The Council was advised that it was the intention of the chief executive to revise the corporate plan once the full senior management team was in place, and that the revised plan would be presented to the Council later in the year. The Council was advised of the substantial progress made by the body in recruiting a full complement of permanent staff. Of the 31 posts approved by the North/South Ministerial Council, 23 have already been filled with permanent appointees. It is expected that the remaining vacancies will be filled by May 2002.

The Council considered a paper prepared by the Special EU Programmes Body that detailed the progress that had been made in the implementation of the Peace II programme. The Council noted that all 26 local strategy partnerships in Northern Ireland had been set up and formally approved by the body. Of those, six have had their local strategies and action plans approved by the body. The Council was also advised that the Executive had approved allocations to the local strategy partnerships, and that interim contract negotiations between the programmes body and the local strategy partnerships had begun.

1.30 pm

The Council was then told of the progress that has been made in setting up the county council-led task forces in the border region. The chief executive advised the Council of progress made in closing the gap funding arrangements. He indicated that an expected 70% of all gap-funded projects will be assessed under full applications by the end of March. The Council noted the progress and asked if the body would consider a possible presentation,

to include examples of projects funded under the programme, to the Council at its next sectoral meeting in this format.

The Council considered a report by the EU Special Programmes Body on the progress made on the INTERREG IIIA operational programme and was pleased to note that the final structure of the programme had been agreed with the Commission at the end of December and that formal approval of the INTERREG III programme is expected shortly.

The Council was advised that the body was assisting the development of the INTERREG III partnerships. It welcomed the imminent approval of the programme and the progress made to date and stressed the urgency of having the programme operational as quickly as possible.

The final paper considered by the Council was a progress report on work under the common chapter. In line with the recommendations of the 'Common Chapter Working Group Report', which was adopted by the Council at the EU sectoral meeting in October 2001, a common chapter joint steering group has been set up to provide a link between central departments, finance departments and the Special EU Programmes Body, North and South.

The Council was advised that the joint steering group has met twice and has agreed terms of reference that will enable the Special EU Programmes Body to discharge its responsibilities under the common chapter. The Council was also told that the establishment of a common chapter working group under the community support frameworks, North and South, has been agreed. The chief executive will prepare a paper detailing the group's structure, membership and terms of reference for consideration by members of the monitoring committees. The Council asked for regular reports so that it can continually review progress on implementing the common chapter.

It was agreed that the Council will meet again in sectoral format in Northern Ireland in May or June. The venue for the meeting has yet to be confirmed. The text of a joint communiqué was agreed and was issued following the meeting. A copy has been placed in the Assembly Library.

Mr Beggs: The Minister said that the Comptroller and Auditor General for Northern Ireland has audited the accounts for December 1999 to December 2000 and certified them without qualification. That is good news. When will the accounts for subsequent years be released so that we can be confident that subsequent spending was also in order?

I declare an interest as a member of the Carrickfergus local strategy partnership. The Minister said that six of the local strategy partnerships' action plans have been approved. Have all local strategic partnerships submitted

their interim local strategies and action plans for consideration?

Dr Farren: Mr Deputy Speaker, was there a question about strategy plans, or was the Member just saying that he had noted the plans?

Mr Deputy Speaker: Will you repeat the question, Mr Beggs?

Mr Beggs: Can the Minister confirm if all local strategic partnerships have submitted their interim local strategic plans and actions plans for consideration? Six have been formally approved. Have all partnerships submitted their plans?

Dr Farren: I cannot say if all local strategic partnerships have submitted their plans at this time.

Those indicated in my statement have been submitted, and others are in the course of submission. I was present at meetings in Dungannon and in Enniskillen on 28 February at which the plans for local strategy partnerships were handed over to the chief executive. That information can be made available to the Member as soon as possible. However, I expect all plans to be lodged in the near future.

The accounts for last year should be lodged by the autumn of this year.

Mr Byrne: I welcome the Minister's statement, particularly the comprehensive activities covered by the Special EU Programmes Body. Will he outline the terms of reference for the working group on the common chapter, and will he tell the House when further progress can be expected on a possible programme of work?

Dr Farren: The common chapter is contained in the structural funds planned for Northern Ireland and Ireland's National Development Plan 2000-06. It sets out a strategic framework for North/South and east-west co-operation across a broad range of sectors and activities. The common chapter provides scope for cross-border co-operation along the border corridor between Northern Ireland and the border counties of Ireland, North and South in the island of Ireland, and east-west between the island of Ireland, Great Britain and Europe and internationally.

The North/South Ministerial Council provides a strategic focus and basis for the implementation of the common chapter, and the Special EU Programmes Body (SEUPB) has a statutory responsibility for monitoring and promoting that. To clarify how that would be carried out the North/South Ministerial Council established a common chapter working group. The group provided recommendations covering the respective roles of the North/South Ministerial Council, the SEUPB and the structural funds monitoring committees.

Progress has been made on co-ordination arrangements, and I am pleased to report that it was agreed at a meeting of the Northern Ireland community structural funds monitoring committee on 6 February, which I chair, that

the chief executive of the SEUPB, as a member of the structural funds committees North and South, will, in consultation with monitoring committee members, prepare proposals for membership structure and draft terms of reference of the joint community structural fund working group for consideration by both monitoring committees.

Overall, the joint steering group, which will liaise with the Department of Finance and Personnel, the Department of Finance in Dublin and the Office of the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister, will provide a joint forum to which the SEUPB can report on a regular basis in respect of its common chapter activities in the context of the European structural funds.

I have given a broad outline of the nature of the working group and its main responsibilities.

Mr Paisley Jnr: I congratulate you, Mr Deputy Speaker, on your appointment, and I hope that you have an interesting time in the Chair.

Will the Minister confirm that this was the first North/South Ministerial Council meeting in this sector since October? It indicates the genuine level of concern there is about special EU programmes and perhaps an altogether different agenda for the body. On the first page of his statement the Minister claimed that a substantial range of business was covered. Does he agree that since the meeting lasted for less than two and a half hours it is doubtful that anything of any substance occurred, other than the filling of the faces of Dublin Ministers at that meeting in the Adair Arms Hotel?

Can he confirm the costs of the meeting and who paid them? Other than being a lunch club for Nationalists, can the Minister detail any substantial or tangible measure that delivers assistance to my constituents as a result of the meeting? Can he confirm that he and his North/South body refused funding to the Gaslight project, which helps the disabled in North Antrim, as a result of the gap funding criteria mentioned in his statement? Does the Minister agree that the decision to hold the meeting in Ballymena was nothing more than a stunt? Does he agree that it was an attempt to rub the noses of Unionists in that Loyalist town given that such a meeting was taking place at such short notice?

Dr Farren: My statement outlined the considerable volume of business that was addressed at the meeting, and I invite the Member to reread it in order to appreciate that. Like all meetings of the North/South Ministerial Council, the meeting received reports from officials and those associated with the various bodies on their work on the matters under their remit. The Member will be aware of the volume of activity and projects that rely on the availability of resources from Europe, each of which was itemised in my report.

The meeting was not a stunt. It was scheduled to take place. As Minister of Finance and Personnel, I was

privileged to co-host the meeting with my Colleague Dermot Nesbitt on behalf of the Executive. As a representative for North Antrim, I was proud to bring the meeting to Ballymena, a town with a large number of pro-agreement representatives.

Mr Paisley Jnr: That is rubbish. The majority of councillors are anti-agreement.

Dr Farren: If one adds the number of pro-agreement Unionist councillors in Ballymena to the number of SDLP councillors, who can be described as pro-agreement, the answer shows that it is not the town that the Member described.

Many of those who attended from the South were pleased with the warmth of the welcome that was extended to them by the deputy mayor of the borough, who was accompanied by another council member and its chief executive officer. In the light of the warm welcome, many of them expressed a genuine desire to visit further the beauties of North Antrim. If it falls within my power, when it is next my turn to co-host the meeting — *[Interruption]*.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order.

Dr Farren: — I shall seek to locate it again in some of the most beautiful parts of Northern Ireland.

Mr McHugh: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I agree with the Minister's desire to hold the North/South Ministerial Council's next meeting in Ballymena. The issues that were discussed are as important to the people and community groups in Ballymena as they are to people elsewhere. I am glad that Ian Paisley Jnr indicated that the meetings should be extended in order to allow the North/South Ministerial Council to become more effective.

Given that out of 300 applications to a rural programme only 14 farmers received funding, can the Minister confirm whether the European funding to which he referred and the Peace II package will achieve their objective of helping the local strategy groups and those people who have been waiting a considerable time for gap funding?

That gives some idea of how difficult it is to complete those forms. What will be done to improve the situation so that the programme can achieve its original objective?

1.45 pm

Dr Farren: We cannot predict success because we are at the early stages of implementing the various EU programmes. However, we plan for success, and we have every hope that we will achieve the aims and objectives of the various programmes. I assure the Member that, although some concerns have been raised about the application process, assistance is available. For example, the intermediate funding bodies are charged with providing technical assistance, which includes helping people find their way through the application process. The bodies are given resources to provide that assistance.

At this early stage of the application process, I do not have any evidence of applications that have not been successful under the Peace II or other programmes. I assure the Member that applications are being, and will be, rigorously scrutinised to ensure that they meet the criteria. In that way, we can be assured that the finances are made available on a basis that is as fair and equitable as possible and that they address real needs in our communities.

Mrs E Bell: I add my congratulations to those of other Members on your appointment, Mr Deputy Speaker. I also welcome the Minister of Finance and Personnel. It is the first time that I have spoken to him since he was appointed.

Unlike some Members, I think that this is a comprehensive piece of work. Like many Members, I have been concerned about the work of the EU programmes and their progress. I am glad to see that work is being done in this area.

Following on from Mr McHugh's question, I would like to ask about gap funding. In his statement, the Minister said that around 70% of all gap-funded projects will be assessed under full applications by the end of March. Can I, and the groups that will be directly affected, be assured that the gap-funding arrangements will address the concerns of those organisations whose very futures have been threatened by the transition to Peace II?

Dr Farren: There is concern about gap funding, some of which is understandable, and some of which is not well-founded. Gap funding was made available to address problems created by the unfortunate delay to the development and implementation of Peace II funding. The deadline for the end of gap funding has been extended for the third time. When all of the finances have been drawn down under that provision, the necessary decisions will be taken by the end of April, which is the date for the closure of allocations under gap funding. We are determined to meet that deadline.

Mr Dallat: Mr Deputy Speaker, I too congratulate you on your appointment.

I welcome the Minister's statement. I would like to pick up on some of the negative comments Ian Paisley Jnr made in his contribution. Does the Minister agree that the DUP may be suffering from a multiple-personality disorder, given that the DUP mayor initially accepted an invitation to attend the North/South Ministerial Council meeting in Ballymena, only to pull out at the last minute? Can the Minister offer any logical explanation as to why other DUP councillors have complained that they were not informed of the meeting, when their colleague, the mayor, knew all the details, and Ian Paisley Jnr was publicly snubbing the event in a blaze of publicity? Furthermore, does the Minister agree that the only thing certain with the DUP is that it enjoys the benefits of the Good Friday Agreement while pretending to remain outside it?

Mr Paisley Jnr: On a point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Members cannot make points of order during a ministerial statement.

Dr Farren: Unlike the Speaker, I do not have the power to analyse the psychological or psychiatric condition of any party or Member. However, the reaction of the DUP to the meeting in Ballymena was curious. Members of the DUP participate in local strategy partnerships, which are mechanisms through which European funding is made available, and they also participate in district partnerships. Communities represented by DUP councillors and Members benefit considerably from measures funded by European Union programmes and administered by the Special EU Programmes Body. As a lay person who does not have the Speaker's professional insight, it seems to me that some DUP party members suffer from a degree of schizophrenia with respect to the European Union project and the manner in which it is administered in Northern Ireland and in the South through the assistance of the Special EU Programmes Body.

Mr O'Neill: I welcome the Minister's statement and see it in the positive light of the European Community's good work in serving the needs of the people in Northern Ireland. I hope that my supplementary question illustrates that positive aspect. Can the Minister confirm that substantial progress has been made with all elements of European funding under the control of the Special EU Programmes Body and that local communities are now beginning to see the benefits of funding?

Dr Farren: All of the European Union programmes under the current round of structural funds are progressing well. Under the Peace II programme, intermediary funding bodies and local strategy partnerships have been appointed, and the first funds are expected to flow between now and the end of April. The other programmes — LEADER+, EQUAL, URBAN and INTERREG III — are progressing, and we expect the formal adoption of INTERREG III by the European Commission shortly.

In relation to the transnational strand of INTERREG IIIB, a publicity seminar will be held in Templepatrick on 6 March 2002.

Since Mr Paisley Jnr seems to think that I cannot identify any project that has benefited, I will take this opportunity to say that after the meeting in Ballymena I visited a special school in that town. The staff expressed considerable appreciation for the assistance given through EU funds, which enabled a specialist music teacher to be appointed. This teacher has done considerable work on behalf of children experiencing disability and learning problems. The staff were most gracious in their welcome and in the appreciation that they extended. Had we had time, there are many other projects in north Antrim and elsewhere to which we could have brought our visitors,

so that they could have seen at first hand the benefit that these funds are bringing to both communities and, indeed, to the North and South as well.

Mr McElduff: On a point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker. A LeasCheann Comhairle, can you clarify the position regarding Members wearing or not wearing jackets when addressing the House. My party leader and I have previously been asked to put on a jacket when we rose to speak. I support the right of any Member to wear or not to wear a jacket when addressing the House, but I want the policy applied consistently.

(Mr Speaker in the Chair.)

Mr Speaker: I am most relieved at the profound concern of the Member about proper order in the Chamber. On this occasion the Member concerned raised the matter personally with the Speaker. Out of an undue concern for the matters arising in the Chamber this morning, he had left his home in Omagh without a jacket. In those circumstances it seemed unreasonable to me that he should either miss the extraordinarily important events of the Chamber or have to return to Omagh to acquire his jacket.

Of course, if the Member who raised the point of order has a spare jacket of a similar size I have no doubt that the degree of inter-party co-operation in the Chamber would mean that Mr Byrne could be supplied appropriately.

Mr McElduff: On a constituency basis.

Mr Speaker: That too. Point of order, Mr Paisley Jnr. If the Member is going to offer his jacket I am sure it would be acceptable.

Mr Paisley Jnr: During the previous question and answer session I was under the impression that Members who are not in attendance for a statement are not usually entitled to ask a question. Perhaps you could clarify that. A question was asked by the Member for East Londonderry, Mr Dallat, who yo-yoed in and out the side Door during the course of Dr Farren's boring statement. He was not here when the statement was being made, and I do not understand why he was called to ask a question, which was completely superfluous to the issue being addressed.

Mr Speaker: I am astonished that the Member is raising the question of revolving Members, since they are a mere understudy to revolving Ministers.

Having checked briefly with the Clerks, I understand that the Member was in the Chamber for parts of the statement. The ruling is that Members who are not in the Chamber for any part of a statement will not be allowed to ask a question. Members present for part of a statement will be able to ask a question only after all those Members who were in the Chamber for all the statement have had an opportunity to ask their questions and then only if there is time remaining. I trust that that helps to answer the Member's concerns.

2.00 pm

HEALTH AND PERSONAL SOCIAL SERVICES BILL

First Stage

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety (Ms de Brún): Molaim go dtugtar a Chéad Chéim don Bhille Sláinte agus Seirbhísí Sóisialta agus Pearsanta.

I beg leave to lay before the Assembly a Bill [NIA Bill 6/01] to amend the Health and Personal Social Services (Northern Ireland) Order 1972 in relation to charges for nursing care in residential accommodation; to provide for the establishment and functions of the Northern Ireland Practice and Education Council for Nursing and Midwifery; 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.

CHILDREN (LEAVING CARE) BILL

First Stage

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety (Ms de Brún): Molaim go dtugtar a Chéad Chéim don Bhille Leanaí (Ag Fágáil Cúraim).

I beg leave to lay before the Assembly a Bill [NIA Bill 5/01] to make provision about children and young persons who are being, or have been, looked after by an authority within the meaning of the Children (Northern Ireland) Order 1995; to replace article 35 of that Order; 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.

PERSONAL SOCIAL SERVICES (AMENDMENT) BILL

Consideration Stage

Mr Speaker: Members will have a copy of the Marshalled List of Amendments, which details the order of consideration. There are four groups of amendments, which we shall debate in turn.

The first debate will be on amendments 1, 2 and 6; the second on amendments 3, 5 and 7; the third on amendment 4; and the fourth on amendment 8. I remind Members who intend to speak that during the debate they should address all the amendments of each particular group on which they comment in so far as they wish to speak on them.

Clause 1 ordered to stand part of the Bill.

Clause 2 (Services to carers)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety (Ms de Brún): Molaim leasú uimhir 1.

I beg to move amendment No 1: In clause 2, page 2, line 21, leave out

“who is aged 16 or over”.

The following amendments stood on the Marshalled List:

No 2: *New Clause*

After clause 3 insert —

“Assessments and services for children who are carers

After Article 17 of the Children Order there shall be inserted —

‘Assessments and services for children who are carers

17A. —(1) If —

- (a) a child (“the carer”) provides or intends to provide a substantial amount of care on a regular basis for a person aged 18 or over;
- (b) the child requests an authority to carry out an assessment for the purposes of determining whether he is to be taken to be in need for the purposes of this Part; and
- (c) the authority is satisfied that the person cared for is someone for whom it may provide personal social services,

the authority —

- (i) shall carry out such an assessment; and
- (ii) taking the results of that assessment into account, shall determine whether the child is to be taken to be in need for the purposes of this Part.

(2) Paragraph (1) does not apply if the child provides or will provide the care in question —

- (a) by virtue of a contract of employment or other contract with any person; or

(b) as a volunteer for a voluntary organisation.

(3) Subject to any directions given by the Department to the authority under —

- (a) Article 17 of the Health and Personal Social Services (Northern Ireland) Order 1972 (in the case of a Board); or
- (b) paragraph 6 of Schedule 3 to the Health and Personal Social Services (Northern Ireland) Order 1991 (NI 1) (in the case of an HSS trust),

an assessment under this Article is to be carried out in such manner, and is to take such form, as the authority considers appropriate.’” — *[Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety.]*

No 6: In clause 8, page 9, line 13, after “individual” insert “aged 16 or over”. — *[Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety.]*

Creidim go dtugann an leasú seo aitheantas do leanbh-chúramóirí agus go dtugann sé aghaidh ar a gcuid riachtanas. Is é polasaí mo Roinne caitheamh le leanbh-chúramóirí mar leanaí ar dtús agus ansin mar chúramóirí. Ní maith liom go nglacfadh leanaí freagrachtaí cúraim chucu féin a chuirfeadh as dá n-oideachas agus dá bhforás.

Is é aidhm an leasaithe seo, a chuireann alt 17A nua san Ordú Leanaí (Tuaisceart Éireann) 1995, ligean do leanbh-chúramóirí measúnú a lorg. Cinnfidh an measúnú ar cé acu is “leanbh le riachtanais” an leanbh-chúramóir chun críocha alt 18 den Ordú Leanaí. Má mheasúnaítear riachtanais a bheith ag an leanbh, ceadóidh alt 18 den Ordú Leanaí don iontaobhas seirbhísí a sholáthar.

Baineann an leasú le gach cúramóir faoi bhun 18 agus ligfidh sé mar sin do chúramóirí de 16 agus 17 a bheith á measúnú faoin Bhille seo agus faoin Ordú Leanaí. Is é m’aidhm nach rachfaí i muinín an Bhille ach go hannamh nuair a bheifí ag amharc ar riachtanais cúramóirí atá 16 agus 17. Ba chóir go mbeadh seirbhísí tacaíochta á gcur ar fáil sa ghnáthshlí don duine fhásta atá faoi mhíchumas lena chinntiú nach mbeidh an duine óg ag gabháil do fhreagrachtaí troma cúraim go rialta

Aithním, áfach, go mb’fhéidir go roghnóidh duine óg de 16 nó 17 bliana in imthosca áirithe freagrachtaí cúraim a ghlacadh, nuair a bhíos tinneas báis ar thuismitheoir, mar shampla. Sna himthosca sin, is dóigh liom go mbeadh sé cuí seirbhísí a thairiscint don duine óg le tacú leis ina ról cúraim.

This amendment recognises child carers and addresses their needs. My Department’s policy is to treat all child carers as children first and carers second. I do not want children to assume responsibility for levels of caring that could impact on their education and development. The purpose of the amendment, which would insert a new article, 17A, in the Children (Northern Ireland) Order 1995, is to allow child carers to request an assessment.

The assessment will determine whether the child carer is a child in need for the purposes of article 18 of

the 1995 Order. If the child is assessed as being in need, article 18 of the 1995 Order will allow the trust to provide services. The amendment applies to all carers under 18 and so will allow for 16- and 17-year old carers to be assessed both under this Bill and under the 1995 Order.

I intend that this Bill should be used only rarely when looking at the needs of 16- and 17-year-olds. Support services should normally be provided for disabled adults to ensure that young people do not undertake regular and substantial caring responsibilities. However, I recognise that a young person of 16 or 17 may choose in some circumstances to assume caring responsibilities — for example, when a parent is terminally ill. In those circumstances, it is appropriate that services be offered to such a young person to provide support in that caring role.

The amendment to clause 2, line 21 is consequent on the amendment to the definition of carer in clause 8, line 13. The effect of those amendments is to restrict the application of clauses 1 to 3 of the Bill to carers over the age of 16. The new article 17A of the 1995 Order will cover carers under the age of 16.

The Chairperson of the Committee for Health, Social Services and Public Safety (Dr Hendron): The Committee took evidence on the Personal Social Services (Amendment) Bill from a range of organisations that will be affected by it. Among them were Barnardo’s, Carers Northern Ireland and the Children’s Law Centre. They were asked to return to the Committee after the Committee Stage of the Bill so that the late concerns that they had raised could be discussed. That has been part of the democratic learning curve for groups dealing with the Assembly. Those discussions have led to proposals for amendments to the Bill, and I thank all who contributed to the process.

The amendments tabled by the Committee were, of necessity, drafted without the benefit of expert legislative drafting advice, so I welcome the Minister’s bringing forward the amendments before us today in response to the Committee’s concerns. These amendments will make several important improvements to the Bill in relation to the short title, information on assessments and the rights of children under 16 who must act as carers. They reflect the Committee’s concerns but are technically more competent than the amendments that the Committee drafted, and for that reason the Committee was content to withdraw its amendments.

I thank Barnardo’s, Carers Northern Ireland and the Children’s Law Centre for raising their concerns about the Bill’s failure to identify children acting as carers with the Committee. Although it was late in the day, the Committee and the Department worked hard to discuss the impact of the changes on the Bill and to bring these amendments to the Floor of the Chamber. The Minister’s action today reflects the power of Committees, aided and abetted by the public, to make necessary and important

changes to legislation. The Minister's amendments would not have happened if the voluntary organisations had not brought these serious omissions in the Bill to the attention of the Committee and if the Committee had not considered their concerns and agreed that there were deficiencies in the Bill. But for that process, the Bill would be the poorer.

Amendments 1 and 6, which we support, are consequential changes, and I will not comment on them. Amendment 2 provides for a completely new and substantial clause that sets out the rights of child carers. As I stressed earlier, this illustrates the power of Committees to change a Bill for the better. The new clause, "Assessments and services for children who are carers", is to protect the rights of children. The Committee tabled its amendment on this, and I am pleased that the Minister's amendment adopts the Committee's position.

The amendment is intended to ensure that children who must act as carers will be assessed under the Children (Northern Ireland) Order 1995 rather than under the Bill. They will be assessed as children first and carers second, an important distinction. Children should first and foremost be treated as children, especially when they have to act as a carer to someone, such as a parent. The amendment will ensure that a child is free to ask for an assessment to determine whether he, a child acting as a carer, should be taken to be a child in need under the 1995 Order. Trusts will then provide the carer with support services appropriate to a child carer. The Committee supports amendments 1, 2 and 6.

Ms Ramsey: I endorse the comments made by the Chairperson of the Health Committee. He pointed out that the Minister and the Department recognise that some children are carers first. That concern was brought to the Committee's attention by Barnardo's, Carers Northern Ireland and the Children's Law Centre. I am happy that the Minister has taken on board their concerns. The Committee proposed amendments to the Bill, and I recognise the work done by the Minister and her officials — some of whom are here today. The Committee gave them a hard time on some occasions.

On advice from the Committee Clerk, the Committee agreed to withdraw its amendments on the basis that the Minister's amendments covered them and also went a bit further. That proves that interested groups — from all related fields — can come to Committees at Consideration Stage, make an impact and change legislation on the Floor of the Assembly. That positive message from the Assembly today will impact on vulnerable members of our society.

Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle.

Ms McWilliams: Our Committee was anxious that once this legislation was passed, children should get not only assessments, but resources to carry out their work. The Committee made the point that it would be passing

legislation in the Assembly that places a duty on organisations to carry out much-needed and long-called-for assessments for carers and the disabled.

Irrespective of those assessments being carried out with community care, resources for the implementation of those packages may not be available. I am pleased that the Committee advanced those amendments.

Mr Speaker, you may be pleased to know that outside organisations are learning how to initiate amendments and are coming forward — albeit a little late in the day — with some of their concerns. Those concerns that highlight the need to change the legislation can be developed in the Committee. That is why we advanced this amendment. It was difficult, because the core of the problem lay with the policy of the Department, which argued that children under 16 are children and not carers.

I visited the Mater Hospital with the Health Committee. In the maternity unit I saw a child of 14 who had just given birth. If that baby had been born with a disability, would the mother have been a carer? Therein lies of the crux of the problem. At what age do we consider someone to be a carer? Although that mother was 14 and may have been taken into consideration under the Children (Northern Ireland) Order 1995, it was the Committee's view that she was a carer and should be assessed accordingly.

Having heard representations from Barnardo's, Carers Northern Ireland and the Children's Law Centre, the Committee is pleased that it pursued this line and held to it. The Department has agreed with the Committee's proposals and accepted this amendment.

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety (Ms de Brún): I recognise the contribution of the representative organisations. I was happy to meet their concerns, expressed through the Committee, and I am grateful to all for their work.

Amendment No 1 agreed to.

Clause 2, as amended, ordered to stand part of the Bill.

Clause 3 ordered to stand part of the Bill.

Question, That amendment No 2 be made, put and agreed to.

New clause to stand part of the Bill.

2.15 pm

Clause 4 (Assessments: persons with parental responsibility for disabled children)

Mr Speaker: We shall now debate the second group of amendments. With amendment 3, it will be convenient to take amendment 5 and amendment 7.

Ms de Brún: Molaim leasú 3. I beg to move amendment No 3: In page 4, line 40, leave out "1972 Order"

and insert “Health and Personal Social Services (Northern Ireland) Order 1972 (NI 14)”.

The following amendments stood on the Marshalled List:

No 5: In clause 8, page 9, line 11, at end insert

“‘area’, in relation to an authority, has the same meaning as in the Children Order;”. — *[Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety.]*

No 7: In clause 8, page 9, line 25, leave out “operational”. — *[Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety.]*

The purpose of amendment 3 is to correct a drafting point. The title of the 1972 Order needs to be given in full, because that expression is not defined in the Children (Northern Ireland) Order 1995.

The purpose of amendment 5 is to insert a new definition that is required because of new information provisions. Amendment 7 is consequential on the references to “area” in the information provision.

Amendment No 3 agreed to.

Clause 4, as amended, ordered to stand part of the Bill.

Clause 5 ordered to stand part of the Bill.

New Clause

Ms de Brún: Molaim leasú 4. I beg to move amendment No 4: After clause 5, insert the following new clause:

“Information for carers

— (1) An authority shall take such steps as are reasonably practicable to ensure —

- (a) that information is generally available in its area concerning the right of a carer to request an assessment under section 1(1) or (2); and
- (b) that those in its area who might benefit from such an assessment receive the information relevant to them;

and nothing in subsection (2) or (3) prejudices the generality of this subsection.

(2) Where it appears to an authority that —

- (a) an adult is cared for by a carer; and
- (b) the adult is a person for whom the authority may provide personal social services,

the authority shall notify the carer that he may be entitled to request an assessment under section 1(1).

(3) Where —

- (a) an authority proposes to carry out an assessment under the 1972 Order of the needs of a person for personal social services; and
- (b) it appears to the authority that that person is cared for by a carer,

the authority shall notify the carer that he may be entitled to request an assessment under section 1(2).

(4) After Article 18C of the Children Order (inserted by section 7) there shall be inserted —

‘Information for carers

18D. — (1) An authority shall take such steps as are reasonably practicable to ensure —

- (a) that information is generally available in its area concerning the right of a person to request an assessment under Article 17A or 18A; and
- (b) that those in its area who might benefit from such an assessment receive the information relevant to them;

and nothing in paragraph (2) or (3) prejudices the generality of this paragraph.

(2) Where it appears to an authority that —

- (a) a child (“the carer”) provides or intends to provide a substantial amount of care on a regular basis for a person aged 18 or over; and
- (b) the person cared for is someone for whom it may provide personal social services,

the authority shall notify the carer that he may be entitled to request an assessment under Article 17A(1).

(3) Where it appears to an authority that —

- (a) a disabled child is cared for by a carer who has parental responsibility for the child; and
- (b) the disabled child and his family are persons for whom the authority may provide services under Article 18,

the authority shall notify the carer that he may be entitled to request an assessment under Article 18A(1).

(4) Where —

- (a) an authority proposes to carry out an assessment of the needs of a disabled child for the purposes of this Part or section 2 of the Chronically Sick and Disabled Persons (Northern Ireland) Act 1978 (c. 53); and
- (b) it appears to the authority that that child is cared for by a carer,

the authority shall notify the carer that he may be entitled to request an assessment under Article 18A(2).”

Some concern was expressed in Committee Stage that carers might not be aware of their right to request an assessment. I wish to ensure that carers are aware of their rights. The purpose of the amendment is to require trusts to provide information to carers. The amendment requires trusts to make information generally available in their areas about the rights of carers to request an assessment and to take steps to ensure that carers have access to such information.

In addition, the amendment requires that where a trust is aware that someone is providing care, the trust must notify that carer specifically of his or her right to request an assessment. The duty to provide information will apply not only to the rights of carers to an assessment under the Bill but under the new provision to be inserted by the Bill in the Children (Northern Ireland) Order 1995.

Dr Hendron: As the Minister says, amendment 4 provides for a new clause that sets out, in a more competent form, the wording of the Committee's withdrawn amendment. The amendment addresses the Bill's failure to place a duty on authorities to take action to provide information to carers, including children and young people, about their right to an assessment and to seek out those carers.

The Committee decided that the matter was too important to leave to trusts to provide separate guidance. The amendment rectifies that serious omission, especially for children, by amending the Children (Northern Ireland) Order 1995, and places a duty on authorities to identify those children who are caring for a parent and tell them of their right to an assessment under that Order. The Committee supports the amendment.

The Deputy Chairperson of the Committee for Health, Social Services and Public Safety (Mr Gallagher): I thank the Minister and the Department for tabling the amendment. When the Committee heard submissions from the carers' representatives, it was clear that many carers were concerned about the lack of information that they received from the trusts and, indeed, about the way that information varied between trusts. The Committee was of the view that carers had a right to the information and that the Bill should make it clear that the authorities have a duty to provide that information.

The Bill did not put that duty clearly on the authorities. However, it is now much clearer. The Committee is happy to withdraw its amendment in favour of that proposed by the Department about the duty that authorities now have to make information on rights available to carers.

Ms Ramsey: Go raibh maith agat.

Mr Speaker, I am conscious of the many times when you have ruled that Members should not repeat one another in the Chamber, and I do not intend to do that. I support the comments of the Chairperson and Deputy Chairperson of the Health Committee and the discussions we have had on the Bill. The Department, the Minister and her officials have taken the issue on board, and rather than assuming that carers are aware of their rights, that duty will be placed on boards and trusts. I welcome the fact that the Minister and the Department have taken our comments on board and have proposed amendments to the Bill. I welcome the amendment.

Ms de Brún: I thank the Chairperson and Members of the Committee for their contributions. I have been able to go further than the Committee asked by providing for general and specific information for carers.

Question, That amendment No 4 be made, put and agreed to.

New clause to stand part of the Bill.

Clauses 6 and 7 ordered to stand part of the Bill.

Clause 8 (Interpretation and regulations)

Amendment No 5 made: In clause 8, page 9, line 11, at end insert —

“‘area’”, in relation to an authority, has the same meaning as in the Children Order;”. — [*Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety.*]

Amendment No 6 made: In clause 8, page 9, line 13, after “individual” insert “aged 16 or over.” — [*Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety.*]

Amendment No 7 made: In clause 8, page 9, line 25, leave out “operational”. — [*Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety.*]

Clause 8, as amended, ordered to stand part of the Bill.

Clause 9 ordered to stand part of the Bill.

Clause 10 (Short title)

Ms de Brún: Molaim leasú 8.

I beg to move amendment No 8: In page 10, line 2, leave out “Personal Social Services (Amendment)” and insert “Carers and Direct Payments”. — [*Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety.*]

The purpose of this amendment is to make the title of the Bill more descriptive of the purpose and content of the Bill.

Dr Hendron: Amendment 8, as the Minister says, changes the short title. In tabling the amendment, the Minister has acknowledged the Committee's view that titles should, wherever possible, be descriptive of the content and intent of the legislation. The Committee was concerned that the Department had proposed legislation that included such a non-descriptive short title. This change does not change the intent of the Bill. It is made in the interests of clarity. Although the Bill's current short title may be technically correct, it does not address the needs of the public for clear and concise information on the content of the Bill. It is important that the public should know what a Bill is meant to do in a simple and straightforward way, and changing the title will help to do that. I trust that the Minister will bear this in mind for future Bills. I thank the Minister for her action today.

Ms McWilliams: When the Bill first came before the Committee, I felt strongly that, as this is a devolved Assembly, the public should know what we are doing. We should not make it more difficult for them to understand the different types of legislation that we are passing. For this reason I proposed that the Department look again at bracketing “Amendment” after “Personal Social Services”, because it is meaningless. We may understand what is being amended, but members of the public who have lobbied for assessments for carers will not. We are trying to make the Assembly as inclusive as possible, and when people campaign, they should understand that the legislation that is passed is for them.

This was an interesting experience for the Committee: we were told that what we were proposing was longer than nine words and that this would set a precedent — a short title is supposed to be short. Nonetheless, we said that the title would then explain exactly what was proposed. We are all learning about legislation, and I pay tribute to the Bill Office. Initially, we asked its officials to explain why we were setting a precedent and why we might not be able to do this. The staff, quite rightly, said that it was not for them to attend for cross-examination by the Committee and that it was up to the Department to give that explanation. It is important that we understand that progress on this is entirely in the hands of the Department. The Clerks sitting to your left and right, Mr Speaker, were extremely helpful to the Committee, and for that we are grateful. I am pleased that, after much consideration, the Department decided that it would be possible to change the short title and that the short title will now say what the Bill will do.

Ms Ramsey: As other Members have said, this amendment caused the most hassle in the Committee, since the Committee members and officials are all still learning. The arguments on this were hot and heavy, and we were passionate about the Bill's saying what it is doing. A number of members proposed this and asked the Department to think again. I am happy that the amendment we proposed, and which the Minister and her officials are bringing forward, goes that one step further. I welcome her commitment and support for the Bill. I support the amendment.

Ms de Brún: I am happy to allay the Committee's concerns.

Amendment agreed to.

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

Schedule agreed to.

Long title agreed to.

Mr Speaker: That concludes the Consideration Stage of the Personal Social Services (Amendment) Bill. The Bill stands referred to the Speaker.

PERSONAL SOCIAL SERVICES (PRESERVED RIGHTS) BILL

Final Stage

Resolved:

That the Personal Social Services (Preserved Rights) Bill (NIA Bill 4/01) do now pass. — [*The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety.*]

Oral Answers to Questions

FIRST MINISTER AND DEPUTY FIRST MINISTER

Legislative Programme

1. **Mr S Wilson** asked the Office of the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister to detail (a) the number of Bills which have currently been under consideration by the Executive for more than two months and (b) when they will be introduced to the Assembly. (AQO 905/01)

2.30 pm

The First Minister (Mr Trimble): There are no Bills currently being considered for more than two months by the Executive.

Mr S Wilson: I am pleased to know that there are no further Bills with the Executive. Will the First Minister confirm that the draft housing Bill, which deals with such important social issues as homelessness and dealing with bad tenants, was with the Office of the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister and the Executive for almost three months? Will the First Minister explain why there was such a delay in bringing the Bill to the Assembly? Is he as slow a reader as he is a learner, or is his office inefficient? Will the First Minister also explain why there should be such a delay in bringing important social legislation to the House? There are six special advisers in his office, and £16 million was voted

"To assist the Executive in making and implementing well informed and timely policy decisions, and improving public services."

The First Minister: I am happy to inform the Member that approval to draft the housing Bill was discussed by the Executive at the meeting on 12 April 2001. However, it was not until 26 November that the Minister for Social Development forwarded a revised memorandum. A further revised memorandum was forwarded by the Minister for Social Development on 18 February 2002. That was discussed and cleared at the Executive meeting on 28 February 2002. The Member will agree that the delay of 10 days was not exceptional.

Mr O'Neill: In relation to that issue, will the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister advise whether the Minister of Education has brought forward a Bill to the Executive on the Burns review or he has advised the Executive of any timetable for implementing the Burns Report?

Will the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister advise whether the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety has provided a timetable for taking forward the Hayes Report and whether that will require legislation?

The First Minister: The Member will know that the Minister of Education has announced that he is extending the consultation period on the education Bill until 28 June. Therefore the question of approaching policy decisions, let alone a Bill, will not come into view until the autumn. We have agreed with the Minister of Education that he will consult with the Deputy First Minister and myself about how a consensus might be reached around any proposals. We are some time away from legislation on that issue.

We have been informed by the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety that, after discussions in the Executive, proposals on the way forward will be published for public consultation in the spring. It is hoped that final decisions can be taken before the end of 2002. The need for legislation will not be known until those decisions are taken.

Mr McClarty: Does the First Minister agree that the DUP's boycott of the Executive is having no effect on the legislative process?

The First Minister: That is correct. Most legislative matters are handled by a written procedure and consequently the presence or absence of DUP Ministers has absolutely no effect on the handling of that business. The so-called DUP boycott is, as on so many other issues, done purely for appearance to disguise the reality of their full participation in the process.

Aggregates Tax

2. **Mr Armstrong** asked the Office of the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister what representations it has made, on behalf of Northern Ireland industry, to the Treasury regarding the introduction of the aggregates tax.
(AQO 949/01)

The Deputy First Minister (Mr Durkan): In our response to the pre-Budget report we have written to the Chancellor welcoming the derogation for Northern Ireland of the aggregates levy, but expressing concern that the partial exemption does not fully reflect the concerns of the aggregates industry. We also indicated that we will be making further representation on the matter. Over the last year our Department has made representations on several occasions to the Treasury on behalf of the Northern Ireland industry regarding the introduction of the levy.

The First Minister and my predecessor, Mr Mallon, raised the issue at a meeting with the Chancellor in January 2001, when they expressed concerns about the impact of the levy and pressed vigorously for recognition of our unique circumstances. That was followed in March 2001 with the presentation of more detailed evidence to support Northern Ireland's case. Sir Reg Empey and Mr Mallon wrote to the Financial Secretary in October, when they pressed the argument again for consideration

of Northern Ireland's case as part of the wider representations made before the pre-Budget report. A paper was also submitted to the Northern Ireland Affairs Committee, as it was conducting an inquiry into the impact of the aggregates tax here.

Mr Armstrong: What further action can the Office of the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister take to ensure that the tax is not levied at any stage?

The Deputy First Minister: We continue to make representations underlining our concerns about the impact of the aggregates tax on our industry. We continue to make the point, at several levels, that not only will it have an adverse economic impact on the industry and on those employed in it, but it will have an adverse environmental impact. The limited derogation to date shows that we have had some success. We will continue to press the case, but there are no automatic levers for success. The Office of the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister, the Minister of Finance and Personnel and the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment will continue to make the case.

Mr Gallagher: I acknowledge the work done on this issue by the Office of the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister and the work done by the Deputy First Minister in his former role as Minister of Finance and Personnel. However, does the Minister understand that a partial exemption will mean huge costs for the building industry, if the tax goes ahead this year? It may mean that there will be job losses in that sector. Will the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister be in touch with the Treasury before the beginning of April to continue to persuade it not to push ahead with that tax?

The Deputy First Minister: We continue in our efforts to highlight to the Treasury the difficulties that the tax causes our industry. Although we welcome the concession that was included in the pre-Budget report, we stressed that it did not meet all our concerns. The tax, albeit in its modified form, will still have a serious impact on our industry. Not only will it have an impact on our industry, it will have an impact on those who use the industry and pay for the goods, which includes the public purse.

Although we have received some budgetary relief on the estimates of the impact, we will still have to pay, so we will continue to make our case. However, I do not want to give the impression that I am confident that we will get more relief soon.

North Belfast Initiative

3. **Mr A Maginness** asked the Office of the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister what progress can be reported on the North Belfast initiative.
(AQO 939/01)

The First Minister: We are fully committed to ensuring that all the measures announced on 23 November 2001 progress as speedily as possible. Substantial progress has been made on a range of measures in the package. The North Belfast Community Action Project is up and running. The first phase of traffic-calming measures is in place, and the statutory procedure to bring forward the second phase is under way. A scheme is in place to ensure protection for the windows of houses at the interface.

In addition, there are some matters that do not fall within our responsibility, but which are the responsibility of the Northern Ireland Office, for example — the work on the extension of the Alliance/Glenbryn peace line, which I understand is complete, and a temporary CCTV camera at the junction of Alliance Avenue and Ardoyne Road is also in operation.

In addition, a wide-ranging sports package for local schools costing £1.5 million is in operation, and the North and West Belfast Health and Social Services Trust has over £100,000 support for additional counselling. A wider assessment of counselling needs in the area is to be completed urgently. It has always been clear that there needs to be an appropriate mechanism for cross-community dialogue to address vital issues, to improve relationships and to build trust. The Office is pleased to hear of progress in that direction and stands ready to support those initiatives.

Work is ongoing on the preparation of a detailed design for the regeneration and improvement of the Alliance Avenue and Ardoyne Road intersection. Officials are continuing to consult both communities about the proposal, and it is hoped that a trial design will be available soon as a result. Although it would have been preferable for the final design to be approved by now, its completion has required careful and sensitive handling. The Office is committed to the process of consultation, to agreement with both communities and, in particular, to a policy of “no surprises”, so some time is needed for that.

Mr A Maginness: I thank the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister for that reply and congratulate them again on their good work on the situation in the greater Ardoyne area. I welcome the emphasis that the First Minister has put on the development of community dialogue and community capacity, which are very important. I encourage the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister to meet at first hand community groups from both sides of the sectarian divide in the area to discuss their concerns and — if it is possible, in that context — to encourage them in community dialogue. I invite the First Minister to indicate any additional forms of funding that might be available for community groups there, and of which they could take advantage.

The First Minister: We acknowledge that community groups have an important role to play in resolving these issues. We have been open to them and endeavour to keep in contact with them. In the run-up to the proposals

of 23 November, the Deputy First Minister and I met a range of groups. We have a local office in the area and maintain contact with several groups. We are, and will remain, available to meet them as the need arises. That is part of the “sensitive handling”, which I mentioned before.

On funding, the North Belfast Community Action Project is working with the Ardoyne Focus Group, the Concerned Residents of Upper Ardoyne and other community groups to assist them to build and maintain their capacity and to access sources of funding. Those include a range of initiatives and schemes from Belfast City Council, the Eastern Health and Social Services Board, the North and West Belfast Health and Social Services Trust, the Belfast Education and Library Board, Government Departments, National Lottery distributors and charitable trusts. There is a range of possibilities, and the Office is doing what it can to assist.

Mr B Hutchinson: Can the First Minister tell the House when the road realignment project will progress?

The First Minister: That situation continues to receive our full attention. We are aware of the need for people there to accept the road realignment project in the context in which it was agreed to implement the necessary works. The Glenbryn residents’ committee had accepted a set of design proposals. However, we are awaiting the consultants’ design proposals based on alternative options, which were asked for by representatives of the Ardoyne Focus Group.

I understand that the consultants are making progress as quickly as possible but must await an engineering drawing from the Department for Regional Development’s Roads Service to see how the alternative approach would reconfigure the road layout at the intersection. I hope that the Department will be able to complete the drawing by lunchtime on 5 March. As soon as the consultants’ design proposals are available, officials will obtain the reaction from both the Glenbryn and Ardoyne representatives. We hope that that will lead to the road realignment project proceeding without interruption.

2.45 pm

Mr Cobain: Will the First Minister consider extending the brief of the North Belfast Community Action Programme so that it can be more proactive in dealing with local concerns over policing manpower on the ground and the work on the abuse of substances and drugs? I draw the First Minister’s attention to the serious blow dealt to the work of the Forum for Action on Substance Abuse (FASA) project on drug awareness in North Belfast, which will have to close through lack of funding at the end of March.

The First Minister: I appreciate the Member’s interest in dealing with drug awareness programmes. I cannot give any detail on the FASA programme, although we will look at the current situation regarding it.

On the general issue, the North Belfast Community Action Project is intended to bring forward a series of relevant proposals within a very short time scale. Those proposals may involve drugs-related issues and local concerns over policing manpower. The possibility is there, through that project, of addressing the matters that the Member raised.

Executive Office - Brussels

4. **Mr Beggs** asked the Office of the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister to outline (a) the consultation between the Northern Ireland Centre in Europe and the Northern Ireland Executive Office in Europe to build on the contacts and networks that have been developed in the past; and (b) how this can be incorporated in the new regional office. (AQO 923/01)

The Deputy First Minister: We recognise that the Northern Ireland Centre in Europe has a significant contribution to make to the development of the Executive's strategic approach to European Union issues. Discussions are taking place with the Northern Ireland Centre in Europe, seeking to agree a mutually beneficial role for that organisation in the development of our European policy. We are keen to draw on the experience of the Northern Ireland Centre in Europe to see how it can complement and assist the work of the Executive.

Mr Beggs: Does the Deputy First Minister acknowledge that, in addition to the Northern Ireland Centre in Europe, there are others outside the Northern Ireland Civil Service who have contributed to Northern Ireland interests in Europe? What consultations have there been with, for example, Northern Ireland MEPs regarding the Brussels office's operations?

The Deputy First Minister: We certainly acknowledge that there are a range of other bodies and persons with significant experience of, and insight into, European affairs. Among those are our three MEPs. The director of the Brussels office has met both John Hume MEP and Jim Nicholson MEP. The office staff have frequent contact with the Brussels-based assistants of MEPs. There have been, and continue to be, efforts to arrange a meeting in Brussels with Dr Ian Paisley MEP, but those have not yet been successful.

The role of the Brussels office is not in any way meant to displace the important role played by our three MEPs in the parliamentary structures. The role of the office is very much to amplify their role, to ensure that they are well informed about the interests and insights of this regional Administration and, in turn, to ensure that issues and ideas identified by them as emerging in the European Parliament can be readily relayed through the office for our information.

The Chairperson of the Committee of the Centre (Mr Poots): Are the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister ready to take off their tunnel-vision glasses

when it comes to European affairs? Do they recognise that three working days' notice is not adequate when inviting an MEP to their office? Are they concerned that the first opportunity that Jim Nicholson MEP had to come to the office was at the invitation of the Committee of the Centre? Will they treat the Northern Ireland Centre in Europe in a more honourable way in the future than they have in the past?

The Deputy First Minister: First, we are in discussion with the Northern Ireland Centre in Europe. As I said in my earlier reply, that is with a view to ensuring that our work and the work of the office can best complement each other and support the interests of the region. We are clearly committed to that.

Secondly, staff from the office regularly go to meet people in various offices in Brussels — it is not the case that everyone must come to them. The staff are available to meet people in various locations.

I hope that MEPs, given their proximity to the Parliament, will be able to visit the office frequently and meet office representatives in the Parliament buildings. The point of convenience works both ways. We must do more to ensure that the office serves the interests of everyone. We have underlined the fact that the office is intended not only to support and represent the interests of the Executive, but to support the many regional interests that have important business in Brussels across several sectors.

Mr Byrne: Did the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister inform the office of the Northern Ireland Executive in Brussels, when they attended its opening, of the Special EU Programmes office in Omagh? Will they ensure that senior EU officials visit us? Does the Deputy First Minister agree that those officials could benefit from visiting such border areas as west Tyrone, where the introduction of the euro has severe implications for businesses?

The Deputy First Minister: I will try not to anticipate any later questions. The First Minister and I stressed to senior officials in the Commission and in the European Parliament that they would be welcome to the region. They in turn stressed that they were keen to visit Northern Ireland. They do not want to visit at an institutional level, but they want to see projects on the ground and meet those who use European moneys well. I would not be surprised if any visiting senior representatives of the Parliament or the Commission wanted to see the three Special EU Programmes Body offices in Omagh, Belfast and Monaghan.

Single Equality Bill

5. **Mr C Murphy** asked the Office of the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister to outline the timetable for the introduction of the proposed single equality Bill. (AQO 933/01)

The First Minister: We are committed to introducing a single equality Bill. We are also obliged to implement European Union Directives, and we prioritise that. We have agreed a revised schedule for the single equality Bill that reflects that priority. We are chasing a moving target, as underlined by the facts that the Directive to establish a general framework for equal treatment and employment in occupation was agreed after we commenced work on the Bill and that another Directive on sex discrimination is currently being discussed in the Commission. The revised schedule also takes account of the comments from consultees, many of whom wanted more time to consider the issues involved.

The implementation of EU Directives on race, religious belief and sexual orientation will be effected by subordinate legislation. We will consult on those Regulations in the autumn, and they will be brought before the Assembly before the election. A White Paper to set out our proposals for the Bill will be prepared and issued for consultation before the end of December 2002. In addition, separate consultation will take place early next year on proposals for tackling age discrimination and, subject to the agreement of the new EU Directive, on gender discrimination. All those elements will be brought together in the Bill. This is a complex area of law, and it is important that we get it right. We anticipate that the draft single equality Bill will be introduced to the Assembly in autumn 2004.

Mr C Murphy: I agree that the issue is complex and must be got right. However, we have fallen behind in the original timetable. I accept that there have been some complex EU Directives, but they come frequently and there will be more. There will be opportunities to amend any equality Bill to take account of EU Directives. If we continue to delay in taking account of EU Directives, there is a great fear among those who are interested in introducing an effective single equality Bill that it could be delayed for many years.

This is the first time that I, as a member of the Committee of the Centre, have heard of a proposed new timetable for the Bill. I urge the First Minister to ensure that all preparatory work is done so that those who are not yet convinced can be assured that a political “dead hand” has not been laid on the introduction of a single equality Bill. Can the First Minister assure us that the timetable will be adhered to?

The First Minister: I am glad that the Member appreciates some of the complexities in this area, and we assure him of our efforts and concerns. We cannot give assurances about matters not under our control. EU Directives are not under our control; however, they must be implemented. We cannot put EU Directives to one side just because we are keen to put a single equality Bill on the statute book. EU Directives force their way to the top of the list because they must be implemented, and many people would quickly point out that they were

being disadvantaged if they thought that EU Directives were not being implemented. Inevitably, we must pay attention to EU Directives.

I hope that no factors will introduce further delay. However, given the complexity of the issue, we will do well to meet our targets.

Mr Attwood: I welcome the commitments outlined by the First Minister to provide the timetable by December 2002 and to end age and gender discrimination. If all the opportunities of the single equality Bill are grasped, we will have a ground-breaking initiative in Northern Ireland that will be followed in Europe, rather than Northern Ireland following Europe as regards Directives.

The First Minister said that due to the complexity, range and nature of the issues some consultees have requested further time to consider matters. What responses to the consultation on the single equality Bill have been received from the Equality Commission?

The First Minister: I thank the Member for his point; in particular his reference to the single equality Bill’s being ground-breaking. The intention is to consolidate the legislation to make it easier for people to follow and apply. It is critically important that, because so much of the legislation relates to employment, we provide a single, comprehensive, consistent code for employers rather than the present overlapping, inconsistent codes. I cannot respond to the question on the Equality Commission. Therefore I will write to the Member.

Mr B Bell: I thank the First Minister for his response. Does he agree that events are as important as legislation? How does he propose to address the ongoing discrimination against the Chinese community?

The First Minister: I take the Member’s point, particularly about the Chinese community. We are conscious that the Chinese community is the largest ethnic group in Northern Ireland and that it makes a valuable contribution to society. We are concerned about recent events that show that the Chinese community is subject to discrimination and, on occasion, attack. A race equality unit has been established and will develop and co-ordinate strategies to deal with such matters.

Mr Speaker: I have been advised that Mr Ken Robinson is unwell and is unable to be here to put his question. Therefore question six falls.

Social Inclusion

7. **Ms Lewsley** asked the Office of the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister whether there are any plans to set up a working group to promote social inclusion for the disabled. (AQO 934/01)

The First Minister: During 2002, we will establish an interdepartmental working group to progress work on the priority of promoting social inclusion on disability,

with input from the voluntary sector as necessary. The working group's focus will be to develop a strategy to implement the Executive's response to the disability rights task force recommendations and to consider any wider issues raised in the consultation on that response. The working group will also monitor the progress of the Executive's response to the task force's recommendations.

Ms Lewsley: I thank the First Minister for his response. Will the group be set up as an implementation body to ensure that legislation is issued?

The First Minister: As I said, the primary focus of the interdepartmental working group will be on the Executive's response to the disability rights task force's recommendations. We look to that working group to develop a strategy to implement those recommendations.

3.00 pm

Rev Robert Coulter: What measures are being put in place to ring-fence money for disability projects, and what guarantees of accountability will be given to ensure that the funds will be spent on the projects to which they have been allocated?

The First Minister: All allocations of money are made in the context of the accountability disciplines that apply here. The effectiveness of the audit arrangements and the Public Accounts Committee has been demonstrated clearly in recent months. The Member can rest assured that the matter will be dealt with properly.

REGIONAL DEVELOPMENT

Water Resource Strategy

1. **Mr C Murphy** asked the Minister for Regional Development to outline progress on the water resource strategy. (AQO 936/01)

The Minister for Regional Development (Mr P Robinson): The Water Service is carrying out a major review of its water resource strategy for the period to 2030. The review has taken longer than anticipated, due to difficulties experienced in the collection and analysis of the extensive and complex operational data required for the development of the strategy. The review is nearing completion, and I expect the draft strategy to be published for public consultation before the summer. However, I am unable to give a more precise date at this stage. Consultation will be wide-ranging, and all interested parties will be given the opportunity to comment on the proposed strategy.

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

Mr C Murphy: I thank the Minister for his reply. I appreciate that such matters can be complex and can take some time. However, I note from Hansard that, during the debate on the Estimates in June 2000, the Minister of Finance and Personnel said that the water

resource strategy report was due in 2001. The Minister for Regional Development has now indicated that a draft strategy will be published for consultation before the summer. However, we have no indication of when the final strategy will be agreed.

Is the Minister aware that many projects — I have in mind one that Newry and Mourne District Council is pursuing at Camlough Lake — are dependent on the findings of, and intentions outlined in, the water resource strategy? Can the Minister confirm that people have told the Department that the substantial funding that may be available for projects is being put in jeopardy by the time that the Department is taking to get its act together on the strategy? Can he assure the House that the Department will publish the consultation document as quickly as possible and that the consultation exercise will be carried out as quickly as possible, so that people who are waiting for the Department to get its act together can go ahead with their projects?

Mr P Robinson: The Department wants to ensure that it has a robust strategy. It is essential, therefore, that we take into account all the information and that we ensure that the information is accurate and can be relied upon. The Member indicated a particular interest in Camlough Lake. At the moment, around two and a half megalitres of water are taken from Camlough Lake each day. I understand that an earlier proposal to extract some 14 megalitres a day was not greeted with any great enthusiasm by people in the Newry and Mourne area. I trust that when the review is completed, people in that area will not be unduly concerned by the proposals for the district. During the consultation process, residents will, of course, have the opportunity to make their views known on the amount of water to be extracted from Camlough Lake.

Mr R Hutchinson: Can the Minister outline the timetable for the publication of the water resource strategy? What opportunities will there be for Members and the public to participate in the consultation process?

Mr P Robinson: We are in the final run-in. In the past week or so I have received a presentation from the Water Service that gave me the background and framework for the resource strategy. It is now in its final stages and is currently being written up.

I have agreed that it would be appropriate for the Water Service to meet with the Committee for Regional Development so that the Committee is the first to see and comment on the strategy. I expect that meeting to take place around Easter, and I would like to put the strategy out for wider public consultation immediately afterward. I regard public consultation as an anchor element in all of my Department's strategies. Plans are greatly strengthened when they are subject to public consultation, and that process provides a degree of additional ownership, whether the strategy involves roads, transport, regional development or, in this case, water.

Mr Savage: I understand that all new houses can be fitted with water meters. Will the Minister announce the introduction of water metering and charges as part of the water resource strategy?

Mr P Robinson: Urging a Minister to bring in metering and charging for water is a novel course for an elected representative to take. The last Assembly in this place was almost, if not totally, unanimous in its decision that it did not want to take that route. There are arguments for charging, but I do not believe that metering is the most effective way of doing so as there are serious deficiencies and inequalities in that process. For example, an individual who owns a house worth £0.5 million would pay the same amount as someone who owns or rents a similar or smaller house that is much less expensive. Therefore, the process would militate against the poor.

I watched some of the coverage of a Public Accounts Committee meeting on this issue. I will not be considering metering as a mechanism simply to determine the degree of leakage. It is an expensive system that would probably cost about £120 million to implement. If I had that amount of money, I would spend it in other ways that would result in much better value for the community.

Portglenone-Randalstown Road

2. **Mr Dallat** asked the Minister for Regional Development to outline his proposals for upgrading the main traffic route from Portglenone to Randalstown; and to make a statement. (AQO 928/01)

Mr P Robinson: The Member will appreciate that there are many more aspirations and demands for road schemes than there are resources to meet them. It is in that context of limited resources that the Roads Service must make difficult decisions in prioritising schemes. The B52 Largy Road between Portglenone and Randalstown is a relatively narrow and undulating rural route, particularly the northern half. However, any significant improvement to the road would be hindered by the close proximity of properties and private entrances and would be expensive. Given the many other competing priorities, particularly on key transportation corridors, the Roads Service has no current plans to upgrade that route.

Mr Dallat: I should declare an interest in the matter as I use this road every day and am a witness to the accidents that occur. Does the Minister accept that when other routes choke up with traffic, that route becomes a main feeder route to the M2 motorway and therefore requires substantial upgrading, not only for the safety of motorists, but for the safety of pedestrians too?

Mr P Robinson: As with many other roads in the Province, that road is important to the overall network, not least because it transports the hon Gentleman to the Assembly every day. However, I am sure that he does not offer that as a reason for giving that route priority.

The Department examines objective criteria when making decisions on the Province's roads, particularly in the context of the regional transportation strategy. That route is not one of those that would be given priority under the proposals contained in the draft regional transportation strategy.

When Members were asked to express their priorities for the 10-year plan, I received no correspondence from the hon Gentleman, either through my predecessor or the director responsible for the Roads Service.

Mr McClarty: What would be the cost per kilometre of upgrading parts of that route to become a dual carriageway?

Mr P Robinson: That would be difficult and expensive work, given the topography of the site. The Roads Service has not costed the dual carriageway proposition because that would involve unnecessary expenditure, given that the work is not a priority. However, road safety records are examined to determine where improvements are needed. Under the draft regional transportation strategy, and given the available funds, the road does not meet the priority requirements to enable it to be upgraded to a dual carriageway.

Car Parking - Belfast

3. **Dr Birnie:** asked the Minister for Regional Development to outline his policy regarding the provision of car parking spaces in Belfast. (AQO 921/01)

Mr P Robinson: My Department's policy on the provision of car parking spaces in Belfast is aimed at facilitating the efficient use of road space, improving the vitality and viability of the city centre by keeping the most convenient parking spaces available for shoppers and visitors and supporting my Department's transportation principles. Pursuant to that policy, my Department has provided charged and free off-street car parks in Belfast and has introduced a charged on-street parking scheme in 92 city centre streets.

Dr Birnie: Will the Minister consider piloting residents' car parking schemes in Greater Belfast as soon as possible? Such schemes would enhance the well-being of inner-city residents, whose streets are used as unofficial free car parks. In addition, such measures would contribute to the general transport strategy by discouraging commuters from using cars.

Mr P Robinson: My Department and I are happy to take that proposition on board. However, the scheme would be viable only if there were a clear undertaking to enforce those measures. At present, the police are not prepared to support the enforcement of restrictions relating to residential parking areas. Therefore, we must examine the wider issue of whether the Department would have the power to enforce such a scheme. Without enforcement, the pilot scheme would not achieve its intended benefits.

Mr S Wilson: Further to the Minister's response, is he aware that as a result of the diminution of police resources stemming from the Belfast Agreement, the police service is now considering ceasing to impose car-parking restrictions? What would be the likely implications of that for the Minister's Department, and how would it affect city and town centres and road safety?

Mr P Robinson: Northern Ireland remains the only part of the United Kingdom that does not have the necessary primary legislation to decriminalise parking enforcement. Such powers would permit the enforcement of on-street waiting restrictions by the roads authority, as opposed to the police. My Department has already appointed a specialist adviser to assist in a study on the decriminalisation of parking enforcement, and consultants will soon be appointed to carry out a feasibility study.

Strangely, during the review of legislation that led to the Road Traffic Regulation (Northern Ireland) Order 1997, the Department was keen to decriminalise parking enforcement. However, the RUC was opposed to it.

3.15 pm

I understand that the police want to direct diminishing resources towards key objectives, and the enforcement of waiting restrictions is not seen as a priority. However, the police and the Department are responsible organisations, and I am sure that the police would never withdraw from enforcement before the Department was ready for a seamless transfer. I am sure that the gap between the police's giving it up and our taking legislation through the House to enable us to take it over could be narrowed in further consultation.

Mr M Murphy: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Does the Minister agree that in the context of road traffic safety, urban space must be managed and that further provision of parking spaces without proper traffic management measures is not the way to create a sustainable traffic management scheme?

Mr P Robinson: Yes.

Water Leakage

4. **Mr McElduff** asked the Minister for Regional Development if Water Service has met its targets to reduce water leakage. (AQO 935/01)

Mr P Robinson: The target of reducing leakage by 13 megalitres a day in 2000-01 was not achieved. That was mainly due to the damage caused by the freeze-thaw in the Christmas and new year period, involving over 340 bursts in the water distribution system. So much water was leaking as a result of the damage that an additional 76 megalitres had to be put into the distribution system to maintain supplies to customers.

The levels of water leakage, or "unaccounted-for water", are too high and are directly related to underfunding

over a long period, which has prevented investment in the water network. The effect of the freeze-thaws over the last two Christmases demonstrates the fragility of the water infrastructure and the need for substantial investment to bring it up to modern standards. The Water Service has invested some £22 million in leakage detection and repair in the last four years and intends to invest a further £25 million over the next four years to achieve what is described as an "economic level of leakage".

Mr McElduff: I appreciate that there are infrastructural problems. Nonetheless, they were there when the targets were set. What specific targets were set by the Water Service to reduce water leakage in the 2000-01 financial year, and how did the Water Service perform? What steps are being taken to address that unmitigated failure?

Mr P Robinson: It is one thing for somebody to say that we were aware of the infrastructure when targets were set, but what we were not aware of was the weather. The House recognises the important part weather conditions play because it has had to address the issue in relation to roads, another of my responsibilities. However, the infrastructure is Victorian in some instances, and certainly there has been massive underfunding. Therefore, it is vulnerable to weather conditions. I have today outlined the target, which is to get towards the economic level of leakage. My Department has now invested more money in that in an attempt to reach that target.

Members must recognise that we are dealing with a long network, which, if it were put end to end, would reach across the Atlantic, and that is the kind of network that has to be searched for leaks. Incidentally, much of it is in private property, so it is not a simple task. It is a difficult task, and the Department is underfunded in its attempt to tackle it.

Mr Byrne: Does the Minister accept that the Northern Ireland Audit Office report into water leakage is disturbing, given that up to 37% of water circulated is leaking away needlessly? What immediate steps will the Department take to address that problem, particularly before we enter a long period of dry weather?

Mr P Robinson: The level of leakage is unacceptable, and for that reason we have set ourselves the targets. There will always be some level of leakage in a system. That is why we keep talking about the economic level of leakage — the level beyond which it becomes cheaper to produce more water than spend money attempting to stop leaks from the existing system.

The only steps that can be taken involve detection systems. They take many forms; reporting leakage is one. However, we are not dealing with one massive gush of water, we are dealing with thousands of small leaks or breaks at joints in the system. There are millions of joints to be covered. The problem is not as simple as Members may think.

We know how much water leaves the reservoirs: we can meter that. However, without taking up the proposal by the Ulster Unionists to meter and charge for water, we do not know how much is being taken at the other end. Therefore, it is quite possible that the estimates of consumption may not be accurate and that assumed leakage levels may not be as high as are contemplated.

Mr McCarthy: I support the Minister's efforts not to introduce metered water to housing properties. Is he aware that the new water meters being installed at rural roadsides are being run over continuously by heavy vehicles, thereby smashing them? That is contributing further to severe water loss, not only to the Department but to the hard-pressed farmer. Will he take immediate action to see that the problem is rectified?

Mr P Robinson: I must tell the hon Gentleman that the problem has not been reported to me. I will enquire to see how prevalent it is and what steps can be taken to avoid it.

A505 Road Improvement

5. **Mr Armstrong** asked the Minister for Regional Development what road improvements are planned for the A505 between Cookstown and Omagh.

(AQO 930/01)

Mr P Robinson: The Roads Service is currently carrying out a scheme to resurface approximately 1.8 kilometres of the A505 west of Creggan crossroads. The scheme is estimated to cost around £90,000. In addition, the Roads Service plans to commence construction of a mini-roundabout on the A505 at the junction of Westland Road and Drum Road in Cookstown later this month. It also plans to resurface a further 650-metre section of the A505 from Farmhill Road towards Glendale Filling Station near Omagh in 2002-03. The latter schemes are estimated to cost around £5,000 and £20,000 respectively.

Mr Armstrong: Has the Minister considered the statistics that reveal that 34% of accidents occurred on the A505 over the period April 1998 to March 2001? There were 99 injury-causing accidents, resulting in two deaths, 37 serious injuries and 150 people being slightly injured over that time. I now know of another fatal accident on that road. What action is the Minister's Department taking to reduce the number of accidents on that road and to encourage drivers to be more aware of its dangers and accident spots?

Mr P Robinson: I am aware of the record of injuries on that road and of the fatal accident on the A505 recently. I want to convey my condolences to the family of the lady who was tragically killed in that road accident, which I believe occurred on 8 February. I understand that the police are still investigating the likely cause of that accident. Therefore, it would be premature for me to comment now on whether there was any road contribution

to it. The Roads Service is aware of the accidents that have occurred and is currently reviewing signing and lining provisions to see what improvements can be implemented.

Rev Dr William McCrea: I agree that it is vital that the Cookstown to Omagh Road be improved. However, does the Minister agree that a bypass at Cookstown must be a priority, because that would assist industrial development in the area?

Will the Minister inform the Ulster Unionist Member that his assertion that both the Omagh and Ballymena divisions serve Mid Ulster is incorrect? The Omagh division serves all of Mid Ulster; therefore, to contact the Ballymena office would be a waste of time.

Mr P Robinson: My hon Friend never misses an opportunity to fight for roads and bypasses in his area. I hope that he is encouraged that provision for several bypasses has been made in the draft regional transportation strategy. I am sure that he will argue in favour of his chosen case. I confirm that the Omagh division is responsible for all of Mid Ulster, as Members who deal with roads issues on behalf of their constituents will be aware.

Traffic Calming Pilot Schemes

6. **Mr Maskey** asked the Minister for Regional Development what criteria were used in determining the areas to be included in traffic-calming pilot schemes such as Ballynafeigh and Bloomfield. (AQO 942/01)

Mr P Robinson: The initiative that was announced in April 2001 introduced trial partnerships aimed at progressing traffic-calming schemes more quickly, with the full involvement of local people.

The 10 sites that were selected for the initiative had already qualified to benefit from traffic-calming measures according to the Department's criteria. These are: the five-year history of road accidents resulting in personal injury; vehicle speeds; the volume of car and heavy goods vehicle traffic; environmental factors such as the presence of schools, playgrounds, hospitals, clinics, shops and public buildings; and the width of footways and the distance of the street from houses. Points are allocated in respect of each factor, and the 10 schemes that are included in the pilot exercise were identified as having a high priority.

The Ballynafeigh and Bloomfield sites scored highly on account of their accident histories and the relatively high volume and speed of traffic in those areas. Streets in both areas are used as rat runs by road users to avoid the main traffic routes such as the Ormeau Road in the Ballynafeigh area and the Bloomfield Road and Beersbridge Road in the Bloomfield area.

Mr Maskey: Has the Department carried out a cost-benefit analysis, or at least a comparative study of such

traffic-calming measures in relation to other road safety methods?

Mr P Robinson: The traffic-calming scheme is one of the most popular commodities on the Department's shelves at present. A massive number of requests for this type of traffic calming are being made, at a rapidly increasing rate. Therefore, despite the absence of a scientific analysis, the public obviously recognises that these measures reduce the speed of traffic, which benefits communities.

The pilot schemes were slightly different from standard traffic calming measures because they sought greater community involvement, which, it was hoped, would quicken the process. Community involvement has resulted in better schemes with greater public support, but it has not made progress more rapid.

In response to the Member, there are safety benefits, and, therefore, the schemes are a useful element of the Department's overall transportation policy. Other sections of departmental funding are directed at road safety, and the Department — as in all things — must balance the level of funds that it allocates for that purpose. Road safety funding was increased in this financial year from the previous year. In addition, under the draft regional transportation strategy, funding will increase substantially over the next 10 years.

3.30 pm

Mr Davis: Does the Minister agree that although traffic-calming measures are an option to deter the hoodlums responsible for the death of a young girl in west Belfast at the weekend, it is only strong action by the courts that will act as the main deterrent to those found guilty?

Mr P Robinson: The hon Gentleman has put his finger on an aspect outside my Department's control in relation to road accidents and traffic calming. It is not the job of the Roads Service to attempt to resolve all these problems. There is a significant role for the road safety powers of the Department of the Environment. The courts can play a role with regard to the sentences that they impose. However, there is also an enforcement role for the police. In many cases, enforcement can be the greatest disincentive to people either speeding or driving recklessly.

ENVIRONMENT

Mr Deputy Speaker: Question 8, in the name of Mr Eddie McGrady, has been withdrawn and will receive a written answer.

School Transport

1. **Mr McElduff** asked the Minister of the Environment what action he plans to take in relation to the Committee

for the Environment's report on transport for children travelling to and from school. (AQO 946/01)

The Minister of the Environment (Mr Nesbitt): As the Member will know from the debate on 19 February on school buses in which he participated, my predecessor, Sam Foster, provided the Committee with a composite reply, which outlined the actions proposed by, first, the Department of Education, secondly, the Department for Regional Development and, thirdly, the Department of the Environment. That reply was based on the 28 recommendations submitted by the Committee. I will arrange for the Member to receive a copy of that response.

I want to take this opportunity to thank Sam Foster for his work. I am glad to see him here, and I wish him well in his retirement. I reaffirm my personal commitment to what Sam Foster has done and to what I hope to do as regards my responsibilities. In particular, I wish to address the question of the reduction of deaths and serious injuries on the roads and build on the work that Sam Foster did.

The Committee's four main recommendations were: to abolish the "3 for 2" provision, where three children under the age of 14 sitting on a bus seat should be reduced to two, which is the position for adults; to ban standing on school buses; to require seat belts on all school buses; and to provide new hazard signage on school buses.

The response to the Committee confirmed that my Department will carry out a regulatory impact assessment of those recommendations and, importantly, a review of the costs and benefits of their implementation. This is a necessary prerequisite to any consideration of the significant financial resources that would be required to implement those recommendations.

In addition, my Department is considering, first, a way of raising awareness among drivers of the need for greater caution while overtaking vehicles where children are likely to be boarding or alighting. Secondly, in conjunction with the Department for Regional Development's safer routes to schools programme, and through the enhanced programme of schools visits by my Department's road safety education officers, we seek to develop a greater awareness among parents and children of the dangers encountered on roads while travelling to and from school.

Mr McElduff: I wish Sam Foster well, and I also wish the Minister well in his new portfolio. When will the Minister take this matter to the Executive to ensure a concentration of ministerial minds and, as he has outlined, joined-up thinking, not least in considering the extension of the safer routes to schools programme?

Mr Nesbitt: This is a serious matter. The Department will conduct those aspects that I have mentioned, and staff have been put in place to do that. It will take time, but it is better to get it right than to rush it. I do not wish

to give a specific time frame in which recommendations will be presented to the Executive and the Assembly. The issue is important and sensitive because it deals with children. We must, therefore, give it our support and measured consideration before we make recommendations.

Mr Foster: I congratulate Mr Nesbitt on his elevation, and I wish him every success. I thank him and other Members for their complimentary remarks.

Anyone who is killed or injured in a road collision is one person too many. However, does the Minister agree with Sammy Wilson's comments in the recent debate on school transport that buses are the safest form of transport for schoolchildren, and that that is borne out by the available data?

Mr Nesbitt: I agree with Mr Foster that one death is one too many. He points up statistics in his question, and it is important to bear statistics and their relevance in mind. I live in the real world, and I know that resources are finite. We must, therefore, deal with what is possible and what is not possible.

There is a good safety record for buses, coaches and minibuses. Statistics from April 1997 to March 2001 show that 130 people between the ages of four and 15 were killed or seriously injured going to or from school. That is a salient statistic. However, the statistics state that six of the children killed, and 93 of the children seriously injured, were pedestrians. One of those killed and 18 of those seriously injured were passengers in cars. None of the children killed and six of those seriously injured were passengers on buses. Statistics can be misleading, but those statistics clearly show that although there are too many deaths, the bus is the safest way to take children to and from school compared to walking or travelling by car.

The Chairperson of the Committee for the Environment (Rev Dr William McCrea): I wish Mr Foster every happiness in his retirement from office. I would also like to express my appreciation of the manner in which he received me and my Colleagues on the Environment Committee when he was in office.

We too live in the real world. Does the Minister agree that legislation that permits 101 children to travel on a 53-seater bus is outdated? The Royal Ulster Constabulary, as it was known at the time, made a presentation to the Committee that stated that a tragedy was waiting to happen. That was the police summary, not the Committee summary. Although the Minister will not give Members a timetable, can he assure us that change will come about before the one hundredth anniversary of the legislation, which will probably be in 2028?

Mr Nesbitt: Dr McCrea has asked me to give an assurance that change will come about. However, this issue involves money. Translink and the education and library boards estimate that it would cost £180 million in capital expenditure and £60 million in annual running

costs to do as he wishes. I am not saying that that should not be done, but there are trade-offs. The Administration has difficult choices to make, and those choices often involve money. The question is: where do we get the money to meet Dr McCrea's request?

My predecessor, Mr Foster, asked Dr McCrea two questions in December, and I ask them again. What did Dr McCrea's Committee consider, from the evidence that it has taken on the 101 passengers on the buses for example, would be the road safety benefits of spending the money that he wishes to be spent? If there is money available, should we spend it on measures to reduce the problems that he has raised, or should we put it into health or education? Mr Foster asked another question: if there is no money available, how can we do what the Member wishes?

Rev Dr William McCrea: That is your responsibility.

Mr Nesbitt: It is our collective responsibility in this Administration.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order.

Mr Nesbitt: The decisions are not easy, and, as Mr Foster has said, one death is one too many. However, when we make decisions about doing things that the Committee has asked us to do, and which we consider seriously, we must also consider the allocation of financial resources. My final word on this is to ask the Committee to help us to answer the questions posed last December.

Planning Applications - Delay

2. **Mr S Wilson** asked the Minister of the Environment what steps he is taking to address the current delay in planning applications. (AQO 908/01)

Mr Nesbitt: My Department has taken several steps to address delays in dealing with planning applications. First, we obtained an additional £850,000 in 2000-01 and another £850,000 in 2001-02 to tackle the backlog of planning applications at that time. An additional 56 professional planning officers and 40 administrative staff have been recruited and trained. We are in the process of recruiting a further 67 professional and 28 administrative staff, and management structures have been strengthened. However, against that backcloth of more money and more professional and administrative staff, it is interesting to note that the number of applications received this financial year is likely to reach 24,500. Indeed, it may reach 26,000 in the coming financial year, and this compares starkly with the 15,000 applications received in 1995.

Secondly, a few weeks ago my Department published a consultation paper 'Modernising Planning Processes', which put forward ideas and options for promoting the operation of planning processes. It aims at producing a simpler, faster and more accessible process. I want to encourage everyone to contribute to the debate, which the

paper seeks to stimulate, on how to improve our planning processes.

Thirdly, I assure Members of my absolute commitment to addressing the delays in the system by continuing the work that my predecessor, Mr Foster, began. I shall also continue to strengthen the Planning Service by endeavouring, where necessary, to get the resources to meet the demands placed upon it that the community expects it to meet.

Finally, I shall reform planning processes to ensure that we can deliver sustainable development and harness growth to build a better future.

Mr S Wilson: I congratulate the Minister on his appointment and wish the former Minister, Mr Foster, all the best in his retirement.

Is the Minister aware that since devolution the delays in the planning system have increased to the point that although there is a target to deal with 65% of major planning applications within eight weeks, only 53% are being dealt with in that period? In Belfast this year nearly one third of the social housing which it was planned to start by the end of March has not yet got planning permission and is unlikely to start in this financial year.

Will the Minister agree that if he wishes to make a name for himself, he must take the planning system by the scruff of the neck, get it moving and stop it gluing up economic development in Northern Ireland?

3.45 pm

Is the Minister aware of two reports published by the Confederation of British Industry and the Royal Institute of Chartered Surveyors, in which scores of proposals have been put forward for improving the planning system? Is he prepared to introduce a system whereby developers who are prepared to invest extra resources to buy in expertise that the Department does not always have could pay that money to the Department in order to speed up the planning process?

Mr Nesbitt: I thank Mr Wilson for his lengthy, three-part question. It is a good baptism to be given a three-part question. His final question is interesting, and I will consider the proposal. However, I will not take any definitive position on it at present.

The Member refers to backlogs and to my making a name for myself. I thank the DUP for helping me to make a name for myself — I can see the pigs flying now. The aim was to reduce the backlog of applications. The backlog comprises applications that are two and a half months old. At the end of December 2001 there were 9,086 planning applications in the system, with a backlog of 4,047. Money saved has been used to put planning officials and administrative staff in place to reduce that backlog. From April 2000 to December 2001 it was reduced by 5%. Of course, more can be done. I am taking the

planning issue seriously. One of the concerns of my constituents is getting planning applications passed.

However, there are tensions in the system. We want speedy decisions, but we also have public participation and openness in Government. Conflicts are not easily resolved. We want quantity, but also need quality. The business community wants quicker decisions, but we also have to protect the environment. These conflicts are part of the planning process, and they make the resolution of the problem difficult.

Mr Deputy Speaker: I note the enthusiasm of the Members and the Minister, but we are still at question 2. Please bear this in mind.

Mr McClarty: I add my congratulations to those already given to the Minister. His assured performance at the outset augers well for the future. Will he give assurances that a genuine consultation process will take place on the planning system and that it will have a significant impact on the current backlog in planning applications?

Mr Nesbitt: Yes. Is that too brief for you? We do want an improvement. One of the key elements of the consultation process on the modernisation of the planning process is that we are endeavouring to set targets by which planning applications are dealt with. We are trying to reduce regularisation, and we are trying to have a business planning zone. We are dealing with factors to improve the speed and effectiveness of consultation and with statutory consultees such as local councils. We are taking this seriously. I have pledged that we want to see an improvement.

Areas of Special Scientific Interest (ASSIs)

3. **Mr Bradley** asked the Minister of the Environment whether he will undertake to review the area of special scientific interest (ASSI) policy to ensure that farmers' long-term work programmes are not jeopardised as a result of agricultural land being designated ASSI.

(AQO 910/01)

Mr Nesbitt: My Department is required, under the Nature Conservation and Amenity Lands (Northern Ireland) Order 1985, to declare an area to be of special scientific interest where it is satisfied that an area of land is of special scientific interest by reason of its flora, fauna or geological, physiological or other features and accordingly needs to be specially protected.

The legislation does not allow considerations, other than the scientific interest of the site, to be taken into account in coming to a decision on that declaration. That is the correct approach in the interests of conserving the important areas of Northern Ireland's natural heritage, and I have no plans to review it. My officials are considering the responses to consultation on proposals to strengthen the protection and management of ASSIs. However, it is important that my Department addresses

the needs of agriculture and fisheries, and those of other land users, when considering how best an ASSI should be managed.

Most ASSIs include some land that is farmed, and, therefore, there is potential for some agricultural practices to damage the scientific interest. Such practices are specified in a list of notifiable operations that is issued to all owners and occupiers when an ASSI is declared. The inclusion of a farming, or any other, activity on that list does not necessarily mean that it cannot be undertaken. However, it provides my Department with an opportunity to consider how appropriate the activity might be in the context of protecting the scientific interest of the site. However, in most cases where agricultural land is included in an ASSI, nature conservation will best be served by the continuation of existing activities by the farmers. Where it is considered that a change in current practices would be beneficial to the conservation interests of the site, my Department has powers to offer a management agreement to the owner or occupier. My Department may make payments to owners or occupiers in return for activities that provide positive nature conservation benefits.

Mr Bradley: Being from South Down, I too extend my congratulations to the Minister on his new appointment, and I take the opportunity to thank the outgoing Minister, Mr Sam Foster, for the valuable assistance that he gave me when I visited his office. I am grateful to him, and I wish him well.

My question on ASSIs stemmed directly from a problem that was brought to my attention. Two farmers were denied the opportunity of reseeding valuable land as part of their works programme because the area was designated as an ASSI. Does the Minister not agree that in such situations no legislation should be implemented that would curtail the day-to-day activities of members of the farming community in working and maintaining their holdings as only they know best?

Mr Nesbitt: As I said, most farmers should continue with their activity. However, I stress that the management agreement is entirely voluntary. My Department and I recognise the important contribution that is made by the farming community. For example, species-rich grasslands, hay meadows, heaths and some sand dunes would not get the necessary protection if they were not being grazed by farm animals. The farming community is, therefore, important to those areas. We wish to have management agreements with farmers where appropriate, but those agreements are voluntary.

Mr McCarthy: We all welcome measures that will preserve our environment. However, the Department of the Environment has recently designated the outer Ards Peninsula and its east coast as an ASSI, which means that local farmers, landowners and others in my area are being threatened with a loss of their rights. Can the

Minister assure the House that the rights of all concerned will not be diminished by that designation?

Secondly, the Minister mentioned preservation. Will he and his Department help when coastal erosion occurs in those areas? Coastal erosion occurs all the time in the Strangford Lough area, and the Department of the Environment, along with the other Departments, turns its back on the problem.

Mr Nesbitt: That is a two-part question. The Member will forgive me if I do not answer his question on coastal erosion. I will ensure that he gets a written answer, giving details of the Department's responsibility, of what can, and cannot, be done and of what may, or may not, have been done.

The first part of the question to do with rights is important not only in the Chamber, but throughout Northern Ireland and further afield, and I tried to address that in my answer to Mr Bradley. People have rights, and those rights must not be trodden upon; therefore rights should be considered in a sensitive way when ASSI designations are being dealt with. The only criterion upon which a judgement can be made is whether an area is of scientific interest or speciality.

Mr Shannon: Is the Minister aware of the substantial concern that is being expressed by farmers, landowners and members of the Ulster Farmers' Union, especially in the Ards Peninsula area? Will he confirm that full consultation will be carried out with everyone concerned? Can he assure the House that the decision to designate is not a *fait accompli*, should people be unhappy or, indeed, unwilling to agree the ASSI designation for their area?

Mr Nesbitt: Many of the aspects that were covered previously answer the Member's question. First, I repeat that, when implementing ASSIs, the Department is concerned that people who are directly affected are handled sensitively, that their rights are taken into account and that any management of that is done voluntarily.

Secondly, the Department is reviewing all the ASSIs. We have about 245 ASSIs, which, in large measure, involve the farming community. However, the Department must achieve an adequate representation across the whole area and across the types of areas to be protected, so it is reviewing every aspect of that, which is all I can say now.

Out-of-Town Shopping Complexes

4. **Mr Dallat** asked the Minister of the Environment what plans he has for ensuring that out-of-town shopping complexes will not reduce town-centre business; and to make a statement. (AQO 927/01)

Mr Nesbitt: Future plans on that subject are a matter for the Department for Regional Development. The regional development strategy recognises the important part that retailing will play in the future well-being of Northern

Ireland, and the Department for Regional Development has agreed to issue a new planning policy statement on retailing in town centres. I understand that it intends to have a draft of the new retail policy ready for public consultation in September 2002.

The existing policy on out-of-town shopping centres is clear. Proposals for major retail development in the countryside — that is, outside development limits — are not acceptable. However, existing policy provides guidelines on what are known as “out of the town centre” shopping centres, but within defined limits. The policy for dealing with those and shopping complexes is outlined in planning policy statement No. 5, ‘Retailing and the Town Centre’, which seeks to strike a balance. There are always conflicts and tensions in what the Department does between protecting the vitality and viability of town centres while at the same time promoting choice and competition to benefit consumers. Such proposals for out-of-centre and out-of-town shopping centres are subject to detailed scrutiny and are assessed against the rigorous policy test of planning policy statement No 5.

Mr Dallat: I welcome the new Minister and hope that in time he will become known for the brevity of his answers.

I pay tribute to the outgoing Minister, Mr Foster, particularly for the attention that he paid to road safety. I have no doubt that many people are alive today who owe their existence to the increased focus of the media on road deaths here. The Assembly owes a debt of gratitude to Mr Foster for that.

Does the Minister accept that failure to implement new planning legislation, as the Republic has done, has meant that we face various problems in sustaining commercial life in many town centres? As long as his Department continues to grant planning approvals for out-of-town shopping centres where there is no established need, the problems can only get worse.

4.00 pm

Mr Nesbitt: I can only repeat what I have said. For out-of-town centres to be permitted, they must pass rigorous policy tests. They will only be permitted outside a town centre if there is no suitable site in the town. Irrespective of what happens in the South of Ireland, when we look at planning applications, we consider the type of retailing that is envisaged, any existing deficiencies and whether there is a need for the shopping centre.

We also consider whether alternative sites exist and the impact on existing shopping in the particular town centre. Those are the important criteria that are considered. I shall look at particular cases in more detail if and when they come forward, but I can only deal with the generality in this case.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Mr Poots, I ask you to be brief with your question.

Mr Poots: As the Minister is aware, the only shopping centre in the region is at Sprucefield, in the Lagan Valley constituency. The Minister’s predecessor granted planning permission for further development at Sprucefield. Will the Minister look further at the reserved matters, as the proposed development has substantially changed? It probably does not now meet the regional criterion as originally envisaged.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Time is up. I am sure that the Minister will provide a written response to Mr Poots’s question.

Mr Hussey: On a point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker. Will the Speaker’s Office give us some sort of definitive outline on the number of supplementary questions that can be taken?

More specifically, with regard to question 4 to the Minister for Regional Development, will the Speaker’s Office look at the number of Members who wanted to ask supplementary questions and the number of Members who were called to ask supplementary questions? The questions related to a matter that, as the Minister said, is under investigation by the Public Accounts Committee. Many Members are deeply concerned about water leakage. However, no supplementary questions were taken from either of the two major Unionist parties to an initial question from Sinn Féin. I ask the Speaker’s Office to look at that and report to the Assembly.

Mr Deputy Speaker: I shall refer your comments to the Speaker’s Office. As you know, there are conventions on the number of supplementary questions that may be asked, but your question will be referred.

RATES (REGIONAL RATES) ORDER (NORTHERN IRELAND) 2002

The Minister of Finance and Personnel (Dr Farren):
I beg to move

That the Rates (Regional Rates) Order (Northern Ireland) 2002 (SR 26/2002) be approved.

I am in the somewhat invidious situation of presenting myself to the House for the third time today. I hope that I have Members' forbearance in doing so.

This short statutory rule specifies the regional rate poundages for the 2002-03 financial year and the amount of domestic rate aid grant applicable to that year. As the Order will increase a tax, the provisions of section 63 of the Northern Ireland Act 1998 apply, and cross-community support is required.

On 25 September 2001, my predecessor, Mark Durkan, announced that the increase in the regional rates for 2002-03 would be 7% in respect of the domestic rate and 3.3% in respect of the non-domestic regional rate. Those increases were subsequently incorporated into the Budget that the Assembly approved on 11 December 2001. The Order to be considered today prescribes the actual rate poundages that reflect those percentage increases. I will briefly describe the articles in the Order.

Article 1 provides legal definitions of the two main classes of rateable property. A "specified hereditament" broadly means a commercial property; consequently, an "unspecified hereditament" is a domestic property. Article 2 affixes 31.42p as the non-domestic regional rate poundage and 199.29p as the domestic regional rate poundage. Article 3 specifies 66.82p as the amount by which the domestic regional rate is to be reduced. The domestic regional rate poundage that ratepayers will actually pay will be 132.47p. In effect, the regional element of the domestic rate bill will rise by an average of £15, and the non-domestic rate bill will rise by an average of £138.

When district rates are taken into account, the total average rate increase facing households will be £30 per annum, or 59p per week. For businesses the overall average increases will be £269 per annum, or £5.17 per week.

Members will recall that the increases proposed in the Budget were considered necessary to sustain spending levels on public services, particularly the agreed priority areas of health, education and roads. It is estimated that the revenue raised from the regional rate this coming year will exceed £330 million. The sum is a very significant contribution towards the programme of expenditure proposals for 2002-03, which were set out in the Budget.

Major issues remain, however, in respect of the financing of local services. Members were made aware of two initiatives to solve the problems. With your

indulgence, Mr Deputy Speaker, I will take the opportunity to make a few short remarks on them.

First, stage 1 of the review of rating policy, dealing with factual analysis and the identification of major issues and policy options, is almost complete. It should be clear to anyone who has considered the range of issues involved in the review that the consultation exercise, to begin around April 2002, will give rise to many complex matters.

In the autumn we must carefully consider decisions following the response to the consultation exercise. Obviously there is a need to address serious deficiencies in the existing system, but we must be careful in the changes we propose. It will be judged in light of what is revealed by the consultation.

Secondly, there have been relative shifts in the values of non-domestic property since the last revaluation in 1997. These have not been solely due to the effects of inflation; social, environmental and economic factors have also been involved. The shifts are widespread and exist within, and between, different classes of property and locations. A further revaluation was necessary to address this shift in values.

The current exercise, which affects only non-domestic property, should be completed towards the end of 2002, and the new valuations will take effect from 1 April 2003. It is not possible to predict the impact of the revaluation on individual properties. However, businesses in areas of relative decline may benefit. That will be welcome news to businesses that have experienced difficulties recently.

As Minister of Finance and Personnel I am committed to public services and to effective public expenditure. The Assembly has heard many calls recently for increased resources for priority areas such as health, education and transport. It can begin to address these issues, but the availability of resources is a crucial issue.

The Order is an outworking of the Budget that the Assembly approved last December. The Executive and I believe that the increases are vital to ensuring that the services that ratepayers expect are maintained and improved. I commend the Order to the Assembly.

Ms Lewsley: Rates have often been debated, and on many occasions their pros and cons have been raised. However, the real argument is how we can continue to make and finance effective public spending decisions.

Whether we like it or not, rates are the only available means of raising revenue to supplement funding for necessary services. Some Members will take a simplistic approach, but that is not good enough. We must show political maturity in our decisions now. If we do not have the political courage to make difficult decisions, we cannot cry for extra resources.

In particular, I refer to the frequent calls for more money for the Health Service, students, education, roads and the environment — in fact, for anything that will get an easy headline. When it comes to finding resources to pay for vital services, what do we see? We see those people who sought the easy headline voting against increases in local rates. We must be realistic. We must raise revenue through innovative means, because the demands on the public exchequer mean that our only indigenous fund-raising mechanism is the rates.

This is an opportunity to deal with budgets in new and innovative ways and for Departments to become more proactive with their allocations. The targets defined in the Programme for Government must be regularly reviewed to enable us to turn them into feasible objectives. However, we cannot do that without adequate funding.

Some Members are playing a short-term political game that will result in long-term political pain for all people in Northern Ireland. It is worth bearing in mind that the Minister for Regional Development, Peter Robinson, has produced a transport strategy that will cost about £950 million. A rates increase would allow for a chance to promote social inclusion by ensuring adequate measures to provide and extend services for people with disabilities. The transport strategy makes no headway in accommodating those people.

Mr Robinson also presides over a run-down Water Service that will require hundreds of millions of pounds to bring it up to standard. The 'Financial Times' recently quoted Mr Robinson as being in favour of increasing the rates to pay for the transport strategy.

The new draft housing Bill shows that the Minister for Social Development has failed to deal adequately with the spiralling problem of homelessness in Northern Ireland. The poor and vulnerable in our society deserve equal treatment. Adequate housing is one of our basic rights. Reasons for homelessness are complex in any ordinary society, but in Northern Ireland there are many more reasons for people ending up on the streets. The draft Bill means that approximately 40% of those who present themselves as homeless will not qualify for help.

In the past, the Alliance Party has called for tax-raising powers to be devolved to the Assembly. I assume that it wishes to raise taxes in order to pay for services. How can that be? When faced with that option, its members always vote against it; perhaps they want tax-varying powers so that they can lower taxes.

If the Assembly votes against the rates increase, it will send out a damaging signal to the Treasury at a dangerous time. We are about to begin a spending review that will determine our total allocation for the next three years. If we fail to show real ability to raise our own revenue, we can expect no favours from the Treasury, and any Member who votes against this Order should bear that in mind.

The Rates (Regional Rates) Order (Northern Ireland) 2002 is an outworking of the Budget that the Assembly approved before Christmas. It is important to note that the Assembly has begun to identify its priorities and to allocate resources to them. It is incumbent on us to take action to back up our words. If we want to deliver good government across a range of services, including health, education and infrastructure, we need to take some financial responsibility for those services.

4.15 pm

I welcome the statement by the Minister of Finance and Personnel that the review of rating policy is being progressed by the Executive. However, can the Minister tell us when the review will be completed and whether the public will have an opportunity to have an input into the review?

I am a member of the Committee for Finance and Personnel, which is examining ways to complement existing funding. It is important that we continually consider and revise innovative ways of raising revenue to enable us to continue to make effective public spending decisions, and to finance them. We must also look at current rating policy, as there are inequalities in the system that need to be dealt with to bring forward a more equitable system for raising revenue. I support the motion.

Mr Shannon: My party is unhappy with the proposed rates increase, and will be voting accordingly. We are on record as expressing our opposition to the increase, and it is important at this stage to reiterate some of our reasons for that.

I am concerned that the regional rates may be hiked above a level that already exceeds the rate of inflation. That is a matter of concern for us and probably for all constituents in Northern Ireland who are represented by the parties in the Chamber. Many Members are also councillors. We have done our best at council level to be prudent and to trim the rates. We have trimmed the rates to the bare minimum, in many cases, to ensure that while the services are delivered, constituents are not overburdened with a rates rise at this time of year.

The past year has been particularly difficult at council level for several reasons, such as councils' responsibility for waste collection and disposal and the landfill tax. European regulations have been targeted at councils, which have been duty-bound to deliver on recycling. Although many councils have been happy to do that, it has been a burden on them. We are of the opinion that the financial burden associated with recycling could in some way be alleviated through the regional rate. We are concerned that EU regulations impose financial burdens.

Many Members feel that a fairer rating system is needed. Some of my constituents have expressed concern about buildings that have been lying vacant for several years because the businessmen and the owners have

been unable to lease them. In many cases, that has been because of a campaign of terrorism. Towns have borne the brunt of that, and certain buildings have remained vacant. The owners have done their best to ensure that the buildings are maintained to a certain standard. However, a rates burden is placed on the owners of the properties — people who have tried to avoid spending any more money on them.

The proposed changes will mean that people with vacant properties will be charged at a high level for their rates. That should be reconsidered, and their particular circumstances should be taken on board. There are several reasons for that, the most important of which is that people in the Province are already overburdened with rates. It is only fair that the people in this Province receive the value for money that they deserve, and that is not offered with this rates increase.

Mr McCartney: The proposal is to increase the rates. The rates will be increased in real terms by 7%, not by the headline figure of 3.4%. Although that is the specified increase in rates, the amount of the rebate has been reduced by 3.37%.

What is the purpose of the rates? The rates are intended to provide the financial resources out of which most of our local government services are funded. Initially, all of those services were funded by rates, but, over the years, central Government put more and more money into work that had previously been a burden borne solely by the ratepayers.

Patricia Lewsley has suggested that, as rates are the only tax-raising power left to the Assembly, and the only source of income other than the block grant, innovative measures should be put in place and that we should be exercising our rating powers to gain revenue with which to fund other services. A picture is painted of a Health Service desperately in need of funds; of an education service that requires all sorts of financial resources for infrastructure; and of a regional development sector for which money is required in respect of transport. It is suggested that the source of that money, other than the block grant, should be rates and that we should continue to increase them. I see Ms Lewsley apparently raising her eyebrows, but I am sure that anyone who analyses the whole drift of her statement —

Ms Lewsley: Will the Member give way?

Mr McCartney: No, I will not give way.

Ms Lewsley: The Member is misquoting me, for a start.

Mr McCartney: I am not misquoting — when the Member's speech is analysed, that will be in it. The Member painted a picture of all of those services requiring resources and of there being no point in going to the Treasury as it would not be willing to assist.

Therefore, it follows, we must think of measures which will raise money to resource those great endeavours.

In fact, the absence of money and resources is down to several factors, and it is open to this Assembly to correct those factors — something that it has been slow to do. A huge amount of public money is being poured down the drain in an excess of administration and a multiplicity of quangos. If the system had been pruned from day one, instead of being promised endless reviews, enormous amounts of money would have been available to fund the services that we are now apparently going to fund through increased rates.

Furthermore, the super-bright people who arranged the agreement knew that there was a huge deficit in capital investment in Northern Ireland's infrastructure that could never be replaced out of the annual block grant — and I have repeated that point many times. Yet, when the agreement was being negotiated, there was no question of telling the Government that they had to make good the amount of money that they had saved through underinvesting, or not investing, in that infrastructure.

Indeed, if my memory serves me right, the Minister of Finance and Personnel announced to a public gathering a couple of weeks ago that something in the nature of £4 billion to £5 billion would be needed over the next four to five years.

Dr Farren: It was over the next 10 years.

Mr McCartney: The Minister says it was 10 years, but I believe that he stated that a substantial proportion of that money would be required in the shorter term of four to five years. Where will this money come from if not from an increase in the block grant? Apparently, if we do not go to the Treasury and demand what we ought to have received in the first place, the money will be raised by the only means available to the Assembly — milking the people of Northern Ireland through the rates system.

In a previous debate I mentioned the absence of any liaison between Departments on a strategic plan for governing Northern Ireland — joined-up government, some might term it. Let us look at some of the effects that will arise from these significant increases in rates. There are many small businesses in Northern Ireland that are not run to make a profit over and above paying the people who run them. They are one-man businesses — florists, greengrocers, corner shops, boutiques and other small businesses — and a significant increase in rates will put them out of business. These people are making a living, but they are not putting away vast profits. They do not constitute a charge on public finances because they are not drawing benefit or anything else. However, when they go out of business, as they inevitably will if there are significant hikes in rates, they may well be a charge on public resources.

What do we see in other Departments? We see vast amounts of money being spent by LEDU on expensive television advertisements giving information about starting a small business. If one wants to do that, LEDU will provide all the necessary support. It will work out business plans to get people started. However, when people examine what happens to small businesses, and when they prepare a business plan to find out how much money will be required not only to rent their premises but also to pay rates, many will be dissuaded. LEDU, which is now joined with another Government body or quango charged with creating jobs, is spending huge amounts of money per job created. That money comes out of the public coffers, and nobody seems to mind if £20,000 or £30,000 is spent in creating a job that may or may not last for very long. No one thinks that if these small businesspeople are put out of business, it is costing jobs.

I want to know how much money the Minister expects to raise from this increase in rates? Has his Department investigated the number of small businesses that may go under if there are significant rises in the rates? How much, ultimately, will the Government have to pay if these people become a charge on the public revenue? We have an Assembly and Executive that has one tool with which to raise money, and they simply cannot resist getting their sticky fingers on the levers of power to extract money from ordinary small businesspeople to blow on grandiose schemes such as the Office of the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister.

What does the Office of the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister do, other than spend £36 million on administration? What does the Assembly do, other than spend £1.2 billion on 11 Departments?

4.30 pm

Dr Farren: Leave it.

Mr McCartney: No, I will not leave it. I will stay here to be a constant thorn in your side and in the sides of people like you.

Mr Beggs: The Minister said that £313 million is raised through local rates. The Assembly must decide what proportion of its expenditure should be raised locally. Some parties appear to continue as they did during direct rule — they call for more spending but for someone else to pay for it. Some of the Assembly's decisions in this regard are not easy. However, it can determine how much funding will be spent on necessary provision in Northern Ireland; for example, health, education, public transport, roads and water treatment. Some people's financial calculations do not appear to add up — they want more money, but they do not want it to be raised in any way, so there is no logic to their argument.

It is strange that a Minister of the party that leads the charge has received in his Department one of the highest increases in departmental funding for next year. That

allocation was made in recognition of the needs of that Department; for example, inadequate public transport and water treatment infrastructure. It is hypocritical that the party of a Minister whose Department has received one of the higher funding increases should argue that the proposed rates increase should be reduced.

Good work is being done in the Assembly. I value the opportunity to contribute to the Public Accounts Committee, which highlights inappropriate spending that was hidden in the past. All Departments and Statutory Committees must ensure that taxpayers' money is used to achieve best value at regional and local government level. I wish that every Member would contribute to the scrutiny of Committees and their Departments. Some Members decide not to contribute but to grandstand here for the cameras. It is important that everybody contribute. If money is badly spent, that should be highlighted, not only in plenary sittings, but in Committee meetings during which Members should take civil servants and Ministers to task.

The Assembly must make difficult decisions about rates. However, the books must be balanced, and Members should consider that when they vote.

Dr Farren: I thank everyone who contributed to the debate. The Rates (Regional Rates) Order (Northern Ireland) 2002 represents a reasonable compromise between the need to generate sufficient revenue to sustain and improve key public services and the equal need not to place a greater financial burden on ratepayers than is absolutely necessary. We have achieved a proper balance, although inevitably not everyone would agree.

The main arguments have been rehearsed before, at the draft Budget announcement in September 2001 and during the Assembly debate of 11 December 2001 on the programme and expenditure proposals. More points were raised today, and I shall try to cover all of them.

I am unsure of whether I understood Mr Shannon's point correctly. He must be aware that non-occupied properties are not subject to rate charging. That includes non-domestic properties as well as domestic properties.

Patricia Lewsley quite rightly emphasised the need for the Assembly to examine carefully the revenue sources it has direct control over, to see to what extent they can fairly and equitably contribute towards meeting our public expenditure needs. She correctly stressed that there are significant deficits in our services and infrastructure that must to be made good. We must satisfy ourselves, in the first instance, and the Treasury, that we are making the best use of revenue sources that we control directly.

To illustrate this point, I will compare the average domestic rate bill in Northern Ireland and the average council tax per chargeable dwelling in England. In Northern Ireland the average is £414.11 in 2001-02; in England, it is £740.54. I am trying to compare like with

like. There is a significant difference in the average contributions made in Northern Ireland and in England. I am not arguing for an increase to match what is being paid in England; I am simply drawing attention to the discrepancy. The Treasury is fully aware of this, and we are reminded of the discrepancies and being asked to examine carefully the revenue streams that we control.

We are about to launch a major review of rating policy. I trust that people such as Assemblyman McCartney will make his views known during the consultation process. It will probably commence in April and conclude later in the year. That will give us time to address the outcome of the consultation and any recommendations proposed. There will be full consideration of the basis on which rates and property taxes can be levied to ensure that they are as fair and as equitable as possible.

Mr McCartney quite rightly pointed to the considerable sums that we require to make good the deficit in our infrastructure. Everybody recognises that deficit, and Members speak about it almost daily. We are aware of emerging plans. For example, the Minister for Regional Development has already stated what he estimates we will require over the next 10 years — approximately one quarter of the £4 billion to £5 billion mentioned by Mr McCartney. I referred to it in the course of the seminar. He obviously paid some attention to the report of that seminar.

That is a significant sum, and we must ensure that we acquire the necessary resources. Some of those resources may be acquired from local revenue streams; others may be acquired from the development of public-private partnerships. Members know that the vast bulk of our resources come by way of the block grant, which we addressed, in part at least, during debate on an earlier motion.

The points made by Mr Beggs support the position that I have outlined. He spoke about our considerable needs, and we must face up to the challenge of acquiring the necessary resources to meet those needs.

Mr McCartney asked what we estimate the revenue from the regional rate for this year to be. We estimate that it will be over £330 million — I made that point in the course of my remarks. He also asked about the effects on small businesses. Again, I pointed out in my opening remarks that revaluations are taking place and, when completed, will take effect from April of next year. I also made the point that businesses in areas of relative decline are likely to benefit. That will be welcome news to businesses that have experienced difficulties.

With those remarks, I conclude my response and hope that if —

Mr Morrow: Will the Minister give way?

Dr Farren: Not at this point. I am winding up.

I trust that I have covered all the substantive points made, but if I have missed any, I will write to the Members concerned.

Question put.

The Assembly divided: Ayes 43; Noes 22.

AYES

Nationalist

Alex Attwood, P J Bradley, Joe Byrne, John Dallat, Arthur Doherty, Mark Durkan, Sean Farren, John Fee, Tommy Gallagher, Carmel Hanna, Denis Haughey, Joe Hendron, John Kelly, Patricia Lewsley, Alban Maginness, Alasdair McDonnell, Barry McElduff, Gerry McHugh, Eugene McMenamin, Pat McNamee, Monica McWilliams, Conor Murphy, Mick Murphy, Danny O'Connor, Dara O'Hagan, Eamonn O'Neill, Brid Rodgers, John Tierney.

Unionist

Billy Armstrong, Roy Beggs, Billy Bell, Esmond Birnie, Fred Cobain, Robert Coulter, Duncan Shipley Dalton, Ivan Davis, Sam Foster, Tom Hamilton, Derek Hussey, Danny Kennedy, David McClarty, Alan McFarland, Jim Wilson.

NOES

Unionist

Paul Berry, Mervyn Carrick, Wilson Clyde, Nigel Dodds, Oliver Gibson, William Hay, David Hilditch, Billy Hutchinson, Roger Hutchinson, Gardiner Kane, Robert McCartney, William McCrea, Maurice Morrow, Edwin Poots, Mark Robinson, Jim Shannon, Denis Watson, Peter Weir, Jim Wells, Sammy Wilson.

Other

Eileen Bell, Kieran McCarthy.

<i>Total Votes</i>	<i>65</i>	<i>Total Ayes</i>	<i>43 (66.2%)</i>
<i>Nationalist Votes</i>	<i>28</i>	<i>Nationalist Ayes</i>	<i>28 (100.0%)</i>
<i>Unionist Votes</i>	<i>35</i>	<i>Unionist Ayes</i>	<i>15 (42.9%)</i>

Question accordingly agreed to (cross-community vote).

Resolved:

That the Rates (Regional Rates) Order (Northern Ireland) 2002 (SR 26/2002) be approved.

Adjourned at 4.55 pm.

NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

Tuesday 5 March 2002

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

Members observed two minutes' silence.

HARLAND & WOLFF PLC — EMPLOYER'S LIABILITY

Mr Speaker: I have received notice from the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment that he wishes to make a statement on Harland & Wolff plc and employer's liability.

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment (Sir Reg Empey): I thank Members for the opportunity to address them on the matter of my Department's obligations to Harland & Wolff plc, which is the shell company left in the ownership of my Department after the privatisation of the shipbuilder Harland & Wolff in 1989.

The purpose of the statement is to inform Members of a significant potential liability that has fallen to my Department with regard to employer's liability claims. That potential liability relates to compensation payments to the victims of asbestos-related diseases who are former Harland & Wolff employees. Many of them have been the subject of intense suffering and distress. I wish to make it clear at the outset that Harland & Wolff plc is an entirely separate legal entity from the current shipbuilding business. The potential liability and my statement have nothing to do with the trading situation of the shipbuilding business or with Harland & Wolff Group plc.

The matter of potential liabilities was first highlighted in the Executive's position report, which was presented to the Assembly by the then Minister of Finance and Personnel, Mr Durkan, on 19 June 2001. It arises because of commitments provided by the Government in 1974 to Harland & Wolff, which were confirmed at privatisation in 1989. Those commitments have crystallised into liabilities as a result of the insolvency of Harland & Wolff plc employer's liability insurer, Chester Street Insurance Holdings Ltd, in January last year.

As a result of the insolvency, employers' liability policy holders, including Harland and Wolff plc and other organisations such as British Shipbuilders, are now required to pay out on agreed claims for asbestosis and associated diseases caused by exposure to asbestos. It is important

to spell out what that means in human terms before I deal further with the legal and technical aspects of the case.

Before 1970, asbestos was commonly used in shipbuilding and other heavy engineering industries. Medical evidence became available that established that exposure to the substance could result in long-term illness or death. Many former workers in the industry find themselves in that situation. This is a tragedy of huge proportions, and nothing in the volumes of legal papers conveys the scale of human suffering and distress involved. Members may have seen interviews with people who suffer from asbestosis or related illnesses, and the tales of those affected are distressing.

Asbestos-related conditions take a long time to manifest themselves and experts estimate that there could be just under 3,000 claims by 2050. Legal advice, affirmed by counsel, has confirmed that my Department has an obligation to provide financial support to Harland & Wolff plc to meet these employers' liability insurance claims.

An actuarial assessment by a leading London-based international firm of actuaries has confirmed that the extent of the liabilities could be approximately £10 million a year in each of the next four years. Total estimated liabilities could be as much as £190 million in the period to 2050.

My Department has already made a provision in its accounts for the current gross cost of those liabilities as estimated by the actuaries. The Department of Finance and Personnel has confirmed with the Treasury that, as a result of the current resource accounting and budgeting rules, the provision will count as annually managed expenditure. That will resolve the main costs of the liability, and that means that, based on the current best estimates, the maximum cost to the departmental expenditure limit that we face is our current estimate of £0.5 million this year and £10 million in 2002-03. From 1 April 2003, claims paid will not represent a new cost, as that is already reflected in the provision. In effect, the remainder of the costs will, within Treasury rules, be met outside Northern Ireland's departmental expenditure limit and will not affect the Executive's spending power.

However, the issue is not simply one of legal commitments and technicalities. The needs and rights of victims of those terrible illnesses are central. They have faced a range of serious medical conditions including asbestosis, mesothelioma, diffuse pleural thickening, pleural plaques and lung cancer. I understand that there is currently no effective cure for many of those diseases, which are debilitating and insidious and which often take many years to present. The responses to drugs are generally short-lived. All that is extremely distressing and traumatic for those involved and for their families, and the Assembly will wish to acknowledge their sense of worry and apprehension.

Therefore, it is important that, although I outline the legal obligations, actuarial assessment and expenditure implications, our debate should be set firmly in that human context.

The matter is urgent for several reasons. We have a responsibility to meet our obligations to victims of those diseases and their relatives who continue to suffer. Harland & Wolff plc is rapidly running out of cash and needs funds urgently so that it can meet claims as they fall due. Therefore, there is an urgent need for an assurance from the Government that sufficient funding will be made available to enable the company to trade properly.

Under company law, the directors cannot trade without an assurance that they have sufficient assets to meet all their liabilities. Therefore, I intend to provide assurance to the directors that my Department will meet its legal obligations and ensure that sufficient funds are provided to allow the company to meet its debts as they fall due.

In parallel with that assurance, my officials, in conjunction with the Department of Finance and Personnel, will seek to ensure the maximum possible recovery of expenditure from the Treasury and from the financial services compensation scheme (FSCS). The FSCS was set up to protect policy holders and others where insurers are unable to meet their liabilities under policies issued. It is funded by levies made on insurance companies. I shall provide more detail about that scheme later.

I must give Members further background information about how the situation arose. In 1975 Harland & Wolff was taken into public ownership and its share capital was acquired by the Department of Commerce — now the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment. After 14 years in Government ownership, the company was privatised in September 1989 through an employee and management buyout that was supported by the Norwegian shipowner and industrialist Fred Olsen.

After disposal of its shipbuilding trade through privatisation to what has become Harland & Wolff Group plc, my Department retained 100% ownership of the old company, Harland & Wolff plc. At privatisation, certain assets and liabilities remained with the old Harland & Wolff plc, in particular, all liabilities that existed at the time of the sale resulting from the conduct of the business before transfer. That was similar to arrangements made for other privatisations.

As I have said, the current position has arisen through the insolvency of Chester Street Insurance Holdings Ltd — formerly the Iron Trades Group — which acted as employers' liability insurer for Harland & Wolff plc and for other leading UK companies, including British Shipbuilders and British Steel Corporation.

The situation, therefore, has UK-wide implications. In addition, it is likely that many of the claims will relate to Harland & Wolff plc workers who were employed and domiciled in Great Britain. Legal advice has confirmed that, as part of the contractual arrangements at

privatisation, the Department has retained an obligation to guarantee funding in relation to employers' and public liability claims, for which Chester Street Insurance Holdings Ltd acted as insurer.

My officials have consulted the departmental solicitor's office at each stage of the process and have taken legal advice from Lovells, a leading London-based international firm of lawyers that acted for the Government at the time of privatisation in 1989. Lovells has continued to provide advice on other Harland & Wolff matters since then. That firm's opinion has been confirmed by counsel.

As I have said, the matter of the potential liabilities was highlighted in the Executive's position report on 19 June 2001. The extent of the potential liability was unclear at that time, and an actuarial assessment of Harland & Wolff plc's potential future exposure was not completed until December 2001.

The actuarial assessment was undertaken by William M Mercer Ltd, a leading London-based international firm of actuaries. The final report concludes that potential claims from now to approximately 2050 could amount to £190 million gross.

Mercer's analysis assumes that there is the potential to recover up to £49 million of the £190 million from the FSCS. Employers' liability cover became compulsory in Northern Ireland in 1975, and the FSCS meets the balance of claims for exposures from that date onwards after recoveries are made from other sources, such as Chester Street Insurance Holdings Ltd.

However, any potential recovery from the scheme is dependent on the eligibility of Harland & Wolff plc as an applicant company. That is being investigated.

10.45 am

The FSCS arrangements apply to companies in Northern Ireland only in respect of agreed claims that cover periods of exposure after 1975 — that being the date at which employers' liability insurance became compulsory in Northern Ireland. William H Mercer Ltd's view is that the majority of exposure at Harland & Wolff plc occurred before 1975. The latent period for asbestosis and related diseases to present could be anything up to 40 years. However, although the time lag on settlement payments could reach as far out as 2050, claims are expected to peak in the next few years.

If the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment were not to confirm to the directors of Harland & Wolff plc that it would meet its obligations, the directors would have no alternative but to seek a winding-up of the company. In those circumstances, the receiver or liquidator would still look to the Government to fulfil their legal obligations to Harland & Wolff plc on foot of the undertakings given in 1974 and 1989. There would also be a further period of uncertainty and distress for the claimants.

The situation is extremely regrettable. However, it has arisen due to commitments made in 1974 and at privatisation, and the unforeseen insolvency of Chester Street Insurance Holdings Ltd. I assure Members that I shall make certain that my officials take every step to monitor the situation, to minimise liabilities and to ensure that maximum recovery is obtained from all available sources.

I have outlined to Members the obligations that have fallen on my Department because of arrangements at privatisation and the insolvency of Chester Street Insurance Holdings Ltd. I have highlighted the urgency of the situation for the company, and I shall ensure that it is provided with sufficient funds with which to meet those obligations. However, I have also emphasised the acute human dimension and the real difficulties faced by those affected by those serious asbestos-related conditions.

The Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment has a clear duty, as owner of Harland & Wolff plc and on the basis of professional advice taken, to respond plainly and unequivocally today and to remove uncertainty for sufferers of those harrowing conditions.

Finally, I wish to express my appreciation to my Colleague Dr Farren and to Department of Finance and Personnel officials for the assistance that they have offered to my Department in recent weeks.

The Deputy Chairperson of the Committee for Enterprise, Trade and Investment (Mr Neeson): It is only right that the Assembly accepts its legal responsibilities. Over the years, I have known many people who have suffered from asbestosis caused by their employment in the shipyard. It is a terrible disease. In many cases, it has resulted in fatalities.

Can the Minister tell the House whether any of the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment's programmes for 2002 and 2003 will be affected by the compensation that is expected to be paid out? Can he clarify whether the Department's budget will be affected by further compensation claims after 2003? Finally, is the Minister aware of any similar situation in which an organisation has been privatised and similar problems could arise in future?

Sir Reg Empey: I said in my statement that the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment has made a bid in the February monitoring round to cover the figure of £500,000 that we believe is necessary in the current financial year. Next year, a liability of anything up to £10 million could fall on my Department in regard to its obligations in this matter. The Department will make bids through the normal procedures with the Department of Finance and Personnel. We must await the outcome of final decisions on the Department's total budget. As I said in my statement, Departments are moving towards a different type of budgeting in the longer term.

That different type of budgeting is best described as resource accounting, under which, after 2002-03, liabilities that are currently provided for will be treated as annually managed expenditure. In practice, that means that the liability is already clear, the Treasury knows what it is and provision is made for it in accounts. That will be conducted nationally.

Mr Neeson's final question was whether similar situations existed in other privatised companies — the answer is "Yes". British Shipbuilders, a state-owned amalgamation of shipbuilding industries, is directly affected by the insolvency of Chester Street Insurance Holdings Ltd. The British Steel Corporation, the former owners of Corus, is also affected directly by the insolvency. The Department of Trade and Industry in London is in the same boat as us.

The matters are being dealt with under annually managed expenditure. My understanding is that, after 2002-03, the spending power of the block will not be affected by those liabilities.

The Chairperson of the Committee for Employment and Learning (Dr Birnie): I note that regulations that relate to compensation for various lung diseases in existing companies currently go through the Department for Employment and Learning.

Will the Minister confirm that the matter is being dealt with urgently? Sadly, any delay may mean that some of the workers and family members who are affected will no longer be alive to benefit from compensation payments. Can he further outline the likely claims on public expenditure in future years?

Sir Reg Empey: The matter is being dealt with urgently because the Harland & Wolff Group plc, which is wholly owned by my Department, has a board of directors who must confirm the company's annual accounts. The directors must be satisfied that there are sufficient resources to meet the company's debts. Those debts are determined by court decisions in respect of individual claims. The directors must respond annually by submitting and signing the accounts, and by having them audited. Therefore, the auditors must know that the directors are satisfied that there are sufficient assets to meet liabilities.

In my statement, I said that I intended to confirm to the directors that my Department will meet the liabilities with regard to those matters so that the company's directors will be satisfied that they have assets to meet their liabilities. If I did not do so, the company would have to go into liquidation. However, that would save the public purse nothing. We are in this position because of undertakings that were given in 1974, and in 1989 at the time of privatisation, that that was happening nationally. Without those undertakings, the company would be unable to trade.

The anticipated amount of required resources for this financial year is £0.5 million. In the next financial year, that could rise to £10 million, depending on the flow of claims and on the level and speed of settlements. There is always some doubt about that. There will be continuous annual monitoring. Actuaries will give annual updates on what the current and future liabilities are likely to be.

The issue concerns provisions. I repeat that we are pursuing every avenue to minimise the resources required to meet those claims. There is a compensation scheme, which has some technical limitations. Nevertheless, we shall pursue it. My colleagues in the Department of Finance and Personnel are fully engaged with the Treasury on the matter, and together every avenue will be pursued.

Dr Mc Donnell: I take this opportunity to welcome the return of the Deputy Chairperson of the Committee for Enterprise, Trade and Investment following his illness. We are delighted to see him. We missed him — even if at times that was only to ensure a quorum.

More seriously, I welcome the Minister's efforts to face up to an awful situation. Asbestosis, mesothelioma and their array of attendant problems are a major human tragedy. In my day job, I treat several patients who suffer from the effects of asbestosis, and it is one of the worst possible afflictions.

Several problems concern the old Harland & Wolff plc and the new Harland & Wolff Group plc. Although I do not wish to pursue those in detail today, perhaps the Minister will provide further information on paper as to the structures and how such matters fit together.

The Minister said that much of the exposure came before 1975. There followed a period of exposure from 1975 to 1989. How much exposure was there after 1989? How much money has been settled to date in respect of existing cases? That might be relevant to future settlements.

Why was none of that foreseen in 1989 at the time of privatisation? Surely steps should have been taken at that time to sort out the respective liabilities of the old and the new companies.

Are there contingent liabilities other than those associated with asbestos? What else might emerge from the woodwork? I urge the Minister —

Mr Speaker: Order. The opportunity is for Members to ask a question. I am usually fairly generous when it is two or three, but when it is 20 —

Dr McDonnell: My question is multifaceted.

Mr Speaker: It is, and many other Members wish to ask questions on the issue. Therefore, I ask the Member to restrict himself to the questions he has already asked and to allow the Minister to answer them.

Sir Reg Empey: I admit that I am struggling to keep up, but I shall try to cover as many points as possible. Through his work, the Member will be far more familiar

with the outworkings of those diseases than will most of the Members.

The Government have no involvement in exposure after 1989. That is a private matter for the insurers of the new company and its own public liability insurers. We have no ongoing trading activities with the old company; therefore my understanding is that no liabilities exist.

I shall write to the Member to detail how much has been settled to date. I do not have that information to hand. However, there are currently approximately 800 unresolved claims in the system. Work continues on those every week.

11.00 am

Of course, not all claims are met. However, it gives an idea of the scale of the problem. The Department expects the number of claims to peak over the next three to four years, because of the time that elapses between people's exposure to asbestos and their making a claim.

The Member asked whether the situation could have been foreseen. The approach taken was no different from that taken in other privatisations. In the 1980s the Thatcher Government pushed forward a series of privatisations in the public sector, and the privatisation of Harland & Wolff was dealt with in the same way. When deals are done in the private sector, it is not unusual for the outgoing shareholder to accept responsibility for existing liabilities.

I have just received information that will give Members a sense of the scale of the situation. When the insurance company was declared insolvent in January, 720 claims were at various stages of negotiation. A further 107 claims have since been received, bringing the total to 827. Of those, 638 were from Northern Ireland-based claimants, and 189 were from Great Britain-based claimants. On 19 February, 414 claims had been settled, and 413 were outstanding. Since January 2001, payments made directly by Harland & Wolff for settled claims for damages have amounted to £2,714,335. A further £786,000 has been paid for plaintiffs' costs. Since January payments made directly by the Iron Trades Group in settlement of Harland & Wolff's defence costs have amounted to £457,000.

Prior to its insolvency, claims were made against the insurers. I do not know the scale of that, but if Members wish to pursue that matter, I will facilitate them.

Mr C Murphy: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. I thank the Minister for his statement. He has told a disturbing tale on two levels. Of primary concern is the suffering experienced by former employees of Harland & Wolff, but of secondary concern is the cost to the public purse of the British Government's failed privatisation policy, for which the public must now pay.

The Minister estimates that the claims will cost the Executive up to £10.5 million by 2003. Following that, the claims are not expected to affect the Executive's

spending power. However, has the Department of Finance and Personnel estimated the cost to the health budget of dealing with an increase in diseases that are directly related to asbestos? What strain will that put on the Executive's spending power?

Sir Reg Empey: The Member referred to the impact of the privatisation policy. He should be aware that the liability arose because of the insolvency of the insurer, not because of privatisation. The Member should also be aware that when the company was in public ownership, vast sums of public money were required to sustain it — there was an ongoing cost associated with the company's being in public ownership. Many companies in public ownership were spectacularly unsuccessful, which meant a higher cost to the public purse.

Inevitably, the health budget will be affected by significant costs, but that must be put in the context of the costs to the Health Service of smoking-related diseases and drug and alcohol abuse. I do not know what the cost will be. My Colleague in the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety may be able to give some guidance. Undoubtedly, the cost will be considerable. Once the illnesses manifest themselves, in many cases they require intense treatment over a long period. I am happy to refer the matter of quantifying the cost to the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety.

Mr Ervine: I pay tribute to the Minister for showing the humane face of Government in his recognition of the suffering of those people. If I interpret his statement correctly, he has placed the most vulnerable, those who are suffering, higher on the agenda than is often the case.

Will the Minister confirm that, in accepting liability, approximately 30% of the moneys that we will pay out will go to members of the legal profession, who are fit and well? Those who suffer from the diseases might be described as the "walking dead", because there is only one outcome of those debilitating illnesses. The long and laborious legal process will ensure that some of the sufferers will not benefit from our liability. Since the Minister is now offering Harland & Wolff plc the wherewithal to pay compensation, can he and the Department expedite the process so that those who suffer from these illnesses will at least feel that their pain has been acknowledged?

I am sorry to take so long, Mr Speaker. I am conscious of your previous intervention.

The British Government seem to have a cunning plan as regards asbestosis. They argue that the insurance company or the company during whose employment a person contracted asbestosis are the only companies that can be held liable. That is a move away from previous cases where insurance companies had to accept partial liability for a person with the illness who could prove that they had worked in many companies, during whose employment they were exposed to asbestos. Will the Minister confirm that the moneys that he will provide to

Harland & Wolff plc are to cover compensation for partial liability, rather than single liability cases only?

Sir Reg Empey: The Member is correct to highlight the vulnerability of that large group of people. I have tried to express my views and those of the Executive in that regard. When I read out the costs of some of the claims that have been met so far, I indicated the substantial contribution towards legal costs that is required. I cannot confirm the figure of 30%. However, the cash amounts are on record, and the Member can calculate the costs when he reads Hansard in the morning.

The claims process can be a long-drawn-out one, and it must be considered from several viewpoints. Not everyone who is suffering from an illness related to employment with Harland & Wolff plc is a resident of Northern Ireland. Harland & Wolff plc had staff in Great Britain who worked as subcontractors in several shipyards over a long period. Some 189 people, out of a total of 638, are based in Great Britain.

A recent court ruling was made in the Fairchild case that, before compensation will be paid, the applicant must prove that he or she contracted the disease because of exposure to the substance at a single place of employment. Employees, therefore, who moved from one company to another cannot prove that they contracted the disease at a specific company. That is my understanding of the Fairchild ruling. Thus, a significant burden of proof is imposed on the applicant. If a person was employed exclusively by Harland & Wolff plc, it will be much easier for him to prove the validity of his case. However, if that employee moved between companies, it will be much more difficult for him to do so. The Fairchild case will be appealed — it is an evolving situation, and it is not clear how it will be resolved. The Member is correct that that has become a significant hurdle for many who may have been exposed to the substance when working for several employers, but I cannot give him any further comfort on the partial liability issue until the case is resolved.

Dr Adamson: I thank the Minister for his statement, which was excellent as usual. How prevalent are the complications of asbestosis, such as neoplasia, pleural and peritoneal mesothelioma and Caplan's syndrome, and, more specifically, how do those diseases affect the relatives of the sufferers?

Sir Reg Empey: The Member is far more able than I am to comment on those illnesses. However, it is clear from the list of illnesses that he read out, some of which I mentioned in my statement, that exposure to asbestos results in a range of diseases that affect people to varying degrees.

The Member raised a significant point about sufferers' relatives. The distress of relatives whose loved ones have contracted such illnesses is only one of the problems to be considered. The situation is potentially similar to that caused by passive smoking in that relatives of people

who were exposed to asbestos at work have made claims in their own right. They ingested substances from fibres that workers transported home on their clothing and, thus, some 30 years later, contracted illnesses that are directly related to asbestos fibres. That evidence was not immediately apparent and has emerged only recently.

Relatives are affected by this in two ways: first, they undergo the trauma of a loved one's illness, and, secondly, as a result of secondary exposure, many contract the illnesses themselves. Sadly, this affects many people, some of whom are not yet aware that they were exposed to asbestos, or of the many insidious and debilitating illnesses that, as Dr Adamson has pointed out, can result from such exposure. The Executive must examine these matters seriously.

11.15 am

Mr Speaker: Lest it be seen as a precedent, I point out that I permitted the Minister to answer that question because he wanted to express something of the human suffering involved, which is entirely appropriate. Had the question been interpreted as a request for a professional opinion, it would have been inadmissible. Even if the Minister had been qualified to respond, questions in pursuit of a professional opinion — for example, legal, medical or other — are inadmissible. Questions to Ministers must relate to their departmental responsibilities. I mention that not to obstruct the question, which the Minister has fully answered, but lest its admissibility be seen as a precedent in any other circumstances. Professional opinion questions are not admissible.

Mr Shannon: I welcome the Minister's statement and the report. He has made a direct attempt to address the delivery of insurance cover and assistance to those who suffered. In my constituency there has been a tradition of people working in the shipyard. Recently I was involved in the case of a constituent who tried to claim damages after the death of her husband, who had suffered from asbestosis. A settlement was made.

What is the timescale between making a claim and receiving a settlement? Many families have waited 12 months, 18 months, or even years, just for their applications to be processed. When can claimants expect to receive the cheques — which is the best way to put it — in compensation for the disease from which they and their families have suffered? Why is 2050 the cut-off date? Also, how can we directly help the families, whom we want to look after?

Sir Reg Empey: The Member, like others, has had first-hand experience of the impact of these diseases. The approach has to include compassion, on the one hand, and realism — given the legal framework — on the other.

This is a complicated process. As I said, 827 claims have been lodged. At insolvency, in January 2001, there were 720 claims at various stages. Since then, 107 claims

have been received, bringing the total to 827. Four hundred and fourteen claims had been settled by 19 February 2002. Therefore half of the total claims outstanding have been settled within this period. Some claims are disallowed, and I have given the reasons. The timescale could be 12 months or longer in some cases. I am conscious that the process should not be prolonged unduly, as highlighted by the Member for East Belfast Mr Ervine, and Mr Shannon. However, public funds are being used, and technicalities will affect whether liability is clearly accepted. As I said, there is an outstanding court case that could delay the process. However, I will take the Member's point on board.

After calculating the dates of exposure to the disease and people's estimated lifespans, it was felt that nobody who might have been exposed to the disease would be alive after 2050. In other words, fewer are thought to have been exposed post-1975 therefore, allowing for individual lifespans, it is unlikely that the majority of sufferers would live beyond 2050. The estimates could vary, but by 2050 the number of claims will have petered down to single figures. The bulk of the claims is expected in the next four or five years.

Dr O'Hagan: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. First, I offer my sympathy to those who have been affected by asbestos-related diseases. It is a terrible affliction.

It is a concern that, once again, the Assembly is paying for commitments made and arrangements negotiated by the British Government in 1974 and during the privatisation of Harland & Wolff plc.

When did Chester Street Insurance Holdings Ltd become insolvent? Did the company become insolvent as a result of the potentially large claims? Are the claims related only to Harland & Wolff plc or to other companies as well? How much was paid to the insurers, and will any of that money be recouped? Go raibh maith agat.

Sir Reg Empey: The privatisation was negotiated by the British Government as part of a series of privatisations. However, the nature of negotiations in subsequent privatisations has not been much different, no special arrangements were made during the privatisation of Harland & Wolff plc that did not apply to other companies.

The reasons for the insurer's insolvency include the huge scale of the settlements and the fact that the volume and amount of claims have been higher than the underwriters anticipated. Therefore the company's liabilities were deemed to be far in excess of its assets at the time, and it went into receivership.

There were approximately 2,000 policy holders, of which Harland & Wolff plc is one. That might give you a flavour of the scale of the situation. British Steel Corporation had thousands of employees, and British Shipbuilders covered many shipyards in the UK. Harland & Wolff plc is only one cog in the wheel. The issue

extends far beyond our shores and involves a large national liability.

Mr Dalton: The financial services compensation scheme may be available to Harland & Wolff plc to enable it to recover some moneys, but its availability depends on the company's eligibility. What are the requirements for eligibility? If such money were recovered, how long would it take for that to be made clear? Would that money be returned to the UK Treasury, rather than to the Northern Ireland Executive?

Sir Reg Empey: With regard to the latter point, if the moneys are recovered from the financial services compensation scheme, they will return to the person and the part of the block that pays the money. In most cases, that would be to the Treasury, because it will pay most of the bill. The financial services compensation scheme is levied on the insurance industry. In other words, all insurers pay into the scheme. It is similar to the Association of British Travel Agents (ABTA) scheme. The industry pays into a compensation scheme to cover situations where a company makes serious mistakes. It is designed to protect the policy holder.

Employers' liability insurance became compulsory in only 1975. Therefore the scheme applies only to post-1975 cases. If one applies to the compensation scheme, eligibility must be approved. One eligibility criterion will relate to the dates when the claims can be deemed relevant. There will be a cut-off point in 1975; and some claims will flow from before that date, and others after it. Another will relate to the eligibility of publicly-owned companies as opposed to privately-owned companies. All those legal technicalities must be drawn out.

With the Department of Finance and Personnel, we have made a commitment to do all in our power to maximise recoveries from the scheme. We should get on with that work and do what we can. In the meantime, it is likely that cash payments will have to be made in this, and the next, financial year. If we are eligible to receive compensation, that will come later. We must make the cash provision now to allow the company to trade and to pay compensation to the victims, as has been requested.

If compensation is awarded, I suspect that it will be divided. If compensation is eligible for individual claims out of moneys that we will have paid, we will have a claim on that. If it is awarded on the bulk of claims — paid by Her Majesty's Treasury — that money will revert there.

ASSEMBLY:

FINANCE AND PERSONNEL COMMITTEE

Resolved:

That Mr Roy Beggs shall replace Mr James Leslie as a member of the Committee for Finance and Personnel. — [*Mr Davis.*]

ASSEMBLY:

BUSINESS COMMITTEE

Resolved:

That Mr David McClarty shall replace Mr Jim Wilson as a member of the Business Committee. — [*Mr Davis.*]

ASSEMBLY:

STANDARDS AND PRIVILEGES COMMITTEE

Resolved:

That Mr Derek Hussey shall replace Mr Roy Beggs as a member of the Committee on Standards and Privileges. — [*Mr Davis.*]

ASSEMBLY:

COMMITTEE ON PROCEDURES

Resolved:

That Rev Dr William McCrea shall replace Mr Ian Paisley Jnr as a member of the Committee on Procedures. — [*Mr Morrow.*]

11.30 am

ASSEMBLY STANDING ORDERS

The Chairperson of the Committee on Procedures (Mr C Murphy): Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. I beg to move:

After Standing Order 73, insert

“74. Appointments to The Assembly Commission

(1) The Assembly shall by resolution appoint the prescribed number of Members of the Assembly to be members of the Commission.

(2) Appointments under paragraph (1) shall be made within 28 days after the first sitting of the Assembly after dissolution.

(3) Any resolution under this Standing Order shall require cross-community support.

(4) In the event of a vacancy occurring, the Speaker shall, as soon as may be possible, inform the Assembly of the vacancy. Any vacancy shall be filled by resolution of the Assembly within 28 sitting days of the vacancy occurring.

(5) A person shall not be eligible for appointment as a member of the Commission if he/she holds a relevant office.

(6) Where a Member of the Assembly is appointed to a relevant office he/she shall forthwith cease to be a member of the Commission.

(7) A Commissioner may at any time resign by giving notice in writing to the Speaker.

(8) In this Standing Order a relevant office means a Minister, a junior Minister or a Chairperson or Deputy Chairperson of:

- (a) a Statutory Committee;
- (b) the Public Accounts Committee;
- (c) the Audit Committee.”

The amendment proposes a new Standing Order to enable a provision of the Northern Ireland Act 1998 to be addressed in Standing Orders. The proposed Standing Order outlines an appointment procedure to the Assembly Commission.

Provision is made for the establishment of the Assembly Commission under section 40 of the Northern Ireland Act 1998. The Act also sets out the Commission’s functions and powers. It also implies that Standing Orders should prescribe an appointment procedure to the Assembly Commission. Standing Orders do not currently make provision for that.

In consultation with the Assembly Commission, the Committee on Procedures felt that the gap should be addressed, and the amendment does that. The Assembly Commission has approved the proposed Standing Order, and it has also been scrutinised by the Assembly legal adviser.

The proposed Standing Order raises several issues. The first relates to the number of members of the Commission.

As stated in section 40(3) of the Northern Ireland Act 1998, the number of members, in addition to the Speaker, should be five. The Assembly, and the Committee on Procedures, are content that the number should remain as is outlined in the Act.

The proposed Standing Order outlines eligibility for appointments to the Assembly Commission and the procedure for filling vacancies, should they arise. The Assembly Commission and the Committee on Procedures felt that the Chairpersons and Deputy Chairpersons of Statutory Committees should not be eligible for appointment to the Assembly Commission. The Chairpersons and Deputy Chairpersons of the Public Accounts Committee and the Audit Committee should also not be eligible. That measure is to ensure that there is no potential conflict of interest with the Public Accounts Committee and the Audit Committee.

The demands and time imposed on the Chairpersons and Deputy Chairpersons of the Statutory Committees meant that it would be unreasonable to expect them to find the additional time required to sit on the Assembly Commission. It was also considered unreasonable that those Members already in receipt of an allowance as office holders should not receive a further allowance for membership of the Assembly Commission.

One final condition that is being incorporated is that appointments to the Commission should require cross-community support. That was suggested by the Assembly Commission, because it is there to represent the interests of all Members of the Assembly, and not party interests. Appointments to the Assembly Commission should require the support of all sides of the House. That was considered to be a greater safeguard to the position of the Commission.

The purpose of the proposed Standing Order is to address a provision in the Northern Ireland Act 1998 that Standing Orders should specify an appointments procedure to the Assembly Commission. The proposed Standing Order makes provision for that in an open and transparent manner.

Rev Robert Coulter: As a member of the Assembly Commission, I support the amendment. The proposed Standing Order establishes a clear and unambiguous mechanism for appointments to the Assembly Commission. It provides for the initial appointment of the body corporate at the beginning of a new mandate, and also allows for the appointment of individual Commissioners as vacancies arise.

The Committee on Procedures consulted with the Assembly Commission on the wording of the proposed Standing Order, and it is the Commission’s view that the proposed Standing Order is fit for the purpose.

Ms Morrice: I wish to raise two points. The first concerns the number of members of the Commission. I

would appreciate clarification, but I assume that this does not preclude any proposal on behalf of the Assembly to increase the number of members of the Commission, if that is the Assembly's wish.

Secondly, I seek clarification on the issue of those members of Committees, especially of the Public Accounts and Audit Committees, who, according to the proposed Standing Order, are not eligible to stand for election to the Commission. Mr Conor Murphy said that there was a potential conflict of interest, and I would like clarification as to what sort of conflict of interest there could be for a member of the Public Accounts or Audit Committees, as those who hold office on those Committees receive no payment for their involvement. What about other Committees? Correct me if I am wrong, but do the Committee on Procedures and other Committees not fall into that category?

The Deputy Chairperson of the Committee on Procedures (Mr Dalton): I support the amendment. Essentially, it is a tidying-up measure. The Northern Ireland Act 1998 made provision for the appointment of a specified number of members to the Commission. Procedures, and Standing Orders should have stated how they would be appointed. The House has not made Standing Orders to deal with that situation. It has been remiss of us, and we should use this opportunity to correct it.

I shall address the points raised by the Member for North Down, Ms Morrice. The 1998 Act, not the Committee on Procedures, specifies the number of members of the Commission. The membership of the Assembly Commission is relatively large compared with the House of Commons. Its Commission has five members to deal with 652 MPs, as opposed to our five members who deal with 108 Members, and possibly even less in the future.

Ms Morrice: I understand that the 1998 Act refers to "at least five" members. There is no specific point that refers to only five members.

Mr Dalton: I apologise. The Member is correct. The 1998 Act refers to "at least five" members. The Commission does not necessarily have to have only five members. However, the 1998 Act clearly indicated that the Commission was expected to have five members.

I assure the House that none of the procedures that are being recommended today are particularly contentious. I hope that the House will agree the proposed Standing Order by means of a cross-community vote, and that, as a result, the Commission will represent the entire House in dealing with its administrative matters. I commend the amendment to the House.

Mr C Murphy: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. I thank the Members who contributed to the debate. I also thank the Rev Robert Coulter for welcoming the proposed Standing Order on behalf of the Commission.

I shall respond to the points made by Jane Morrice. There is nothing to prevent the Assembly from changing the number of members of the Commission. The 1998 Act specifies the number as

"5 or such other number as may be prescribed by standing orders".

The Commission has been in operation since devolution, and the number of members has not presented a problem. No representations to increase the number of members on the Commission have ever been made to the Committee on Procedures. If Members feel strongly about the matter, the Committee will revisit it, and it will be for the House to decide.

The Committee felt that membership of the Public Accounts Committee or the Audit Committee was incompatible with membership of the Commission due to the nature of the Commission's powers and functions, such as entering into contracts and investing money. That may cause conflicts of interest or lead to suspicion about a Member's probity.

The Committee also specified that Ministers and junior Ministers should not sit on the Commission. It would be difficult for them to find time to attend meetings, and it would be unreasonable for them to receive yet another addition to their salary for membership of the Commission. The Chairpersons and Deputy Chairpersons of Statutory Committees already receive an addition to their salary and are not eligible, so there is consistency between their treatment and that of junior Ministers.

With regard to Chairpersons of other Standing Committees, the Committee on Procedures and the Commission are agreed that a holder of an office that already attracts an addition to his or her salary should not be eligible for an office that would qualify for a further addition.

The Senior Salaries Review Body (SSRB) is due to report in April, and it may recommend that Chairpersons of Standing Committees should qualify in the same way as Chairpersons and Deputy Chairpersons of Statutory Committees do at present. If the recommendation is made, and passed by the Assembly, that Chairpersons and Deputy Chairpersons of Standing Committees should receive an additional salary, the Committee on Procedures will undertake to look again at the Standing Order to reflect that.

I trust that I have answered most of the questions. I would like to thank Mr Dalton and other Members for their comments. The Standing Order sets out a clear method of appointment for Members to the Assembly Commission. It redresses a gap in Standing Orders and fulfils the requirement of the Northern Ireland Act 1998. It also reinforces the importance of the Assembly Commission as a body to represent the interests of all Members, not only those of the larger parties.

Mr Speaker: I have been listening to what Members have said, as I usually do, and, before calling on the House to vote, I would like to clarify something. It does not seem to me that there is a reference to members of the Public Accounts Committee and the Audit Committee, but to the Chairpersons and Deputy Chairpersons of the Public Accounts Committee and the Audit Committee. There was an interchange between the Chairperson and a Member about members of those Committees. I wish to draw attention to the fact that when Members are voting, they are voting only on the question of Chairpersons and Deputy Chairpersons, not on the question of Members.

Mr B Hutchinson: On a point of order, Mr Speaker. I am the Deputy Chairperson of the Audit Committee. My understanding of my responsibilities, and the Committee's responsibilities, does not match up with what the Chairperson of the Committee on Procedures has just said. What is the procedure? The Audit Committee does not award contracts to anyone. Its responsibility is to ensure that the Northern Ireland Audit Office has its budget. We have no responsibility other than to ensure that it has its budget and that its estimates come in at a certain level.

Mr Speaker: That would be a legitimate point to put in a debate, and it would be a case for tabling an amendment. However, from an order point of view, what is on the Order Paper is competent. It may not be pleasing, and the arguments adduced may or may not be welcome or acceptable, but there is nothing out of order about the amendment. I simply wanted to ensure, on the other matter, that Members were clear about what they were voting on, because there appeared to be some lack of clarity.

Mr B Hutchinson: Further to that point of order, Mr Speaker. The reasons for excluding the Chairperson and Deputy Chairperson of the Audit Committee are wrong, and they are legally wrong in terms of Standing Orders with regard to responsibilities.

Mr Speaker: From an order point of view, it is perfectly legitimate to put down what is here. It is perfectly competent. The arguments adduced for doing so may be a subject of dispute. I understand what the Member is saying, and if the Member or any other Members wish to change it that will require the tabling of an amendment — clearly not in this debate but at a subsequent time. That would be the proper way to address the question. I now hope that everyone is clear about what they are voting on, and I will, therefore, put the question. As this is an amendment to Standing Orders, the vote requires cross-community support if it is to pass.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved (with cross-community support):

“74. Appointments to The Assembly Commission

(1) The Assembly shall by resolution appoint the prescribed number of Members of the Assembly to be members of the Commission.

(2) Appointments under paragraph (1) shall be made within 28 days after the first sitting of the Assembly after dissolution.

(3) Any resolution under this Standing Order shall require cross-community support.

(4) In the event of a vacancy occurring, the Speaker shall, as soon as may be possible, inform the Assembly of the vacancy. Any vacancy shall be filled by resolution of the Assembly within 28 sitting days of the vacancy occurring.

(5) A person shall not be eligible for appointment as a member of the Commission if he/she holds a relevant office.

(6) Where a Member of the Assembly is appointed to a relevant office he/she shall forthwith cease to be a member of the Commission.

(7) A Commissioner may at any time resign by giving notice in writing to the Speaker.

(8) In this Standing Order a relevant office means a Minister, a junior Minister or a Chairperson or Deputy Chairperson of:

- (a) a Statutory Committee;
- (b) the Public Accounts Committee;
- (c) the Audit Committee.”

COMMITTEE FOR ENTERPRISE, TRADE AND INVESTMENT: REPORT ON THE ENERGY INQUIRY

The Chairperson of the Committee for Enterprise, Trade and Investment (Mr P Doherty): I beg to move

That this Assembly approves the report of the Committee for Enterprise, Trade and Investment on its inquiry into the Energy Report (3/01R) and calls on the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to implement the Committee's recommendations at the earliest opportunity.

A Cheann Comhairle, as Chairperson of the Committee for Enterprise, Trade and Investment, I have the task of presenting the Committee's report to the Assembly. In the time allocated, I shall give a brief overview of the report, commenting on the key points and highlighting some of the major recommendations contained in it.

My colleagues on the Committee will comment on the finer details. I wish to take this opportunity to welcome back the Committee's Deputy Chairperson, Sean Neeson, after his recent illness, especially as it was he who primarily led us to embark on this inquiry.

11.45 am

When the Committee began its inquiry, it did not anticipate the sheer magnitude of the task. It was a lengthy and wide-ranging inquiry that took almost one year to complete. The Committee received 32 written submissions from organisations and individuals, and 29 oral evidence sessions were held with groups and individuals. Those sessions involved a wide range of bodies, including the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment, the energy regulator, energy producers and suppliers, business associations, district councils, academics and voluntary groups. They came from as far away as the USA and Venezuela. The Committee was overwhelmed by the volume and quality of the evidence received. Committee members wish to place on record our gratitude to all those who submitted evidence, both oral and written. That evidence helped to inform, to a large extent, the many important recommendations that are made in the report. I also wish to place on record members' gratitude to the Committee Clerk, her staff and the Assembly research staff for their invaluable help to the Committee throughout the inquiry and in the preparation of the report for publication.

It will be helpful to Members if I outline the background to the report. During the Committee's previous inquiry into 'Strategy 2010', many witnesses commented on the high cost of electricity in the North and how that affects the competitiveness of local businesses. The Committee wanted to examine the causes of high electricity prices and what could be done to make electricity cheaper for consumers. In addition, proposals had been floated that a new combined-cycle gas-turbine power plant should be built at Coolkeeragh. However, that proposal would

require a natural gas pipeline to be constructed from the Greater Belfast area to the north-west. The Committee wanted to assess that proposal, and examine how natural gas could bring social benefits to our communities, not least in tackling fuel poverty. The signing of the Kyoto protocol has committed us to the reduction of greenhouse gas emissions. To achieve that, renewable sources of energy must be developed, which in turn have great employment potential. The Committee wanted to examine the issue and assess the potential growth of that sector.

I shall now address some of the key issues that were identified by the Committee during the inquiry. The high cost of electricity for consumers is primarily a direct result of contracts that were made at the time of privatisation in 1992. Those fixed inflation-proofed contracts will remain with us until 2012 and have brought significant profits for the generation companies and for Viridian/NIE. Any efficiencies made by those companies have not been passed on to the consumer, but instead have gone to shareholders as profits. The buying-out of the contracts has been the subject of much debate and discussion in the Committee. The idea that the contracts should be bought out by a consumer bond has its attractions. However, that would simply replace one long-term contract with another. It would mean an immediate reduction in electricity prices, but it could result in the long-term price being higher than if the market were allowed to dictate prices after 2012. I shall return to that issue later.

The extension of natural gas provision to the north-west was identified by the Committee as a key issue for the future of electricity generation at Coolkeeragh, as well as for the eradication of fuel poverty in the towns along the route of the pipeline. The Committee considered the eradication of fuel poverty as a high priority for the Executive to tackle.

A total of 170,000 households in the North are considered to be fuel poor. That equates to a scandalous 28% of homes in which existing conditions mean that more than 10% of the income is spent on fuel. The Committee fully endorses the Assembly's earlier decision to raise the energy efficiency levy to an average of £5 per customer. The revenue raised — £3.25 million a year — will go towards introducing measures to eradicate fuel poverty within 14 years.

Another key issue for the Committee is to improve energy efficiency. That includes: the need to upgrade building regulations; better awareness for consumers in the use of energy efficient appliances; the development of combined heat and power plants — including consideration of the use of domestic waste as a fuel source; incentives for industry to introduce greater efficiency measures; and the promotion of more energy efficient transport.

The development of renewable energy sources is another key issue identified by the Committee. Renewable energy

comes from various sources — from the heat and light of the sun to the use of agricultural waste in the biogas process. The Committee is concerned that present pricing regimes and structures militate against the development of renewable energy. OFREG is looking at the issue. The Committee made a total of 45 recommendations under five headings. I shall concentrate on the main recommendations.

Identifying the reasons for high electricity costs was relatively straightforward. How to address them was an altogether different story. The Committee acknowledges that its recommendations will not have an immediate effect on electricity prices, but it is confident that, in time, they will make a significant difference.

I shall mention two recommendations. The first involves the buying-out of the long-term generation contracts. Almost every submission that was made to the Committee mentioned the need to take action on those contracts, which are the primary reason for high electricity costs in the North. The Committee considered the issue at length, especially the idea that contracts should be bought out by consumer bonds financed over a long period. The advantage is that electricity costs would be reduced almost immediately, subject to Government legislation. The main difficulty is that the scheme would replace one long-term contract with another lasting for 10 years, 30 years or 40 years. Prices would fall after 2012 when the current contracts expire and many critics argue that the bonds effectively charge the consumer twice for the same thing.

After much debate, the Committee decided that as the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment was about to embark on a consultation exercise on its energy strategy, we would await the outcome of that exercise before making a final decision. The Committee acknowledged that the bonds issue would require a more detailed examination than Committee resources would allow; for example, the production of a full economic appraisal. The Department should, therefore, take the lead in addressing that crucial issue. The Committee is keen that it is resolved one way or another as quickly as possible.

The second recommendation relates to the setting up of a cross-departmental ministerial task force to develop a strategy to tackle the scourge of fuel poverty in our society. It is a scandal that in the twenty-first century, 170,000 homes in the North are considered fuel poor. The Committee strongly believes that the Executive must tackle that issue. It is cross-cutting, because social and economic development, health, housing, equality of opportunity and employability issues are all connected to fuel poverty. We ask the Executive to examine that high priority matter.

The Committee agreed that energy efficiency is an important aspect of energy matters. It covers a wide range of related topics from building regulations to electrical appliances and from the disposal of domestic waste to

efficient electricity generation. The Committee made several recommendations, which, if adopted, would help to reduce energy waste and, therefore, contribute to the reduction of greenhouse gases. In addition, the use of domestic waste as a fuel source would also contribute to a reduction in the problems associated with landfill sites.

Perhaps the most exciting aspect of energy is the potential created by the development of renewable energy sources, although that is fraught with difficulties. There are many technical problems to be overcome, but the most serious is that of the public perception of renewables, especially wind turbines. Renewable energy is an exciting area, because it is at a relatively early stage of development here. It offers plenty of opportunities, not least in the creation of jobs and the regeneration of rural communities. There is much yet to be done, and, to assist the development of that fuel source, the Committee recommends a target of 35% of electricity generation from renewable sources by 2020, with an interim target of 15% by 2010.

Several other recommendations were specifically designed to stimulate and enhance renewable energy provision. A key recommendation involves the raising of public awareness of issues surrounding “green” electricity, which would assist in increasing public demand for renewable energy.

The Committee also recommended that the establishment of a renewable energy agency be considered. Although the Committee is reluctant to add more bureaucracy to the Administration, it felt strongly that there is merit in having a statutory body to co-ordinate the Government’s strategy for the development of renewables. The creation of such an agency would send clear signals to the industry and the public that the Government are serious about their declared commitment to the environmental issues of the Kyoto protocol and subsequent targets for the reduction of greenhouse gas emissions.

On employment, there are job opportunities in research and development, and in the construction, installation and maintenance of machinery. In rural communities, biogas technology offers real possibilities for job creation and crop diversification for farmers growing willow coppice. Gasification may also assist to solve the problem of the disposal of animal waste. All relevant Government bodies must open their eyes to the potential of that aspect of renewable energy for rural communities and adopt a co-ordinated approach to realise that potential.

The extension of the natural gas network beyond Greater Belfast has been discussed for some time. Although the extension of the pipeline to the north-west has been linked to the development of a new electricity plant at Coolkeeragh, the Committee agreed that there is a strong social need to bring gas to more homes. That would be a major factor in eradicating fuel poverty in many homes

along the route of the pipeline. To make extensions to the pipeline viable, the Committee agreed that postalisation of electricity and gas costs is required and must be borne equally by commercial and domestic consumers to ensure that all consumers pay the same tariff, irrespective of their location.

Recent increases in the capacity of interconnection between Northern Ireland Electricity (NIE) and the Electricity Supply Board (ESB) in the South means that the NIE system no longer works in isolation. There will soon be 940 megawatts of interconnection between the two systems. The gas networks will also be joined in the future, with a planned gas connection between Gormans-town and Belfast. The Committee welcomes those developments, as a larger all-island network with connections to GB and Europe will open up electricity and gas markets to greater competition.

12.00

More interconnection must be developed. That needs to be done in tandem with common approaches to application, fiscal regimes, chartering policies, effective regulations and strong consumer protection. A single transmission system operator across the all-Ireland market would have clear benefits. Active consideration must be given to that recommendation.

Although there are no nuclear power installations on the island of Ireland, we are much affected by the environmental impact of nuclear plants on the west coast of Britain. The Committee was unanimous in its recommendation that Ireland remain a nuclear-free zone and in the call for the closure of those plants in GB that have a great impact on people in Ireland. It seems inappropriate that such vast sums of money are spent by the UK Government to support the nuclear industry when a cleaner, greener form of energy is available. The sum spent on the development of renewable energy is paltry when compared with that spent on nuclear energy. The Committee, therefore, also recommends that Government subsidies to the nuclear industry should be re-directed to renewable energy.

The complex issues that the Committee dealt with in its inquiry, and its subsequent recommendations, require careful consideration by Members, the Minister, the Department for Enterprise, Trade and Investment and others who are affected directly by the report. Global issues, such as global warming, require global solutions. Everyone must play his or her part in the protection of the environment for future generations. In doing so, we can redevelop the agriculture industry and rural communities, creating employment opportunities for thousands of people and position ourselves as a world leader in those technologies.

Energy is an issue that touches all our lives. We owe it to our constituents to ensure that affordable electricity and heating is available at home and in the commercial world. The report can make a difference in bringing down

electricity prices, eradicating fuel poverty and contributing to the reduction of greenhouse gas emissions.

I have outlined the main points arising from the inquiry, and I commend the report to the House.

Mr Speaker: The Business Committee has allocated three hours for the debate. If Members, on average, restrict themselves to 10 minutes or so, almost everyone who has put his or her name down so far will have a chance to speak. I hesitate to set a time limit, because some Members may be able to be more concise than that, and others may need a little more time. However, I remind the House that if Members do take more time, with the result that others do not get to contribute, they can speak to their party Colleagues who spoke for too long.

The Deputy Chairperson of the Committee for Enterprise, Trade and Investment (Mr Neeson): First, I want to thank the Chairperson for his kind remarks. I also want to thank all the Members who contacted me recently with regard to my illness. I am pleased to say that I am on the road to recovery.

Some Members: Hear, hear.

Mr Neeson: I could not resist the opportunity to be in the House today to contribute to the debate on the presentation of the report. I have been interested in energy for many years. I am delighted that the Committee has spent a long time in dealing with such an important and complex subject.

I thank the Committee Clerk and her staff for their help, the Assembly's research staff, and the Committee's Special Adviser.

This report is long overdue. During the years of direct rule, energy was not given the attention that many of us thought it deserved. Hence, we are now dealing with issues and problems that would not have arisen had there been greater scrutiny, especially on the part of public representatives.

In 1999, before power was formally devolved to the Assembly, I organised an all-party group of Assembly Members to meet the then Industry Minister, Adam Ingram, to discuss the extension of the natural gas pipeline to the north-west. The cross-party group came into being because Assembly Member Bradley had raised the issue of the pipeline in the Assembly. The then Minister was impressed that Assembly Members were uniting on a cross-party basis to deal with a specific issue of importance to them and their constituents. We discussed extending the natural gas pipeline to the north-west and also to the canal corridor, Craigavon and so forth. The Department took those issues on board.

I welcome the recent decision to grant licences to extend the natural gas pipeline from Carrickfergus to Derry, and also to the south-east of the Province. That is an important commitment to extend the gas pipelines to areas of the Province that have been unable to avail of

natural gas. The fact that an extra 32-35% of the Northern Ireland population could be provided with natural gas is to be welcomed.

The Committee would have preferred that the gas pipeline be extended North/South. A series of meetings on that issue were held. Although the outcome will not be reached as speedily as we would have liked, particularly the provision of natural gas to the south-east, an important commitment remains.

The £30 million budgeted by the Executive, plus £8 million from the Irish Exchequer, towards the gas pipelines represents an important commitment to the projects and the extension of the availability of natural gas. However, I am slightly concerned at how the projects have been clouded by the so-called "investment appraisal" that was mentioned in the House. That issue must be clarified, but the important point is that we are creating a level playing field for consumers in Northern Ireland. It is only right that both domestic and commercial consumers should benefit from natural gas. The Committee and I are committed to the principle of postalisation. If that is to be done, the costs should be borne by commercial and domestic consumers.

The aim is to develop a high-efficiency gas power station that will not only serve the north-west, but can become part of the island energy strategy, which the Committee and the Department fully support, and which comprises east-west dimension also.

It is ironic that almost 20 years ago, in the last Assembly, I rose, close to this spot, to support the proposal to extend the natural gas pipeline from Kinsale to Northern Ireland. I was barracked and heckled at Northern Ireland's readiness to burn anything from the Irish Republic except the "green" gas. We now have an opportunity to burn "blue" gas from Scotland — how times have changed.

A major customer is essential to the success of the natural gas pipeline to the north-west. I welcome Coolkeeragh's involvement as a major customer and the fact that, in addition to the public commitment of £38 million, we have the prospect of a contribution of more than £200 million from the private sector. That will lift the pressure that affects electricity prices throughout Northern Ireland.

I am pleased also, because much activity related to Northern Ireland's energy is concentrated in my East Antrim constituency. In addition to Ballylumford and Kilroot, a new gas-fired power station is under construction, there is a new gas interconnector in the area and the Moyle interconnector recently came on-stream.

Committee members had planned to visit the Moyle interconnector on 6 March, but unfortunately other Assembly commitments will prevent us from doing that. However, we hope to visit the site soon because some issues must still be dealt with, most of which are environmental. The Department of the Environment and Northern Ireland

Electricity have attempted to deal with them. Cheaper electricity from Scotland should, primarily, be for the benefit of Northern Ireland consumers. Currently, several customers for power from the Moyle interconnector are based in the Republic of Ireland, but it is important that benefits are also felt in the North.

One of the more contentious issues dealt with by the Committee was whether, given its location, Kilroot should use Orimulsion to generate electricity. Members had concerns for the environment, but as part of our study we visited an Orimulsion-fired power station in Denmark and were very impressed by its standards of environmental protection. As someone with a power station in his own backyard, I am committed to using Orimulsion if the stringent guidelines of the AES Corporation are applied. That would lead to a reduction in Northern Ireland's electricity prices.

It is important that the Assembly has oversight of the guidelines for environmental protection, but Carrickfergus Borough Council will also be responsible.

Mr Wells: Can the hon Member confirm that Carrickfergus Borough Council members visited the Orimulsion-burning plant in Denmark and that they too returned with the view that it is an optional means of electricity generation at Kilroot?

12.15 pm

Mr Neeson: I agree. We should seriously consider that option. We do not want to put all our eggs in one basket, as we did in the 1970s and 1980s, and if we were to depend totally on the use of natural gas to fire power stations, we would fall into the same trap. There are other options for generating electricity. Mr Speaker, I hope that you will bear with me. I have missed a few weeks in the Chamber. I would like —

Mr Speaker: Undoubtedly, that is the case, but the Member must understand that there is no leeway from the Business Committee on the amount of time available for the debate. Therefore, I urge the Member to take that into account and to try to bring his remarks to a close in order to enable all other Members who wish to contribute to do so.

Mr Neeson: Our problems were inherited as a result of the privatisation that went ahead with little political consultation with the parties in Northern Ireland. At the time, I made a submission on behalf of my party. I have serious concerns about the suggestion of using consumer bonds as an easy fix. Although there may be short-term benefits, the consumer will have to pay in the long term. We must address ways to deal with the problems, while ensuring that the full burden is not placed on consumers.

I hope that the Assembly supports the report. The Department has issued a consultation paper, and I hope that the Minister and the Department pay heed to the issues that the Committee is raising today.

Dr Birnie: I welcome the report and congratulate the Committee on its production. It is a complex report, and, as someone who is not a member of the Committee, I have reservations and a certain amount of timidity about discussing it. In order to be “beyond reproach” like Caesar’s wife, I should declare a small interest, which is stated in the Register of Members’ Interests. I own a few hundred shares in Viridian, but I assure the House that that will not affect my conclusions.

The report states that major consideration on the options available to reduce prices will be delayed until the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment produces its paper. As the previous two Members who spoke said, the Committee’s report fully explains the workings of consumer bonds. If those could be made to work, they would reduce prices for the rest of the decade. However, thereafter prices would be higher than in the absence of the bonds.

Therefore, should we opt for consumer bonds? From a political viewpoint, they have some attraction. Prices would fall in the near future, and, as Members know, future generations cannot vote in the 2003 election. However, in principle, the issues are more complex than that. In any case, given the current state of the financial markets, could a sufficient number of consumer bonds be sold? Many hundreds of millions would have to be sold to generate a sufficient income stream.

There is much to be welcomed in the report. Paragraph 3.3 refers to the issue of tightening building regulations so that energy efficiency is stressed more than in the past.

For example, recommendation 4 states that domestic consumers should not cross-subsidise large-scale, predominantly industrial users of electricity as they have done in the past. Recommendation 15 states that the existing five-year derogation for natural gas from the climate change levy should be lengthened to 10 years.

I doubt that the report has established that a cost efficiency would necessarily be achieved, by having a single transmission operator for both the Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland markets, as suggested in recommendation 43. However, I would have liked the report to develop another aspect of the all-island energy market: I would like the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment, with his Southern counterparts, probably through the North/South Ministerial Council, to attempt to ensure that Northern Ireland firms are increasingly able to either build or take over power stations in the Republic of Ireland. The market in the Republic of Ireland has been booming and is nearing capacity. It therefore needs to build more power stations, or, should we have a surplus in production, to buy electricity from Northern Ireland.

With regard to the liberalisation of ownership of generation capacity on both sides of the Irish border, one

problem is that the Irish generator, the Electricity Supply Board (ESB), is still state-owned, and therefore does not compete on a level playing field with its Northern Ireland counterparts. I like the suggestion in the report that, as far as possible, we should copy the Nord Pool idea, which is how the small Scandinavian economies have managed to link their energy markets. We should make the most of the increasing number of electricity and gas connectors, across the border and across the Irish Sea. For the first time, it is possible for Northern Ireland to tap into the wider United Kingdom and European Union energy networks.

In general, the report’s 45 recommendations are supported by good evidence, and I commend the Committee for that. The apparent exception, which the Chairperson of the Committee mentioned, is the first recommendation, which concerns nuclear power. If I have interpreted it correctly, the recommendation in effect calls for, among other things, the eventual closure of the nuclear industry in Great Britain. I am no fan of nuclear power, and it is likely that, since the 1950s, the nuclear industry in Great Britain has not been economically viable. If operators had been forced to pay the full costs of the production of the electricity, particularly the decommissioning costs of power stations, they would not have balanced the books.

However, the issue of when the UK should withdraw from nuclear power generation is a complex one. The report has not addressed that properly despite this prominent recommendation. The report does not consider the impact of rapidly squeezing nuclear electricity production in meeting the Kyoto target. The Kyoto target relates to carbon dioxide production from fossil fuels. Furthermore, the report does not consider the fact that the production of fossil fuels is not an entirely safe option. Regrettably, people die in the production of coal, gas and oil. It is often argued that the nuclear industry is not safe, but those industries are not perfectly safe either.

In general, I congratulate the Committee for Enterprise, Trade and Investment on the report, and I support the motion.

Mr Speaker: At this stage, rather than call a Member who is likely to be interrupted, I suggest that the House, by leave, suspend until 2.00 pm, when we will complete this three-hour debate.

The sitting was suspended at 12.25 pm.

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

2.00 pm

Dr McDonnell: Many issues have already been covered, and one of the disadvantages of being the fourth or fifth Member to speak is that some of the best points have already been made. However, much more remains to be said than could ever be covered in one debate.

When the Committee began its inquiry, it expected it to last six to eight weeks. It found some interesting aspects under every stone it upturned. The underlying motivation for all the Committee's questions and actions was its quest for a good reliable energy supply at a reasonable price. From the outset, the Committee was pushed towards the inquiry by a steady chorus of complaints from industry and commerce, and from energy users in general, about the punitive price of electricity.

I make no apology for repeating core points that have already been made by other Members, because the Assembly will be forced to revisit the energy supply issue, probably once a year, for the next 10 years, until matters are sorted out. It will take 10 years to get to grips with the fallout from the pseudo-privatisation of 1992.

For far too long, we have neglected the issues that surround our electricity supply and related energy-efficiency issues. We are now paying a high price for that. If we continue to neglect those serious issues, the price may become even higher. The crucial issue that underpins the debate is the scandalously incoherent contracts that were handed out to the generators in 1992 by the then Department of Economic Development. In effect, the new and private owners of the power stations received a licence to print money. In plain man's language, those contracts have ensured that, in most cases, electricity prices are double what they should be, especially for domestic users, who are the most vulnerable.

It is no exaggeration to say that power station owners were given a licence to print money. As I understand it, contractual arrangements were put in place so that the generating stations would be overpaid for producing electricity. They are also generously paid for standing by in case they are needed to produce electricity and for any increase in fuel costs. The only thing that they do not get paid extra for is scratching themselves occasionally, should the need arise. They appear to have the contracts so well tied up that there is little opportunity to unpick them.

We await the imminent publication of the Department's paper, entitled 'Towards a new energy market strategy for Northern Ireland'. I welcome guidance from the Department on how we should get to grips with cutting energy costs.

Sooner or later we have to decide whether to buy out the overgenerous parts of the generating contracts or hang on in until 2012. I have great difficulty with both

options, because with each we lose out. Bonds have been suggested as a financial mechanism, a type of mortgage that would reduce prices in the short term by approximately 25%. However, that would create a debt that would have to be paid off between 2010 and 2030.

I resent having to consider buying out parts of those contracts and giving the generators a second golden handshake to the highly profitable contracts they already have. However, it might be penny wise and politically foolish not to do something like that. In California, some generating stations just pulled the plug and stopped working when they did not make a profit. Our old and efficient overpaid power-generating stations might hang on to their licences to print money until 2012 at the high prices of today and then, when forced to meet the real world and market prices, they might just crash out, collapse and dissolve themselves, and we would not want that.

There are several issues that I would like to deal with, but that is not possible in the time afforded to me, so I shall pick just a few. There is serious concern that domestic users are subsidising large industrial users and that as the market partially opens — it is 30% or 35% at present — large users can buy electricity in a relatively free or semi-free market, while domestic users are lumbered with the bulk of the penalties or charges for the guarantees that have been made to the generating stations. If our generating stations have received contractual promises that guarantee them a licence to print money for the next 10 years and the heaviest industrial users are allowed to buy their electricity on a more open market, the bulk of the burden falls to domestic users. That is unfair, and many pensioners live in fuel poverty as a result.

There are also the long-term contracts. No future Government, or anybody else, should let contracts that will tie us for 20 years without any allowance for changing circumstances. Mistakes were made in 1992, and the length of the contracts ties us to those mistakes. If the contracts had been for 10 years, or had been renegotiated every five years, we would have had a get-out clause.

In the medium to long term we must separate power procurement and transmission. I am not unduly critical of NIE, but if we are to pretend that we have an open market, we need an open market. We cannot have a consortium that appears to be privatised yet still has a monopoly.

During the 1990-92 privatising period, we went from a state monopoly to a privately-owned monopoly, with many guarantees underwritten by the state and Government. We shall continue to pay for those for many years to come.

When considering opening the market and liberalising the electricity market, another fundamental point is that we cannot have an open market if we do not have a market. Without interconnection, we shall not have a market at all.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Dr McDonnell, please draw your remarks to a close.

Dr McDonnell: We need a massive increase in inter-connection with the Irish Republic and Scotland. We should also explore interest in an interconnector between the Republic of Ireland, perhaps in Dublin, and Wales. That market cannot be opened without access for the electricity flow.

Mr Deputy Speaker: The Speaker has not imposed a time limit, but if I am to include everyone who has expressed a wish to speak, I must advise Members to keep their comments to 10 minutes.

Mr Wells: I support the Committee's report. I am delighted to see Mr Neeson, the Deputy Chairperson of the Committee, back with us. As the hon Members will know, another member of the Committee, Mrs Annie Courtney, is still recuperating. We wish her all the best. I am sure that she will be reading our contributions to this debate on the Internet tonight.

This was a long and difficult report to prepare. It started out as a stroll around the energy market and suddenly became a marathon that went on for many months. I am slightly disappointed that it has not engendered the degree of enthusiasm among Members that I had anticipated. It rather reminded me of my time with the National Trust, when I used to give talks at Women's Institutes. For 10 years, I was given a bog-standard request to talk about country houses, until one day I received an invitation to give a talk to a Women's Institute near Magherafelt on threats to the global environment. I thought that I had finally arrived, and that people had recognised my ability. Therefore, I prepared what I thought was a wonderful talk about chlorofluorocarbons (CFCs), global warming and all the major issues of the day. I gave the talk, and thought that it was fantastic.

There was a competition after every Women's Institute meeting. On this occasion, the competition rewarded suggestions that would most improve the environment in Magherafelt. I thought that the winner would be a CFC recycling plant or a ban on hardwoods. There were 11 entries, and nine of those stated that what would most improve the environment of Magherafelt was the appointment of a traffic warden. My entire contribution had gone six feet over the heads of the ladies present.

In some respects, that is also my view on the report. The 98 Members who are not here have evidently concluded that there is such unanimity and agreement within the Committee that they do not need to come and contribute. That is regrettable. This is one of the most important issues that the Assembly will ever face. Energy is fundamental to everything that we do, not only for our industry and homes, but for our environment. However, it has not exactly been the hottest ticket in town.

The report is opportune; in fact, many developments in the energy field emerged while the report was being prepared. One major announcement was made after the report was completed — the proposal to have a 200-megawatt

wind farm off the coast of north Londonderry, in Castlerock. That has major implications for the growth of renewables in the Province. It would be a welcome signal for the future if that proposal were to get off the ground.

I welcome the various promises made by the Minister that consultation papers will be issued. Indeed, one has already been issued by the director of OFREG on the issue of creating a level playing field for the sale of renewables. I understand that a major consultation paper is pending on the use of the bond to buy out the generation contracts. The Committee examined that on many occasions and ultimately could not decide whether we should commit ourselves to supporting the bond.

2.15 pm

We approached the fundamental issue of how to finance generation contracts with a completely open mind. The Committee looks forward to engaging in the difficult and detailed debate that is required to decide what to do about that crucial issue. As the Member for South Belfast, Dr McDonnell, said, almost all of the argument on energy in Northern Ireland is based on the fact that the contracts given to the generators at privatisation were such that the Government did extremely well out of them. The consumer has been paying through the nose ever since. That issue must be tackled in the near future.

I welcome the Committee's decision fully and enthusiastically to rule out forever, if possible, any prospect of nuclear power generation in Northern Ireland. As a representative for South Down, I am well aware of the enormous concerns that that community has about the impact of emissions from Sellafield. Therefore, we felt that it was important to put down a marker to say that that type of generation is unacceptable. It poses too many dangers and threats to the environment.

The Committee took a different view on Orimulsion, and I wish to deal mainly with that subject. I went into the debate deeply cynical about, and critical of, Orimulsion. I remember being telephoned by a company representative and telling him that if he was contacting me about Orimulsion I was not interested. That was my view based on media coverage of the issue.

However, even with that scepticism, I went to Denmark and saw electricity generation at the Kalundborg plant. I spoke to the Danish equivalent of Friends of the Earth and to the World Wildlife Fund. I spoke to other environmental groups in the area, and I examined all the papers. In addition, I asked Dr Andrew Galway, a leading scientist formerly of Queen's University, to look at the science of Orimulsion, and the emissions and the environmental problems associated with it.

At the end of that process, I believe that Orimulsion should remain an option for electricity generation in Northern Ireland. I am surprised that I am taking that viewpoint, but that is based on the facts. Much of what

has been said about Orimulsion has been slightly inaccurate. The statistics show that Orimulsion could lead to a significant reduction in generation costs in Northern Ireland — possibly up to 25% lower. Moreover, with proper technology and the installation of a flue gas desulphurisation plant, Orimulsion could lead to a significant reduction in greenhouse gas emissions. However, that must be done with the most modern technology.

Orimulsion is 2.7% sulphur, heavy fuel oil is 4% and coal is 2.5%. However, with the installation of a modern flue gas desulphurisation plant, we envisage a 95% to 97% reduction in sulphur emissions. That is a major environmental benefit that cannot be ignored. Moreover, with the use of electrostatic precipitation measures we can reduce particulate emissions significantly. We can also reduce carbon dioxide emissions, which are the same as heavy fuel oil and 15% less than coal.

The danger of spillage from the tankers that come from Venezuela to Kilroot has yet to be investigated satisfactorily. It must be emphasised that we are talking about a small number of movements of very large tankers, rather than the hundreds of movements of smaller oil tankers that already occur in Belfast Lough. The Committee took a very responsible view on that. It said that it would proceed to consider Orimulsion as an option only if the environmental impact analysis stacks up, which will be a very important document, if the economic appraisal comes out in favour and if it is voted through by the Assembly. Therefore, there is a triple lock on Orimulsion.

It would be foolish for the Assembly to dispense with the option of Orimulsion. That could leave us totally dependent on gas as a major source of electricity generation. It took a great deal of debate in Committee to arrive at that compromise to which everyone has signed up. The Committee agreed — courtesy of heavy lobbying from Jane Morrice — that Orimulsion should not be allowed to stand in the way of a rapid growth in the use of renewables in Northern Ireland.

The Committee has signed up to a target of 15% renewable energy by 2010 and 35% renewable energy by 2020. Those are demanding targets, but they are the least that we can do in order to meet the obligations of the Kyoto protocol. That was an issue that the Committee had to think about long and hard. However, even if there is the potential for the production of 10,000 megawatts of renewable electricity in Northern Ireland, there will always be times when the wind does not blow. Today, for example, it might be difficult to generate enough renewable electricity to keep Northern Ireland going.

The physical problem in Northern Ireland is that electricity cannot be stored. The scientist who discovers how to generate huge amounts of electricity in the winter, store it in a huge battery and release it in the summer, when less renewable energy sources are available, will

make a fortune. That science, however, does not yet exist. Therefore, supply has to be matched to demand during periods of peak wind flow and periods of calm. Whatever happens, fossil-fuel-burning electricity plants will always be necessary for those periods.

The questions are simple. Do we become entirely dependent on gas? Do we go down the route of coal, or heavy oil, which are greater pollutants, or do we retain the option of Orimulsion, the supply of which is guaranteed and cheaper, and which could reduce greenhouse gas emissions?

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

Mr Wells: For that reason, we agreed to retain Orimulsion as an option.

I am delighted that the report included a strong recommendation on the alleviation of fuel poverty. That is long overdue, and what is proposed could tackle the problem, and end it once and for all.

Ms Morrice: I shall begin by declaring an interest. My sister is involved in an American energy company, which gave evidence to the inquiry. I have no financial interest in that company.

I wish to add my thanks to the Committee Clerk, her staff, our researcher and our expert adviser for the tremendous work that they all put into the production of the report.

During the inquiry, I came to the conclusion that to describe the energy industry in Northern Ireland as complicated must be the understatement of the year. Every time I turn on a switch, I think of transmission lines, grids, pylons and generators, and hundreds, if not thousands, of workers toiling day and night to ensure that I am connected. It is important that Committee members also pay tribute to those workers.

Each member of the Committee has his or her particular area of interest. Although the repetition of some points may have been somewhat boring at times, it is always valuable to make those points. It is well known that my area of interest is renewable energy.

There is no question that the recommendations on renewable energy, if implemented by the Minister, will open new doors for the potential of the renewable energy industry in Northern Ireland. The Committee Chairperson spoke about the establishment of a renewable energy agency with a pricing system that would regularise prices and bring them into line with modern realities. All those recommendations will be valuable in changing attitudes towards the use of energy and in encouraging people to use local resources properly.

The aspect of renewable energy in which I have most interest is wind, in particular offshore wind energy. Everyone realises that wind has never been in short supply in Northern Ireland and that it never will be in short supply. We also have tremendous amounts of water.

If those elements were brought together and properly harnessed they could totally revolutionise the region's industrial fortunes. That would place Northern Ireland back on the pioneering global technology map. Energy produced from offshore wind has the potential to breathe new life into Northern Ireland. However, the biggest challenge that we face is human energy, which we did not discuss much in Committee. Do we have the skills, the creative thinking, the innovation and the confidence to match the natural resources supplied by the earth? Northern Ireland's advantages in that area are substantial.

We heard the Minister's statement about Harland & Wolff and liabilities, and we are pleased that something is being done to help the yard with claims from employees. Shipbuilding skills are, of course, diminishing. However, let us not talk about shipbuilding; let us talk about marine technology. A company such as Harland & Wolff, with its knowledge of the sea, and the instruments and machinery that manoeuvre its depths, is perfectly positioned to pioneer this new technology for the good of the shipyard and for the good of Northern Ireland.

Northern Ireland has the edge in other areas — we have the combined research capacity of our two universities, especially in the areas of environmental science and engineering. An increased focus on research, development and innovation, and a greater appreciation of the growing world market in clean, green technology, would enable our universities' capacity to expand. Another area of skills is our highly educated, youthful workforce, which, in the past, has tended to leave Northern Ireland in search of new opportunities. For 30 years we exported our greatest resource — our young people — and with those young people went their potential to bring new thinking, new ideas and new energy to these shores. We must give them a solid reason to stay.

The greatest opportunity that we have to reverse the downward spiral of our decline is the new beginning that is offered by devolution. We need positive, constructive leadership, the promotion of inspiration, innovation and creative thinking, and we desperately need collective self-confidence.

The winds of change are blowing in our direction. Our location on an island, off an island, off mainland Europe, gives us a passport to a healthier, wealthier, sustainable, economic and social development. However, do we have the human geography? I am not only talking about people skills, I am talking about leadership skills. Do we have the human energy to match that which the earth gives us?

When there were bad times in Northern Ireland, and people were leaving in their droves, the old joke was "Would the last person out please turn out the light". Those of us who stayed or came back believed for a long time that we were operating in complete darkness.

With devolved government the lights have been switched back on, and the spotlight is on us, our economic develop-

ment and our ability to move forward. It is up to us, and it is our duty, to ensure that we never fall back to the dark days that we experienced in the past. I am taking poetic licence and moving slightly off the subject of energy when I talk about human energy, but that is just as important.

2.30 pm

As we discovered with this inquiry, there is a lot more to do than just flick a switch to turn a light on. We need energy to build up our skills, our abilities and, above all, our confidence. We need to believe in ourselves again, we need to have pride in ourselves, and we can do it. As the Chairperson of the Committee said, we can lead the world in global technology in renewable energy. We have the resources, we have the skills, and all we need now is the will.

Dr O'Hagan: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I place on record my thanks to the Committee Clerk and her staff, the research staff, the special adviser to the Committee and to all the people and organisations who gave evidence and worked with us. I look forward to working with those people and groups in the future.

There was a huge amount of work in the inquiry — much more than we anticipated. However, it was enjoyable and interesting — it is a fascinating subject — and we all learned a lot. We covered a wide range of issues, as can be seen from the report. The Committee was unanimous on some issues, for example renewable sources such as wind energy, which it was glad to welcome, and particularly, as Mr Wells said, the offshore wind farm off the north coast. All those are good, exciting plans with which the Committee is pleased to be involved.

On other issues such as Orimulsion — and this has already been mentioned — there was not complete agreement, but the recommendation shows that the Committee managed to come to a consensus on it. On health and environmental grounds not all of us were convinced about the efficacy of Orimulsion, but we believe that this recommendation comprises enough checks, balances and triple locks to ensure that the subject gets a proper airing and debate.

A key issue that came up time and again is generation contracts, which is the bad deal that was negotiated for consumers at the time of privatisation. Consumers here are still paying through the nose for the bad deal made then. The more the Committee examined this, the more we became concerned about the nature and effect of these contracts. Unacceptably high electricity prices in the North of Ireland are matched by unacceptably high profits. The Committee looked long and hard at various ways to deal with the generation contracts: do we go down the route of consumer bonds; should we look at more vigorous pursuit of the British Treasury, which was the main financial beneficiary of this deal; or should there be more exploration of legal action in Europe on grounds of anti-competitiveness?

As the inquiry progressed, Committee members became aware that we were probably not in possession of all the facts and so could not come to a fully informed decision. Further public airing of these matters and consultation are vital. That is why the Committee arrived at the conclusion in recommendation 2 that it would be content to await the outcome of the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment's consultation paper 'Towards a New Energy Market Strategy for Northern Ireland'. The Committee will be taking a keen interest in this consultation process.

Time and time again, the critical importance of an all-Ireland energy market was raised. It became clear that it was illogical for a small island of five million people to have two separate energy markets. It was also clear that both home and business consumers in the North of Ireland are disadvantaged by high electricity prices. It makes sound economic sense to have a single all-Ireland energy strategy. Regardless of the political views and persuasions of the members of the Committee, they agreed with the notion and creation of an all-Ireland energy market, and our recommendations reflect that.

Another issue raised was the need to eradicate fuel poverty, and there is a responsibility on all of us to achieve that. The Committee supports increasing the energy efficiency levy to £5, as agreed by the Assembly. However, key to that is the need for the levy to be administered openly, so that everyone can really see people being taken out of fuel poverty in a quantifiable, rather than a piecemeal, way. The task force on fuel poverty must be cross-cutting and cross-departmental. Targets for eradicating fuel poverty must be set down and kept to. We can now see a clear way to deal with fuel poverty and finally eradicate it "once and for all", as Mr Wells said.

This report will, I hope, open up these issues. There are many matters to be debated and considered in further detail, but I commend the report to the Assembly.

Go raibh maith agat.

Mr McClarty: I welcome the opportunity to debate the Committee for Enterprise, Trade and Investment's energy report. The Committee members and clerks worked hard to produce a thorough and comprehensive assessment of the twenty-first century energy market in Northern Ireland.

The report makes several key recommendations in respect of gas energy and the gas network extension. Specific recommendations concluded that

"The Committee supports the provision of a gas pipeline to the north-west and the conversion of Coolkeeragh Power Station to a combined cycle gas turbine."

"Any postalisation of both gas and electricity costs must be borne equally and equitably by all commercial and domestic customers."

And that

"Support should be sought from the European Union and other sources to meet the costs of current and future gas pipeline extensions."

There are many obvious and some less obvious reasons for the Committee's supporting the gas network extension to the north-west of the Province. I will briefly mention some of them under four specific headings.

First, there is an economic imperative to bring gas to those parts of the country that have no access to that fuel source. The proposed northern gas corridor would encompass the main urban areas of Londonderry, Limavady, Coleraine, Ballymoney and Ballymena, which, combined, represent a substantial economic region with an even greater potential for employment, investment and business start-up rates than before. There are pockets of high unemployment, higher-than-average levels of multiple deprivation and below-average industrial diversity. There is a strong argument that a gas pipeline extension to these areas would be an incentive for further foreign direct investment and would facilitate the diversification of the local economy. It would also ensure a level playing field for attracting future inward investment to the Province. Industrial competition would improve, as a cheap and environmentally friendly fuel would be widely accessible.

Secondly, from an environmental point of view, the gas pipeline extension would significantly reduce emissions of carbon dioxide, sulphur dioxide, black smoke and nitrogen oxides. That would help the north and north-west of the Province to contribute to a cleaner environment in areas renowned for their outstanding natural beauty. The estimated net present value of the reduction in environmental damage costs is some £20 million over 25 years.

Thirdly, the Government have stated objectives on energy policy. The gas pipeline extension to the north-west would offer potential diversification of energy supply to almost one fifth of the population. Ultimately, that would increase the availability of natural gas to 65 % of the entire Northern Ireland population. Costs to consumers would be reduced by an estimated £10 million per annum over 10 years. Energy efficiency would improve also, because of the ease with which gas, as a fuel, can be controlled.

Perhaps the most compelling arguments in favour of the extension of the gas pipeline relate to social need. As a result of the pipeline extension, average annual domestic savings are estimated at £100 per household. That would contribute considerably to the reduction of fuel poverty, as some of the most deprived areas in Northern Ireland would be served by natural gas.

Failure to extend the gas pipeline would make the north and north-west more peripheral and less attractive to inward investment. The northern corridor area would be put at a disadvantage by comparison to Greater Belfast, and the region would be prevented from attaining some 2,000 person years of employment arising from the construction of a combined-cycle gas-turbine power station,

gas transmission and distribution pipeline. Over 50,000 people who live in wards that are among the 15% most deprived in Northern Ireland would be excluded from the environmental, employment cost and associated benefits of natural gas.

For some unknown reason I am slightly biased towards the north and north-west of the Province. However, the arguments in favour of the gas network and its extension to those areas speak for themselves.

I want to comment briefly on two other recommendations in the Committee's report. It is important that electricity and gas costs be borne equally among all consumers in Northern Ireland. It would be grossly unfair if, for example, consumers in Coleraine were asked to pay more than consumers in Belfast, just because of the increased cost of piping fuel to Coleraine. Therefore, postalisation of both gas and electricity costs must be equal and equitable for commercial and domestic consumers alike throughout Northern Ireland.

To help to finance the gas pipeline extension to the north and north-west regions, there should be a combined and concerted effort, along with other energy-emergent peripheral regions, to obtain European Union support for the project and for future pipeline extensions.

The proposals and recommendations in the report, which relate specifically to the gas network and pipeline extension, demonstrate a common sense approach to the development of our energy supply needs in the decades ahead. I commend the entire report to the Assembly, and I support the motion.

Mr McMenamin: I support the report. I am relatively new to the Enterprise, Trade and Investment Committee and have not taken part in the enquiry, but I am pleased to be able to comment on such an important issue. I commend the Committee on its inquiry and thank the officials for their help.

I want to deal with two aspects of domestic energy consumption. My Colleague Dr McDonnell and other Members have talked already about high energy costs. In order to realise Northern Ireland's commitment to reducing worldwide emissions, a comprehensive strategy for energy efficiency across all sectors is needed.

2.45 pm

The energy inquiry report makes several sensible recommendations for increasing energy efficiency. Paragraph 3.20 recommends that Northern Ireland building regulations should be amended to include major improvements and minimum standards in the provision for energy conservation. Many of us live in homes that were built 40 to 50 years ago, and some live in homes that are over 100 years old. The Assembly must examine building standards in order to bring them up to those in many parts of Europe. Houses that are built this year

will still be standing in 80 years' time, wasting as much energy as we are foolish to allow.

The report ensures that the public sector leads by example, making rigorous savings in energy use. The report also calls for energy efficiency improvements in the domestic setting, with energy linked to the rateable value of homes, and finance for homeowners — with which to make their homes more energy-efficient. Everyone, young and old, can play his or her part towards energy efficiency. The simple task of switching off unnecessary lighting and televisions in homes when not required is one way of saving energy and money. The Department for Social Development's Warm Homes Scheme can play an important role in providing energy efficiency measures for low-income households. The Assembly must monitor the funding and eligibility of that programme to ensure that all those who need assistance can get it.

'Energy Efficient Appliances' recommends that concerted action be taken, both to raise public awareness of appliance labelling, and to ensure that that is underpinned by appropriately competitive retail prices for category "A" labelled appliances. It is estimated that in Northern Ireland less than 20% of our energy use is through efficient appliances. The report also recommends that the use of domestic rates be given further consideration as a fuel source for combined heat and power (CHP). A further recommendation, referring to power stations, recommends that all new gas power stations should be CHP stations. A presumption in favour of those stations when awarding contracts would help to achieve that. Combined heat and power plants should also be mandatory for planning approval for large developments such as hospitals, industrial estates, and so on.

The report also proposes that serious consideration be given to the regulation of domestic oil distributors. That is an important point, since — through the Northern Ireland Housing Executive and the Department for Social Development schemes — low-income tenants increasingly use oil to heat their homes. Although gas and electricity are regulated with regard to price, payment methods and customer service, oil companies are not expected to adhere to such regulations. Some oil distributors offer excellent services, but that is not widespread. Domestic customers must be protected.

The introduction of the climate change levy was widely criticised in Northern Ireland. The report recommends that the five-year derogation on that levy should be extended to 10 years for industrial natural gas users in Northern Ireland. Companies that have met energy efficiency targets should be given a rebate on the climate change levy. That sensible and important recommendation encourages companies to connect to the expanding gas network, particularly in areas such as west Tyrone, Omagh and Strabane.

Other Members mentioned fuel poverty. Twenty eight per cent of householders in Northern Ireland live in fuel poverty. That is equivalent to 170,000 homes. The Assembly cannot credibly claim that it is a functional devolved Government if it allows that scandal to continue. I support the report.

Mr Clyde: I support the motion and commend the report to the House.

Since spring 2001, the Committee has studied in earnest ways to reduce the cost of generating electricity — not only to exact the more efficient use of energy, but to bring about a significant reduction in greenhouse gases that arise from the production and use of energy. I have no doubt that the Minister will elaborate further on the need to bring about such a reduction in greenhouse gases, if Northern Ireland is to meet the targets defined within the Kyoto protocol by 2008-2010.

The report says much about the conversion of Kilroot power station to burn Orimulsion. Serious account of the environmental aspects of that move should be taken before it is pursued. The Assembly should note the potential of renewable energy, both in accessing it directly and as a means of generating electricity.

I draw Members' attention to page 53 of volume I of the report, which describes the biomass process of producing heat for private use and electricity for sale. Willow, grown as a short-rotation crop, may be harvested as a fuel in a combined heat and power plant to produce both heat and electricity. Important jobs and opportunities may be provided through growing and harvesting willows, the processing of raw materials and maintaining CHP plants.

Mr Wells: I am sure that the hon Member was alarmed, as I was, at Dr O'Hagan's assertion that the Committee supported the development of an all-Ireland energy market. Does he agree that that is not the case? Nowhere in the report is there any endorsement of an all-Ireland energy market. The phrase that is used is an "all-island energy market" that will enable this part of the United Kingdom to buy and sell power from another state — the Irish Republic.

Mr Clyde: I acknowledge the Member's point.

Among the environmental benefits of renewable energy are less waste in landfills, valuable habitats for wildlife and fewer greenhouse gas emissions. I commend the work of Rural Generation Ltd at Brook Hall Estate. The Committee saw a prototype gas generator that ran off gas from landfill sites on its visit to Brook Hall. I encourage the Department to look favourably upon "green" electricity and power.

The uptake of renewable energy in Northern Ireland must be increased. It would make an important contribution to driving down fuel poverty and making it a thing of the past in Northern Ireland. However, for such

an outcome to be realised, the public sector is under a responsibility to lead the way in promoting the advantages of, and harnessing the potential for, greater use of renewable energy.

Much in the report is to be commended to the Assembly. I ask the Minister to attach significant weight to all its recommendations. I support its proposals, and look forward to their early implementation. I thank the Committee Clerk and her staff for compiling the report.

Mr Armstrong: I welcome the opportunity to participate in this debate. As a member of the Committee for Enterprise, Trade and Investment, I commend the report to the Assembly.

The report covers all aspects of energy, including electricity costs, energy efficiency, renewable energy, gas networks and Orimulsion. However, the report does not sufficiently emphasise the importance of waste management, especially the use of waste in the production of energy and heat. Vast amounts of waste are produced across Northern Ireland and all over the world. Waste must be used in some manner, whether it is buried, burnt or reused. There must be more research into the use of waste products and their conversion into heat and energy.

The city of Gothenburg in Sweden is almost entirely heated by the incineration of city waste. It must be emphasised that modern incineration techniques are clean burning. There should be several plants in Northern Ireland to segregate waste into different categories and incinerate it, producing energy and heat. Different filters can be used, depending on the type of waste, to eliminate toxic fumes. If used in that way, waste can be converted efficiently and effectively into energy. That energy would be constantly transferred into a grid system or used to provide continuous hot water for nearby towns, cities or local industries.

Similarly, the establishment of anaerobic digesters enables animal waste to be used by converting slurry and other farm and food waste into biomass. The digested mass is returned to the land as a less toxic fertiliser than raw slurry.

Modern farming methods produce much waste, and the establishment of biomass plants, such as the proposed plant at Fivemiletown, is to be commended. The Department of the Environment and the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development should consider, and assist financially, a network of digesters in that area.

The section of the report dealing with renewable energy states:

"When wind speeds are low then energy from biomass would need to be a significant proportion of the mix."

Windmills and biomass plants should therefore be used in conjunction with each other. All waste could then be restructured as a recognised product, with no unwanted

and unused surplus, and as a vital component in the production of heat and energy, with liquid fertiliser as a by-product.

The analysis and correct utilisation of our food and animal products would end the advice given to farmers that slurry should be spread only at certain times of the year. Farmers are conscious of the environment. That analysis would enable the farmer to know exactly what he is putting on the land, thereby using the product more effectively and efficiently. The efficient and effective use of waste is of the utmost importance. What better way is there to produce energy to the benefit of all?

The report mentioned the Committee's visit to Brook Hall Estate, where willows are cultivated and the biomass is used to produce heat, energy and power. The energy produced is used on the farm, and the excess is sold to the grid system. The price received is low — approximately only 2p per kilo — but perhaps negotiation could improve it. The Department of Agriculture and Rural Development has adopted a scheme to promote the growing of willows. I highlight the success of the process and recommend the use of such regeneration. It is a possible cash crop that would enable farmers to diversify. The process of converting willows into energy delivers such benefits to the farmer as additional income, the use of the biofilter by which the willow can be irrigated by either slurry or water from treatment plants, the production of semi-charcoal ash and the by-products of the gasification process, which can be used as fertiliser.

Wind turbines enable the use of free fuel in the production of energy. Some people consider them unsightly. That is probably how they were regarded when they were put up many years ago in Denmark. However, they are now a tourist attraction. That type of energy production would work well in many areas.

The report considered the use of Orimulsion at Kilroot power station. Its successful use in this country, as in others, would avoid dependence on gas or oil as a single-energy source. It is relatively cheap, and I am sure that further research would show that its use is safe.

With regard to the natural gas network, the fact that Lough Neagh lies between mid-Ulster and Belfast puts my constituents at a disadvantage, although it is vital in the supply of water to Greater Belfast. I urge the Minister to invest in biomass facilities in that densely agricultural rural area to ensure the more environmentally friendly production of energy.

3.00 pm

In conclusion, I commend the report to the Minister. However, I recommend that financial assistance be given to facilitate the conversion of domestic and industrial waste products to energy and heat. That would benefit our people's health and that of the environment. Biomass, biogas, renewable energy produced by wind turbines

and the utilisation of waste are of vital importance, and I strongly recommend that they be further investigated, with the welfare of the people of Northern Ireland in mind.

Mr A Doherty: I feel like a dysfunctional Don Quixote because, while Don Quixote tilted at windmills, I want to tilt at the people who tilt at windmills. I shall return to windmills later.

The Committee for Enterprise, Trade and Investment is to be commended for its report on the energy inquiry. It is a perceptive analysis of an issue that is of great importance to industry and commerce, and to families — all of which are burdened by punitive and excessive energy costs. To its credit, the Committee is sensitive to the suffering of the 170,000 or more households that are experiencing fuel poverty. In addition, it is not looking for cheap solutions to energy problems. Whatever profits that the big players in energy production might make, nothing is really cheap if the provision of the product brings with it threats to people's health or damage to the environment.

I shall leave the economic and technical aspects of the report to those who are better qualified than I — most Members are better qualified than I — and express my contentment that the report demonstrates the Committee's commitment to sustainable development, and that it takes an enlightened approach to the environmental implications of energy production and marketing.

The fact that the Committee comes out firmly against nuclear energy production and reprocessing, and that it is highly critical of the UK Government's arrogant and irresponsible approach to those issues, is particularly satisfying.

The report highlights the fact that more than 60% of Northern Ireland's greenhouse gases arise from the production and use of energy. To meet its obligations and targets for the reduction of those gases, it is essential that energy production from dirty sources be rapidly phased out and that only clean and environmentally friendly processes be encouraged or permitted. In that respect, I draw attention to an alarming proposal to mine up to 600 million tonnes of lignite, with the intention of using it to fuel a massive 600-megawatt power station. Lignite is an extremely dirty fuel. To permit that development would have a devastating impact on the natural environment. Added to that, the potential for air pollution is such that I urge the Committee to be firm in its opposition to such proposals, which strike at the heart of its declared objectives.

I am satisfied by the support that the report offers to the extension of gas pipelines. My memory is not what it used to be, but I believe that I was the first Member to raise the matter in the Assembly, in the hope that natural gas would be made more widely available to domestic and business users, and that a gas-fuelled power station could be developed at Coolkeeragh.

The report raises a raft of other environmental matters worthy of examination, but I shall limit my contribution to two further issues. I have serious reservations about the use of Orimulsion as a fuel in Kilroot or any other power station in these islands — sorry, Mr Wells.

I now return, as promised, to the windmills.

Mr Wells: The hon Member stated that he is opposed to the use of Orimulsion. Will he tell the House why?

Mr A Doherty: I have serious reservations about its use. The same reservations are contained in the report. I could expand on the issue. The Member knows more about it than I do, but I shall keep my reservations. I am sorry, Mr Deputy Speaker, I should not be amused by that.

Finally, as promised, I return to the subject of windmills. Land- and sea-based power-generating windmills are the most exciting and visible manifestation of the merits of renewable energy resources. As someone with an interest in, and concern for, all aspects of environmental protection, I am aware that some environmentalists are offended by the visual impact of windmills on our beautiful landscape. Hence, my earlier comments on windmill-tilters.

It is more than clichéd to say that beauty is in the eye of the beholder, or that, in design terms, form follows function. It can be argued that the power-generating windmill is an elegant and restrained piece of design, as much in tune with our times as the master mills of La Mancha, which so upset Don Quixote, and the quaint and beautiful windmills of south-east England and the Netherlands were with their times. Windmills are certainly no more obtrusive than the thousands of high-tension power pylons and the myriad telecommunications masts that are menacingly mushrooming everywhere.

The squeaky-clean efficiency of the graceful, wind-powered mills should leave the most fervent environmentalist with a happy glow; they more than compensate for their visual impact. Some might even say that they brighten up and add interest to our dullest and most featureless hillsides. I support the motion.

Sir Reg Empey: I am not sure how much time you will permit me to respond, Mr Deputy Speaker. There is a great deal of ground to cover. I shall try to address as many of the issues that Members raised as I can, after my initial remarks.

Like other Members, I welcome the report. Today's debate has been notably mature. There are related issues that people could exploit and use to play to the Gallery. However, the amount of effort that the Committee put into the report over almost a year clearly indicates that all the issues are being taken seriously and dealt with in a mature and methodical way.

In moving the motion, the Committee Chairperson made it obvious that no blinding flash of light revealed how we should deal with the electricity costs and other issues. The Committee recognised the complexity of the

subject, and the report itself is a complex document. I commend it to the public. This debate will not create a cheap headline; that should not diminish the fact that the report represents a great deal of work by many people over a long time. Their work will ultimately help to contribute to the solutions to our energy difficulties. I hope that the media cover the debate. I also hope that the public recognise that work is being done here, and that not all debates involve headline-grabbing play-acting, although many do.

Reference has been made to the 32 written submissions made, the 29 organisations involved, the visits that took place and the 30 issues that were raised in the submissions. Those issues have been grouped into five broad themes: electricity costs; improving energy efficiency; renewable energy; gas network extension; and an all-island market.

The report makes a total of 45 recommendations, not all of which are directed at the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment. Some recommendations are directed at other Departments and at parties with a direct interest or involvement in the energy market. I shall respond formally to the report's recommendations in due course, when I have consulted with Executive Colleagues. In the meantime, I wish to make some initial observations and to respond to some of the questions that Members raised.

It is almost one year to the day since I made a statement to the Assembly in which I reviewed progress on the energy front in the previous 10 years, assessed the current position, drew attention to the continuing historic and structural problems in the energy arena and outlined some initial thoughts on the actions that were needed to resolve those problems in order to create a more modern, efficient energy sector.

In particular, I indicated my intention to prepare a revised energy strategy for Northern Ireland. One of the main difficulties for policy-makers in that area is that the context in which decisions are taken continues to change. Progress is made, new issues arise, and little remains static. If we compare the Northern Ireland of today with that of 10 years ago, several significant differences are apparent.

Energy is now the responsibility of the devolved Assembly. There is increased worldwide concern about climate change and the need to reduce greenhouse gas emissions as much as possible. The issue of fuel poverty is becoming much more evident, and it was mentioned by almost every Member who participated in the debate. The previous policy of a centralised, largely publicly-owned energy sector has been replaced by a policy of energy decentralisation based on private or community ownership. The outworking of that revised policy has yet to be completed. The development of a liberalised market in electricity and gas across the European Union

has had, and will continue to have, major implications for the local market. Finally, the emergence in recent years of energy taxation and the associated subject of emissions trading may well have a major impact on our economic life.

Although the context may continue to evolve, it has not prevented progress being made. That includes further significant progress in the past year, most notably the endorsement of an extension to the natural gas network; the commissioning of the Moyle interconnector; the further opening up of the electricity market; the publication of the Ian Cope Associates reports on an all-island market; the renewables consultation exercise; and the announcement of the proposed first major offshore wind project off the north coast. I appreciate the wholehearted support and co-operation of the Committee on all those issues.

In the next few days, I plan to publish an initial consultation paper on a revised energy market strategy. The paper will canvass views on the shape, structure and content of a new energy strategy for the Northern Ireland of the twenty-first century. Having considered the responses to the paper, and also taken into account the Committee's recommendations contained in its report, I plan to issue a revised draft strategy, and to introduce the associated legislation required to underpin that strategy, later this year. With the Members' co-operation, I hope to have legislation dealing with the priority issues passed in this Assembly's lifetime.

Some major problems remain, which the Committee has considered. It will be invaluable to have their helpful analysis and recommendations on solutions set out in the inquiry report.

Taking each of the five report themes in turn, I shall outline my initial thoughts on the action needed to address those problems. Electricity costs are probably the most intractable problem on my desk, and I take some comfort from the fact that the Committee sees no easy answer to that complex issue. I have asked my officials and the Regulator General for Electricity and Gas to give me an action plan to achieve an early and continuing reduction in electricity prices. I plan to say more on that crucial matter when clear options are identified, and I assure the Assembly that that will be sooner rather than later. Only last week, it took only a few major businesses in Northern Ireland to starkly underline the impact that energy costs have on competitiveness. I am, therefore, determined that the time for words is over and the time for decisive action has come.

Many of the report's recommendations for improving energy efficiency fall within the remit of my Executive Colleagues. It will be necessary to consult them before I prepare my response to the report. The efficient use of energy will benefit not only industrial and domestic consumers, especially those on low incomes, but also

the environment. Improved energy efficiency is not an option for Northern Ireland — it is a must.

My Department issued a consultation paper last autumn on the further exploitation of our renewable resources. The results of that consultation are currently being analysed. Harnessing new renewables potential must play a key part in progressing the energy agenda. My plans for the greater use of renewables, including revised trading arrangements and the possible introduction of renewables obligation, will be contained in the draft energy strategy statement planned for later this year.

3.15 pm

My Department will also contribute to a study into the capacity of the electricity network to cope with increasing amounts of renewable energy, especially wind energy. My overall aim is to stimulate rapid deployment of renewable energy resources without an unacceptable increase in the price of electricity.

The announcement from the Executive and the Irish Government last autumn supporting the north-west and South/North gas pipeline project was probably the main and most exciting achievement of the past 12 months. The Committee, working in the background, played no small part in helping to achieve that important breakthrough, and I pay tribute to its efforts. The regulator has recently granted a gas conveyance licence to Bord Gáis in respect of the project, and I shall shortly ask the regulator to invite expressions of interest for the distribution of gas into towns along the pipeline route. Many Members have been pressing for that as it will indicate whether there is any interest in supplying gas to those towns.

On many occasions, I have made clear my commitment to the creation of a more integrated and competitive energy market on the island of Ireland, within a European context. I was grateful for the report published by IPA Energy Consulting last autumn. My counterpart in Dublin, Mrs O'Rourke, and I hope to announce an action plan arising from that report in the near future.

An all-island market is not a panacea for the problems in the local energy market, nor will the benefits of an all-island market appear overnight. A great deal of careful consideration must be given to the wide range of technical, financial and legal issues involved. It is vital that the transition to an all-island market is properly planned, bearing in mind that there is almost a public monopoly in the Republic and a privatised sector here. We must also remember that an energy market of five million people is fairly minute. Through Great Britain, major links to the EU must be maintained if we are to get the properly open market that we need.

The Committee has made an impressive number of detailed and wide-ranging recommendations. Approximately three quarters of them will fall to my Department for response, with the remainder falling to other

Departments. My initial view is that many recommendations are sensible, including those on revised consumer representation arrangements, the greater use of renewable energy, the benefit of energy efficiency and the support for the extension of the gas industry. Others cause me more difficulty, including the recommendation that all new gas-fired power stations should be combined heat and power stations and the provision of grant aid to domestic consumers who are seeking to avail themselves of energy from renewable sources.

I shall reflect on the Committee's report, and I shall seek the views of my ministerial Colleagues before preparing my formal response. It would be sensible if I were to take additional time to incorporate, where appropriate, the responses to the Department's energy strategy consultation paper, which will be issued in the next few days. Responses to that paper will be requested by 30 April.

In his opening remarks, the Committee Chairperson set the scene for the report, but he and several other Members emphasised the issue of fuel poverty. The statistics are shocking — 28% of households fall into that category. An initial consultation paper on proposals for the new energy strategy and the accompanying legislation will include an invitation of views on a possible increase in the £2 levy, which is currently collected by NIE from customers for investment in energy-efficiency projects under the regulated scheme. We shall carefully consider recommendations in the light of responses and discuss them with the regulator — who has also recently consulted on the proposals — and with the Department of Finance and Personnel. A formal written response will be given to the Committee's report.

I shall give details of an anecdotal case. In my constituency, Willowfield is a target area of the warm homes scheme, and it is twinned with Turf Lodge in west Belfast. A few weeks ago, I was present at the opening of a house that had all the benefits of the scheme.

Gas central heating had been installed. Extra insulation, loft installation, low-energy bulbs and electric kettles, and a whole range of other things were also installed. That was a fantastic job for the elderly resident, who no longer had to worry about bags of coal. It was much cheaper. The sad thing is that there are insufficient applicants for the scheme. We have not got the message through to the grass roots.

We were unable to implement the scheme in that area, even though funds were available. Therefore, money is not the only issue. We must get the message across to people. It is a fantastic scheme and a wonderful example of what can be achieved. There are savings in convenience, health and cost. The money is lying there, yet the Housing Executive is unable to spend it because of the insufficient number of applicants. That is something that we must take on board.

Like other Members, I am pleased to see Mr Neeson in his place again. I am aware of his long-term interest in the gas sector. I appreciate that his constituency plays a significant role in energy in Northern Ireland. However, one of the technical matters that he raised was that of postalisation. That may be double Dutch to many people. When people criticise us, they sometimes forget that there is postalisation for electricity. Does anyone seriously believe that it costs the same to get electricity to Carrickfergus as it does to Belleek? Of course it does not. However, is anyone seriously suggesting that Belleek residents should be charged the economic rate for getting electricity to them?

Dr McDonnell: Yes. *[Laughter]*

Sir Reg Empey: From the safety of the Malone Road, that was probably to be expected. *[Laughter]*. It is not something with which most Members of the House would agree.

Postalisation seems reasonable. Take the postal service. One stamp delivers everywhere, and it is exactly the same principle. The gas industry should not be discriminated against. Therefore, I fully support the concept.

Some people say that this will have an adverse impact on electricity prices. I say that to bring in gas will have a beneficial effect on electricity prices overall. There is a large fuel cost element in our electricity bills, and increases in fuel costs are automatically transferred to the customer. The more efficient the power stations are, the less fuel they use, and, therefore, less energy costs are transferred to the customer. Gas-fired electricity generation is more efficient than the old methods used in the 1960s and 1970s. There are benefits to be gained. I agree with the Deputy Chairperson that the process of postalisation should take place.

Dr Birnie raised several issues, including that of building regulations. That issue was also raised by Mr McMenamin. I shall come to that in a moment. Dr Birnie also said that I should deal with Northern Ireland companies' ability to build power stations and to supply electricity in the Republic. He said that I should raise that issue at the North/South Ministerial Council with my counterpart there. I point out to Dr Birnie that energy is not one of the matters dealt with by the implementation bodies. There are purely ad-hoc arrangements between our two Departments. I am happy to draw any of those matters to the attention of the Department of Public Enterprise in Dublin. That can be done through a phone call.

Dr Birnie raised the issue of the Kyoto protocol and the nuclear side of things. I am aware of the concerns that people have about nuclear issues. One view expressed was that no electricity generated by nuclear power should come into Northern Ireland. Just as it is impossible to tell the difference between "orange" electricity and "green" electricity, so it is impossible to tell the difference

between nuclear- and coal-based electricity. Unless some testing mechanism is developed, we shall not be able to distinguish between them. What comes through the Moyle interconnector ends up in a pool in GB, and we have no control over where the electricity is generated.

Nuclear covers about 20% of generation in the UK, but if it is got rid of, it must be replaced with something else. If that is not renewables, it will be coal, oil or gas. I understand the difficulties, but there is no easy answer. The end result will be that more fossil fuels will be burned, instead of dealing with the nuclear issue.

Dr McDonnell said that the basic objective is to have a good, reliable energy supply at a reasonable price. That is exactly what we want. However, there is a misunderstanding among Members about the contracts. The generators are not necessarily evil people who have scooped a fortune and have a licence to print money. The generators had to pay more for the power stations than they were worth, and that is why we have difficulty with those contracts. When privatisation was taking place in Great Britain, the money that the Government got for the power stations was equivalent to £109,000 per megawatt. In Northern Ireland they got £166,000 per megawatt. The Government got a significant premium for selling the generation capacity in Northern Ireland in comparison to what they received in Great Britain. That is why we have difficulties now.

The power stations are being paid for availability. If they do not turn a wheel they are paid the same as when they are producing. People must understand the origins of that difficulty.

Mr Wells said that the inquiry started as a stroll and ended up as a marathon. During his remarks, I formed the conclusion that staff in my Energy Division and others were making the same contribution that he thought he was making in Magherafelt, and I tried to picture some of them in uniform going around issuing tickets for bad parking. I understand and sympathise with him that it is very difficult to draw a crowd for some of those issues. However, that does not mean that they are not important, and he is right to concentrate on it.

Mr Wells also said a lot about Orimulsion. I met the Venezuelans through their ambassador and a representative from their company. We must think also about the treatment and the working conditions of the people who produce Orimulsion. Much criticism has been directed at the state company in Venezuela, and what is deemed to have been the exploitation of the environment and the people who produce Orimulsion.

Much depends on a major environmental assessment. Unlike oil, Orimulsion sinks. Therefore, if anything happened in Belfast Lough, Orimulsion would not float and be contained in the usual way — it would sink. I am not yet satisfied that a mechanism or procedure exists to deal with it in those circumstances. Whether those

circumstances are better than what we have with oil, or whether they are worse, I am not sure.

3.30 pm

However, much will depend on its environmental impact. I have an open mind on the Orimulsion option, as does Mr Wells, because it could possibly cost less and result in environmental improvements. I also accept the need to consider fuel diversity, so that we do not return to being wholly dependent on fuel oil, which was the position a few years ago.

Any decision to convert to the triple firing of coal, oil and Orimulsion in Kilroot, and the accompanying refinancing of the existing contract to 2024, which would be required to allow the providers to recoup their investment, requires the agreement of the owners, AES Kilroot, and NIE. The decision would be subject to the satisfactory outcome of economic appraisals by the independent regulator and the granting of the necessary statutory consents from my Department under the Electricity (Northern Ireland) Order 1992, and planning approval. There is a long way to go, but I do not underestimate its significance.

Ms Morrice spoke about the complexities of the industry. I have come to that conclusion independently, and I can assure the Member that it is highly complex. The targets for renewable energy have been set at 15% by 2010 and 35% by 2020. The responses to the recent consultation paper 'Renewable Energy in Northern Ireland – Realising the Potential' are currently being evaluated. In addition to that, the Department and NIE will sponsor a comprehensive study of the electricity network to determine the extent to which renewable energy sources can contribute safely to mainstream electricity supply. Part of the problem is that when the wind is blowing, a surge is created. When the wind is not blowing, the supply stops. There are technical reasons to be considered, which will be addressed in that comprehensive study. We will learn as we go, but the possibilities of renewable sources of energy will require us to smarten up and deal with that matter.

Dr O'Hagan dealt with generator contracts and the all-island market, and the fact that we face a public sector versus private sector situation. With regard to the all-island market, my counterpart Mrs O'Rourke and I commissioned a study last year to assess existing arrangements, to identify barriers to trade and to consider the options for collaborative progress. We will have to await the outcome of that study before I can take matters further.

Mr McClarty mentioned the European dimension. Major energy projects, including the Moyle interconnector and the Scotland to Northern Ireland pipeline (SNIPS), have had European support in the past. It is yet to be determined what the European situation will be with regard to the gas pipelines. The issue will be progressed,

but I am not yet in a position to determine whether there will be a European dimension to that project.

Mr McMenamin and other Members referred to the building regulations, which will affect the future. He also mentioned the lifespan of houses; I live in a house that is considerably older than that which he spoke about, but I am aware of the issues. Responsibility for building regulations rests with the Department of Finance and Personnel. I shall consult Dr Farren on the relevant recommendation and include the outcome of that consultation in my written response to the report. I shall deal with that matter later.

Mr Clyde spoke about greenhouse gases and renewable energy. Mr Armstrong spoke about waste. One gets the impression that he has a connection with the agriculture industry, but he made a valid point that is high on the agenda, and which I take seriously. My Colleagues in the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development have a problem with the tightening of the regulations governing the disposal of slurry, and anaerobic digesters are a possible solution. Arthur Doherty spoke about lignite. If the power providers at Ballymoney make an application, it will have to be treated in the same way as other applications, but there are significant environmental concerns.

A Government support fund of £60 million was announced in 1995 to help to reduce electricity prices. The use of that fund was determined by direct rule Ministers. An initial £15 million was spent to reduce the level of tariff increases in 1996-97. A further £5 million was set aside in 1997 to fund long-term energy efficiency programmes, such as the warm homes scheme, which are now managed by the Department for Social Development.

The final £40 million was used to buy down some of the costs of generator contracts. Some £10 million was spent at Ballylumford and £30 million at Kilroot. Adam Ingram, the then Economic Development Minister, announced that decision in March 2000. My role was to confirm that this offered the best long-term benefit for customers from the final tranche of money. I did that in June 2001, when various tripartite legal agreements had been drawn up and VAT issues had been resolved. There is a great deal of misinformation about that fund.

I thank the members of the Committee and Members of the Assembly for their participation today. We will take the comments seriously, and we will respond in full. I will be seeking the co-operation of Members and the Committee when I introduce the legislation that is necessary to implement as much as possible. I intend to have it done in the lifetime of this Assembly, but I will require the co-operation and goodwill of Members if I am to achieve that.

The Chairperson of the Committee for Enterprise, Trade and Investment (Mr P Doherty): Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I thank the Minister and the Members who participated in the debate. I am

greatly encouraged by the Minister's support for the report. We covered a huge range of issues, such as bonds, renewables, nuclear energy, Orimulsion, fuel poverty, Coolkeeragh, the gas pipeline to the north-west, the 1992 contracts, human energy, postalisation, EU support, building standards, biomass, combined heat and power and the generation of heat and power from waste.

Everyone who spoke touched on those issues to some extent. However, before I deal with the individual comments I thank the members of the Committee for the enormous amount of work and energy that they put in collectively over the past year to produce the report and to produce — and I reflect the Minister's words — this mature debate. It is a credit to the Committee that it has presented the report in the way that it has. I also thank the Special Adviser to the Committee for his enormous help as we waded through seven or eight drafts to come to this final conclusion.

The Committee's Deputy Chairperson, Mr Neeson, spoke clearly about the licensing of the pipeline to the north-west and his support for that, and of Coolkeeragh and the absolute need for postalisation and support for the pipeline going through the towns in the north-west. He also mentioned Orimulsion, the strong environmental and Assembly guidelines to be met and the need for us to not put all our eggs in one basket.

I will come back to the question of Orimulsion and the subject of bonds, because at times during the debate one might have thought that we had a slight difference of opinion on those subjects. We agreed to have a "triple lock" on the question of Orimulsion. Some Members approached the triple lock by way of unlocking it, others approached it by way of leaving the lock on. We recognised that that issue had potential, but huge issues with regard to the economy and the environment had to be dealt with. Likewise when we touched on bonds we correctly decided that, as the Minister was about to launch a fairly major inquiry — and he has many more resources than we have — we should await the outcome of his review.

Dr Birnie spoke about the building regulations, nuclear power, and ESB's monopoly in the South, which is true. The Committee decided not to take evidence on the use of nuclear power, which we are unanimously against. We knew that we were leaving ourselves open to a challenge on that, but the political view was strong, and we stated that in the report.

Dr McDonnell summed up the strong view of the Committee with the phrase "scandalous contracts". However, he also pointed out that even though the ESB has a monopoly in the South, NIE has an effective monopoly in the North and we are dealing with two big, strong companies as we move into this new era. He also said that this is but a stage in the debate, which is another strong point, as we will undoubtedly return to the matter often.

Mr Wells talked about nuclear power, the triple lock in Orimulsion, fuel poverty and renewable sources of energy. He contributed a good deal to the debates on Orimulsion and fuel poverty, and I thank him for his clear views on those serious issues.

Ms Morrice spoke on renewable sources, which became her main issue. We deferred to her views often and leaned on her sometimes to produce additional papers for the Committee — we thank her for that effort. She said that we are blessed — or some would say not so blessed — with high winds that we could harness and match to local skills that have always existed in the North. She made a key point when combining all those factors — that we should use the will, the political will and the confidence to tackle all those issues, match our human energies with our natural wind, with emerging skills and those that have existed here in abundance for some time.

Dr O'Hagan talked about renewable sources and Orimulsion; she came up with a different perspective on the triple lock. She spoke clearly about the generation contracts and queried whether there is potential within EU legislation for legal options that might help us deal with the contracts. She also spoke of the abiding problem of fuel poverty and how we can overcome it.

Mr McClarty spoke clearly about postalisation, his and the Committee's support for that, fuel poverty, his clear support for the north-west pipeline and the economic imperative for that to go ahead, together with the need for European support to build it.

The newest member of the Committee, Mr McMenamin, talked about "warm homes", a simple phrase that sums up much of the debate on fuel poverty. He also spoke of the need to upgrade building standards and the need to try to expand the scope to opt-out on the climate change levy.

Mr Clyde spoke of the cost of electricity, and it was that very question — "Why is the cost of electricity so high?" — that began our inquiry into energy. That core issue kept us focused on our deliberations. Mr Clyde also spoke about Orimulsion and the potential development of the biomass process given Ireland's agricultural background.

3.45 pm

Mr Billy Armstrong talked about waste management and the potential for using waste to generate heat and power. He also spoke about the biomass and biogas processes. Arthur Doherty spoke about tilting at people who tilt at windmills, and left me wondering what he really meant by that. He was clearly against Orimulsion, nuclear energy and lignite but strongly supported the development of wind energy.

The Minister described this as a mature debate. I thank him for that, because the Committee worked maturely and produced a mature report. He spoke of the gas network, the Moyle interconnector, the revised energy strategy and legislation within the lifetime of the Assembly.

There were five key points: electricity costs; improving energy efficiency; renewable energy resources; gas network extensions; and the all-island energy market in an EU context. We all recognise that there are technical and legal issues. The Minister acknowledged that three quarters of the 45 recommendations were within his Department's remit.

The Minister gave us more information about the problems associated with Orimulsion — such as workers in Venezuela who are badly treated, and some technical aspects, which we need to consider carefully. He also gave us more information about how those bad contracts came about in the first place. He blamed the direct rule Ministers, and there is no harm in that.

I thank Members for the way in which they approached the debate and recommend the report to the House.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That this Assembly approves the report of the Committee for Enterprise, Trade and Investment on their inquiry into the Energy Report (3/01R) and calls on the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to implement the Committee's recommendations at the earliest opportunity.

COMMITTEE FOR HEALTH, SOCIAL SERVICES AND PUBLIC SAFETY: REPORT ON CANCER SERVICES

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

That this Assembly approves the Second Report of the Committee for Health, Social Services and Public Safety (2/01R) on the Delivery of Cancer Services in Northern Ireland and calls on the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to implement the Report's recommendations at the earliest opportunity.

I am pleased to bring the Committee's second report of this session before the Assembly. The report examines the delivery of cancer services in Northern Ireland, and I am gratified that it enjoyed the unanimous support of Committee members. I thank them for their hard work and positive support throughout the inquiry, which began in May 2001. I thank the Committee Clerk and staff, in particular the Assistant Clerk who worked so hard for the last nine months to produce the report. The Committee also wants to record its gratitude to the 31 organisations and individuals who gave evidence orally and made excellent written submissions, which were most enlightening. Those witnesses included representatives from the Ulster Cancer Foundation, Action Cancer, Macmillan Cancer Relief and many other bodies.

The Committee undertook an inquiry into cancer services primarily for three reasons. First, there was consensus on the need to focus on a disease that is expected to overtake coronary artery disease to become the number one killer in Northern Ireland in the next five years. Every Member, I am sure, has someone in his or her immediate or extended family who has had, or has, cancer.

Secondly, the Committee was aware of the considerable public concern about the quality of, and access to, cancer treatment. There have been widespread reports of the most intense pressures on staff and equipment at Belvoir Park Hospital. The hospital staff are doing their best to cope until the new regional cancer centre is built. The pressures have led to much frustration and disquiet for patients and staff. Members may have heard Dr Russell Houston talk about that problem on the radio this morning. The Committee visited Belvoir Park Hospital, and it has been debating the issue of whether to invest in Belvoir Park or to wait until the new cancer centre is completed at Belfast City Hospital. There are major problems in that area.

Thirdly, it was felt that such an inquiry would be a timely opportunity to review the progress on the recommendations for cancer services that arose from the Campbell Report of 1996. Although there have been welcome advances in cancer treatment since then, the evidence points equally to continuing variations in quality

and provision of treatment for different cancers across Northern Ireland.

I will not give anecdotal evidence about cancer patients, but I want to emphasise the lack of uniformity of treatment across Northern Ireland. Some people die of cancer unnecessarily, and there is difficulty in obtaining early diagnosis, which is a key element of successful treatment.

The report is wide-ranging and covers matter such as the needs of patients and palliative care and important strategic issues such as cancer prevention and information management. However, in the limited time available, I want to concentrate on three areas. No doubt my Committee Colleagues and Members will pick up on other important points. I will restrict my comments to the key areas of the report: resources, the regional cancer centre and — an area in which I must declare a personal interest — primary care and the role of the general practitioner.

Cancer is a major public health problem. The financial cost of early diagnosis, treatment, care and support for patients is huge. A combination of clinical advances, an ageing population and an increase in patient expectations will contribute to increased pressures on cancer services for the foreseeable future. Therefore it is imperative that the ambitious plans for the new regional cancer centre, an expanded cancer workforce, new diagnostic equipment, drugs and information systems be accompanied by the requisite funding levels, if they are to meet the long-term needs of the population successfully. That will be no easy task in the current climate of tough governmental budgetary constraints.

The question of funding for cancer services is a microcosm of the wider debate on the long-term resourcing of the Health Service. In that context, it is worth pointing out that the UK Government spend just under 7% of GDP on health, by comparison to an average of 8.6% in other Western countries. In France the figure is 9.6%, and in the United States of America it is 14%. Recently I was told that, in the USA, \$1 is spent on diabetes-related conditions for every \$7 that is spent on health.

We must face the reality that securing a first-class health service for the future and for the treatment of cancer will be achieved only at considerable cost. However, our people deserve the best.

There is no dispute that significant funding has been ploughed into cancer services since the Campbell Report of 1996 to help to bring about a patient-focused realignment of services. Some £13 million of additional funding per annum has helped to meet the escalating drug costs, brought about improvements in infrastructure and provided for the appointment of over 200 additional cancer staff. The provision of an extra £3 million this year for the development of local cancer services, on top of £7 million in 1999-2000 and £8 million in 2000-01, has helped to provide a welcome boost to specialist

staffing, including two additional consultant oncologists and 70 nurses.

The Committee also welcomed the provision in July 2001, by the new opportunities fund, of £6.4 million towards a range of innovative projects aimed at cancer prevention, detection, treatment and care, including funding for four much-needed magnetic resonance imaging (MRI) scanners. However, that is no substitute for the provision of mainstream Government funding for cancer services in a planned and rational way. I appreciate that the Minister has put in much effort to provide MRI scanners, and I thank her for being present at today's debate.

The Committee notes the vital financial contribution made by the voluntary sector to cancer services. However, it also recognises that there has been an over-reliance on that sector, particularly for palliative care and information services. It is clear that the increasing demand for cancer treatment year-on-year, and the rapid development of new drugs, will require an increasing level of resources. Drug costs are currently estimated to increase annually by £7.5 million over the next three years. The number of referrals to oncologists has risen from around 3,400 in 1996 to over 4,000 in 2000. The figure is eventually expected to rise to some 6,500. The cancer workforce plan, including training, will require considerable resource commitment. The latest figures for the regional cancer centre are £57 million for the capital build and £10.5 million for annual revenue costs.

In view of the patent need for substantial additional investment in cancer services, the Committee was shocked to learn of the growing disparity in funding allocations for health services between here and England. The inquiry highlighted an alarming gap in expenditure on health and personal social services between Northern Ireland and Great Britain, where the growth in expenditure in real terms amounted to 35% and 57% respectively during the 1990s. I refer Members to the recent report by the Northern Ireland Confederation for Health and Social Services (NICON) — the organisation that represents the four health boards. Mr Brendan Cunningham, the chief executive of the Southern Health and Social Services Board, acts as its spokesperson. Members may want to examine that report, as it gives direct comparisons between funding for the Health Service in England and Wales with that in Northern Ireland. It makes fascinating reading, and it shows how badly done by Northern Ireland has been.

If Northern Ireland had matched the increases for England, the health and personal social services would have gained an extra £83 million for this year, £138 million for 2002-03 and £214 million for 2003-04. To that end, the Committee fully supports the Minister and the Executive in pressing for a fair allocation of UK public expenditure to Northern Ireland. The Barnett formula, which is used to determine our levels of expenditure, is

recognised as resulting in lower levels of public expenditure in Northern Ireland than in Great Britain.

Significant additional resources, amounting to over £1.2 billion, have been allocated for the next three years to support the ambitious National Health Service cancer plan, published in 2000, for England and Wales, which is designed to deliver the fastest improving cancer services in Europe over the next five years. Given Northern Ireland's well-documented problems of poverty, social deprivation and historical lack of investment, it is unacceptable that cancer services here should not enjoy a similar pro-rata spending increase to support a strategic plan to improve staffing levels, equipment, facilities, drugs and information systems.

The Committee supports the work of the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to secure extra funds to improve the quality of health treatment and care.

That is a priority in the Executive's Programme for Government. The Minister has achieved a measure of success in obtaining extra funding from increased Budget allocations and Executive programme funds since devolution.

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

4.00 pm

Any future departmental commitment to substantially increase resources for cancer services must be accompanied by robust monitoring mechanisms with clearly defined goals and objectives. A rigorous audit of cancer services must be conducted annually, both regionally and in cancer units, to ensure that outcomes and improvements are properly measured and demonstrate value for money.

The issue of funding leads me to the biggest area of public concern about cancer services — the absence of the long-promised regional cancer centre. The centre of excellence was a major recommendation of the Campbell Report, and it is increasingly concerning that, some six years later, not a brick has been laid.

The Committee welcomes the fact that the four cancer units have been operational since October 1999, providing more than 50% of all day-patient chemotherapy treatment and specialist services for breast, lung and colorectal cancers. However, the lack of movement on the regional cancer centre is a critical issue that impacts on patients' treatment and care. It also affects the morale of the hard-pressed cancer care professionals.

At this point, I want to mention Prof Patrick Johnston and his team at Belfast City Hospital, and Prof Roy Spence, the senior cancer surgeon. I am sure that many people in Northern Ireland appreciate that we have some of the top cancer specialists in the world, particularly in Prof Johnston, who heads the team. He worked along with Dr Rick Klausner, director of the National Cancer

Institute (NCI) in Bethesda, Maryland, USA. That institute is the largest of its kind in the world.

I also remind Members of the Dublin-Belfast- Washington memorandum of understanding, signed in October 1999, concerning cancer research. The Committee and I recently received a letter from Prof Johnston about the research in which he and his team are engaged. He said that the cancer research effort at Queen's University, which includes work at Belfast City Hospital and the Royal Victoria Hospital, has achieved a very high score in the latest university research assessment exercise in one of the most difficult units of assessment — unit of assessment 1.

That assessment puts the cancer research programme at Queen's University at the top of the national and international research effort, and it recognises the pioneering achievements of the clinical and basic scientific staff within the centre, whose dedication and hard work on behalf of cancer patients is beginning to pay off. We recognise that we have world-class research, but today's report is about the delivery of cancer services.

The regional cancer centre is the key missing link to a modern, fully integrated, patient-centred cancer service for all people in Northern Ireland. It should be seen as a symbol of quality, and it should provide central leadership and direction to the cancer units and hospitals that deal with cancer patients.

The Committee was most concerned about the unacceptable delays in getting the new centre off the ground. The first report of the Regional Advisory Committee on Cancer anticipated that the new cancer facility would open in 2003. Given that it will take at least three years for the centre to be built, the completion date will be a long way off that originally envisaged.

The rapid increases in the estimated costs of the new centre are a cause for considerable concern. The figure has risen from £32 million in 1999 to the latest estimate of £57 million, which underlines the need to move rapidly on the project. The massive hike in costs has been attributed to substantial changes in the specifications to take account of clinical advances, new equipment and patient numbers.

The Committee accepts the importance of getting the design and shape of the centre, together with its equipment, right from the outset to ensure the optimum configuration. However, why is it taking so long to settle on a final plan? Thousands of people in Northern Ireland want an answer to that — not only patients and their families, but those who are working at the coalface of cancer services.

The Committee notes that a final business plan has now been approved. The latest information that I have says that the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety and the Department of Finance and Personnel have passed the previous business plan, which, I

believe, was issued in September 2001. I understand that the private finance initiative is now under way. The Minister will refer to that point later.

The Minister must tell the Assembly how quickly the centre will be built if the private finance initiative option is used, and at what final cost to the public purse. She must reassure the Assembly and the public that value for money will be a prime consideration of any funding route taken.

Given that once approval to proceed has been granted it will take some three years to construct and equip the centre, it is imperative that the necessary funds are urgently secured regardless of the option pursued. The Committee had a detailed discussion with the Minister on the potential of the Executive programme funds, in particular infrastructure funds, to assist in the building of the new centre, and supports her efforts to explore that. There is a compelling case for funding a flagship project that will provide all the people of Northern Ireland with a centre of excellence for years to come. The centre will also act as a magnet for expert staff and research funding, which is also important. I referred earlier to the top class research efforts already in place here.

The Campbell Report recognised that primary care has a crucial role to play in the delivery of high quality cancer care. More than 90% of cancer patients spend most of their time at home, and primary care teams meet most of their needs. Apart from GPs, the teams comprise such different professionals in cancer care as community and Macmillan nurses, and specialists in speech therapy, dietetics, occupational therapy and social care, all of whom play a pivotal role in a cancer patient's rehabilitation process. The Committee supports the development of the multidisciplinary-team approach to primary care so that good practices in cancer care can be disseminated across the health boards and trusts.

The Committee welcomes such schemes as the Northern Target initiative in the Northern Health Board, which involves closing down GP practices for one afternoon a month for the entire multidisciplinary team to meet away from the workplace to discuss such common issues as education, communication and guidelines.

GPs make a significant contribution to the delivery of cancer services as they are normally the first point of contact for cancer patients and their families. They can play a pivotal role in successful early detection, prompt referral, interface with secondary care and out-of-hours care. As many cancers can be successfully treated if detected in time, public awareness and knowledge of early symptoms are important. Therefore, it is vital that GPs be kept fully up to date with the latest developments, especially those that concern treatment and recognition of symptoms. The Committee was encouraged to learn that the Campbell commissioning project is developing guidelines for the symptoms of each cancer to help GPs decide whether to make urgent referrals.

The British Medical Association (NI) General Practitioners' Committee highlighted pressures on time and backlog of work as obstacles to improved cancer services, and pointed to the need for more GPs and nurses to speed up the process for referral and investigation. Given the pressures under which GPs operate, the Committee accepts the Campbell commissioning project's argument for GPs to have adequate time to see their patients.

The Committee commends the initiative by Macmillan Cancer Relief in providing a network of GP facilitators across the four health and social services boards' areas. They will act as advocates on behalf of the GPs in their areas, by highlighting concerns and by working with colleagues in hospital and community settings to resolve problems in the system and to effect innovative improvements in the delivery of cancer services. At this point, I draw attention to the officials from the Southern Health Board who met with us recently. They have adopted an initiative that includes pharmacists. It is to do with palliative care for people with cancer, and the aim is to ensure that such people who need drugs such as morphine at night time, through the night, and on Saturdays and Sundays can get them and will not be left uncared for.

The Committee learned that a major issue for GPs is their frustration with blockages in the referral system as a result of lengthy waiting lists for CAT or MRI scans.

The British Medical Association (NI) General Practitioners' Committee reports that the increasing specialisation of cancer consultants can make it difficult for GPs and their patients to identify the best referral pathway. Therefore, the Committee for Health, Social Services and Public Safety sees considerable merit in the argument for a simple electronic referral system in various sites in Northern Ireland complemented by a cancer registry of specialist services that lists the availability of multi-disciplinary cancer teams, in order to minimise delays. As early diagnosis is so important, there must be a robust system to monitor the implementation of referral guidelines.

There is considerable scope for improvement in the interface between primary and secondary care. In May 2000, a survey of GPs revealed a general perception that access, transport, information flow, the co-ordination of services provided to patients, the accessibility of consultant staff to GPs and the discharge/outpatient information that GPs are given had deteriorated in the preceding year.

Those views echo witnesses' evidence that their "cancer journey" can be chaotic, with delays in referral from the GP to the hospital, long waits for consultation at hospital, delays and confusion over tests, lost records and failure to transfer information to the GP. The apparent lack of a seamless, patient-centred cancer service is a matter of deep concern to the Committee. There must be effective two-way communication channels between primary care professionals and their secondary care colleagues. The Committee believes that there must be a change of

culture between the primary and secondary sectors from one of competition to one of collaboration, with a view to promoting the needs of cancer patients above all else.

Recently, officials at Antrim Area Hospital told the Committee that, following referral by a GP, it can take up to nine months for a patient to receive an endoscopy to diagnose cancer. If someone has a growth in his or her colon, imagine what can happen in nine months.

The Committee was dismayed to learn that the first details that GPs receive about cancer patients are frequently contained in a handwritten discharge letter given to them when they carry out a home visit. It would greatly benefit primary care practitioners if a minimum set of data relating to each patient were made available. To that end, the Committee warmly welcomes the initiative taken by the Campbell Commissioning Project in the development of patient-held records. That should help to improve the speed of communication between hospitals and doctors. It would also help to inform patients about the management of their treatment. The Committee recommends that the Department introduce that initiative across Northern Ireland as soon as possible.

Given that 90% of all cancer patients are looked after in the community, there is a need for a fully integrated out-of-hours service. Out-of-hours care is the single most important issue raised by GPs. The Committee is concerned that in many parts of Northern Ireland there is no cover after 5.00 pm. That is totally unacceptable, and the Department should ensure a fully integrated, equitable, out-of-hours service for cancer patients throughout Northern Ireland. Lessons can be learned from the model of excellence in the South and East Belfast Health and Social Services Trust, which offers 24-hour nursing care and a rapid response team.

Specialist and district nurses have a central role to play in the delivery of cancer services in the primary care setting. Meaningful investment in community nursing services would make a significant impact on cancer services provision in the primary care setting and would be an important step towards achieving a more equitable service.

The Committee trusts that the report's 41 recommendations will form part of a co-ordinated, inclusive approach to improving the quality of cancer services and outcomes for patients, and to eradicating inequities in the system. The recommendations recognise fully the need for cross-departmental collaboration and for close liaison between the statutory and voluntary sectors on strategic planning.

I look forward to today's debate, which will lend a timely platform to this extremely important health matter. The people of Northern Ireland deserve the best facilities possible. I commend the report to the House.

Madam Deputy Speaker: Before I call the next Member, I advise Members that, given that three hours have been allocated for the debate, they should limit their speeches to 10 minutes.

4.15 pm

Rev Robert Coulter: In bringing forward this report, the Committee realised the importance of cancer services in our community. When we found out that, as it says in the report, cancer will affect one in three of the population, we began to grasp the importance of the issue. When we consider that 6,500 people will be diagnosed with cancer in the near future, and that 3,500 people die from cancer here each year, we are immediately conscious that we are not dealing with some unimportant, short-term strategy. If we are to provide a service that will not only relieve the pain of cancer sufferers but also help their families, the report must be taken most seriously, not only by the Minister, the Department and the Assembly, but by everyone in our community.

The number of people who are diagnosed with cancer and the number of cancer deaths are only the beginning. Cancer casts a feeling of dread over everyone because there is a sense in which we all wonder whether we shall be the one in three to receive the death sentence. That is why we must inform the population that cancer need not be a death sentence. There are cures and effective ways to overcome cancer. We need not necessarily despair, and our families need not sink into a morass of hopelessness. By trusting and depending on the Health Service and its staff's expertise, we can have hope where before there was only despair. But — and this “but” is important — the waiting times and the number of people who are left without treatment for far too long are causing not only those who suffer, but the entire community, to lose confidence in the ability of the Health Service to address a situation that is of vital importance to one in three of the population and their families.

As we consider the report, we must address several issues. I compliment the Committee Chairperson on covering so much ground; indeed, he has covered so much that he has left very little for the rest of us to say.

I am amazed that the only guidance circular that the Department issues on waiting times for cancer treatment relates solely to breast cancer referrals. I ask the Minister to take the matter back to the Department; there are so many other forms of cancer. Without being facetious, that circular cuts out the male half of the population. Half of the population does not receive any guidance on waiting times for cancer treatment.

A short-term strategy must be devised to improve communication between acute hospitals and GPs. There is far too much isolation. The them-and-us mentality is much too prevalent in the Health Service. Services remain isolated from one another, and people are too often concerned with their own sections. We need a fully

integrated service, especially where cancer services are concerned, so that patients are looked after by the whole service — from the GPs, to acute hospital attention and subsequent community care.

We can deal with the situation in two ways — through short-term or long-term strategies. In the short term, decisions must be made immediately. Hospitals are crying out because of lack of beds, staff and capacity, and we must address those issues. Different sections must not only be brought together in a multidisciplinary team, but we must examine the financing of cancer services. There is no point in having a cancer centre that will be the best in the world in four or five years' time. Such a long-term strategy would be of no benefit to the many patients who are waiting for treatment.

As regards finance, the community is prepared to play its part. A team effort will be required to overcome financial problems. When the Department says that it does not have funds, we must consider other ways of raising money. Some years ago, we came up against funding problems for the cardiac unit at the Waveney hospital in Ballymena. We brought the community together, and a great deal of money was raised. I ask the Minister and the Department, if the community were to raise hundreds of thousands of pounds, would they be prepared to match the amount pound for pound? In that way, the entire community would become involved — people would be interested in what they were doing and they could see that something was being done.

Our party's slogan with regard to the delivery of health services is “Putting Patients First”. If the Department and the Health Service were to take that on board, a service could be delivered in which the whole community could have confidence.

I support the efforts of the Minister and the Department. I recognise that there have been shortfalls in investment, but immediate action must be taken on our cancer centre. We must have decisions, not more consultations. Let us move forward, and take our people with us, so that we can provide them with a Health Service in which they can have confidence.

Mr Berry: In 1996, Henrietta Campbell produced a report on cancer services called ‘Cancer Services — Investing for the Future’. That was a ground-breaking report; it was radical and pioneering, and one which has become the benchmark and framework for cancer service development in Northern Ireland.

The framework is that in its recommendations lies the goal of a proper cancer service. The benchmark is that we only have to compare what we have with what we should have.

In a sense, our report looks at both those aspects. Good points are clearly indicated, but sadly there are serious shortcomings that need to be addressed without

delay. Our cancer services are a story of fortitude in the face of discouragement and valour in the face of limitations. The minutes of evidence that we have published contain several strong indictments about the range of measures that are lacking simply because there is no proper strategy.

First, there is the missing link — the new cancer centre. The vision of the “hub and spokes” has not been achieved. The spokes are being developed thanks to the clinicians, the trusts and voluntary organisations, but there is no hub. The ministerial delay and inactivity is apparent to all, but especially to those who suffer. Instead of pursuit, authorisation and implementation, all we have are delays and excuses. The central recommendation of the Campbell Report has not even materialised after five years, and there is no excuse for that. The new cancer centre is not merely an aspiration, but the crucial element of our cancer services, and its ongoing absence is a disgrace. A commitment that is not actively pursued towards achievement is but a mockery. As the report states, it is symptomatic of much that is happening in the Health Service when it comes to spending money — namely there is a lack of clearly defined objectives and goals. However, here is one goal that can, with active pursuit, be achieved. As Mr Coulter said, the reality of more than 6,000 cancer cases a year, with 3,500 deaths, is sufficient to show the need for the new centre.

Secondly, there is piecemeal implementation. Progress has been made since 1996, and all progress is welcome. The report clearly acknowledges each and every step taken, and tribute must be paid to those directly involved in delivering cancer services. However, no proper timetable exists for implementing all the recommendations of the Campbell Report. The Campbell Commissioning Project said that we are around 50% down the road — that is disappointing and is not helped by the glaring absence of service development money specifically for cancer services in the Budget. How that was overlooked needs to be explained, and to be told that any extra money that may become available will be used for cancer services is hardly reassuring.

Our report makes it clear that each part of the framework must be developed in parallel, not in isolation. The Ulster Cancer Foundation stated in its submission that “much remains to be done.” We need a cancer plan, as Mr Gibson of Macmillan Cancer Relief pointed out when he said that

“Announcements about specific increases are to be welcomed. However, what is needed is the generic, medium-term ability to examine the entire scope of cancer services and to suggest improvements over three to five years.”

In other words, like the rest of the Health Service, it is plagued by a short-term approach and no long-term plan. We really need an independent audit of the resources provided and the services delivered. There are so many layers that it is all getting out of control.

Thirdly, there are serious trends. Although improvements have been made in particular areas such as the area of consultants, the Committee is concerned about what the Campbell Commissioning Project termed as the haemorrhaging of skilled staff from Northern Ireland. Given the time and investment in training, this is a significant matter.

Given the Department’s staffing plans, there is considerable concern as to whether these targets can be met and sustained in the long term. Without crucial commitments and clear objectives, what is currently a trend will, in time, become a major crisis.

4.30 pm

Another trend that causes concern is the increasing workload on GPs. Since 1996 their workload has increased to such a degree that they have less time to spend with patients, and because of that the detection of cancer may be seriously hampered. I trust that that will be addressed in the near future.

Our report also highlights the need to improve GPs’ ability to diagnose cancer in the first place. That is not helped by the increased workload, part of which is due to the mass of guidelines sent to them every week. Little wonder that Mr Quigley, the chief executive of Action Cancer, is concerned about the ability of the Health Service to hold on to GPs and good medical staff. Our expertise is at risk, because they are attracted to other places.

Dr Patterson from the General Practitioners’ Committee said that for GPs the biggest obstacle is coping with demand, which in turn is hampered by the backlog of work and the extra workload created by those who have difficulty getting treatment. Those delays have become familiar in our Health Service. We should read the submission by the General Practitioners’ Committee to realise GPs’ concerns.

The Committee Chairperson has regularly talked about a trend that must be radically reversed: the tendency to allow equipment to get out of date. There is evidence of piecemeal replacement and repair. It is incomprehensible that cancer patients are subjected to treatment with equipment that, in some cases, is a decade out of date. Up-to-date equipment is vital. At other times, patients have to wait while equipment is repaired. Given that any financial announcement about new equipment, while welcome, occurs a considerable time before the actual purchase, there should be a rolling programme of replacement for vital equipment. That is possible, given the millions that are wasted elsewhere.

There are also some general needs. The variation in delivery causes great concern. Patients may or may not receive treatment, depending on where they live. Many of the submissions, including those of the Ulster Cancer Foundation and Macmillan Cancer Relief, drew our attention to the variation in delivery experienced across

Northern Ireland, where services and treatment are available in some areas but not in others. The Department must give genuine consideration to that matter and ensure that such variations are removed, because it is a matter of severe concern.

Of equal importance is a directory of specialists involved in cancer services. This was recommended by the Campbell Commissioning Group, but so far it has not materialised. There have been promises, but no product. I urge every Member to read the report in order to get a full picture of the current situation in cancer services. The second volume of submissions, in particular, reveals the real problems that people who are actively involved in the delivery of cancer services face.

Finally, I join with the Members who have commended the Health Service staff who are working at the coalface on a daily basis, dealing with cancer patients. We salute these people, who are doing wonderful work, as well as the cancer organisations who work continually, not only with us, but most of all with cancer patients. I also commend the Committee Clerk and staff for their dedication and commitment. I trust that everybody will support this important motion.

Ms Ramsey: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I commend the Business Committee for allowing three hours for this debate. During recent health debates we have all complained that we have been involved in writing up reports and then an hour or an hour and a half has been allocated for debate, so maybe they are taking our complaints on board.

As a member of the Committee for Health, Social Services and Public Safety I support the motion and commend the report.

I want to take the opportunity to thank the Committee Clerks and the support staff for their help and support over the past few months. Some of them worked hard over the Christmas recess. We appreciate all that work in providing the Committee with the relevant information and documentation in order to finalise the report.

As several Members have said, the Committee received detailed written submissions and took oral evidence from several organisations and individuals with an interest in cancer and cancer services. I thank them for their efforts and their excellent presentations.

Nearly 10 months ago, the Committee agreed to investigate the position of cancer and cancer services and, where possible, make recommendations to the Minister that might improve services. From the report, the Committee has made 41 recommendations, which I hope the Minister will examine. I thank the Minister for her attendance at the debate. This is an issue for the Executive, and I raise it at nearly every debate. The Executive have stated time and again that health is a priority in the Programme for Government. If that is the case, the

Executive must provide proper long-term funding so that problems in the Health Service can be tackled and, more specifically, cancer services can be dealt with.

Our communities have one of the highest levels of deprivation. We also have one of the highest smoking rates as well as a poor diet. All those factors are associated with increased rates of cancer. As several Members have said, cancer will affect one in three of the population, and one in four will develop cancer before the age of 75. Mr Coulter pointed out that referrals to oncologists have risen from 3,400 in 1996 to 4,000 in 2000; approximately 6,300 people have been diagnosed with cancer, and 3,500 have died. Cancer is expected to be the number one killer in the next five years. That is the stark reality.

Measures such as screening, education and raising awareness must be increased and made more effective. I welcome the advertisements currently running on television, and I support the need for more of those advertisements. I also welcome the initiatives taken by groups such as Action Cancer and others in raising the awareness of some cancers. The levels of uptake of screening programmes in socially disadvantaged areas are poor. Education is a key factor in that. Last year, over 31% of women had not had a cervical screening test in the previous five years, and 28% of women aged 50 to 64 had not had breast screening in three years. That is again a stark statistic that we must try to tackle.

There is also a commitment to providing services in the medical and professional field. Prof Paddy Johnston pointed out to the Committee that in the five years since the Campbell Report was published there have been some significant improvements and patients are beginning to experience benefits in cancer services. He said that there is more specialist focus on cancer care, and multi-disciplinary teams are making valuable developments in most areas of cancer care. He also stated that there is better access to investigation and treatment for some cancers. Chemotherapy now has a consultant-led presence, and the quality and profile of cancer research has improved. That has led to the development of clinical trials research that allows patients access to new therapies as they develop.

In the report the Committee took on board not only the negative side of cancer services and what cancer patients are experiencing but also the positive work that is being conducted, both in the community sector and the voluntary sector. Action Cancer pointed out that services should seek to address the needs of patients from the start. Nobody would argue with that. There is concern with regard to referrals from GPs to hospitals, and back again.

Action Cancer said that services should take a holistic view of patients and should help to address their physical, emotional, social and spiritual needs. Nobody would argue against that. We cannot look at cancer in isolation; we need to take on board the social, emotional and

physical effects that it has on people. Action Cancer also said that each patient's needs differ and that services must be flexible to meet those needs. The Committee took both statements on board and made suitable recommendations. Evidence has shown that the transition from GP to hospital and back has not been smooth — and that alarmed the Committee.

Poor diet also causes death from cancer, and the Committee strongly advocates initiatives such as the five-a-day programme, which is designed to improve diet by increasing consumption of fruit and vegetables. I welcome and highlight that initiative taken by the Minister of Education and the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety. I appeal to them to ensure that the programmes are not only carried out, but are seen to be carried out where they are most needed.

Interested groups are carrying out positive, ongoing work. Like other Members, I thank them for their hard work, dedication and commitment. Without such individuals and the voluntary and community sectors, services could be worse off. We must appreciate their hard work.

The Chairperson referred to the cancer action plan earlier, which is an all-Ireland report on cancer launched recently by the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety and her counterpart in the 26 Counties. We must support that initiative. In a joint press release the Ministers said:

“This report is the result of a major collaborative effort between the two Registries North and South in partnership with the US National Cancer Institute. It is an excellent example of cooperation between expert organisations. It gives us strong pointers for future action to help prevent cancer, improve care and treatment services, and strengthen research arrangements on the island.”

That is the vision we were seeking when we were examining cancer services.

The Committee makes 41 recommendations. Some Members reading the report or the executive summary may feel that some recommendations seem quite simple and ask why they were not implemented already. Others might feel that some recommendations seem quite silly, and if we are talking about lack of services, why are we making such recommendations.

The issue that struck me was the up-to-date information that many patient advocate groups are asking for. They want information on waiting times for the treatment of different cancers to be presented in an easily understood format on the Department's web site and other public information facilities. That issue kept coming up. I was struck that people were being diagnosed with some form of cancer but were being left waiting for months without relevant information. People were wondering whether they would have the energy to beat their diagnosed cancer.

I acknowledge the commitment from the Minister and her announcement of additional money to cancer

services. However, the Health Service has been underfunded for years, and cancer services face extreme and complex problems. The Executive must accept that health has been underfunded. If health is a priority then the Executive should put their money where their mouth is.

Mr Foster: I felt duty bound to be involved in this very important debate. I hope that progress will be made. Cancer is a scourge.

4.45 pm

I wish to congratulate those who work so diligently in the Health Service to prevent this enemy of society. There are 8,700 new cancer patients a year and 3,800 deaths from cancer a year. Either sex has a one in three chance of developing cancer. To think of it in another way, of the 108 Members in the Assembly, 36 could be afflicted with cancer in their lifetime.

Cancer survival rates for the United Kingdom have been consistently poor and rank at the bottom of cancer survival rates in western Europe. We must improve access to high-level care, provide a patient-centred service, provide efficient and effective services to all and for all and provide services and facilities that are flexible and fulfil the requirements of the community.

A new case of cancer is diagnosed in Northern Ireland every 80 minutes. It is a shocking and a frightening thought. On 3 October 1999 a tripartite agreement was signed in Parliament Buildings between the USA, the Republic of Ireland and Northern Ireland to initiate a centre of excellence in Northern Ireland. It was to lead Europe in cancer services. I was pleased to be part of that as the UUP health spokesman, and I was accompanied by Dr Joe Hendron.

I would also like to pay tribute to the hard work of Prof Paddy Johnston and Prof Roy Spence. Dr Henrietta Campbell, the Chief Medical Officer, was also very supportive. There was a memorandum of understanding, of which I have a copy. What has happened to it? Where has it gone? Is it not time that we saw some movement to fulfil that magnanimous intent?

There are other needs to be fulfilled. I accept, having been in the Executive, that it is always easier to be an advocate than a doer. However, there is a real and presently unfulfilled need. The regional cancer centre is the missing link to a fully integrated cancer service for all the people of Northern Ireland.

We require more oncologists to service the need in the outpatient clinics of our major hospitals. At one time, we needed 30 oncologists to cater for our needs; today we have 10·5. The number of patients has increased by 54·4% in the past four years, while the number of oncologists has increased by 23·5%. That is not a good record.

Coming from a country area as I do, I find it a shame that people in rural areas are less likely to beat cancer.

They are up to four times more likely to die before the disease is diagnosed. Weak and elderly patients have to endure very long journeys. Surely everyone is entitled to equality of treatment? I come from Enniskillen, which is very isolated. To reduce services in that part of the world would be lacking in compassion and totally unacceptable.

The spend in Northern Ireland is approximately £15 million a year. We need about £25 million a year in order to cope. New money is essential. It is the duty of Government to invest in the vital quest to arrest the scourge of cancer, because there is no wealth but health, and hence, life.

Mr Shannon: I support the report. Ilka thrird bodie in the Unitit Kingrik taks sum kin cancer — a fair scunnersum stateistic. Oot the 108 LMFs here theday, 36 wul maist lyke tak the cancer for sum pairt o thair lyfes. That feigur's a quare gunk, but whit begets us mair is that monie o thaim waitin on treatment could hae sae lang as nyne month ti byde, on ower thae months the cancer could get that ill the wad be nocht could be duin for it. We cannae hauld wi sicna seituation, an we maun luik at it nou. It is aw weill an guid allouin that our Halth Service is crummlin doun around our lugs and that we'r needin ti dae sumthin anent it, but fowk as coud mend an gae on ti hae fu an blyth lyfes is leiterallie diein, thai'r efter bydin that lang. A'm o the opeinion the recommends wul hae fowk waitin ower lang on trysts wi specialists, but gif this pairt o't is juist a preliminary bydin tyme wi the inlat for lowdenin the tyme tint on waitin leits in the twa-thrie yeir cumin, A'm for uphauldin it an grie it soud be putten forrit.

One in three people in Britain are diagnosed with cancer. That is a scary statistic. Out of 108 Members, 36 will be diagnosed with cancer at some stage in their lives. The figure is astounding, but what is more astounding is that many of those people have to wait for up to nine months for treatment. During those months the cancer can become terminal and, perhaps, untreatable. This is an untenable situation, and it must be addressed immediately. It is all very well to say that the Health Service is crumbling around us and we need to do something about it, but people who could be cured and go on to lead full and happy lives are dying while waiting for treatment.

The waiting time recommendations for appointments to meet with specialists are still too long. If this is just a preliminary waiting time with the prospect of reducing waiting lists in the next couple of years, I will be in support of it, and I will agree that it should be recommended. My constituency of Strangford, along with the rest of the Antrim coast, has a high frequency of cancer. I agree with the implementation of a comprehensive regional cancer plan. That would enable each region in Northern Ireland to address particular needs such as bowel cancer and children's cancers. It is imperative, however, that the Minister and the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety listen to those people

who work with cancer patients. They must listen to patients to gain an extensive understanding of the problems that they face when they are trying to fight this debilitating and exhausting disease. We must give every patient the full opportunity to survive cancer, as opposed to living with it.

As a matter of extreme urgency the communications system between hospitals must be not only instigated, but safeguarded. General practitioners, consultants, Macmillan nurses, hospices and laboratories must be connected to a central network that allows patients' records to be updated immediately, to prevent the duplication of tests and, in some cases, of drugs prescribed. Nothing can be more disheartening than having to describe one's ailment over and over again to uniformed personnel simply to gain some relief from the constant pain and discomfort. We must remove some of the lengthy and frustrating red tape for the 8,500 people who are diagnosed with cancer every year and who have a real battle to fight.

Those frustrations come across to the nurses, doctors and patients as stress, creating a working environment that is unhelpful to the healing process. The communication system will be a useful tool for examining areas, such as Strangford, which have concentrations of certain cancers. The cause can then be investigated in the light of those findings.

Ensuring that only the medical staff is privy to information is difficult. Many members of the security forces have been diagnosed with cancer. Members of the Special Branch allege a link between 10 deaths from cancer and the radios that they use while on duty. Their families would not like it if those patient details got into the wrong hands. If there is a way of safeguarding the information system from subversive intrusion, I will fully support its immediate implementation.

It is often through cancer charities that patients find the most helpful, patient replies to the never-ending questions about their condition. One patient told me that he was given answers from the hospice nurse only because members of hospital staff were so rushed off their feet that they came to regard his constant questioning of his treatment and his bodily changes as a nuisance or a psychological problem. He told me that he was not an angry young man; he simply wanted to know what to expect so that he could prepare himself for the next stages of the disease.

Only after visiting the hospice nurse, and sitting with him for over two hours, over several cups of coffee, did he get the answers to his questions — the answers that he had been looking for. Hospice nurses and Macmillan nurses should be drafted into the equation at a much earlier phase, and they should be accessible to the patients — located on the wards instead of being restricted to their own buildings. After all, the word "cancer" strikes fear into the hearts of any man or woman, be they as strong as Hercules or as intelligent as Prof Stephen Hawking.

Smoking, as the main cause of cancer, should be actively discouraged. We need to see more advertisements such as the recent one that featured the aorta of a 32-year-old smoker. If you have seen that television advert you will have been impressed. However, if you like mayonnaise, you may never eat it again. It caught my attention, but one such advert is not enough. We need more hard-hitting advertisements. I agree with the Committee's recommendation that there should be a Province-wide ban on cigarette advertising. That needs to happen soon. Nearly every advertising hoarding in Ards has a cigarette advertisement at one point in the year, and some of those are near schools. Perhaps the national scheme, which recognises those who have given up smoking or rewards those who have given up, could encourage more smokers to give up. However, do they have the right incentive?

Something needs to be done, as I have noticed that smoking has become glamorous again, probably due to the film industry and television. It is certainly rubbing off on our children. There are figures to suggest that 25,000 teenagers will die from smoking-related diseases in middle age, and that gives a perspective of what could happen. Yesterday I met with teenagers from Donaghadee High School who are investigating what we, as MLAs, are proactively doing in the Assembly to combat smoking. It would be fantastic for them to see that the Assembly is making moves to do something specific, targeted and focused.

At this stage I want to mark up the issue — and I have asked the Minister a question about it — of teenagers and their rehabilitation in hospital. Teenagers need to have their own rehabilitation unit when they are having treatment, rather than being alongside smaller children. Teenagers are growing up; they need somewhere for themselves, and I hope that we can get the answers that we need on that.

Research shows that cancer can be genetic, but are there outside influences that can predetermine which person out of three will get cancer? I want to see schemes set up whereby family members of those with cancer are screened, so that we can prevent cancer starting, and subsequently, painful and radical treatment being used. It should be the Government that starts those schemes and not the family members. In the United States of America, a news anchorwoman started a campaign for the relatives of victims of bowel cancer. She encouraged them to contact the cancer centres in their towns that were organising countrywide research into the disease from which her husband had died the year before. It was a personal initiative, yet it started a movement. That one brave woman wanted to help others.

It is the responsibility of the Government and the Department of Health in the Province to help the people, whom they are supposed to represent, by organising that sort of scheme. It can be done, and it should be con-

sidered. It would provide families with education about the disease, such as symptoms, eating habits that can combat cancer and other invaluable information. Cancer — the scourge of modern society — needs to be addressed. I commend the report, and I hope that the Minister and her Department can respond in a positive manner.

Mr J Kelly: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I too welcome the report. Prof Paddy Johnston has played a Herculean role in the fight against cancer. In speaking about the report 'Cancer Services — Invest Now', he said to society here:

"No longer accept a situation where a set of diseases that affects one in three of our population and results in the death of one in four of our people is not adequately resourced and tackled in order to bring our survivor figures for cancer up to those seen in the best European countries, such as Switzerland and Holland."

At the other end of the spectrum, a cancer patient said:

"To have one's mortality threatened in such a basic way can be life-changing and very frightening. The very least that we can expect from a cancer service is that it not only meets the physical needs of the patient but also the emotional needs of both the patient and their families."

Cancer is a frightening disease, and we have all been affected by it in some way, through our families or our extended families. It is frightening to think that approximately 8,000 new cases of cancer occur each year in this part of Ireland, mainly among the elderly.

5.00 pm

The key to the problem facing not just our cancer services but the entire Health Service is contained in the first paragraph on resources in the executive summary of the Committee's report.

"If we had matched the increases in England our health and social services would have gained an extra £83 million in 2001/02, £138 million in 2002/03 and £214 million in 2003/04."

That is an example of the ground that we need to make up — a total of £435 million.

Cancer will affect one in three people, and the impact is massive. The emotional cost of cancer, the stress and the need for real, extra care cannot be underestimated. I welcome the progress made in bringing resources closer to the patients. We need a vision for health, and it must be patient-centred. We need diagnosis and review facilities close at hand, and I welcome the Minister's response to the Campbell Report. The four cancer units are now providing 50% of all-day patient chemotherapy, and that is the way to go.

I welcome the provision of more MRI scanners and in the interim the upgrading of equipment at Belvoir Park. However, that is not a long-term solution. The original plan for the regional cancer centre would have provided a facility with a certain level of services, but the £57 million plan will create a world-beater — a facility of international standard, and the international links fostered and deepened will ensure that we deliver a world-

class service. That must be our vision, and people deserve nothing less. I recognise the urgent need to start building the regional cancer centre, but I am not convinced that private finance initiative (PFI) is the best route, either in cost or speed.

We have mentioned health and health promotion, and we need to consider the tobacco-smoking statistics and the number of young people whose health and lives are endangered from smoking. Smoking kills people — 3,000 people die prematurely because of smoking in this part of Ireland each year, with an annual in-patient care cost of £22 million. Smoking accounts for 30% of all cancers and 80% of lung cancers.

I welcome the Minister's and the Department's efforts to bring about a preventive process in the fight against cancer. It is important that we look not just at the statistics but at young women especially coming out of school. The first thing they do is light a cigarette. How to combat that and bring the message home that they are shortening their lives is of concern to us all. They are shortening lives that could play an important part in programmes and schemes for good health and in the future of this part of Ireland.

I congratulate the Minister on her Health Promotion Agency. We need more public health and prevention of illness campaigns. They should be central to our vision for health. I am pleased that the Executive last week endorsed the Investing for Health strategy.

I will return to the matter of resources. More people must be trained, and the Minister of the Department for Employment and Learning will support and facilitate that aim.

We must ask why there are not enough consultants and nurses. The origins of that problem extend back for 10 or 15 years. We must make changes to the training process, especially in specialist areas. I do not need to repeat — or perhaps I do — that the Health Service needs more money. I am sure that the Minister of Finance and Personnel will support this.

We must challenge the unfair Barnett formula, but not just for talk's sake. Either there is a case for challenging how the block grant is worked out, or there is not. We must challenge the British Exchequer, and the Executive, the First Minister, the Deputy First Minister, the Finance Minister and the Health Minister should all be engaged in that process. Most importantly, every party in the Executive, and every Department, must accept hard choices, because there will be hard choices in the battle against cancer.

As other Members have said, we must not forget those people who worked so hard to bring the report to the Assembly. It has been a massive piece of work for many people in the Committee, and we must thank all the people and organisations who made submissions.

All those people expressed the same concerns about the underfunding of the Health Service and the way in which the whole foundation of cancer treatment is being run down, with staff having to use outdated machinery that breaks down. That is because we did not have the sort of funding required to give the Health Service the facilities to treat cancer patients.

I want to mention a few points from the executive summary of the report. The Committee recommends that:

"The Department should encourage cancer specialists to work collaboratively to develop effective guidelines that will help GPs and other primary care professionals to recognise the symptoms of cancer."

That is where the primary care issue is coming into focus, because we are told that early detection of cancer is more than half the battle.

I want to quote also the recommendations that:

"A multi-disciplinary team approach should be developed and good practices in cancer care disseminated across HSS Boards and Trusts."

and

"The Department should urgently complete its analysis of staffing needs and produce a detailed regional workforce plan, underpinned by education and training for cancer staff".

Education and training programmes play a vital role in the fight against cancer.

I thank again those who came to the Committee to give evidence and express the professional opinions that are contained in the report and its recommendations. Go raibh maith agat.

Mrs I Robinson: As a member of the Health Committee, I support the motion. I thank all the contributors who came from a wide range of interested groups concerned with cancer provision to give evidence and detailed accounts of their dealings with cancer services in Northern Ireland. It would be impossible to list them all, but they provided the Committee with a broad understanding of the entire cancer service provision in Northern Ireland. In particular, I commend Roy Spence and Patrick Johnston of Belfast City Hospital for their unstinting work in the cancer field. I thank the Committee Clerk for providing members with full briefings for each meeting of the Committee and for compiling the report. I also thank our Chairperson, Dr Hendron, for his detailed presentation, which left little more to be said.

The issue of cancer will, undoubtedly, touch every household in this country at some time. Cancer is set to become the biggest killer in Northern Ireland in the next few years. At current rates of incidence in the UK as a whole, one person in three will be afflicted before their seventy-fifth birthday.

In the UK, almost 250,000 new cancers are diagnosed every year, and there are over 140,000 deaths from the disease. In Northern Ireland, which is identified as

having high levels of poverty and social deprivation and as lacking in health investment, it is unacceptable that cancer services do not enjoy a pro rata ring-fenced spending increase in line with the rest of the UK.

With that additional money, Northern Ireland's cancer services could support a strategic plan for improved staffing levels, facilities, equipment, drugs and information systems. Additional funding will be extremely difficult to acquire for Northern Ireland, such is the unfair and disproportionate level of funding it receives. For a country that is at the upper end of the socio-economic deprivation league compared with the rest of the UK, Northern Ireland has demonstrably lower funding allocations for health services.

During the 1990s, when expenditure on health in Northern Ireland rose by 35% in real terms, the rise in England was 57%. Although the contrast in percentage is evident, the disparity becomes more obvious when the differential with England is applied pro rata to Northern Ireland's health budget. Had Northern Ireland matched the increases for England, health and personal social services would have gained an extra £83 million this year, £138 million for 2002-03 and £214 million for 2003-04. Several Colleagues referred to those figures earlier. However, I believe that it is important to emphasise those amazing figures. I would like someone to tell me that those figures are fair and reasonable. The people of Northern Ireland are treated in a second-class fashion in relation to the proper and proportionate allocation of health funding.

The Committee for Health, Social Services and Public Safety undertook the inquiry into cancer services for three reasons. First, there was consensus on the need for a strong focus on the disease that is set to become our biggest killer. Secondly, Committee members were aware of the public's concern with regard to the equality of, and access to, cancer treatment across Northern Ireland. Thirdly, an inquiry would provide the opportunity to review what progress, if any, had been made in Northern Ireland since the Campbell Report in 1996.

The Committee's investigative remit included, at its core, patients' needs, provision of services, staffing levels of doctors, nurses and ancillary staff, variations in services for different cancers and the structure of the cancer centre and the cancer units. As Members can see, the Committee carried out a full investigation. It found that, although some progress has been made, more work and, more importantly, more money is required.

Not all of the 41 recommendations in the report will cost more money. Many of the recommendations concern good practice and should already be receiving attention from the Department. However, many other recommendations will need extra cash to achieve a successful outcome. In order to raise the provision of cancer services in Northern Ireland, the inevitable requirement is funding. The ambitious National Health Service cancer

plan for England and Wales, which aims to deliver the fastest-improving cancer services in Europe over the next five years, is something that we should also aim for. The plan will receive considerable additional resources: some £280 million in 2001-02, £407 million in 2002-03 and £570 million in 2003-04. What does Northern Ireland receive in comparison?

I want to draw Members' attention to a report in the 'Daily Express', which I was reading this morning on my way from London. It states:

"Millions of women could soon undergo genetic screening to discover if they are at risk from breast cancer, after a breakthrough by scientists. Their revelations today, that a combination of dozens of genes cause the disease, is expected to revolutionise Britain's approach to breast cancer within five years. The team at Cambridge University discovered that more than half of all breast cancer cases are likely to occur in a small group of women at high genetic risk. Screening those women, who make up just 12% of the population, or giving them preventative drugs, could save many of the 13,000 breast cancer victims each year."

I am not for one moment saying that this is the route that we should take, but it is an interesting approach. The newspaper report goes on to say that, rather than spending lots of money on a "one-size-fits-all" breast screening programme that examines some women too often and others not enough, screening could be planned according to a woman's risk. For women with a very high risk of getting the disease, drugs such as tamoxifen may be useful preventative agents.

5.15 pm

Last night, experts predicted that, within five years, it would be possible to provide a national genetic screening programme. If we are to make strides towards a breakthrough in the treatment of breast cancer, it is important for the money to be in place to bring those benefits to women diagnosed with the disease.

In relation to cancers caused by smoking, a newspaper this morning stated that America is now banning the sale of cigarettes to people under the age of 21. I believe that the previous age was 18, but it has now been raised to 21. America leads the world in the banning of smoking in public places. It also has stringent laws deterring young people from being caught in the trap of beginning smoking. Can something akin to that not be pursued in Northern Ireland? Why are we always lagging behind? Think of the money that the National Health Service would save in treatment, and of the number of man-hours that would be saved in the workplace.

The Executive's Programme for Government sets out their aims to improve the quality of health treatment and care for the people of Northern Ireland. How will that be done without additional funding? Northern Ireland's cancer services are not on a par with those in the rest of the United Kingdom. It is vital that substantial investment in cancer services be achieved if we are to receive

the quality and level of care that should be expected in a modern, patient-centred Health Service.

It is important that this report follows on from the initiative first begun by the Calman Hyne Report in 1995, and by the Campbell Report in 1996, which has helped to increase the provision of cancer services in Northern Ireland. I hope that the Committee's report will not be wasted or ignored but will, in fact, spur us all on to get the proper funding that cancer services require. There is no doubt — statistics clearly back up the argument — that we are unfairly treated in Northern Ireland. I urge Members to support the report and to join together to demand extra funding for this service, which desperately requires our immediate attention.

The Deputy Chairperson of the Committee for Health, Social Services and Public Safety (Mr Gallagher): In previous discussions in the Chamber on the Health Service, I have said that the most important people are the users of the service. On this occasion, I am sure that everybody agrees that the direct needs of those for whom the cancer service exists — the patients — must be uppermost in our minds.

Time and again, in submissions to the Committee, individuals strongly expressed their desire for the development of a patient-centred cancer service, with the three-fold purpose of early diagnosis, prompt referral and early consultation. On early diagnosis, much greater emphasis must be placed on heightening public awareness about the symptoms of cancer. Information on the symptoms must be presented in an easily understood format. Urgent diagnosis will lead to patients being admitted to hospital for immediate treatment or being placed on a waiting list for non-urgent treatment. Screening is a vital tool in the early detection of the disease and contributes to improved survival rates.

The breast screening programme was mentioned. It has contributed to the best survival rates in the UK. However, we must do more, especially in educating the public and in targeting the uptake of screening programmes among the poorer people in the population, because it is there that uptakes are well below average and cancer rates are at their highest.

There is scope for the Health Promotion Agency, together with the health action zones and primary care professionals, to promote greater public awareness in the areas of highest deprivation.

With regard to referrals, the Campbell Report indicated an expectation of a two-week deadline between GP referral and a patient's being seen by a consultant. However, with the exception of breast cancer referrals, waiting times are longer. The Eastern Health and Social Services Council reported that patients wait six to seven weeks for radiotherapy.

In the matter of early consultation to improve waiting times, Northern Ireland must learn from such initiatives in GB as the Cancer Services Collaborative to maximise the benefits of multidisciplinary teamwork and redesign services from the patient's perspective.

Progress towards a new target of one month from diagnosis to treatment will require significant investment in equipment and in staff. On the community care side, more patients are treated as day patients and cared for at home. Although that is good, it places more pressure on that service. More skilled staff are needed, together with more domiciliary care packages. In some submissions to the Committee there was evidence that the number of referrals was growing every month. I ask the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to ensure that the necessary funding is in place to provide support for the increasing demand on the community care service.

Many patients live not only long distances from the cancer centre but also long distances from cancer units. There must be a strong focus on the delivery of services at local hospitals to cut down on transport. The new cancer units are a welcome development and have brought 50% of chemotherapy treatment closer to the patients. The Committee supports, for example, the idea of a local nurse practitioner's carrying out reviews at local hospital clinics. The Committee also welcomed the improvement of primary care facilities to support taking blood samples nearer the patient's home and sending the results electronically to the regional cancer centre as an example of overcoming the problem of distance.

With regard to patient involvement, the poor level of communication at all levels was cited as a concern by patients, especially when it came to the breaking of bad news. Patients valued the personal touch in those circumstances. The point was made repeatedly that patients want to be treated sensitively and as people. Members might think that that goes without saying, but what the Committee heard indicates that improvements could be made in that area.

I refer now to a regional workforce plan. Effective investigation and treatment of cancer requires the combined services of specialist doctors, nurses and others, and I support the tributes and complimentary remarks on the work of volunteers for the service. To meet the growing demand for cancer services, the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety must work alongside the boards, the trusts and the voluntary sector to bring about a detailed workforce plan for the recruitment and retention of the expanded range of staff, to include surgeons, GPs, nurses, scientists, therapists, technicians and administrative staff.

Steps must be taken to examine the pay, flexible working hours and structured career progression of cancer staff, particularly in areas with labour market shortages. The Committee agrees that planning for such

a complex operation must be detailed and, therefore, will take time and involve additional resources.

Progress towards an expansion of patient-centred services for Northern Ireland must be supported by the implementation of a realistic regional cancer plan with clear leadership, targets, milestones and effective auditing mechanisms. We need a comprehensive strategy similar to the NHS cancer plan for England.

Prevention has been mentioned. Smoking accounts for 30% of all cancers and 80% of lung cancers. There is scope for the Health Promotion Agency to work with others. Combined efforts must be made to increase public awareness of the dangers of smoking, particularly among young people. The Health Promotion Agency's initiative should be given appropriate financial support.

The Committee received an interesting submission from Dr Anna Gavin of the Northern Ireland Cancer Registry. The registry collects and analyses information on all people who are diagnosed with cancer. As well as issuing a report for Northern Ireland, the registry contributes to the publication of an all-Ireland statistical report on cancer. Members will understand that that information is useful and important in the battle against cancer. However, data protection issues and the concerns of the General Medical Council mean that doctors are cautious about releasing information about their patients. That reluctance leads to an incomplete picture of cancer patients, which places limitations on research, for example. It is an issue that must be addressed, and while the protection of that data is important, the concerns about cancer should outweigh the risks that I have outlined.

To put patients first, we should reassure them about the confidentiality of their records. The Department must act to overcome the information gap. The Committee believes that the Department should either make cancer a notifiable disease or refer to section 60 of the Health and Social Care Act 2001 for Great Britain, which would resolve the issue.

I thank all who made submissions. I especially thank the Committee staff. The preparation of the report created a demanding workload, and they responded with energy and enthusiasm.

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety (Ms de Brún): Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Déanaim comhghairdeachas leis an Dr Hendron agus lena Choiste as a dtuarascáil thábhachtach dhea-dheartha ar sheirbhísí ailse. Tá áthas orm go bhfuil deis luath ag an Tionól an tuarascáil a phlé; tuarascáil ar ábhar atá an-tábhachtach ag ár bpobal.

Beidh mé ag féachaint go cúramach ar an 41 mholadh sa tuarascáil, chomh maith leis na moltaí a luaigh Comhaltaí sa díospóireacht inniu. Tá obair thábhachtach ar bun cheana féin ag forbairt seirbhísí ailse, agus tagróidh

mé di sin níos déanaí. Déanfaidh mé trácht achomair fosta ar chuid de phríomh-mholtaí na tuarascála.

B'fhéidir go mbeadh sé ina chuidiú ag Comhaltaí dá ndéarfainn cúpla focal ginearálta faoinár seirbhísí ailse. Aithníonn tuarascáil an Choiste gur cuireadh feabhas nach beag le heagraíocht ár gcuid seirbhísí ailse ó foilsíodh Tuarascáil Campbell i 1996.

Bhí feabhsúcháin suntasacha ann. Mar shampla, forbraíodh seirbhísí áitiúla oinceolaíochta sna haonaid ailse, agus soláthraítear breis agus 50% de cheimiteiripe othar lae taobh amuigh den aonad ailse i mBéal Feirste. Ceapadh comhairligh agus oiliúnaithe oinceolaíochta agus altra sa lárionad ailse agus sna haonaid ailse; fágann sin go bhfuil thart ar 500 ball foirne gnóthach ag cur seirbhísí radaiteiripe agus ceimiteiripe ar fáil do othair ailse aosacha. Rinneadh cur chun cinn suntasach ag bunú foirne ildisciplíneacha agus ag oiliúint foirne. Tháinig méadú faoi thrí ar líon na n-oiliúnaithe san oinceolaíocht mhíochaine sna cúig bliana seo chuaigh thart; tháinig méadú ar an líon oiliúnaithe sa mhíochaine cúraim mhaolaithigh fosta. Tháinig borradh suntasach fosta i líon na n-oiliúnaithe atá ag gabháil don raideolaíocht, don histeapaiteolaíocht agus don phaitelaíocht.

5.30 pm

I congratulate Dr Hendron and the Committee on producing an important and well-crafted report on cancer services. I am delighted that the Assembly has had such an early opportunity to debate the report, which covers a subject that is of crucial interest and relevance to the community. I wish to consider carefully the report's 41 recommendations and the many points that Members raised in the debate. Significant work is already under way in developing cancer services, and I shall speak about that later. I shall also touch briefly on several of the report's main recommendations.

It may be helpful if I begin with some general remarks about our cancer services. The Committee's report recognises the very positive achievements that have been made in the organisation of our cancer services since the publication of the Campbell Report in 1996. Significant improvements have been made. Local oncology services have been developed at the cancer units, and over 50% of day-patient chemotherapy is now provided outside the cancer centre in Belfast. That is important because chemotherapy can be provided closer to people's homes, involving less travel and reducing stress for patients who are very ill.

Significant progress has been achieved by the establishment of the multidisciplinary cancer teams and by staff training. Additional consultant oncologists, specialist trainees and nurses, along with support staff, have been appointed to the cancer centre and units. That brings the total number of staff who are involved in the provision of radiotherapy and chemotherapy services to adult cancer patients to about 500.

It is important to plan for the future, as John Kelly and Tommy Gallagher said. In that respect, the number of trainees in medical oncology has trebled in the past five years, as has the number in palliative care medicine. In addition there have been significant increases in the numbers of trainee radiologists, histopathologists and pathologists. The Department has established international links with the National Cancer Institute (NCI) in the United States, and the Department of Health and Children in Dublin, to create a cancer consortium, which was mentioned by the Chairperson of the Committee, by Sam Foster and others. As they said, these arrangements afford world-class links to our research community. The enthusiastic involvement of the NCI is, in part, a response to the quality of the research that is being carried out here.

The cancer consortium, which links the health and research communities, North and South, with the NCI in the US, is an outstanding practical example of co-operation. Through the consortium, the research and development office has already secured two jointly funded, three-year epidemiology fellowships, which are linked to the Belfast and the Southern cancer registries. The close co-operation and collaboration registries will, for the first time, make data available on the incidence of cancer throughout the island of Ireland. The consortium is also fostering a scholar exchange programme among the three partners, as well as a major clinical trials initiative. The latter will enable cancer patients throughout the island of Ireland to participate in clinical trials.

We will also take part in international conferences. One such conference will take place at the Royal Victoria Hospital in October 2002. We will oversee the establishment of the Telesynergy network, which can facilitate exchanges of data and images between the National Cancer Institute in the USA and ourselves. The institute is anxious to improve palliative care arrangements in the USA, and are looking at our palliative care arrangements as a model.

I am pleased that the Committee has acknowledged the improvements that have been made in areas such as the development of cancer units, the innovative work in palliative care services and the improvement of chemotherapy treatment.

Bob Coulter, Sue Ramsey and the Committee Chairperson also made the important point that many more patients are now being referred for cancer treatment. Twenty per cent more patients are receiving chemotherapy now, by comparison to four years ago, while radiotherapy treatments have increased by 14% in the last year alone. Although the growth in demand is evident, cancer services staff receive large numbers of patients for diagnosis, treatment and review.

I echo Members' acknowledgement of the debt of thanks that we owe to the staff working in that crucial area. Their hard work, commitment and dedication under-

pins the developments in that area and ensures the continued development and improvement of our cancer services.

Since the publication of the Campbell Report, cancer-related specialities have been given priority for increased trainee numbers. The number of trainees working in the medical oncology field has trebled in the past five years, as has the number of trainees working in palliative care medicine. There have also been significant increases in training numbers for radiologists, histopathologists, and haematologists. The Department's development of workforce planning is proceeding as a matter of urgency, and I am committed to putting in place the steps necessary to ensure that we train, recruit and maintain the base of specialist staff necessary to provide modern cancer services.

Although substantial progress has been made, much remains to be done. In particular, I appreciate the Committee's concerns about the speed of progress and the building of the new cancer centre. There has been no undue delay in advancing that vital development. I inherited a planned investment of some £32 million and a PFI process in train.

If time allowed, I could go through the steps taken by former Ministers and others in the service in the six years since the Campbell Report was published. However, I shall highlight only one issue. Last year, the trust and clinicians involved made the case that we needed a state-of-the-art facility, incorporating new and emerging technology, and building on advances in patient care and treatment. They stressed that the cancer centre must be designed and equipped to serve the community well into the next century, therefore calling into question the planned investment level of £32 million.

Thus, I had a decision to make, and I have made that decision. I decided not to proceed simply on the basis of what had already been there, but I agreed that a revised business case should be produced to achieve the vision of a modern, patient-friendly centre. That work, which has drawn on expert advice and the latest planning guidelines available, has resulted in a substantial remodelling of the centre. The business case for the new centre has been improved and now stands at £57 million, and I am considering urgently the financing of the new facility. I will be seeking funding for this major building project from the next tranche of Executive programme funds and appreciate the support that the Committee has offered me in securing that funding.

The Chairperson of the Committee for Health, Social Services and Public Safety quoted Patrick Johnson in his opening remarks. I will quote from a recent press release issued on behalf of Belfast City Hospital Trust in which that internationally acclaimed professor of oncology, based at Queen's University and Belfast City

Hospital, confirmed what has been said about recent developments in the cancer centre.

"It is also important that the necessary time has been taken to get our vision for the new Cancer Centre right. The concept of cancer centres and what they should contain has been evolving rapidly in recent years. The original proposals have now been expanded to ensure that the new Cancer Centre is sized not only for current demands but to meet future demands, technological advances and changes in treatment regimes. There has been enormous development of our understanding in each of these areas during the past few years."

In his opening comments, the Chairperson said that value for money is a primary consideration, so he will understand why I have to look carefully at any rise from £32 million to £57 million in the financing of such a centre and ask my officials to do the same. I am delighted that my Department and the Department of Finance and Personnel have approved the business case.

Another important development is the forthcoming provision of MRI scanners for each cancer unit. These new scanners, along with the installation of an MRI scanner at the City Hospital and a replacement MRI scanner for the Royal Group of Hospitals, will make a key contribution to cancer care and will effectively reduce waiting lists. Meanwhile, I am acutely aware of the importance of maintaining current services, particularly at Belvoir Park Hospital. As the Committee's report recognises, the equipment there is ageing, and when it breaks down, it can disrupt patient care. I want to ensure that safe and effective services are available at Belvoir Park, and I will take any steps that are necessary to achieve that. In that context, I am glad that my Department has been able to secure funding to install two new linear accelerators at Belvoir Park, and these will be operational by June next year.

In addition, I have approved a list of urgent remedial repair work and some £550,000 to fund immediate repairs to the building infrastructure and equipment to improve the current services. I am conscious of the increasing pressure on services at Belvoir Park, and my officials are liaising with boards and trusts to see what additional steps can be taken to enhance services at the hospital pending the installation of the two new linear accelerators. I assure Members that none of this work detracts from the ongoing planning or timing of the new cancer centre.

The Committee's report recognises that cancer treatment and care is a resource- and cost-intensive service. As all Members said, funding is essential to ensure that continuing developments can be made to our cancer services, and, since I took office, I have provided £11 million of additional revenue for that. On top of the additional resources provided in 1999-2000, we are now investing £18 million more per annum in cancer services than in 1998-99. This is a significant investment, which I plan to supplement to a modest extent in 2002-03.

The Chairperson, Mrs Robinson and others pointed out that the Committee also highlighted the serious underfunding of our health and social services in recent years by comparison with the funding for those in England. Costs here are inescapably driven by developments in England. Just think of the pay review body's recommendations, drug costs, clinical and other professional standards. The great bulk of my budget is effectively pre-empted by costs determined in England.

Mr Shannon, Mrs Robinson and Mr Gallagher also referred to the need for a regional cancer plan and to the NHS cancer plan. The Campbell Report provides the core of such a plan for the development of cancer services here. It is further underpinned by our wider public health strategy 'Investing for Health', the report on palliative care and separate initiatives on screening for breast, cervical and colorectal cancer. As I said already, survival rates for breast cancer are better here than in Great Britain at present. Many elements of the national cancer plan in England are already in progress here. The modernisation and improvement of our cancer services has been under way for some time. This programme, which is well advanced, includes the development of a regional network with the cancer centre in Belfast and cancer units at Antrim, Belfast City Hospital, Altnagelvin, Craigavon and the Ulster hospitals.

5.45 pm

Mrs Iris Robinson also referred to genetic cancer and the 'Daily Express' report. Genetic testing is available here for families with a known genetic predisposition. Specialists dealing with breast cancer cases are aware of the importance of increased frequency of screening for families with a genetic predisposition. Studies into the best way to treat people with a high genetic risk are under way.

I appreciate the Committee's strong desire to increase funding in line with England, Scotland and Wales and to ring-fence any increase. However, I am also conscious that such an approach is only possible if our Health Service is adequately resourced overall. If the proposal were taken up at present, it could seriously undermine the funding of other vital health and social services. I am determined, however, to maximise the scope for the development of frontline services. In the coming year the modest level of developments that I envisage in my budget proposals for health and social services overall will only be possible because of the savings of £12 million that the service will achieve, which I mentioned, a further £3 million recurrently and £3 million non-recurrently that I am squeezing from my overall baseline.

Joe Hendron talked about the need to monitor outcomes and to ensure value for money. I fully support the process of audit throughout the cancer services, and I agree with the Chairperson that it is important. So far, £100,000 has been allocated through the regional medical

audit group for cancer-related audit projects, and I fully accept that a systematic audit should be an integral part of the quality assurance process for cancer care.

Bob Coulter and Joe Hendron talked about the need to eliminate competition between various sectors, particularly primary and secondary care. The approach that I have taken, and which the service is taking through priorities for action, is one of co-operation rather than competition, removing the last vestiges of the internal market and making the most of our integrated services. My Department's regional advisory committee on cancer and the Campbell Commissioning Project have already ensured that a great deal of work has gone into the development of professional guidance and the organisation of services, referral pathways and treatment regimes. I am aware that initiatives are in place to improve communication between district nursing staff and specialist staff at the cancer centre and cancer units.

Jim Shannon and Rev Robert Coulter asked about guidance on waiting times. I announced that a two-week referral target would be introduced in August 2000 for people with suspected breast cancer. I have received advice from boards, trusts and specialist staff that it is vital that any progress towards hardening targets must be preceded by adequate resources. To introduce such targets without the right level of resources, staffing and physical capacity would risk distorting services to the direct disadvantage of patients who should have clinical priority.

I have also been advised that recent medical and scientific evidence shows that the two-week target is not appropriate for all cancer types and that earlier treatment may not always significantly benefit patient outcomes. It is important, therefore, that I take account of expert medical advice before making any firm decisions on setting further targets for early referrals. Rev Robert Coulter was also concerned about waiting times, specifically for males. Prostate cancer is a slow-growing condition and may be present for many years. Studies are taking place under the national screening committee into the optimal way to detect and treat the condition.

Paul Berry talked about the need to replace equipment. Indeed, in an ideal world one would be able to replace vital equipment in line with the manufacturers' guidance and also invest in new technology, where and when it is proven, at the same time. However, health and personal social services have simply not been resourced to enable that to happen. I spoke often — in the Assembly and through the media — about funding failures in the past, especially during the leadership of the British Conservative Government. When I arrived in post, I found a service that had not had recurrent investment in staff, staff training, the replacement of equipment or in capacity, either in the community or in hospitals. Lack of capital created a backlog of some £35 million.

I have made real progress in the provision of imaging equipment in recent months, particularly magnetic resonance imaging (MRI), and I welcome the Committee's appreciation of that.

Paul Berry also asked about variations in the delivery of services. I appreciate that in a period of expanding services, some variation in delivery across the service may arise. That will often reflect the availability and recruitment of specialist staff, who are often in short supply. I fully accept that we must ensure that high-quality services are available to cancer patients, regardless of where they live or which cancer unit they attend. I expect any variations in services to be addressed as more staff are appointed.

Sam Foster expressed concern about travel times for cancer patients. I am fully committed to ensuring good access to cancer services. As Dr Hendron has already acknowledged, more than half of all day-patient chemotherapy services are already provided in local cancer units, which are nearer people's homes. That decentralisation of services has significantly reduced travelling times for many patients and has made services more accessible to many people with cancer.

I am also aware of local initiatives by trusts to help patients to access services. Transport to hospital is arranged for any patient who is unfit to travel. Tommy Gallagher will welcome the pilot scheme in the Erne Hospital, which may also provide a way forward for other areas. He asked whether the reviews could take place in local hospitals; therefore, he will be particularly pleased with the nurse-led pilot scheme at the Erne Hospital, the aim of which is to improve local access to services for appropriate oncology review patients. It may be possible to build upon that model. Mr Gallagher also asked about data protection. My Department is preparing a consultation paper that will consider data protection and confidentiality in health and social services. The paper will set out the issues faced by the health and personal social services and the possible solutions, including the option of legislation, which has been mentioned. I expect that paper to be issued shortly.

Mr Paul Berry expressed concern about the haemorrhaging of staff from cancer services here. That would have to be a concern, although there is little evidence to date that that is a reality. Some staff have gone elsewhere to work, but having regard to their place of origin, the numbers have been small to date. However, it is a matter of great importance to me, and I will be keeping that concern to the fore. I am anxious to increase the number of staff being trained, and the human resource strategy is being developed to address real and perceived shortages of specialist staff. Therefore I can assure the Committee that I will continue to work with Colleagues in the Executive to secure the level of funding that cancer services and all our other health and social services so rightly deserve.

As Rev Robert Coulter, John Kelly and others mentioned, the report highlighted that around 6,300 people are diagnosed with cancer each year and that approximately 3,600 die annually from cancer. The Committee has mentioned that the survival rates for ovarian cancer are poor. With the introduction of new treatment regimes, we expect that those rates will improve soon. However, I emphasise that our survival rates for breast cancer are better than GB's. In addition, treatment for testicular cancer has been the great success story of the past 10 years.

As Joe Hendron and Paul Berry said, the Committee's report points out that general practitioners are usually the first point of contact for a cancer patient and can play a pivotal role in early detection, referral, treatment and care. I firmly agree that GPs have a crucial role in cancer care. I want to ensure that guidelines are developed to help to raise awareness of cancer symptoms among GPs and the public. Although we do not want to frighten people, we should aim to make awareness of symptoms part of everyday life and to reinforce the fact that early diagnosis can lead to a cure.

The regional advisory committee on cancer, which was set up by my Department, has already produced a series of guidelines that have a particular focus on the needs of primary care. In general, those guidelines have been produced by multidisciplinary teams, and in some instances the regional advisory committee on cancer has endorsed guidelines produced in England and Scotland, where the material has been suitable.

Sue Ramsey, John Kelly and Jim Shannon talked about the importance of early detection and health promotion. Smoking is responsible for one in three of all cancer deaths, and it is important to tackle tobacco use. A public information campaign has been running since 1999 and aims to increase public awareness of the dangers of smoking. The campaign has included television advertisements, a web site and a magazine aimed at young people.

The latest phase of the campaign includes a hard-hitting television advertisement titled 'Artery' — described very graphically by Jim Shannon — and is aimed mainly at adult smokers. Two additional advertisements promote nicotine replacement therapy, and the campaign, which will run until the end of March, also promotes a telephone helpline service. Members will be pleased to know that there will be follow-up advertising.

Last 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 Department of Health and Children is represented on that group. I remain committed to banning the advertisement of tobacco products, as it undermines the work of health professionals and others who try to prevent the adoption of the smoking habit and who deal with the consequences of smoking. My officials are pursuing how best to progress that issue, taking into account developments in Britain and the South of Ireland.

With the help of the Health Promotion Agency, the Department of the Environment and the Health and Safety Executive of the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment, my Department will explore how best to build on the existing provision of smoke-free facilities in all public places and workplaces.

Jim Shannon, John Kelly and Sue Ramsey specifically highlighted smoking among young people. Children are vulnerable, and great care must be taken in the design and content of campaigns aimed at discouraging schoolchildren and young people from smoking. It is essential that such campaigns be pre-tested with the target audience to ensure, as far as possible, that they achieve the desired effect. Two television advertisements aimed at second- and third-year pupils have already been broadcast, and my Department will continue to work closely with the Health Promotion Agency, the voluntary and community sectors, and others, to tackle the problems of smoking among schoolchildren and young people.

Sue Ramsey talked about the importance of diet and the promotion of healthy eating. Nutrition is one of the priority areas identified in the Executive's public health programme, 'Investing for Health', which will be published shortly. Surveys commissioned by the Health Promotion Agency have demonstrated a significant increase in awareness and understanding of key messages on nutrition and health, and my officials have been monitoring the introduction in Britain of the national fruit scheme. From December 2002 the ministerial group on health plans to introduce free fruit in schools as a pilot project, now that we have secured resources from the Executive programme funds.

Voluntary charities are excellent at reaching people's hearts and minds and play an invaluable role in health promotion. I want to ensure that the statutory sector works with the voluntary sector to further develop the role of charities in health promotion.

Madam Deputy Speaker: I remind the Minister that she is entitled to speak for 10 minutes for each hour of the debate. I ask her to draw her remarks to a conclusion.

Ms de Brún: The Committee has recommended that all patients should have equity of access to out-of-hours services, and I support that recommendation. The South and East Belfast Trust has a 24-hour rapid-response team that has been pivotal in allowing patients to stay in their own homes, rather than going into hospital.

It is also proposed that a full out-of-hours referral capacity will be introduced in the future as the scope of the cancer unit increases.

6.00 pm

The Committee's report emphasised the many positive developments in our cancer services. Much good work has been done to improve and modernise those services, and there is still much to do.

I add my voice to the Committee's praise for the important contribution to cancer care made by the voluntary organisations. I want to ensure that mechanisms like the cancer forum continue to drive forward the crucial partnership between the statutory and voluntary sectors.

As every Member who has spoken emphasised, the future development of our cancer services will depend on the availability of proper resources. I shall continue to work with my Executive Colleagues to secure the necessary funding to provide modern, safe and effective cancer services.

I have referred to several of the Committee's recommendations and some of the issues mentioned in the debate. I shall give careful consideration to the Committee's report, which is most helpful, and shall respond to the Committee in greater detail in the coming weeks.

Dr Hendron: I thank the Minister for being present throughout the debate and for her comments, and I shall refer later to what she has said. I also thank all those Members who spoke in the debate. I hope that Members will not be frightened by the papers that I have here — I have only made a few sketchy notes. The only problem is that I cannot read my own handwriting.

Rev Robert Coulter and other Members referred to the question of waiting times. Rev Robert Coulter also mentioned breast cancer, and the lack of guidance for the male population on the types of cancer that they might have. Above all, he talked about the decisions that were being taken. I myself referred to the issue of communication with GPs. That is important in order to achieve early diagnosis.

Paul Berry referred to the Campbell Report and to strategies. He talked about the frustrations of patients, comprehensive long-term plans and the pressures on staff. He paid tribute to hospital staff, as did other Members. Mr Berry also mentioned an independent audit. There is no doubt that the workload of GPs has increased. It is also important to replace old equipment.

Ms Ramsey made some similar points. I appreciate the fact that she thanked the Business Committee. That was an important point, as we were not allowed three hours to debate the issue of children in care. My Colleagues all thanked their staff for the work that they have done.

Ms Ramsey and other Members referred to deprivation. The question of cigarettes comes up over and over again. The importance of a healthy diet that incorporates fruit and vegetables cannot be overestimated. I remind Colleagues of the World Health Organisation's advice that five portions of fruit and vegetables should be eaten every day to help prevent cancer. The television advertisements have been very effective.

Ms Ramsey talked about cervical screening and breast screening in deprived areas. I hope that the boards are taking that matter seriously. Many references have

been made to Prof Paddy Johnston and Prof Roy Spence. Ms Ramsey also talked about an all-Ireland cancer registry, and mention was made of the work of Dr Anna Gavin of the Northern Ireland Cancer Registry.

Mr Foster described the number of deaths from cancer as frightening. That is especially so when one thinks of the number of Members of the Assembly who might fall victim to the disease. Mr Foster mentioned the memorandum of understanding that marked the tripartite agreement between the United States, Dublin and Belfast to establish a cancer centre of excellence. I recall our involvement as respective health spokesmen for our parties nearly three years ago.

Mr Foster also talked about people in rural areas, as did Mr Gallagher. There is a major problem there. I cannot even begin to address the issue of an area hospital for the south-west, other than to say that people there are entitled to as good a service as anyone else in Northern Ireland.

Mr Shannon talked about service delivery and waiting times, and about the one in three people who contract cancer and the one in four people who die from it. He also applied that scenario to the number of Members in the Assembly.

I referred to the fact that in some hospitals, especially in Antrim, people can wait for nine months for endoscopies. People may have to wait for seven or eight months to have a colonoscopy to find out if there is a possible tumour in their colon.

Mr Shannon referred to a regional plan and to cancer charities. He also spoke about the cigarette advert that shows the damage caused to the aorta by smoking. That advert is very powerful. John Kelly mentioned the work of Prof Patrick Johnston and others, and he talked about the physical and emotional needs of patients, about the number of new cancer cases and about the comparisons with England and Wales.

I referred to the Northern Ireland Confederation for Health and Social Services (NICON) Report of the four boards in which Mr Brendan Cunningham compared funding in England and Wales with that in Northern Ireland. I shall not repeat those figures, but they are very important.

Mr Kelly dealt with the Health Promotion Agency and the problem of young people smoking. He also referred to health action zones, and I would like to make the point that we have health action zones in north and west Belfast, Armagh and Dungannon. That is medicine at the coalface. Those people do an outstanding job, and I should like to see the number of health action zones increased. Mr Kelly also referred to a workforce plan in education.

Iris Robinson thanked various people including Prof Roy Spence, Prof Patrick Johnston and the Committee

Clerks. She referred to the fact that one in three people get cancer. She also mentioned social deprivation and the NICON Report. Mrs Robinson also talked about human resources — doctors and nurses — and the introduction of a cancer plan.

Huge funding is being pumped into cancer services in England and Wales in the next three years. The Minister referred to breast cancer and the importance of the high genetic risk. That screening can be carried out in Northern Ireland. Everyone is agreed that extra funding is needed to highlight the dangers of cigarettes.

Mr Gallagher talked about putting patients first, and no one will argue with that. Early diagnosis is the most important thing, followed by prompt referral to a consultant. He also dealt with health action zones and multidisciplinary teams.

Mr Foster referred to rural areas and the long distances that people have to travel for treatment. Reference was made to patient involvement and their being treated with sensitivity.

With regard to the all-Ireland cancer registry, I pay tribute to all involved in its development, especially Dr Anna Gavin.

I thank the Minister for her attendance. I appreciate her congratulations to the Committee, and I hope that she will study the 41 recommendations in its report. The Minister referred to the great achievements in cancer units — 50% of chemotherapy can now be administered closer to patients' homes. The Committee met the multi-disciplinary cancer teams and appreciates the work that they have done. The Minister also referred to the international link. One cannot emphasise that enough — I mentioned the Washington, Dublin and Belfast memorandum of understanding. The Minister also detailed the research and development that has been carried out, the extra staff trained in the treatment of cancer, the major trials that have been conducted throughout Ireland and the introduction of palliative care.

The Southern Board is making a magnificent effort through the use of pharmacists, other primary care professionals and a Macmillan GP facilitator so that people can get access to drugs such as morphine and pain relievers at night, at the weekend or at any other time. The Minister

said that more patients are referred for cancer treatment, and I am sure that that is true. We owe a debt to all the staff. She also stated that more training has been undertaken since the publication of the Campbell Report.

I accept that the Minister inherited the problem of the cancer centre. The cancer figures have risen every year, so we need a major treatment centre. I am aware that three business plans have been published, the most recent of those in September 2001. The Department of Finance and Personnel agrees with that.

I wonder when the announcement will be made. She referred to Prof Paddy Johnston and others, and we all accept the point made about value for money. It is easy to want to open the centre tomorrow. However, getting the funding and value for money are important.

The Minister has worked hard on the subject of MRI scanners, and I pay tribute to her. She mentioned the genetic aspects of breast cancer, to which Mrs Robinson also referred. She mentioned the comparisons in funding in England and Wales with that in Northern Ireland, and we accept that there is a lack of capital. Furthermore, she mentioned poor survival rates from ovarian cancer, the early diagnosis by GPs, and diet, which is important for our young people.

I thank everyone who contributed to the debate, especially the Minister. However, my primary question is this: will she give a clear timetable soon for the new regional cancer centre? That is what people want to know. Mr Shannon made a point about banning smoking in public places, and I would like to see that happen. Much has been said about the Health Promotion Agency, but achieving funding is difficult. The agency receives a small amount of funding. However, it is doing a good job, and perhaps it should co-ordinate health promotion across the boards and trusts.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That this Assembly approves the Second Report of the Committee for Health, Social Services and Public Safety (2/01R) on the Delivery of Cancer Services in Northern Ireland and calls on the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to implement the Report's recommendations at the earliest opportunity.

Adjourned at 6.12 pm

NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

Wednesday 6 March 2002

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

Members observed two minutes' silence.

EXCLUSION OF SINN FÉIN

Mr Speaker: I wish to advise Members that the Business Committee has allocated two hours for this debate. The proposer of the motion will be given 20 minutes to speak, and 10 minutes has been allocated for the winding-up speech. All other Members who wish to speak — and who get the opportunity to do so — will be allowed up to 10 minutes. Apart from the proposer of the motion, Members may speak only once. I remind Members that, given the number who wish to speak, they do not have to take their full 10 minutes. If some Members speak for less than 10 minutes, then more Members can be facilitated.

Rev Dr Ian Paisley: I beg to move

That, in consequence of:

the Provisional IRA's retention of its illegal weaponry;

its continuing threat, and pursuit, of terrorist outrages to secure its aims;

its maintenance of an active terrorist organisation;

its continuing engagement in murder and other acts of violence; and

the fact that it is inextricably linked to Sinn Féin,

this Assembly resolves that Sinn Féin does not enjoy its confidence because it is not committed to non-violence and exclusively peaceful means and further resolves that, in accordance with Section 30 of the Northern Ireland Act 1998, this Assembly determines that members of Sinn Féin shall be excluded from holding office as Ministers for a period of twelve months from the date of this resolution.

I remind the House that the last time a motion like this was before us, there were two motions saying the same thing. It was no stunt then, because there was an election. The Official Unionist Party was happy to have the benefits and to propose that particular motion.

It is the policy of fascism to boycott an elected Assembly and then endeavour to gain influence in that Assembly to keep free debate from taking place. Surely debate on the subject should take place in this House.

The spokesman of those that are absent from the Benches today was not prepared to say in public that he was calling for the abandonment of the IRA. How can he reconcile that position with the so-called Mitchell principles and the so-called peace policy that we are supposed to be pursuing? Those are the facts of the case. People who refuse to face up to, or vote on, the issue are showing that they faithfully want to keep the IRA in place. Anyone who does not vote for the motion is saying that Sinn Féin/IRA should be in the Government of Northern Ireland and should not be ejected from that Government.

I welcome the debate. Once again it is clear that the Official Unionist Party and its friends in the SDLP, alongside IRA/Sinn Féin, have tried to stop the debate. It is clear from Mr David Trimble's attitude that he does not want the spotlight to fall on decommissioning. He wants to keep his party in union with IRA/Sinn Féin and carry on the charade that exists in Northern Ireland today.

I listened with interest to the accusations he made in the House on 4 March when he said that there was an abuse of procedure in calling for this debate. What a cheek. The greatest abuse of procedure took place in the House on the day he relied on the Alliance Party and the Women's Coalition for his election as First Minister, claiming that a majority of Unionists supported him. Those so-called Unionists backslid seconds later and went back to their old stands as Nationalists, or fellow travellers with Nationalists and Republicans.

The majority of Unionists in the House do not support the stand that Mr Trimble is taking. On 8 October 2001, Mr Trimble claimed that the debate then was taking place before his party's annual meeting. We are not interested in his annual meeting, because it will not change the position. He must be very scared of his party's annual meeting if he thinks that a debate in the House will change the number of votes that he will receive.

His party's anti-agreement members are joining my party every day. What is more, people in his party are more interested in saving the party than saving the country, and he meets those difficulties by lining up with IRA/Sinn Féin.

This debate will take place. This is not a DUP motion only; other Unionists signed the petition. My party and other Unionists who are associating themselves with the motion — including Official Unionist Party Members — form a majority. Therefore, the Unionist majority supports the debate, and it must take place.

There is only one way for us to register opposition to IRA/Sinn Féin's remaining in Government, and that is to vote for the motion. The only way to get proper decommissioning is to throw IRA/Sinn Féin out of the Executive. People will then wake up to the fact that we really mean business. We will hear spokesmen from the Official Unionist Party say that the debate is ridiculous, and it can do nothing. They can do something. They can

put IRA/Sinn Féin out of the Executive, and the case for decommissioning will be established beyond doubt. There will be a complete change in attitudes across the water. That is the only way it can be done.

There has never been a clearer choice to be made between terrorism and democracy than that which must be made today. It is no good supporting a quest against international terrorism while failing to stand up against one of the most ruthless killing machines in Western Europe.

According to press reports, world terrorist organisations, including the IRA, met recently at global terrorist conclaves. If the IRA is part of that conclave, it is one of the terrorist organisations with which the Assembly should be at war. However, instead of being at war with such organisations, the Assembly wants the IRA to sit in partnership as its blood brothers in the Government of this part of Her Majesty's kingdom. Do Unionists want to go on sharing power with an organisation that retains its capability for terror and is directly engaged in terrorism at present?

On Thursday 21 February 2002, Matthew Burns was shot dead in Castlewellan, County Down. He had previously been targeted by an IRA punishment squad but had fought it off. He was a kick-boxer and had made fools of the six-man squad. However, the IRA returned to shoot him at point-blank range. Are those the actions of a group that is committed to peace and democracy? The House must answer that question.

In order to cover those actions, IRA/Sinn Féin claims that they are the actions of dissident Republicans. That cannot cover the fact that, in the period between the signing of the Belfast Agreement and the end of 2001, there were over 180 paramilitary-style assaults and over 150 casualties from paramilitary-style shootings — all emanated from IRA/Sinn Féin and its associates. Many other incidents never reach the press. During the all-party talks, the former Irish Foreign Minister Dick Spring said that Sinn Féin/IRA could not be in Government by day and in terrorism by night. However, at present Sinn Féin/IRA is in Government by day — because of the votes of the Official Unionists in the House — and it is in terrorism by night.

The SDLP and its leader, the Deputy First Minister, have an obligation in today's debate. If they believe that no terrorist should take part in the democratic system without repudiating terrorism, they should vote for the expulsion of Sinn Féin from Government. The DUP has consistently maintained that IRA/Sinn Féin must disarm fully and credibly.

The current talk, which I heard from the Unionist Minister Mr McGimpsey, is that there has been decommissioning — that is a joke. Does anyone who is in his or her right senses really believe that there has been decommissioning? No one knows where or when that

decommissioning took place. No one knows what sort of weapons were taken and destroyed. No one knows where the weapons were destroyed. No one knows whether they could be examined after they were destroyed. The theory is that the weapons were thrown over the side of a boat. I do not know whether Gen de Chastelain put on a diver's attire, went down to the seabed, pulled up those weapons, brought them to the surface, examined them and declared that they were out of order. I do not think that to dip a rifle or a machine gun in saltwater would transform it. Such weapons could be reusable, yet the House is told that that process constitutes decommissioning.

An election is coming up in the Irish Republic. IRA/Sinn Féin would like to sit in coalition with the ruling parties there. That will create for them another symbolic lie with which to cod the people. Well, that might fool the people of the Irish Republic who need to be fooled, and it might fool the people up here who, for political reasons, want to keep them in power to save their own bacon, but it will not fool the people who really know the situation, and it will not fool the people in this Province whose relatives were murdered — and people are still being murdered — by IRA guns.

10.45 am

On 26 May 1998, Mr Trimble said

"democracy dictates that before we will sit in an Executive with Sinn Féin we require a declaration that the 'war' is over, the standing down of 'active service units', the handing over of the remains of the 'disappeared', full co-operation with the Decommissioning Commission, an end to targeting and punishment beatings and actual disarmament itself."

That statement could not be clearer, and I challenge the Official Unionist Party leaders to table that. If that is what they believe and what they say they were elected on, they should table a motion to that effect in this House and see how many votes they get. If any of those Unionists dared to say in their constituencies what their votes will say in this House today, they would get very short shrift indeed.

The time has come for us to recognise that there are IRA/Sinn Féin gunmen abroad who are prepared to shoot their fellow Roman Catholics or anyone else who stands in their way. It is happening now in our Province, and it is important to say that that can cease if a majority of Unionists come together, stand together and vote together today. That would be the end of IRA/Sinn Féin in this House — everybody knows that — but they have to be preserved.

There is no doubt that the IRA continues its crimes, as I have said. Its members, known as the "Colombian three", presently await trial in that country for their terror-training activities. When they were arrested, we were told that they had nothing to do with the IRA. At the beginning, it was said, they were on holiday and

completely isolated. We were told that one of them had nothing to do with Cuba. Now, it has been admitted that they had everything to do with Cuba and with all the charges that have been laid against them. And yet, people in this Chamber are still in cahoots with them. After the happenings in Colombia, there was a certain amount of evidence that they had been teaching the terrorists there how to use certain weapons.

Today, we must decide if we are to perpetuate the lie that Sinn Féin/IRA members are just like the rest of us when, in reality, they are still terrorists. Those absent from those Benches today are no different from what they were before the Anglo-Irish Agreement or before they supposedly agreed the Mitchell principles. They have not changed one iota, and every decent person in this Province recognises that — and when certain politicians are questioned by their constituents, they recognise and admit it too.

Mr Dodds: Is that not precisely why politicians and leaders of parties in the Irish Republic are saying that they would not tolerate Sinn Féin in the Government in the South? Yet, parties here — Ulster Unionist, SDLP and others — lecture us and tell us that we should tolerate them in Northern Ireland. Is that not the greatest hypocrisy of all?

Rev Dr Ian Paisley: Yes, it is the greatest hypocrisy of all. However, it is also the greatest lie of all, because I do not believe a word of what they say in Dublin. If they had to have IRA/Sinn Féin in the Government in Dublin, they would take them in. Mr Ahern would kiss them on the cheek and try to make the same excuses that are made for them by Unionists in the North of Ireland, and I think that my hon Friend would agree with me.

Mr Dodds: Hear, hear.

Rev Dr Ian Paisley: We are told that the IRA has decommissioned, yet people like Matthew Burns are shot dead and top IRA men are found with rocket launchers in mid-Ulster. According to the 'News Letter' one of them was released as part of this iniquitous agreement. Those are the facts of the situation.

Were I to think for one moment that my Colleagues and I could remove these IRA/Sinn Féin Members by walking out of this Assembly, we would not be in it. We know perfectly well that they want rid of any voice of opposition. They do not want to hear — they do not even want a debate like this one. In this part of the United Kingdom armed terrorists control an arsenal of guns, and their elected representatives stand up and defend that. Another party — supposedly defending traditional Unionism — agrees that those terrorists should be in Government and tells us that this is a farce. It is not a farce when it puts down a similar motion, or when it goes to the country. That party's manifesto says that they want the people of Northern Ireland to understand the answers to these questions.

"Will paramilitaries be allowed to sit in the Northern Ireland Government? No. The Ulster Unionist Party will not serve with any party which refuses to commit itself by word and deed to exclusively peaceful and non-violent means. The agreement says that only those who have renounced violence will be allowed to exercise power in any future Ulster Government. We will hold Tony Blair and other parties to their obligations on this issue."

We are doing exactly that — holding Unionists to their obligations. Mr Nesbitt, the new Minister, can smile and laugh, but the time will come when he cannot laugh in County Down and must face the issues before the people.

Mr McCartney: He will have his ministerial salary in the bank.

Rev Dr Ian Paisley: Yes, and under the rules of the Assembly he will also have a very tidy pension. We must keep that in mind.

Flying in the face of those pledges, however, the IRA is in Government in Northern Ireland. I challenge the Ulster Unionists to come clean on the matter and tell us in this debate that they will continue to support the IRA in Government, for that is their policy, and that they now regret all the things they said because they have changed their minds. That is the decent thing to do. People can change their minds, and they should let us know that they have done that. On the one hand to say that they have not changed their minds and on the other to do what they are doing is a disgrace.

"The Ulster Unionist Party will not serve with any party which refuses to commit itself by word and deed to exclusively peaceful and non-violent means ... We will hold Tony Blair and other parties to their obligations..."

Our motion today does exactly that. We hold them, their toadies, their fellow travellers in terrorism, Mr Blair and Mr Bush to that declaration of war against terrorism while terrorism is blessed, patronised, supported and defended by them.

Mr Nesbitt: In the context of this motion, had the IRA by now completed decommissioning there would have been no excuse for this debate. In saying that, neither do I excuse Loyalists. Why do I use the word "excuse"? I do so because the DUP only pretends to oppose Sinn Féin. In reality, it does not.

The purpose of the DUP's motion is to target Unionists in the week before the annual general meeting of the Ulster Unionist Council, and to ask the House to endorse its tactics for confronting the Republican movement.

Let us take a few moments to examine how the DUP has dealt with the Republican movement. Mr Paisley said that the time has come for us to recognise that gunmen are abroad. The time has come? I have heard such words from him before. He also said that the DUP really means business. We have often heard such words from the DUP. Where have the DUP been, and where are they trying to take us? Members of the DUP will

remember its European election advert in May 1979. It stated — *[Interruption]*.

Mr Dodds: What was the result?

Mr Nesbitt: I will come to that. It stated:

“the Unionist candidate, who can devastate the Republican challenge”.

Where is that devastation from the DUP? Dr Paisley went on to say:

“I can top the poll and go on to demand and get what is rightly ours: total security and a proper Parliament and Government for Northern Ireland.”

Of course, as his Colleagues chided a moment ago, he was right, because Dr Paisley did top the poll. On 12 June 1979 he said — *[Interruption]*.

Mr Dodds: On a point of order, Mr Speaker. I am delighted that the newly installed Minister is taking so much time to recall, and to remind the House of, the Democratic Unionist Party victories chalked up by Dr Paisley. I hope that he will continue in that vein by mentioning other European election results and the results of the recent Westminster elections.

The motion deals with Sinn Féin’s being in Government, and although I am delighted that the Minister is taking time to remind Members of the DUP’s election successes, I would like a ruling on the relevance of some of his comments.

Mr Speaker: I hear what the Member says, but I will act with customary generosity in approaching such questions.

Mr Nesbitt: I said at the outset that the purpose of the motion is to persuade other parties to adopt DUP tactics. I am trying to show how unsuccessful those tactics have been. On 12 June 1979, Dr Paisley said:

“The mantle of leadership democratically has been given to me. It is a twentieth century miracle.”

Twenty-two years later he is still demanding it — and without much success. Remember also — *[Interruption]*.

Mr Speaker: Order.

Mr Weir: I thank the Member for giving way. Would he confirm that he is speaking about the same DUP that canvassed with him in 1997 when he was seeking election to Westminster? Is he talking about the same Dr Paisley who canvassed for him then?

Mr Nesbitt: It is a pity that Members cannot listen to the truth, and show manners by listening in silence. In 1979, there was also a Westminster election. The DUP said then that

“the Province must be put on a war footing, and the IRA must be dealt with once and for all.”

We have heard those same words today — but where have the DUP’s tactics got us?

I remember — and I am sure that others do — that in 1980 there was “Smash the IRA”. In 1981 there was the “Carson Trail”. In 1986 there was Ulster Resistance, and, of course, the Third Force.

11.00 am

I regret that Mr Robinson is not here, because at an Ulster Resistance rally in November 1986, he said:

“The organisation will only be stood down when its task is completely done.”

Mr Paisley wore a red beret then. He has delivered a great deal since 1986. A couple of days later, the same Mr Robinson was in Kilkeel to speak at an Ulster Resistance rally. He said:

“It stands to reason that Ulstermen, capable and prepared to defeat the IRA, will do so, and we will.”

They have gone a long way towards doing that.

To return to the present, on the television programme, ‘Insight’, in June 1998, Mr Robinson was asked what he would do if there were a Government comprising Sinn Féin. He said:

“Under those circumstances, very clearly we will be a peaceful, constitutional, legitimate, democratic opposition.”

The DUP Ministers cannot be in opposition, because they have taken the Pledge of Office. Their position is hypocritical.

The concept of rotating ministerial posts was another of the DUP’s tactics. Let us look carefully at the words of the press release, which announced that there would be

“a series of short-term ministerial appointments, replacing resigning Ministers with others at regular intervals.”

That was supposed to occur until the next election. It never happened.

Finally, Mr Speaker — *[Interruption]*.

Mr Speaker: Order.

Mr Nesbitt: I am sorry that the DUP’s pain is long-standing, but this is the last time I am going to say anything about it.

Let me remind the DUP — *[Interruption]*.

Mr Speaker: Order. I ask the House to give the Member a hearing. It seems only reasonable and fair that all Members should receive a hearing, and that certain Members should restrain themselves.

Mr Nesbitt: Let me remind the DUP, who often remind us, that its 1998 election manifesto promised that it would

“refuse to give credit or legitimacy to Sinn Féin.”

On ‘Hearts and Minds’ in May 2001, Noel Thompson questioned Peter Robinson. Noel Thompson quoted Dr Paisley, from the minutes of an Agriculture and Rural Development Committee meeting. Dr Paisley said:

“I am trying to give every party an opportunity.”

Of course, that includes Sinn Féin, despite the fact that he will not recognise Sinn Féin as legitimate. When Peter Robinson was challenged by Noel Thompson on that matter, he said:

“Of course the Chairman has to allow anyone on that committee... to ask a question. It is a legal responsibility that you have to allow it, and if he didn't he would be the first person to find himself in the courts”.

He defended what Dr Paisley was doing. When has the DUP ever worried about law and legalities? The answer is never. Again, the DUP is just slightly hypocritical.

Let us recall some DUP proposals that were made a few years ago: there should be an elected convention; there should be discussions, and then, if there were a final proposal from those discussions, it should be put to a referendum. The proposals asserted that

“it is only by a referendum that a constitution can be made to stick.”

Finally, the proposals stated that

“all politicians who want to stay in politics would be compelled to work such a constitution, accepted by the electorate through referendum.”

That is precisely what the Ulster Unionist Party is trying to do. We had our convention, our talks and our referendum, and we are here, making sure, by process, that all elements of the referendum are implemented through the Belfast Agreement. The UUP is doing that. Today's motion will not achieve that.

Who wrote those proposals? Those proposals for a convention and a referendum and to compel people to listen to what was said through a referendum can be found in an article in the ‘News Letter’ of 24 November 1979. They were proposed by the DUP. The Ulster Unionist Party has delivered; the DUP has not. The DUP talks tough, but acts weak.

Mr Dodds: On a point of order, Mr Speaker. I refer to your earlier ruling about flexibility and generosity, and Members are aware of your attitude with regard to these debates. However, is it not startling that throughout the entire 10-minute diatribe that we have just heard, there was not one mention of IRA/Sinn Féin or its culpability? Yet, from beginning to end, that diatribe attacked other Unionists, the very thing that the DUP was berated for on the radio today by a ministerial Colleague of the Member. In a debate such as this, is it in order for the Member, the apologist for IRA/Sinn Féin in the Ulster Unionist ranks, to contribute to the debate by spending 99% of his time recalling previous radio interviews and documents, and so on, but not addressing the issue of IRA/Sinn Féin in Government? The Member may be embarrassed by that; I know that he has little defence for it. Mr Speaker, surely it is your duty to the House to at least call him to order on those issues.

Mr Nesbitt: On a point of order, Mr Speaker.

Mr Speaker: I will give a ruling on the first point of order. Other Members may raise points of order if they wish. I listened carefully, and as well as I could, to Mr Nesbitt's comments. It is my understanding that he was attacking, not the subjects of the motion, but the process by which the motion was tabled. Therefore, I have not ruled him out of order.

Mr Nesbitt: On a point of order, Mr Speaker. Is it correct for Mr Dodds to mislead the House? If I am correct, his initial comments were that I made no reference to the IRA. The record will show that my very first words were in reference to complete decommissioning.

Mr Speaker: I did not take Mr Dodds's comments to be an attempt to mislead the House. I took them as a point of order, and I have responded to them as such. I hope that the House will understand that.

Rev Dr Ian Paisley: On a point of order, Mr Speaker. When you read this debate in Hansard tomorrow, I would like you to look out for Mr Nesbitt's comments that accused every member of the DUP of never keeping the law. Will you examine those comments? As you well know, such comments, when made in the House, are dealt with very seriously under ‘Erskine May’.

Mr Speaker: The Member will be aware that I have previously ruled — as is ruled in the House of Commons — that when a Member refers to a body of people, that has a different meaning to a Member referring to an individual. I have made such rulings in respect of previous references to Sinn Féin Members, for example. In parliamentary language, a reference to a body as a whole means something different to a reference to an individual.

Rev Dr Ian Paisley: Will you look at the comments?

Mr Speaker: I will read tomorrow's Hansard avidly to check that it accurately reflects what I have heard in the debate.

Mr Roche: It is significant that the Assembly is debating the issue of decommissioning for the simple reason that when the Prime Minister of the United Kingdom and the Prime Minister of the Republic published the so-called implementation plan after the Weston Park talks, the obvious intention was to bury the issue of decommissioning, to restore the operation of the institutions established under the Belfast Agreement and to dispose entirely of any requirement to decommission. That implementation plan contained a mere reference to the idea of decommissioning, although at the same time it included a detailed list of concessions to IRA/Sinn Féin, including an amnesty that individually, and therefore collectively, amounted not merely to the appeasement of terrorism but to the legitimisation of terrorism itself.

In his statement on 1 August, Mr Reid was entirely confident that Mr Trimble, as the leader of the Ulster Unionist Party, would comply with the requirements of the implementation plan, and in putting himself forward

for re-election as First Minister on 6 November, Mr Trimble did indeed comply. That shows that Mr Trimble is perceived to be and, in fact, is a mere puppet in the hands of these so-called two Governments.

The amazing thing is that in the debate on the amnesty for terrorism Mr Trimble conceded that he does not know exactly what was agreed at Weston Park. Nevertheless, he was prepared to comply with the core requirement of Weston Park and put himself forward for re-election as First Minister in circumstances that in themselves should have been sufficient for him to refuse. He was re-elected in the context of a so-called putting of arms beyond use, which effectively amounted to a recognition by the two Governments of the right of the IRA to hold its arms and dispose of them at will. In other words, there was a recognition of the legitimacy of the holding of arms by this terrorist organisation — that is what that non-event really amounted to.

As well as that, he allowed himself to be reinstated as First Minister on the basis of a vote that was an insult to the integrity of Unionism in the Assembly. That vote was based on cynical labelling and the use of the term “Unionist” to put those who were actually opposed to the Union and committed to terror into the Executive, and that was done with the support of parties whose entire significance lies in the fact that they are simply lackeys and bootlickers of terrorism.

The interesting and significant thing on 6 November is that there was an international context which meant that Mr Trimble was under no political imperative to restore the working of the Executive and restore the leaders of Sinn Féin/IRA to the Government of Northern Ireland — there was no political imperative whatsoever to do that because of the events of 11 September 2001 in the United States and the quite proper reaction of the Bush Administration to those events. The reaction of the Bush Administration to the events of 11 September 2001 was to draw a clear line between democracy and terror, and at the very time that Mr Bush was drawing that line, the IRA was demonstrating beyond the possibility of refutation that it was on the side of terror. It was actually demonstrating what everybody had known for decades — that it was at the very heart of international terrorism. Mr Trimble allowed himself to be reinstated as First Minister and the representatives of a terrorist organisation to be put back into the Government in an international context in which he could have done the exact opposite. He was under no imperative to do what he did.

In the context of this debate it is important to ask a simple question: why should members of IRA/Sinn Féin never — and this is the position of my party — ever be in the Government of Northern Ireland? The answer is very simple: IRA/Sinn Féin is literally a murder machine. In the recent debate on the amnesty, numerous Members tried to equate the IRA with the security forces. There are a number of ways of making the distinction, and the

one that I want to make now is this: the IRA exists to murder — that is why it exists — and the security forces, representing the legitimate monopoly of force by the state, exist to protect people from organisations such as the IRA. That is the distinction, and members of an organisation whose prime and only purpose is to murder should never be part of a Government — and certainly never part of a Government in the country where the murders were carried out. The whole thing is absolutely ridiculous and quite beyond belief.

11.15 am

I should like to develop that point in more detail, but I feel, Mr Speaker, that I have to be careful about how I go about it. I see that you are nodding. I have to be careful, but I will say that there are reputable authors and investigative journalists who, outside of this House, can make detailed claims about the activities of Members, without any fear of legal recourse by the named Members. The authors of the books and articles that name those Members as being involved in murder and the organisation of IRA terrorism know that in a civil action — the outcome of which depends on the balance of probability — those people could never swing the balance of probability in their favour because of the weight of the evidence. That is why they have never attempted to defend their names in a court of law.

Mr McCartney: On the one occasion when they did — the “Slab” Murphy case — it was thrown out of court in a libel action.

Mr Roche: I thank the Member for that significant point. Let me indicate, without naming the individuals involved, the type of claim that has been made. A Member of the Assembly has been named, by two reputable journalists, as being among the planners of Bloody Friday. I do not need to say that Bloody Friday was one of the most appalling atrocities that ever took place either in Northern Ireland or elsewhere.

Another Member has been named as being responsible for three atrocities — and many others, but I will mention three. First, in one of the most recent books on the IRA, he is named as having authorised the Enniskillen bomb. Secondly, in a recent newspaper article, he was linked to the Claudy bomb. Most of us have probably forgotten about the Claudy bomb, but it was one of the most tragic events in the history of the troubles, because it involved the death of a child.

The same individual was named in a recent book, published approximately two years ago, as having introduced the human bomb into the arsenal of IRA terror. It might be worthwhile to explain what the human bomb is. One of the most lethal weapons in the terrorist conflict that is taking place in Israel is the suicide bomb. If the members of an organisation are committed to murder and terror, but have not got the bottle to commit suicide, they take an innocent member of the community, and,

under threat of murdering his family, tie 1,000 lb of explosives to him and tell him to go to a checkpoint. When he reaches the checkpoint, the people who are monitoring his movements press the button and the whole thing explodes. That is the human bomb.

The first human bomb was a man called Patsy Gillespie. It was a most appalling atrocity. The mind that can conceive that and put it into effect is something that normal, decent people — *[Interruption]*.

Mrs I Robinson: Sick.

Mr Roche: — exactly — could not even begin to understand.

However, those people are in the Assembly. In fact, they are in the Government. I am not here, Mr Speaker, to criticise any ruling that you have ever made as Speaker, but it appears to be an anomaly that those people can be named outside of the House but cannot be named inside it.

Mr Speaker: Order. I fear that the Member is going to be unhappy about the further ruling that his time is up, but it is.

Mr Watson: Two weeks ago the Republic's Attorney General described Sinn Féin as

"a dagger at the throat of social justice".

In fact, he went on to say:

"Any person or party who owes a loyalty to the IRA and its Army Council, to its acclaimed right to inflict murder and torture, simply has no business in the Dáil".

How right his comments are, and who could fault him for his opinions but for the fact of their blatant double standards and the staggering contrast when compared with the South's policy on IRA/Sinn Féin's participating in Government here in Northern Ireland? It seems that the parties in the Republic can unite in their opposition to Sinn Féin/IRA. The Attorney General's thoughts are shared by the leaders of all the main political parties in the South. Indeed, each has raced to declare publicly how unsuitable IRA/Sinn Féin members are as potential Government Ministers and, more importantly, why.

The Irish Prime Minister said recently on BBC's 'Breakfast with Frost':

"I've made our position very, very clear. In our constitution there can only be adherence to one police force, one army, and until Sinn Féin makes their position unambiguous and clear [...], then that's not possible and that's not going to be possible for some time."

He also said:

"Even if the IRA were disbanded, all weapons put beyond use and there were a complete end to vigilantism and punishment North and South, and full support given to the Police Service of Northern Ireland" — *[Interruption]*.

Mr Speaker: Order. I ask that the Member be given a proper hearing.

Mr Watson: As I was saying:

"...there would be insufficient time to establish confidence for Government participation to be realistic."

The bleatings of politicians in the Republic suggest that private armies and the activities of shadowy vigilante groups cannot be permitted there, yet they are justified in Northern Ireland. Politicians in Dublin also cite IRA/Sinn Féin's call for the early release of the murderers of Garda McCabe to back up their own exclusion case. It would appear that sauce for the political goose in the North is unbecoming for its Southern gander. Just as IRA/Sinn Féin is unpalatable to Nationalists and Republicans — in the true sense — in the South, so they are equally distasteful to the majority of Unionists in the North.

Although IRA/Sinn Féin has had the time and opportunity in Northern Ireland to prove itself worthy of holding office, it has repeatedly failed to do so. Contrary to all the promises that it has given through the media, and despite its having been given more than one chance in the House, the frequency of punishment attacks is now higher than it has been since records began, and there were only two fewer shooting incidents last year than in 1975. Furthermore, it should be noted that the only reason that the number of shootings did not overtake that for 1975 is that the Republicans called an abrupt halt to such activity after 11 September to avoid putting Sinn Féin in an awkward situation as regards its backers in the United States.

Let there be no doubt that violence is still Sinn Féin's bargaining tool, and, more worryingly, as Unionism has witnessed, particularly since the signing of the Belfast Agreement, it can be turned on and off according to its political needs to gain additional concessions.

The parties in the South believe that the concept of sharing collective responsibility with IRA/Sinn Féin is a non-starter. With no blushes at their astonishing hypocrisy, they state that issues of justice, the army, the police and — wait for it — the defence of the state are among its main reasons for that. The irony is that although Sinn Féin is deeply unwelcome to its Nationalist bedfellows and agreement-supporting acts in the South, it is deemed worthy of ministerial portfolios by a minority of Unionists, together with constitutional Nationalists in the North. Those Unionists who advocate the presence of two Sinn Féin Ministers in Northern Ireland need to consider whether politicians in the South, who are reluctant to give Sinn Féin/IRA houseroom, have a point. The fundamental question of whether IRA/Sinn Féin is fit to hold office must be considered.

The harsh reality is that Sinn Féin remains tied by an umbilical cord to the IRA, and despite all its talk of freedom and freedom fighters, it is resolutely preoccupied with control. Internally it maintains a virtually military discipline, while externally it seeks to control those communities in which it has a presence. The party has a fundamental problem with the concept of freedom. It has not yet

come to terms with the rights of others to disagree and to dissent, so violence becomes the end result.

That is highlighted by the recent attack on an SDLP worker in Castlewellan, after which the SDLP Member for South Down eloquently stated that the attack might have been carried out by

“...some element of Republicanism that couldn’t tolerate his criticism and tried to terrorise him into silence.”

I do not apologise for reminding the House of the awkward subject of exiles and beatings, not to mention the murders since the start of 2001 to which the Provisional IRA have been linked. Although Sinn Féin/IRA might point out that Loyalists are now responsible for more attacks than the IRA — make no mistake, I remain unambiguous in my criticism of all paramilitary violence — the difference is that Loyalists have no hope of achieving a mere sniff of political power, this year or in the foreseeable future.

Furthermore, the umbilical cord that links Sinn Féin with the IRA also feeds other terrorist organisations like FARC, ETA and the PLO, even to the point of embarrassing the political hierarchy in front of its American supporters. Nevertheless, it rallies dutifully to the defence of those apprehended. Through its links with international terror, IRA/Sinn Féin has proven to be lacking in its commitment to the fundamentals of democracy and to the bottom line of law and order.

Members should remember when voting in these Lobbies that even while claiming to recognise the legitimacy of the gardaí — something which the RUC or the new Police Service will never achieve in the eyes of Republicans — IRA/Sinn Féin has never fully assisted officers investigating the Omagh bomb to bring the perpetrators to justice. Do such people and their policies merit authority over two of the most important Departments in the Executive?

Guns and government do not mix. Nevertheless, IRA/Sinn Féin is brutally aware that political power comes through the barrel of a gun, and the terrorist leopard has no intention of changing its spots. Let there be no doubt that if Sinn Féin gets its way, it will soon be wielding executive power on both sides of the border — literally in two separate countries. That will give it an influence that is unattainable to any other political party or Government.

I want to be clear to those of my Unionist family: there will be little sympathy in future elections for those who make their own beds and later complain about the lumps in the mattress, or who sup with the devil and complain that their spoon was shorter than a 40 ft pole when it is too late. It is said that

“by their deeds ye shall know them.”

By its actions IRA/Sinn Féin has made plain what it is and what it stands for.

As Members consider this exclusion motion — not for the first time — they must be under no illusions as to the objectives of IRA/Sinn Féin. They must take notice of the consequences of sharing power with those people who oppose this state to their very core.

Last year a magazine for young Republicans eloquently put forward the Republican agenda beyond a shadow of a doubt. It said:

“Sinn Féin Ministers are not in Stormont to run the health service or the schools as part of some permanent settlement...They are there to pursue our revolutionary objectives.”

Unionists and constitutional Nationalist representatives in this Chamber have sought the decommissioning of weapons and the disbanding of terrorist organisations long before the Belfast Agreement was signed, and now can be the time to say that enough is enough. We are still entitled to ask “Is the war over?”. Those were the words of our First Minister, Mr Trimble, in November 1998. In this debate we are still entitled to ask “Is the war over?”.

I support the motion, and, on the basis of my argument, I urge others to do likewise.

Dr Farren: It is very clear that in its stated objective of seeking the exclusion of Sinn Féin, and pursuing an attack on the Good Friday Agreement, this is not a serious motion. Everything that has been said, and much of what remains to be said, will make that abundantly clear. The DUP is not serious about having any party or anyone excluded from the Executive — it never has been. It is serious only about trying to embarrass the Ulster Unionist Party on this occasion. It also wants to sow further dissension in the Unionist community in the hope of electoral gain from that embarrassment and dissension.

The DUP is attempting to disrupt the workings of the Assembly by foisting on us a completely unnecessary and intentionally divisive debate. It exaggerates and continues to whip up, rather than allay, fears and apprehensions across the whole community — fears and apprehensions that, in many respects, I recognise to be genuine.

It is not my responsibility in this debate to defend any other party.

11.30 am

It is my responsibility to defend and uphold the Good Friday Agreement, and to ensure that its benefits continue to flow for all our people. Those benefits can be seen in the progress that is being made towards lasting peace and political stability. We have a Government that are accountable to the people, and that pursue economic and social policies that have the potential to bring even greater benefits to all sections of the community. Despite all the difficulties and challenges, we have been gradually laying the foundations of a warm house for all, whatever their background, identity, affiliation or ultimate aspiration.

I recognise that in laying those foundations, we have much building left to do. However, in this enterprise, the DUP seems confused. It does not know what its role should be, or how it might play that role. *[Interruption]*.

Mr Speaker: Order.

Dr Farren: If the DUP were honest in its confusion, I would have greater respect for the position that it articulates. There is very little on which I agree with Mr Cedric Wilson and his Colleagues, but I acknowledge the honesty of their position in the Assembly. They say that they will not mix it with Sinn Féin, and they do not. If the DUP were serious, it would follow Mr Cedric Wilson's example. However, it cannot resist the temptation to play political hokey-cokey: one leg in, one leg out; one arm in, one arm out. No wonder their Members' heads spin in confusion all the time.

DUP Ministers communicate in writing with my Executive Colleagues and me. Talking is merely another form of communication. The DUP Ministers ask the Executive, with their two Sinn Féin Ministers, to consider and approve their proposals. I am not the arbiter of the spending allocations that are made to Departments, but those DUP Ministers discuss their spending plans in detail with me, knowing that I must go and seek the endorsement of my Colleagues in the Executive. They ask that those Ministers approve their spending plans also.

The DUP Members participate in district partnerships and local strategy partnerships. They work in local groups with representatives from all political parties, including Sinn Féin. The DUP Members apply for funds that are managed by the Special European Union Programmes Body, and other North/South agencies directed by the North/South Ministerial Council, with which they also claim to have no truck. *[Interruption]*.

Mr Speaker: Order.

Dr Farren: The hypocrisy and the cynicism of the motion can hardly be more transparent. There remains a serious obligation on all pro-agreement parties to advance all aspects of the Good Friday Agreement. There is an obligation to advance not only the institutions that have been established through that agreement, but the confidence-building measures that are contained in the agreement. Those include the obligation to promote decommissioning. Implied in that obligation is the obligation to rid society of paramilitarism. The SDLP has consistently made the argument that paramilitarism is inconsistent with democracy.

The SDLP has continued to make that argument not just in the Assembly but throughout the 30 years in which paramilitarism wreaked havoc in many sections of our community. Paramilitarism includes Loyalist and Republican paramilitaries.

The progress that has been made must continue. Members place their trust in the work of the decommissioning body, and, with the support of the two Govern-

ments, the SDLP and other pro-agreement parties, it has worked hard to ensure that decommissioning will be progressed, and, ultimately, that it will be successful. Therefore paramilitarism, which has been a poison in our society, will be completely eliminated sooner rather than later. The warm house that we are building with confidence can then continue to be built, and it can shelter all, even those who oppose its construction.

Rev Dr William McCrea: The motion has been tabled by Members who believe that apologists for gunmen should have no place in Government. The vote today will be a test for all Members. Do they want a Government involving IRA/Sinn Féin, or a Government that are exclusively and totally committed to peaceful and democratic means? We must not forget that while we are here to debate this important motion on the exclusion of IRA/Sinn Féin, many still carry the wounds of 30 years of terrorism. There are widows carrying broken hearts and children longing for the return of their fathers, but that will never happen because of terrorism. However, that does not seem to matter to many Members.

Many elected representatives of the Unionist community cannot face this debate; how could they? How could any Unionist defend putting IRA murderers into Government over the people whom they have murdered for the past 30 years? It is pathetic that the Ulster Unionist Party could muster only a lookalike mortician and a comedian on the Front Bench instead of taking this matter seriously.

The DUP has been castigated for carrying out stunts. What greater political stunt is there than the abuse of having a First Minister elected without the support of the majority of Unionists in the Chamber? It was he, in his dash to power, who put IRA/Sinn Féin terrorists into the heart of Government. The Ulster Unionist Party is guilty of putting them there. However, it could join with the rest of the Unionist family to put them out. The Ulster Unionist Party has run away from its electoral manifesto commitments.

Dr Birnie: Will the Member give way?

Rev Dr William McCrea: No, I will not give way. The Member will have plenty of time to take part in the debate, and he will not have competition from the rest of his party, for they are not in the House.

The debate clearly shows, as the vote will show, that the majority of Unionists in the House do not agree with Sinn Féin/IRA's being in Government. One of David Trimble's main policies in allowing Gerry Adams and Martin McGuinness — the representatives of gunmen — to be in Government is not supported by the majority of Unionists in the elected Northern Ireland Assembly.

Rev Dr Ian Paisley: Perhaps the Member will agree, as he looks at the Bench on the other side, that not one Member of the Republican and Nationalist parties —

especially those Nationalists who are supposed to believe in democracy — is in his place. Nevertheless, having made that clear outside, they were still called to take part in the debate.

Rev Dr William McCrea: That will speak volumes. The majority of Unionists outside the House do not support Mr Trimble and the Ulster Unionists. It is with them — the electorate — that David Trimble will finally fall, and may that happen soon.

Today's vote will also demonstrate that there is no cross-community support for David Trimble or Mark Durkan to be the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister. They require more than 50% of the votes of the House. I challenge them, if they are so confident, to resign their posts and put themselves forward for re-election. When Mr Trimble was returned to office he did so on the back of the greatest cheater's charter ever. We are lectured about morality, honour, honesty and truth; yet, the proponents of the agreement are not prepared to go through the proper democratic process, because they know that they do not have the support in the House.

No other society, indeed no other Government, would tolerate such a situation. There is no better example of that than the Republic's Minister John O'Donoghue, who unequivocally ruled out his party's entering into Government with Sinn Féin/IRA because they were associated with a private army, and he stated that they could, therefore, not be trusted with matters such as defence, justice and security. The hypocrisy of Fianna Fáil in promoting, and advancing at every turn, the inclusion of Sinn Féin/IRA in the Executive Government of Northern Ireland is absolute, when Bertie Ahern scorns their presence in the South.

IRA/Sinn Féin has not changed its ways; it has not decommissioned. Instead, it chooses to target, train and murder. Mr McGimpsey claims that the great achievement of the Ulster Unionist Party is that it achieved decommissioning. Mr de Chastelain tells us that he does not know where he was, he does not know how he got there, he does not know who went with him, and he cannot say how much material he saw or did not see, but he knows that he left the weapons and the bunkers safely under the control of the Provisional IRA. That is a tremendous achievement for Mr McGimpsey and Mr Trimble to beat their chests and cry

"We did this all in the name of Unionism."

The events of Sunday 17 February 2002, in my constituency of Mid Ulster, highlighted the real agenda of IRA/Sinn Féin. Found in the heart of McGuinness's territory was a sophisticated rocket launcher and warhead. Those arrested are well-known IRA members. What was IRA weaponry doing on the move? Had this not been decommissioned? We know that nothing has been decommissioned. Make no mistake about it: these were intact weapons of war to execute and murder the ordinary

decent citizens of my constituency. The Ulster Unionist Member, Billy Armstrong — where is he today? — said in the 'News Letter' on Tuesday 19 February 2002:

"Once again we see the contempt that republicans have for the peace process."

Surely in the light of those words he should back the motion, or else he is a hypocrite saying something for public consumption while supporting IRA/Sinn Féin in the House. We know that he will be an obedient poodle who will do his master's bidding when the strings are pulled. Those who fail to back the motion are registering their support for, and placing their confidence in, IRA/Sinn Féin. The IRA has never shown any remorse for its deeds.

The reality of the debate is that it reflects that decommissioning has yet to occur, and that the IRA has no intention of decommissioning. Mr Trimble and his Weston Park negotiating team told us that decommissioning was the only item on the agenda to be dealt with. Yet he and Jeffrey Donaldson breathed life into a talks process that led to a five-page document in which 67 words dealt with decommissioning, and the rest detailed the destruction of policing and security installations and attempts to put the IRA back into Government. What a set of negotiators; considering that Weston Park delivered promises for an on-the-run amnesty that is being developed for IRA murderers.

The Ulster Unionist Party in its document, 'Understanding the Agreement', claimed:

"Decommissioning alone, of course is not enough. Paramilitary organisations must stand down their units, and the IRA must indicate that the war is over."

Ulster Unionists who fail to support the motion will, once again, be trampling their pledge to the electorate into the ground. They will also be registering a vote of confidence in Martin McGuinness and his friends within the IRA murdering machine.

As I have said, in no other democratic country in the world would there be terrorists in Government. However, of course, we find one here in the post of Minister of Education.

11.45 am

I am reminded that the Provisional IRA has, down through the years, murdered schoolteachers, schoolchildren, principals, students, others who work in schools and school bus drivers. Many innocent victims have been murdered in the presence of young people and students. Millions of pounds have been wasted through damage to schools and universities by IRA bombs. There remains a crisis in education funding, which can, in part, be attributed to 30 years of terrorist onslaught directed against us by the Provisional IRA.

This is the same Minister who, after the elections to Londonderry City Council on 16 May 1985, said:

“We do not believe that winning elections and winning any amount of votes will bring freedom to Ireland — at the end of the day it will be the cutting edge of the IRA that will bring freedom.”

When Mr Trimble addressed the Assembly the other day he told the DUP and its friends to get out of the place, but he did not tell Martin McGuinness or the members of the IRA to leave this place to true democracy and to true democrats.

The motion is simple: we can choose to exclude the political representatives of the most brutal killing machine in Western Europe and take a stand for democracy, decency and justice, or we can choose to allow them to remain in the Chamber with their stockpile of weaponry, dancing on the graves of thousands. Make no mistake, we will hear from Mr Trimble that, prior to the election, he will have a stunt for the electorate, and the IRA will have a stunt to seal or open another bunker prior to St Patrick’s Day and the Irish Republic’s election.

Mr Weir: With one brief period of exception, the party that is the subject of the motion has lived up to its old nickname and has effectively run away today. We are confronted by the absence of the party opposite, but it is not the silence of the lambs; rather it is the silence of the wolves.

We are reminded of the flexibility of the English language. When the phrase “motion for exclusion” is used by anti-agreement Unionists, the words become equated with “stunt”, “joke” and “political escapade”. We are accused by that erstwhile visitor to Northern Ireland, Lord Kilclooney, of tabling the motion for narrow political purposes. To be fair to Lord Kilclooney, the next time he comes here, he might include a visit to the Policing Board. Yet, when the First Minister uses the phrase “motion for exclusion”, he is suddenly said to be taking a stand of courage against the ravages of terrorism; he is showing decisive leadership and using a device to force Sinn Féin to decommission — the motion to exclude suddenly becomes something noble.

Today’s debate was inevitable, because when the Government were re-established in November, there was no firm basis. When we were deciding whether to re-elect the First Minister and establish the Government, two questions were raised about decommissioning by others and me. We needed to know whether we were establishing a secure Government, so we asked for clarity on what the supposed act of decommissioning had been. Secondly, we asked if it was a one-off gesture or part of a process. As responsible politicians, my Colleague, Pauline Armitage, and I and others went to Gen de Chastelain — the only person who could give us an answer. We had a lengthy meeting and asked him a wide range of questions. It has already been said that there was no detail on the methodology, the amount and where or when decommissioning had taken place. One phrase that was bandied about was that “the amount was significant”. Gen de Chastelain denied that he had said that the amount

was significant. One of my Colleagues asked him if, given that he had described the IRA event and the LVF action as significant, he still regarded the LVF act as significant. The general replied that he did and for the same reasons as he had at the time. He said that an event had taken place and that it was “significant”.

In the light of the LVF’s subsequent actions, for anyone, Nationalist or Unionist, to draw reassurance from the significance of its decommissioning shows how paltry the reassurance from Sinn Féin was. The more important question about whether Sinn Féin is fit to be in government is not about the actions that it has taken in the past, but about its future intentions.

Gen de Chastelain was asked several questions on this, for example “You are saying that the only commitment by the IRA has been to meet again soon. There has been no commitment to any second act of decommissioning?” The answer was “That is correct. The only formal commitment has been the one they made publicly to initiate a process to put arms beyond use on 6 May last year. However, we do not want to be involved in a one-off event.”

Another question was “Am I correct in saying that there has been no specific commitment by the IRA to a timetable?” The answer was “That is correct.” Yet another question was “Is it also the case that they have given no specific commitment to complete decommissioning?” The answer was “That is also correct.”

In November many of us warned that we had seen a cynical gesture, aimed simply at getting Sinn Féin back into government and the First Minister back into his position. We were told that we were scaremongers who were opposed to peace. However, there has been no commitment — and, more importantly, no action — by Sinn Féin to move towards a peaceful way forward and complete decommissioning.

Mr McCartney: The Member may be aware that, one week ago, Gen de Chastelain confirmed in an interview everything that the Member has said, and indicated that there was absolutely no prospect — immediate or otherwise — of any further event. As far as he was concerned, no further progress had been made.

Mr Weir: I am grateful to the Member for that information, which confirms what has been said.

It seems strange that this is happening four months after it seemed appropriate to set up the Government. The first time the Government were set up, continuing without decommissioning was said to be intolerable after two and a half months. However, not only has the First Minister failed to back the motion, but there has not been even a vague hint of sanctions against Sinn Féin/IRA.

It is not solely the absence of decommissioning that renders Sinn Féin’s continued role in government incompatible with democracy; it is their daily activities, such

as punishment shootings, criminality, occasional murders, exiling of people, beatings, gangsterism and refusal to end the war.

Nationalist politicians and media commentators on both sides of the border often tell me that we cannot expect 30 years of terrorism to end overnight, and that it will gradually peter out. However, it is probably more than seven and a half years since the first ceasefire, and we have not seen the violence peter out. We have seen the paramilitary activity tighten its hold on the community, and the authorities have consistently turned a blind eye to it.

Mr Gibson: Does the Member accept that the current threats against 22 people in west Tyrone and the find near Ballybofey — only a few miles from west Tyrone, on one of 49 roads that cross the border — are evidence that the IRA is active and not on ceasefire?

Mr Weir: Absolutely. Whenever something happens or threatens to happen, either a wall of silence faces us, or it is dismissed as internal housekeeping. Alternatively, when something happens the whispers go out; the oft-used excuse that, whether the violence came from the Loyalist or Republican side, it cannot be attributed to mainstream paramilitary organisations. It is supposedly the work of dissidents and mavericks.

We must be grateful that the NIO was not in charge of this country in 1939. We can imagine the sort of statements that would have been produced after the invasion of Poland. It might have said that it was not the work of the Nazi Party, which was committed to the European peace process, but of a few dissident, maverick Germans.

Indeed, the Government, having examined the situation, could declare that Herr Hitler was still on ceasefire. Humour aside, every time that the Northern Ireland Office turns a blind eye to recurring Loyalist and Republican terrorist activity, it effectively gives it a green light. It says to terrorists that as long as they do not stir things up by making it obvious who is directly involved or by killing people from the other community, it will not place sanctions on their activity.

However, it is not only the Northern Ireland Office that has a responsibility. Assembly parties, including the UUP and the SDLP, have a moral responsibility. The House heard many fine words from Minister Farren, who told us that terrorism is incompatible with democracy and that it could not be tolerated. It has been tolerated by Assembly parties for too long. The House has heard enough of fine words. It is time for parties to commit themselves to sanctions. The one sanction that is available with regard to Sinn Féin/IRA that would have any effect, or afford an opportunity to achieve decommissioning, is exclusion from office until that decommissioning has been completed and terrorism has been brought to a halt. I urge not only the UUP but also the

SDLP to stand shoulder to shoulder with us, the other democrats in the Assembly, and to have the courage of their convictions. Instead of SDLP Members skulking in their offices today, they should come into the Chamber and vote for the motion. That would send out a clear signal that the Assembly will no longer tolerate the terrorism of Sinn Féin or Republican and Loyalist paramilitary groups. I urge Members to support the motion.

Mr C Wilson: Given that Ministers and those in senior Government positions in the rest of the UK are rightly removed from office for crimes such as lying, misappropriation and financial impropriety, the people of Northern Ireland are entitled to ask why the Assembly must debate the issue of the removal of someone from Government who, as Minister of Education, boasts openly to schoolchildren about his days on the run when he avoided proper retribution for such crimes as the House has heard of today.

The people of Northern Ireland would also be correct to ask why, as Dr Paisley and others have asked, the Government of the Republic of Ireland, the other co-sponsor of the Belfast Agreement, have different criteria for those who are considered to be fit to hold office. Although I agree with Dr Paisley that there may not be much genuine intent on Mr Ahern's behalf, he has set the criteria that the IRA must decommission all its weapons, and that Sinn Féin must divorce and dissociate itself completely from the IRA before it can sit in an Administration in the Republic of Ireland.

The hypocrisy of the British and Irish Governments comes as no surprise to anyone in Northern Ireland. They are the people who forced the iniquitous Belfast Agreement on the poor, unsuspecting, decent, law-abiding citizens — Protestant and Catholic, Unionist and Nationalist. The agreement is now starting to show its true colours. It is quite clear that the Belfast Agreement was created because the British and Irish Governments decided that they would appease terrorism rather than challenge it or deal with it. My Colleague Mr Roche has related, in graphic detail, the crimes committed by the people who now sit in Government over those whom they terrorised. These people have still not been brought to book for crimes such as the murder of Patrick Gillespie.

Why do we have such an Assembly, an elected body, in Northern Ireland? People had high hopes that the Assembly would be a starting point for a devolved Administration.

It stemmed from the two Governments' decision to pay the price to get the terrorists off their backs. However, it could not have happened without the betrayal of the Unionist and, indeed, of the wider community, by Mr Trimble and his Colleagues. Moreover, it was Mr Trimble who permitted those people to be brought into government in Northern Ireland. That diametrically opposed his pledge in 1998 in an Ulster Unionist Party document

that encouraged people to vote “Yes” in the referendum. Mr Nesbitt is clutching at straws when he points to what he deems an act of decommissioning. They are no doubt hoping that there will be another event or stunt in the next week or two, whereby Sinn Féin/IRA will try to build some confidence, as they call it.

12.00

Mr Trimble set a higher criterion that is, in fact, closer to that of the Taoiseach, Mr Ahern. He pledged that the UUP would not serve in the Executive Committee with any party that is not genuinely committed to peace. If anyone is in any doubt about what that means, he goes on to say that

“the commitment to peaceful and non-violent means is incompatible with the existence of a private army. Decommissioning alone, of course, is not enough. Paramilitary organisations must stand down their units, and the IRA must indicate that the war is over.”

I ask Ulster Unionists to judge that against the present situation and to explain why they are still in this House and in the Executive with Sinn Féin.

We must face reality. People will undoubtedly ask why, even if every Unionist were present and voted for the exclusion of Sinn Féin from the Executive, the motion would not succeed. It is because, under the present system, cross-community support is required. Undoubtedly, support would not be forthcoming from Sinn Féin’s bedfellows in the SDLP, the Women’s Coalition and perhaps even from those who still claim to have some element of Unionism in their loyalty.

There is only one way in which the community and the House can rid itself of the spectacle of Mr Martin McGuinness and Ms de Brún fronting a party that is inextricably linked to a terrorist organisation, and I ask anyone to challenge my thinking and reasoning on this. Given that the two Governments will not do it for us, the only effective and possible means of removing Sinn Féin from office is for the Ulster Unionist Party and the Democratic Unionist Party to resign their ministerial positions. The Executive cannot continue without a Unionist input.

I agree with Dr Paisley, and I shall face his challenge fairly and squarely. He rightly said that the DUP’s leaving the Executive today would not bring about the demise of the Executive. However, it would clearly leave Mr Trimble exposed. I appeal to my Colleagues in the Democratic Unionist Party to do that to him to leave him naked and alone in an Executive with those fronting paramilitary organisations. That would be the beginning of the end of this unholy edifice.

If the Ulster Unionist Party and the DUP cannot bring this process to an end and remove Sinn Féin/IRA from the Executive before the end of this Assembly session and so allow them into the next Assembly session, they will be equally guilty of betraying the electorate and the decent people of Northern Ireland. Our future, the future

of democracy and the future of those who hold dear decency and the entire structure of law and order in this Province is in our own hands.

It is in the hands of every Unionist in the Chamber, and I ask for a united Unionist front on the issue. As the Ulster Unionist Party approach the Ulster Unionist Council meeting on 9 March I ask them not to consider what is right for David Trimble or the yes/no divisions in that party but to ask themselves how democracy can best be served and proper structures put in place. That cannot be done by propping up the system that was set up under the Belfast Agreement. I leave the Unionist community to determine whether there is a will in Unionism to deal with the issue of terrorists in Government. Only through a united Unionist approach can Sinn Féin/IRA be removed from Government.

Ms Armitage: Again, the deadline for total decommissioning — 28 February — has passed. The original date was May 2000. In a letter to David Trimble before the referendum on the Belfast Agreement, Prime Minister Tony Blair said that decommissioning must begin immediately the Assembly elections were over, that there was a limit of two years for the completion of this process and that all participants had to reaffirm their commitment to the total disarmament of all paramilitary organisations.

The Prime Minister went on to assure David that if the provisions in the agreement were not strong enough on that point then he, the Prime Minister, would introduce the necessary legislation.

The Ulster Unionist Party also made commitments to the electorate. It said:

“The UUP will hold all parties and the Prime Minister to these commitments. The UUP will not serve in the Executive Committee with any party which is not genuinely committed to peace.”

It went even further:

“The UUP regards actual decommissioning as evidence of a commitment to totally peaceful and democratic means. In any event, the UUP will refuse to serve alongside any group of ... terrorists. The commitment to peaceful and non-violent means is incompatible with the existence of a private army. Decommissioning alone, of course, is not enough. Paramilitary organisations must stand down their units, and the IRA must declare that the war is over.”

Those are not my words. I am quoting from the Ulster Unionist Party document ‘Understanding the Agreement’.

All my life I have been loyal to the Ulster Unionist Party. Now I have been suspended because I decided to stand by that document and my election manifesto. As an Ulster Unionist I look forward to the day when a policy of removing terrorists from the Government of this part of the United Kingdom will mean that my loyalty to that party can continue.

There has been no decommissioning about which we can be certain. There was, apparently, a significant act of decommissioning in October 2001. There is nothing more to report at the moment, so Tony Blair has had

another bright idea. He will slightly change the criminal justice procedures. The coat of arms will remain in some courts, and the Union flag will fly on designated days.

The UUP has talked of its achievements on the criminal justice procedures. It should not have signed up in the first place to an agreement that would remove the Union flag and the coat of arms. Had it not agreed to that, it would not have had to fight so hard to retain the status quo.

Mr Blair and Mr Reid will doubtless announce an amnesty for terrorists on the run. Since that was never part of the Belfast Agreement, smiling, lying Tony decided to serve up a wee sweet pill to the Unionist community before the real — bitter — one. No one should be surprised; we have seen it all before.

The terrorists who carried out the Teebane massacre, killing workmen who were travelling home after an honest day's work, will be free to do what they want and to go where they like. The same applies to the Enniskillen bombers and to the terrorists responsible for the attack on the Darkley Mission Hall and for the Kingsmill massacre, La Mon and Bloody Friday — to name but a few.

I have no doubt that the concessions agreed at Weston Park were in exchange for an act of decommissioning in October 2001. There was one item on the agenda at the Weston Park talks — decommissioning. Now, months later, we still have no decommissioning, just more concessions.

Who altered the agenda? I had a meeting with Mr Trimble, and he told me that the Prime Minister had changed the agenda, and that he — Mr Trimble — was very annoyed. I repeated my question. Again, Mr Trimble looked at me and said "I was very annoyed". Perhaps our Prime Minister should spend more time trying to defeat terrorism in the United Kingdom, and less time trotting around the world talking tough on terrorism. Would Mr Blair allow terrorists to hold ministerial posts in his Government? Even the terrorists' best friend, Bertie Ahern, does not want them.

Following a murder in Castlewellan, County Down, a Sinn Féin Member said that he was 100% sure that the IRA had had nothing to do with it. However, Members are always told that Sinn Féin cannot speak for the IRA and that it knows nothing about the IRA's guns.

As a reasonable person, I accept that members of Sinn Féin have been elected. Members of Sinn Féin live here, and I ask them to decommission their illegal weapons. That was part of the great and wonderful Belfast Agreement that they signed up to, and which they want to see implemented in full. Mr Adams has said that he is going to try to persuade moderate Unionists like me to join him in a new, agreed United Ireland. Well, Gerry could make a positive start. He could start by decommissioning all his illegal weapons. I still will not join his United Ireland,

but I will try to make him feel more welcome in my United Kingdom.

Decommissioning always seems to get a reprieve. The deadline was originally May 2000; that became February 2001; and now it has been extended to 2006 or 2007. Why do Members accept those deadlines? The Royal Ulster Constabulary was not granted a reprieve on its disbandment, uniform changes or recruitment policies. Why? It was because Members of the House would not have accepted it. How then can Members of the House accept a process with no decommissioning? Surely decommissioning is at the very heart of the peace process. Repeatedly extending the deadline gives the impression that decommissioning is not really that important. Sinn Féin can sit back, retain its weapons and seek more and more and more concessions.

Everyone in this House should be equal when it comes to creating a peaceful, prosperous Northern Ireland. I have no guns, bullets or Semtex to use as a bargaining tool. I have nothing more than my conscience, my memories of my murdered friends and my honest belief that I have a right to see decommissioning now, rather than in 2007.

I appeal to the Prime Minister, his Government and Mr Trimble to stand by their commitment to decommissioning as part of the peace process. We will possibly see another bunker sealed within the next few days. I hope that members of the Ulster Unionist Party do not jump up and down with excitement, because it is not for their good, my good or the good of Ulster — it is so that Sinn Féin might get a few extra votes in the elections in the Irish Republic.

The relatives of those who gave their lives for this country must wonder why they did it, for we now share power with the men and women who murdered their loved ones. I wonder how the Unionists in this House will be recorded in history. We will not be around to see that, but we have children and will have great-grandchildren, to whom we have already given a murderer and a bomber as a Minister for their education. I suggest that we do not let them down again. I support the motion.

12.15 pm

Mr Dodds: I will be brief, to allow the Member to have sufficient time for his winding-up speech. I wish to reply to some of the points of those who attacked the DUP and then scurried out of the Chamber, because they did not have even the courtesy to listen to the rest of the arguments. The absence of other parties from the House, with some exceptions, shows contempt not for certain parties, but for the people of Northern Ireland. Those parties try to downplay the importance of decommissioning, yet no issue is more important to the people of Northern Ireland than the way in which the so-called peace process has allowed people to be in Government

while holding on to paramilitary weapons and maintaining a paramilitary organisation.

If those Members think that the issue will be brushed under the carpet because they are absent, they have another think coming. Even the parties in the South recognise the dangers that they might face and are speaking out on the issue. As my hon Friend said, undoubtedly they speak with forked tongues, but they make the same point. However, some Unionists still sit silently in the Chamber, or on their hands, and are prepared to allow IRA/Sinn Féin in Government in Northern Ireland, although Nationalists and Republicans in the South do not, and would not, support their presence in Government.

Some 99% of the Ulster Unionist Party's contribution to the debate was a tirade of abuse against the DUP, based on a series of documentation. Some of the UUP were members of the DUP for much of the time that the documents referred to. I see one of the Members, from Lisburn, who will undoubtedly be opposed to what Mr Nesbitt said, as he supported many of the policies at the time and is on record as saying so. The UUP has no defence against our arguments for the exclusion of IRA/Sinn Féin. IRA/Sinn Féin is a paramilitary-linked organisation, which is part and parcel of the Republican movement, and which is engaging in paramilitary, violent activity today — never mind its history. It has never apologised for that history, and it has never disowned it. It should not be in Government. Rather than take that issue on, the UUP prefers to attack other Unionists. Mr McGimpsey had the audacity to say on the radio this morning that the motion was really an attack by the DUP against Ulster Unionists.

Dr Farren said that the DUP was confused. The only people in Northern Ireland who are confused about the Democratic Unionist Party's position are Dr Farren and those who oppose the DUP. I am glad that he has finally had the courtesy to reply, since he did not have the courtesy to wait to hear the other arguments, but scuttled out as soon as he had finished his own speech.

Mr Speaker: Order.

Mr Dodds: Dr Farren spoke about the DUP's taking the Pledge of Office, an issue that I heard about on the radio this morning. The DUP took the Pledge of Office, subject to its electoral commitments and manifesto. It acts entirely in accordance with that procedure and those commitments, unlike others, and it abides by those manifesto commitments. Mr Trimble and the Ulster Unionist Party proposed the exact same motion before the last election, as the hon Member for North Down Mr Weir pointed out. When that party proposed the motion, it was considered to be a tremendous act of courage, designed to take on the IRA; now it is considered to be a stunt. The difference is that, at that time, there was an election coming up, for which Mr Trimble needed support. He thought that the motion would give him some cover.

As Dr Paisley said, if the Ulster Unionist Party is prepared to leave office, the DUP will not remain in the Executive. However, if the DUP were to leave its ministerial positions now, those positions would be taken by its enemies and used to advance the pro-agreement agenda.

Likewise, it has been agreed by all anti-agreement Unionists that it would be wrong to leave the Assembly, even though Sinn Féin is part of it — we have to be here to take Sinn Féin on. We have to ensure that we use the tactics that were endorsed by the electorate when they were put to them at the recent election. There is no confusion — the people are clear, and we are clear. We are going to remain here to harry and harass Mr Trimble, IRA/Sinn Féin, the SDLP and anyone else who wishes to implement the pro-agreement agenda.

Mr McCartney: It is a regrettable matter, but one of which the pro-Union supporters will no doubt take note, that the Ulster Unionist Party, in league with Irish Nationalists and Republican parties, has confined this important debate to two hours.

None of those parties — and especially not Sinn Féin — wishes to have an issue central to the very heart and concept of democratic government fully debated in a public forum. The number of Ulster Unionist and SDLP Members, to say nothing of Sinn Féin, present for this debate on such a central issue is nothing short of a democratic disgrace, and the contributions of some, such as Dr Farren, are nothing short of democratic depravity.

The peace process was allegedly based on the negotiation of a political settlement between parties dedicated to a peaceful democratic process. It was claimed that only those who eschewed violence as a means of achieving political objectives, and who were permanently committed to non-violent means, were to be included. However, Sinn Féin/IRA bombed and murdered its way, not only into the negotiations, but into Government over those whom it had terrorised, while the security forces who have upheld the rule of law have been downgraded and demeaned.

The peace process and the institutions that it has spawned were merely a cover for conflict resolution between the British Government and violent Republicanism, camouflage for the appeasement of terrorism to obtain not an end to acts of terrorism, but an end to such acts on the British mainland. The Belfast Agreement was conceived as the product of political terror, and it survives because of the threat of renewed mainland terror.

The price of England's safety was the promise to Sinn Féin/IRA of a transitional process towards Irish unity, and the retention by Sinn Féin/IRA of its weaponry is its means of ensuring that perfidious Albion antes up in the fulfilment of its undertaking. Nothing else can explain the abandonment by the British Government of every position that they have taken on the need for decommissioning. They have exaggerated the significance of,

and accepted, every ambiguous and deceptive statement on decommissioning made by Sinn Féin, and they are permitting the denigration and demeaning of every symbol, flag and insignia of the majority's British, political and national identity.

That is all made possible by the British fear of a resumption of mainland violence and the retention by Sinn Féin/IRA of its weaponry. Even post-11 September 2001, the British Government stay in cowardly concession mode, despite the fact that the United States's attitude to terrorism would have made any immediate resumption of mainland violence by the IRA improbable.

Current proposals for granting amnesty to criminals on the run bear witness to the continuance of this sickening appeasement. The British Government have been able to pursue a policy of endless concessions to Sinn Féin/IRA by the abject failure of David Trimble and his party to support other pro-Union parties in excluding Sinn Féin from the democratic process while it remains inextricably linked to armed and violent terrorists who retain the means of death and destruction and who, almost daily, engage in the most serious criminal acts of violence and intimidation.

What is the reason for the Ulster Unionist Party's behaviour? It is that Mr Trimble and his supporters on the institutional payroll are more dedicated to their personal and party interests than they are either to the democratic process or to the defence of the Union. The twists and turns of Mr Trimble and some of his political henchmen, such as Messrs Nesbitt and McGimpsey, are too numerous to detail.

Unfortunately for them and their party, as far as the electorate is concerned, they are becoming like President Clinton, whom one Washington journalist described as having no one left to lie to. They are discovering that the pro-Union people now recognise that they have been conned and that Northern Ireland is, indeed, a cold place for Unionists. It is a cold place because Sinn Féin/IRA has the weapons that frighten Mr Blair and his Government into turning the heat down by an endless stream of concessions to Republicanism. Indeed, so gutless are Mr Blair and his political gofer John Reid that the latter is inviting Sinn Féin/IRA and the Irish Government to give Unionists a little heat — perhaps in case Unionists decide that Northern Ireland has become so cold and that heat is so necessary for their survival that they begin to warm themselves.

Does Sinn Féin, that regurgitates the worn out mantra that it is entitled to be here on the basis of its mandate, not realise that since Adolf Hitler's thugs received the judgement at Nuremberg, parties can no longer claim to have a mandate to murder, maim and destroy on that basis? They can no longer claim, as Mr Milosevic is discovering, that acts of violent political terrorism can receive the absolution of an electoral mandate. Nor can

Sinn Féin/IRA be allowed the protection of a military ceasefire to justify acts of civil murder, violence and intimidation against those whom it decides to punish. Indeed, nothing is more despicable than Prime Minister Blair's failure to honour the pledges on beatings and intimidation which he gave not only to the pro-Union people, but to those living in Nationalist areas whom Republican terrorists continue to prey upon and attack.

Democracy and its institutions cannot coexist with terrorism, and what is appalling in democratic terms is the position of the SDLP and the Ulster Unionists. They seem to think that terrorism can, indeed, live side by side with democracy. Democrats cannot negotiate on an equal basis with those who can threaten violence and who retain the means to make good those threats. Perhaps Mark Durkan, now in the elevated position of Deputy First Minister, did not realise the full import of his remarks in a recent debate when he revealed that senior British officials at Weston Park in effect contrasted the relevant political leverage of democrats such as the SDLP with that of Sinn Féin in four words — you have no guns. Now is the time when all democrats must remove Sinn Féin/IRA from the political scene until it, like the rest of us, has no guns.

Now I will mention the absent senior sycophant Dermot Nesbitt. In this Chamber on 19 February he said:

"I hope that he reads the transcript of today's debate, because he is the hypocrite; he is prattling appeasement when he uses phrases such as 'mere form of words'. If anyone does not believe me, especially Mr McCartney, I invite him or her to read the 'Belfast Telegraph' of 1 May 1998, which plainly shows that..." [Official Report, Vol 14, No 8, p351]

Well I have read the 'Belfast Telegraph', and there is not one single word about decommissioning and not one single phrase about "a mere form of words". After two letters and six phone calls Mr Nesbitt replied that the weight of his onerous duties of office prevented him from responding.

This is the man who invited everybody in the Assembly to go and look at the 'Belfast Telegraph' of 1 May 1998, yet he now finds that even he cannot go. That is typical of the turns, twists, deceit, duplicity and utter cowardice of an Ulster Unionist Party that has deceived and conned the pro-Union electorate. However, its time is up. I support the motion.

12.30 pm

Mr Speaker: I remind Members that, in accordance with section 30 of the Northern Ireland Act 1998, this motion may be passed only with cross-community support.

Question put.

Mr Speaker: I declare that the motion has fallen.

Mr Dodds: On a point of order, Mr Speaker. If there is a dispute about the outcome of the vote, do you not have to call a Division?

Mr Speaker: If the House wishes to divide, I am certainly prepared to call a Division.

Question put.

The Assembly divided: Ayes 30; Noes 3

AYES

Unionist:

Fraser Agnew, Pauline Armitage, Paul Berry, Norman Boyd, Gregory Campbell, Mervyn Carrick, Wilson Clyde, Nigel Dodds, Boyd Douglas, Oliver Gibson, William Hay, David Hilditch, Roger Hutchinson, Gardiner Kane, Robert McCartney, William McCrea, Maurice Morrow, Ian Paisley Jnr, Ian R K Paisley, Edwin Poots, Iris Robinson, Mark Robinson, Peter Robinson, Patrick Roche, Jim Shannon, Denis Watson, Peter Weir, Jim Wells, Cedric Wilson, Sammy Wilson.

NOES

Nationalist:

Alban Maginness, Conor Murphy, John Tierney.

<i>Total Votes</i>	<i>33</i>	<i>Total Ayes</i>	<i>30 (90.9%)</i>
<i>Nationalist Votes</i>	<i>3</i>	<i>Nationalist Ayes</i>	<i>0 (0.0%)</i>
<i>Unionist Votes</i>	<i>30</i>	<i>Unionist Ayes</i>	<i>30 (100.0%)</i>

Question accordingly negatived (cross-community vote).

Mr Dodds: On a point of order, Mr Speaker. That vote shows overwhelming approval for the exclusion of IRA/Sinn Féin, and it shows that a clear majority of Unionists in the House are in favour of that. Will you ensure that that is brought to the attention, not only of the Secretary of State, but also of the Prime Minister? He pledged that if the mechanisms of this Assembly did not prove adequate for removing IRA/Sinn Féin, he would take action. Will you ensure that that is drawn to his attention so that he fulfils the pledge he made to the people of Northern Ireland before the referendum?

Mr Speaker: I do, as a matter of course, bring to the attention of any Ministers motions that relate specifically in their terms to the Ministers involved. This motion relates to responsibilities within the Assembly, not to what the Prime Minister might do. It would be inappropriate for me to take that action. I have no doubt that there are Members here who are fully equipped to do what the Member suggests. That is the proper course of action, rather than for me as Speaker to address the matter.

Adjourned at 12.44 pm.

NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

Monday 11 March 2002

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

Members observed two minutes' silence.

ASSEMBLY BUSINESS

Mr Speaker: Following last Monday's Question Time, Mr Derek Hussey raised a point of order seeking clarification on the convention adopted by the Speaker or Deputy Speaker in choosing supplementary questioners.

The choice of supplementary questions is at the discretion of the Speaker or Deputy Speaker, and there are many matters to be taken into account. I have discussed the matter on several occasions with the Business Committee. There is the need to balance satisfactory exploration of the issue with the need for Ministers to answer as many tabled questions as possible in the time available.

Aside from the question from the Member who tabled the question, I shall ordinarily call a maximum of two further supplementary questions. I do that to ensure that Members who take the trouble to table questions are not excessively disadvantaged by other Members who request to ask supplementary questions. I shall not generally call more than one Member from any party to pose a question or supplementaries to it. In addition, I shall not call a Member to pose a supplementary question who already has a listed question on the Notice Paper that may be reasonably expected to be reached by the Minister during Question Time.

There are many other matters to be taken into account, such as the preference accorded to Chairpersons and Deputy Chairpersons of Committees whose Minister is answering the particular questions, the preference accorded to other Members in a constituency, when a constituency is the subject of a question, and the recognition of Members who have a standing interest in the issue to hand.

With only two supplementary questions and at least five major sections of the House, if not more, it is clear that on many occasions there will not be a balance within a question. However, the Speaker or Deputy Speaker does try, as far as possible, to maintain a balance over time. I have studied Hansard in respect of this period of questions, and I am content that, as far as was reasonably possible, the proper conventions were followed in questions to the

Minister. I hope that this assists in clarifying the matter for the Member and the House.

Mr Hussey: On a point of order, Mr Speaker. The Minister mentioned people who had a relevant interest in the issue. However, two members of the Committee for Regional Development were not called to speak. In spite of the cross-community nature of the Assembly, no one was called to speak from this side of the House.

Mr Speaker: I have to say that I think the Member is picking and choosing; he needs to be careful that he is not challenging the Chair. The question of the occupant of the Chair at any time is not a matter of issue. The conventions are clear, and Members will see that the matter was properly attended to. I hope that the Member will read all of what I have said, not just the bits of it that happen to suit that particular question for himself.

PUBLIC PETITION

Transfer of Omagh Permit Office

Mr Speaker: Mr Hussey has begged leave to present a public petition in accordance with Standing Order 22.

Mr Hussey: I beg leave to present a petition on behalf of 91 farmers from West Tyrone under Standing Order 22. I acknowledge the work of Omagh district councillor, Bert Wilson, who is a farmer and a signatory of the petition. The petition is in support of the transfer of the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development permit office from Sperrin House, Omagh, to the agricultural mart at Drumquin Road, Omagh. The concern of the petition is further heightened by the closure of parking facilities at the former Omagh Showgrounds site, thus increasing the difficult access problems at the current location of the Department's permit office and the problems associated with parking in Omagh generally.

Mr Hussey 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 a copy to the Chairperson of the Committee for Agriculture and Rural Development.

ASSEMBLY:

Committee of the Centre

Resolved:

That Mr Duncan Shipley Dalton shall replace Mr Fred Cobain as a member of the Committee of the Centre. — *[Mr Davis.]*

ASSEMBLY:

Committee for Health, Social Services and Public Safety

Resolved:

That Mr Tom Hamilton shall replace Mr Alan McFarland as a member of the Committee for Health, Social Services and Public Safety. — *[Mr Davis.]*

ASSEMBLY:

Committee of the Centre

Resolved:

That Mr Danny Kennedy shall replace Mr James Leslie as a member of the Committee of the Centre. — *[Mr Davis.]*

PRIMARY CARE

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

That this Assembly expresses its grave concern about the future of primary care services in Northern Ireland and calls on the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to take prompt action to allay the serious concerns of the professionals and staff working in health and social services about the arrangements for local health and social care groups.

The debate is about the future of primary care services in Northern Ireland. The Prime Minister, Tony Blair, and successive Secretaries of State have told us that the Health Service should be primary care led — it should be led from the coalface: from the bottom up; not from the top down. The former direct rule Minister, John McFall, produced a document some time ago called 'Fit for the Future — a New Approach.' It was addressed to the New Northern Ireland Assembly, and it expressed a vision of health and personal social services as a single integrated service centred around primary care.

The needs of people were to come first, and the needs of organisations were to come second. The proposed new groups are to be committees of the health boards. I welcome the end of fundholding because of the inequities in the system. However, the four health boards have been around for years, carrying out the commissioning for non-fundholding practices, and they have not succeeded. We are moving backwards rather than forwards.

I unequivocally support the setting up of new primary care groups, with multidisciplinary teams working together. However, the guidelines should have been issued a year ago — certainly, at least 10 months ago. Our vision for primary care should be similar to that in England — empowering front-line staff to use their skills and knowledge to develop innovative services, with more say in how services are delivered, and empowering patients to become informed and active partners in their care.

We understand the massive financial constraints on the Minister and the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety and I am aware of the recent report by the Northern Ireland Confederation for Health and Social Services (NICON), which covers the four boards. One of the points that it made was that an extra £100 million per year is needed, in real terms, over the next 10 years to bring the service up to an acceptable level. I accept that there has been a legacy of underfunding over many years. However, a 7.2% increase for the health budget was announced in October 2000; £17 million was allocated in November 2000; £14.5 million was allocated in January; and a further £18.5 million was allocated in February. In total, the budget available for 2002-03 will be over one third — 37% — larger than the budget when the Minister took office. That is an increase of £687 million.

There are huge pressures on primary care professionals. I must refer to the waiting lists, which everyone is currently talking about. I accept that there have been 20 years of underfunding, and I appreciate the efforts that the Minister has already made. We have the problem of the cancellation of outpatient clinics. We have so-called bed blocking — I do not like that term, but we all know what it means. I am aware of the Minister's framework for action on waiting lists announced in September 2001 and the boards' comprehensive waiting list plans and quarterly monitoring reports. Indeed, I think that there are also bimonthly meetings. However, if there were one board instead of four it might be easier, and we might get more uniformity of services across the North.

On 20 February, the Minister announced the establishment of 15 new local health and social care groups, and I will quote from her press release at that time. Commenting on the high degree of consensus among stakeholders in establishing the new groups, the Minister said

"I hope this will point the way to a continuing focus on partnership, co-operation and shared objectives, which will be crucial for the new Groups to fulfil their full potential."

I accept that, but there was not consensus among stakeholders on the option that the Minister chose. In the same press release the Minister said

"The experience of the five Commissioning Pilot Groups has shown that GPs and other primary care professionals working together in groups have improved the provision and quality of local services."

I agree with that statement, and I would have thought that the new primary care groups would be based on such pilot groups. However, Dr Harold Jefferson, chairperson of the successful Lisburn commissioning pilot, said in a recent letter to all MLAs

"I am deeply distressed and disgusted at the present plans for the local health and social care groups. What is to be their function?"

Dr Jefferson goes on to make the point that although we are told that the groups are developing from the commissioning pilots, they bear scant resemblance to these organisations.

On 1 March, the director of primary care in the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety replied to Dr Jefferson. In his letter the director blames the Assembly, because it voted last year to delay the ending of GP fundholding. However, Mr Speaker, you and Members know that the purpose of the amendment was to facilitate, and ensure that the Department brought about, a seamless transition into new primary care structures. Over a year has passed, and we do not have any such transition. The director also said

"We have always believed that a timescale for setting up the new groups is achievable, provided that there is appropriate commitment, co-operation and goodwill from all concerned."

However, there is total commitment and goodwill from all the professionals in primary care.

The problem lies with the Department, which seems to have wasted almost a year. It is inexcusable that the guidelines for new primary care arrangements have not been introduced in the last nine or 10 months. I have heard explanations from the Department about finance and personnel. It can juggle the figures in whatever way it likes, but the fact is that at least 10 months have been wasted. The guidelines must have been ready a year ago, and I do not see why they were not announced long before they were.

12.15 pm

Mrs Hilary Herron of the Royal College of Nursing (RCN) sent a submission to the Assembly's Health Committee, expressing the disappointment of RCN members. The RCN referred to the amendment tabled a year ago and the fact that seamless transition is now impossible. The RCN also stated

"Frontline primary care nurses have not had an opportunity to voice their opinions regarding the guidance on the constitution, governance and accountability arrangements."

Front-line nurses who work at the heart of the community should be represented in the group.

In its letter of 19 February 2002, the Northern Ireland Board of the Royal College of Midwives made various points, one or two of which I will quote

"We were profoundly dismayed therefore to find that the midwifery profession is not even mentioned in the recent Guidance Circulars, there is no recognition of midwives as primary care professionals, there is no provision to have midwifery representation on the Management Boards of the proposed new Local Health and Social Care Groups."

The Royal College of Midwives also stated

"Although the Minister in her announcement of 12 October 2001 indicated that there had been 'broad support' for the preferred model proposed in 'Building the Way Forward in Primary Care', the Royal College of Midwives, in common with most other professional organisations in Northern Ireland, including the Royal College of Nursing and the British Medical Association, did not support the proposal to establish LHSCGs as committees of the existing Health and Social Services Boards, seeing this as adding another layer of bureaucracy to an already 'top-heavy' structure for health care provision".

Dr Brian Patterson of the General Practitioners Committee (Northern Ireland) of the British Medical Association Northern Ireland also wrote on 1 February 2002 and made many points. I will not repeat all that group's concerns except for two, which I will quote:

"lack of detailed guidance across the board bearing in mind LHSCGs are due to go live in 8 weeks' time";

and

"no details of timescale as to when LHSCGs will be empowered".

All Members will have seen that letter, so I will not quote anything more from it.

The Northern Ireland Multi-Disciplinary Primary Care Forum stated

“We see proposals that still have no clear vision or commitment. They create, in the words of one civil servant, a set of new bureaucratic quangos.”

It goes on. The Northern Ireland Public Service Alliance (NIPSA) quoted two aspects of deep concern:

“fair protection for GP fundholding staff...”;

and

“inadequate public consultations about the Department’s guidance on the composition and operation of the proposed Local Health and Social Care Groups.”

In relation to the first point, I am aware of the re-deployment centre in the Central Services Agency. I have had telephone discussions with the relevant person there. I hope it works out, but I have doubts about it.

The bodies that wrote in totally supported the new groups, as we all do. They do not, however, make any reference to delays. Correspondence was also received from Prof Salmon, Chairperson of the Northern Ireland Trust Nurses Association, from the Directors of Nursing in the boards and from the Association of Directors of Social Services, whom we met last week. There were also a couple of other groups. We all support the local health and social care groups, but it is a question of how the groups are set up and why the guidance was not given long ago.

The Minister appeared before the Health Committee on Wednesday 6 March to discuss the health budget and primary care. We were pleased that she did, and it took several hours to cover both subjects. At the meeting, reference was made to the Committee meeting on Wednesday 27 February, when representatives of the Royal College of Nursing, the British Medical Association GPs’ Committee and the Royal College of Midwives attended. Those bodies requested a meeting with the Minister. Members will have a copy of a letter dated 19 February, signed by Dr Brian Patterson, Mrs Hilary Herron of the Royal College of Nursing and Mrs Breedagh Hughes of the Royal College of Midwives, in which they expressed extreme worries about the situation. Those three groups represent many front-line staff, and, therefore, the Health Committee advised them that they should seek a meeting with the Minister. At the Committee’s meeting last Wednesday, we were told that no such request had been received. I subsequently found out that a letter, signed by all three representatives, was handed in at Castle Buildings on Tuesday afternoon. I am not suggesting that the Minister knew about that, but the letter was handed in.

I strongly support the primary care groups. We will be in big trouble if we do not get primary care right, because it is the basis of the whole Health Service. Everyone concerned must be involved in meaningful dialogue.

I welcome the end of fundholding, and I sincerely want the new primary care groups to succeed. We have had a golden opportunity for change. Perhaps it is not too late. The people of Northern Ireland deserve the best; it is now up to the Minister and her Department to achieve that.

Mr Speaker: The time limit for this debate is two hours. As one might imagine, many Members wish to participate. Therefore, in order to facilitate as many Members as possible, I am imposing a limit of six minutes on all contributions, except those of the Minister and the mover of the motion.

Dr Adamson: My background is in community child health, although I trained as a general practitioner. I am acutely aware that early diagnosis has become increasingly important, due to recent advances in drug therapy and the potential gains from the modification of risk factors. In most areas of medicine early diagnosis assists the GP, as it permits the formulation of a management plan, which obviates much of the later crisis intervention. Family practitioners remain the central core of the provision of support and co-ordination in medicine, which benefits both patients and carers.

I am not a member of the Committee for Health, Social Services and Public Safety, but I keep in close contact with my Colleagues on it. The Department’s consultation paper, ‘Building the Way Forward in Primary Care’, had many positive features that can be readily supported. The proposals were outlined in section 6 of the document, following an analysis of five models or options in the previous section. This is the model described as option 3, evolving into the option 4 model. Both models involve the creation of multidisciplinary care groups to serve populations of between 50,000 and 150,000. Option 3 proposes groups that would be mainly advisory, while option 4 proposes groups having devolved commissioning budgets.

If any approach is to be successful in developing the agenda for change in health and social care and developing the full potential of primary care, we must clarify the concept of primary care to include health, social and community care. It is inevitable, and highly desirable, that closer working relationships with community trusts will develop, and, eventually, integration can take place between the new local health and social care groups as equal partners.

Adequate resources will need to be prioritised to allow the new groups to flourish. Important areas include training and managing support and resources for infrastructure and programme development. The costs involved in information and communications technology (ICT) development are considerable, but essential if desirable quality improvements are to be realised.

Much will depend on the overall resource allocation to health and social care. If the allocation is inadequate,

no amount of innovation or efficiency will be able to deliver the required outcome. Northern Ireland should aim to have at least the same resource per capita as any other region in the United Kingdom — preferably a sum that fully reflects the additional needs of our population.

Option 4 might not be an end in itself, but it is a firm foundation for further developments in integrated health and social care delivery. The Department has said that it must ensure that the right structures are in place and that the right policies are pursued in order to achieve the Executive's strategic priority of working for a healthier population. However, we must not become bogged down in bureaucratic wrangling when the real war is against disease, social injustice and the inequalities in health and well-being for a large section of the population.

Mr Berry: The motion does not argue for the retention of GP fundholding. Indeed, the argument is not about the merits or demerits of GP fundholding, which, as it is currently constituted, is dead in the water. Those who wish to rehash arguments over that issue have lost the plot, or at best they want to deflect attention away from the real issue that the motion is concerned with.

A recent newspaper report about the discontent over the circumstances surrounding the ending of GP fundholding exemplifies all that is wrong about the way in which the Health Service is run in Northern Ireland. It is one thing to remove GP fundholding, but it is quite another to turn back the clock by 10 years without any understanding of what will replace it, or without the implementation of a replacement that will fit in with the improvement of the Health Service. That is not only sheer incompetence but official ignorance under the guise of skill.

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

In its wisdom the Assembly gave the Minister and the Department a year to come up with clear plans that were properly resourced and carefully set out, and which could be supported fully by the Committee for Health, Social Services and Public Safety and the primary care sector. Instead, the Minister was aggrieved when the Assembly delayed the ending of GP fundholding for another year. That was a wise decision. There was no replacement on the table, under the table or outside the door. There were not even mirrors. It is now one year later and — surprise, surprise — the issue is not much further forward. It is little wonder that professionals are distraught and angry. The seamless transition is non-existent. The Minister has angered just about everyone who is involved in the delivery of services. Doctors, nurses, midwives and a host of other professionals are extremely angry at the latest botch-up by the Department.

What has been happening? Since the issue was last debated in January 2001, little has happened. In the past few weeks, however, there has been some activity. The Department issued a press statement on 16 October 2001. Impressively, it took from January 2001 to October

2001 to come up with that. The statement was followed by a circular on 14 December 2001. There was no consultation or negotiation before, during or after those events. It is an attempt at change by uninformed, incompetent diktat. It is clear that if the Minister had spoken to professionals, she would simply have exposed her own ignorance.

The Minister promised the Assembly that when GP fundholding was replaced, all would be well. All is not well, and worse still, there will now be a gaping hole where once there were clinicians in operation. That is hardly the most brilliant piece of leadership. There is chaos, uncertainty and, at best, mere cant. It is unacceptable that just a few weeks before the changeover nothing concrete is in place. Perhaps everything is supposed to happen over the next couple of weeks, as if by magic. Furthermore, there is no blueprint. Neither the Health Committee nor the Assembly has been presented with the finalised blueprint for primary care, a blueprint that should have been debated and voted on by the Assembly. That would show professionals where things are going. How the Minister can continue to make piecemeal changes without a plan is beyond the comprehension of any rational individual.

The Minister, the Department and those who work in the primary care sector do not know where things are going. Not once has there been a simple outline of how the removal of GP fundholding, in the absence of any specific transitional scheme to finalised agreed arrangements, will improve either the quality or quantity of care. There has not been one piece of hard, factual data. The Assembly is entitled to hear how the removal of GP fundholding will improve the quality and quantity of care to patients in the absence of a transition to finalised arrangements. Where are the hard, real, factual data?

On 17 January 2001 it was recorded that the Chairperson of the Health Committee expressed the strong view of the Committee that GP fundholding should cease only when the Department could make the planned seamless transition to an agreed alternative.

Amazingly, we are no further on today. Those who argued against our motion last year said that it was wrong. One Member had the nerve to suggest that an extension would not allow for a proper replacement for GP fundholding to be put in place and that it ought to go immediately.

12.30 pm

We must listen to the British Medical Association (BMA), which wrote to the Committee for Health, Social Services and Public Safety about the end of GP fundholding and said that there had been no detailed guidance, no details about timescales, no proper resources, no meaningful consultations, no primary care development funding and no details about the redeployment of GP

fundholding staff. That is a clear vote of no confidence on the part of the professionals. I support the motion.

Mr J Kelly: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. This motion does not come before the House with the full consent of the Health Committee. The vote was 4:3 in favour. My Colleague, Sue Ramsey, and I opposed its tabling because of the same misinformation that we have heard from Mr Berry. We believed that the motion would be divisive and would not be concerned with primary care or with the delivery of healthcare to those who need it.

At the Committee's meeting last Wednesday, Sue Ramsey and I asked for the motion to be postponed for a week or a fortnight to allow people working in primary care piloting commissions to address the Committee. The Committee has only heard from groups opposed to the transition from GP fundholding to primary care. Even within those groups, there has been marked disagreement over the way forward.

I thought that the Committee's function was to bring the Minister before it to address its concerns about primary care and to ask people working in that sector to give the Committee their views on the transition from GP fundholding to primary care. That did not happen. There was no consensual discussion from those representative bodies in favour of primary care. Their point of view was not heard. The only point of view that the Committee heard came from those who were ostensibly opposed to the introduction of primary care. The Royal College of Nursing, the Royal College of Midwives and the BMA disagreed among themselves over the way forward.

It was inappropriate for the Chairperson of the Committee, as a GP, to bring the motion to the House without declaring his interest in the transition from fundholding to primary care.

Dr Hendron: On a point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker. If Mr John Kelly looks at the record of the debate last January he will see that I clearly and unequivocally stated my slight link with primary care at that time. My position has not changed since then.

Mr McCartney: On a point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker. The Assembly is entitled to note that the Chairperson of the Health Committee, Dr Joe Hendron, is a GP — the world and his wife know that. Any suggestion in these circumstances that he has any axe to grind or that he has misled the Assembly or the Committee in any way is quite wrong, and that should be stated.

Mr J Kelly: The Chairperson's vested interest in GP fundholding was not on the record of this debate.

The House of Commons Select Committee on Health said of the transition from GP fundholding that it would improve patient care and the health of the population by

"putting doctors and nurses into the driving seat and by ensuring co-operation rather than competition within the NHS".

We support that.

The Committee's second report also recognised that

"there have been some problems with implementation in areas where there have, historically, been tensions between fundholders and non-fundholders and that changes are going ahead more smoothly in areas where general practice has traditionally enjoyed a good relationship with the health authority."

It went on to say that all health professionals in primary care, whether in general practice or community trusts, were finding the pace of change quite threatening, so there have been difficulties in England, Scotland and Wales with the transition from fundholding to primary care. Such expressions of doubt and concern have not just come from this Assembly, its Committee for Health, Social Services and Public Safety and its Health Service.

My colleague and I oppose this motion, because ample opportunity was not given to practitioners in primary care to express their views to the Health Committee. There are difficulties, but the best way to address them is for the Minister, the Committee and all the groups involved in the transition to meet and discuss how those difficulties could be solved. A more orderly method of teasing them out is by discussion and debate. There is no doubt that primary care is the care of the future — by all objective standards of critical analysis it can ease tensions in the Health Service. Go raibh maith agat.

Mr McCarthy: I thank Dr Joe Hendron, the Chairperson of the Committee for Health, Social Services and Public Safety, for bringing a vital subject to the Floor of the Assembly. I also welcome the Minister and hope that she can help us to overcome our concerns.

We must not forget that the one-year extension to GP fundholding brought benefits to local communities. However, we are a few weeks away from the introduction of an entirely new system, and I am deeply disappointed that very little is known about how things are expected to work out. I hope we are not experimenting with the health, and possibly the lives, of people. Ordinary people want and expect a good local GP service, and in general they are not interested in how it is administered.

All Assembly Members have received correspondence from anxious people, one organisation noting that

"A year of development time has been squandered, Assembly wishes ignored...."

This is not the first time that Assembly wishes have been ignored, and we must act to ensure that the will of the Assembly counts and is acted upon by the Executive and its Ministers. The same organisation concluded that

"the opportunity to change the HPSS to work better for the population has also been ignored."

We see proposals that still have no clear vision or commitment. They create a set of new bureaucratic quangos. They have no obvious purpose or goals, certainly none that could not be achieved by existing arrangements."

In addition, the Hayes Report identifies the need for a strong, well-organised primary care system. That does not seem to be the aim of current policy guidance, and it certainly will not be its outcome.

I support local primary care groups that can and must make a difference to the health of our constituents. I appeal to the Minister to heed the advice of medical professionals who have years of experience and are willing to see change succeed. There is no reason to change the system unless we are confident that it will bring early benefits to health provision for everyone. That must be a priority for all. I support the motion.

Ms Morrice: Health and social care groups will improve prospects for better services if they are developed through meaningful engagement between professionals and service users. The experience drawn from successive primary care pilot schemes has shown that family doctors, community nurses, social workers and other professionals can work together successfully to redesign and develop services for the community. For the benefit of all, we must grasp and exploit the opportunity to extend this concept to people throughout Northern Ireland.

The purpose of local health and social care groups is to give the people who work in primary care, and the communities that they serve, more influence over the way in which services are arranged and developed. At present, planning and development of the services is organised through what is called “commissioning”, and responsibility rests with the four boards. It is important that, under the new arrangements, the next few years will see local health and social care groups gradually taking on more responsibility for commissioning services. Most importantly, the process must be undertaken through effective, collective working between professional staff and community representatives. We hope that the boards will be fully committed to actively supporting the growth and development of these groups.

We have stressed on several occasions the importance of how the 18 members of each group will be chosen. When the groups become fully operational, five of the members will be GPs, and the remainder will be made up of a range of grass-roots health and social care professionals, including those allied to medicine, nursing, pharmacy and social work. It is significant that two members will be community representatives who will promote the interests of patients and other service users.

Scotland, England and Wales are already moving in this direction, and it is time for Northern Ireland to develop such community groups. A balance must be struck between representation and the obvious need to not make the groups cumbersome. Initially, not everyone will be able to achieve representation. We are glad that there is a mechanism to review the situation within 18 months. Groups will be able to be flexible, but I stress that midwives should be represented on them — they must not be left out.

Ms Ramsey: I understand the Member’s concern about midwives. The Royal College of Midwives expressed that concern, so I raised the matter with the Minister in the Health Committee meeting on Wednesday. The Minister said that, in the guidance, “nurses” is used as a generic term and does not exclude midwives.

12.45 pm

Ms Morrice: I thank the Member for that information. That is good news, and I hope that midwives will be included.

Real opportunities to improve services and build community confidence and the confidence of professional staff do not come often and must be quickly and properly grasped. It is clear from letters that we receive that there are concerns about the Health Service, but they can, and should, be addressed through the normal channels. My Colleague, Monica McWilliams, as a member of the Health Committee, will be working to allay those concerns.

Making changes to health and social services is rarely risk free. However, it is a hugely important task that is often wrongly perceived as presenting a threat to the stability of existing services and to the jobs of much-valued health and social care staff. Health and social care groups can strengthen services — they pose no threat to the roles and jobs of front-line staff. If anything, they maximise opportunities for staff and provide a basis for professionals from many backgrounds to interact more readily with patients and to tailor successfully services to meet their specific needs.

Although we accept that the Minister should work hard to allay existing concerns, we do not support the motion. This is a real chance to make meaningful and constructive change to primary care services in Northern Ireland, and we should take that chance when we can.

Mr McCartney: I support the motion. It is public knowledge that the Health Service as administered in Northern Ireland is dysfunctional. The waiting lists are not only the worst in the United Kingdom, they are the worst in Europe, and it is plain that organisational reform of the delivery of primary healthcare is nothing short of chaotic. What are the reasons for that? The first reason is how resources are used, and the second is the delay in this much-needed reform.

As Dr Hendron rightly pointed out, capital investment in the basic infrastructure of health was underemployed for many years under direct rule. However, that merely underlines the failure of those who agreed the terms of devolved Government to ensure that the underspend on capital infrastructure funding was made good.

Having said that, resources are also being massively reduced by a welter of bureaucratic expense under devolved Government. Several weeks ago, I pointed out that £1.2 billion will be spent on the administrative costs of running the 11 Departments and the Assembly. Almost 14% of

the block grant is being spent on feeding the Assembly and its administrative processes, which are a dripping roast for those who benefit from them.

I have been recently informed that the cost of ministerial cars, which are provided by the Assembly and by the Administration, amounts to £1.2 million per annum. Something must be done about resources. We shall not receive more resources through any increase in the Barnett formula, so they must be obtained in other ways — and not by petty efforts such as raising the rates by £12 million to screw many small businesses and put them out of business when that £12 million will cover only one third of the £36 million needed to meet the Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister's administrative costs alone, Mr Trimble's Department. Therefore, something must be done about resources.

There is also the issue of organisational reform. It is plain from correspondence to Members from the professional organisations affected by these reforms — GPs, midwives, nurses and other care professionals — that the transitional arrangements for going from fundholding to the provision of primary healthcare through local health and social care groups is nothing short of a disaster. The Minister has provided no guidance on the core issues. Local groups cannot influence either the commissioning of secondary care services or primary care development, and we have no details of the timescale within which the groups will be able to do that other than a bare statement in a circular.

The Minister's statement of 16 October 2001 about groups progressing to delegated budgets as quickly as they can demonstrate their capacity to deal with them entirely ignored the fact that a broad spectrum of fundholders and other groups have experience of controlling their budgets and could do that efficiently. There are no guarantees with regard to service provision to patients after 1 April. However, the Minister has done something about that belatedly. The funding arrangements are totally inadequate. In Northern Ireland the funding will be £3 per patient; on the mainland the funding is between £7 and £8 per patient. How can any form of comparable primary healthcare service be delivered when the cost of providing that is being cut from £7 or £8 to £3? There is also a lack of meaningful involvement of all stakeholders in the process, and there has been no meaningful consultation on the constitution of the groups, the management boards or the remuneration arrangements.

In response to John Kelly, I will close by stating that most groups are totally opposed to what is happening. The South and East Belfast Primary Care Group had this to say:

"In February 2001, the Assembly rejected the timetable then proposed to develop new Primary Care structures issued by the DHSSPS. The Assembly accepted the argument that the gap between the ending of existing arrangements on 1 April 2001 and the

earliest operational date of any new proposals would be detrimental to the provision of Primary Care services."

The Minister and her Department have wasted an entire year and have failed to put in position any guidance, instruction or constitutional arrangements whereby primary care can be developed. I have great pleasure in supporting the motion.

Mr McGrady: I approach the motion and its expression of concern for the new structural arrangements based on information that I have received from people on the streets and in constituency offices, including people from the medical fraternity, and their experiences. There is enormous and grave concern that the new structure is not even designed to deliver better primary care and will constitute yet another bureaucratic structure laid over an already overstructured delivery of medical facilities.

There is concern about the levels of bureaucracy and the levels of resources that were supposed to be available for the new development. I hoped, as did all laypersons, that the new structure would speed up access to primary care and contribute to shortening the much-quoted waiting lists, which are causing increasing daily concern to people on both elective and non-elective waiting lists. An increase over the past year of 14.5 % and a failure by the Department to achieve its set targets and explain why those targets are not being met against a backcloth of increasing funding are shortcomings, not least in clarity.

We must try to achieve that clarity so that we can redress what appears to be happening, which seems to be — and I cannot substantiate this with facts and figures — more money chasing less effective delivery. If that is the case, it requires an urgent and extreme remedy.

I come to the debate not from the point of view of statistics or finance but from my experience and knowledge of the unnecessary pain and suffering being placed on families, the communities and the country. The relief of pain and suffering is the objective of all medical services.

Mr J Kelly: Will the Member give way?

Mr McGrady: No, I have just started. I will give way when I come to something substantial that the Member might wish to query, but I have not dealt with the generics yet.

It is correct to look at how efficiently and effectively the Heath Service is administered, but that must be done with the objective of achieving better relief of pain and suffering. We cannot include in a motion such as this the provision of care for cancer patients, because that is not primary care — although initially everything is primary care. People are literally dying against a backcloth of a lack of medicines and treatments that are available elsewhere, and that is never acceptable in a society such as ours.

Alongside that, medical professionals — GPs, midwives and district nurses — do not know how the proposal can

work, and they do not know why it has been made. In fact, GPs have asked the Department to explain the objective, purpose and facilities that will drive the new structure, which will start in two weeks, but they have not had a meaningful answer.

We have heard Members talking about a variety of bodies — the Royal College of Nurses and the Royal College of Midwives — who say that there has been no meaningful consultation on their participation. However, district nurses and midwives are primary carers. If they do not know what is going on, what, in the name of God, are the patients going to do?

GPs are not sure about what is happening and what will be expected from them. The new body to be set up — and I stand to be corrected on this — will consist of GPs, who will get an extra £17,000 a year for administration. All of the others, midwives, district nurses and lay people, if there are any, will get nothing. This is not an even-handed scheme that will encourage co-operation and a better development of resources.

The BMA finds the process incredible. It says that there is no long-term vision, no medium-term plan and no short-term direction. It criticises the lack of information it is receiving from the Department, information that is necessary to achieve what, it is hoped, will be an improved system of delivery.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Time is up.

Mr McGrady: My goodness — time passes when you are enjoying yourself.

Dr Birnie: In case Mr John Kelly should ask, I am not a medical doctor, so that should be all right. I thank Dr Hendron for giving us a timely opportunity to speak on the subject.

I want to focus on the local health and social care groups, because they are very much at the nub of the motion. As several Members have said, it is significant that many care professionals have expressed doubts about the proposed arrangements, notwithstanding the general support for the broad principles of primary care groups as set out in 'Fit for the Future'.

1.00 pm

Unfortunately, the current proposals from the Minister and the Department are inadequate to empower and resource, as Mr McGrady mentioned. For example, where, in the current proposals, is there clear, detailed guidance on the formation and function of local health and social care groups? Crucially, why is there is no meaningful involvement in commissioning from the outset? If that does not occur — and some of us doubt whether it will ever occur in the future — social care groups will simply become another talking shop in a sector that has too many layers of administration.

A more malign interpretation of what may be going on is that to the extent that the groups will include membership from the health boards, this change is, in effect, a way of entrenching the power and position of the health boards. That is something that should be subject to review, and I hope that it will be subject to investigation during the overall review of public administration. Furthermore, there seems to have been a complete lack of involvement of many of the grass-roots stakeholders, especially community nurses and professions allied to medicine.

Our primary health care system differs substantially from, for example, that in America and much of the rest of the EU. Many commentators have judged that features of our primary system, especially the way in which GPs and others act as gatekeepers to care elsewhere in the system, are good features that should be cherished and developed. The problem with the Minister's proposals is that instead of carefully prepared evolutionary change, we seem to have in the offing, from the beginning of next month, something that is, in effect, a diktat. Diktats may well be attractive when coming out of a revolutionary approach to politics, but, in general, they are not a sensible way in which to engage with the major stakeholders, civil society, and to make sensible, evidence-based approaches to policy. I have great pleasure in supporting the motion.

Mr Shannon: I support the motion. There are many people with cancer in my constituency, which has a predominantly elderly population. The GP surgeries are so packed that we must plan to be sick at least two weeks in advance. If, God forbid, we plan to injure ourselves, we must give one week's notice to the treatment room for an appointment with the practice nurse. Those are facts.

It is unbelievable that someone who has severe pain because of a genetic disorder cannot get relief from pain that has been debilitating him for at least three days, because that is the earliest that he can get an emergency appointment. Such patients know that they are not ill enough to attend casualty. Many also do not feel that they are ill enough to sit for four to 12 hours in a busy emergency department when all they need is a prescription for pain relief that could be easily taken care of with a ten-minute chat to their GP, who is familiar with their condition.

The NHS plan states that, by 2004, the Government will have revolutionised their primary care services. By 2004, many people will have encountered much pain and discomfort. Many will have resorted to incurring large bills for private treatment, so that at least they can see someone when they are ill and not two weeks after the event.

We have all heard of the baby twin across the water who died after NHS helpline staff told her parents that she had colic and how to treat her. The baby had meningitis and died in days. Believe it or not, the Government plan

to use the helpline and an Internet site even more to reduce the number of people using the doctors' surgeries and the numbers in the waiting rooms of doctors' surgeries and hospitals. Is that just another way of fudging the figures? Many believe that that is a possibility. As elections approach, the need to reduce waiting times will help people to focus more.

Primary care, like every other part of the public sector, was underfunded by the Government for 20 years. The Conservative Government put the primary Health Service under self-management, and, to some extent, that worked. However, the population keeps growing, and the funding has stayed low.

Some GPs have found a better way of managing the money and do not want the new reforms, as they are now presented, to come into effect. They are just beginning to pull together under the strain that the last reforms caused. A surgery in Strangford took a long and incisive look at the patients that attend there. They found that they fell into two categories — the asthmatics and the elderly. The doctors put a major part of their budget into those two problems and set up a clinic for asthmatics to free some of the time that they spend with their patients. Patients with asthma now have an allotted time for seeing their doctor and the main nurses.

The doctors also set up an elderly patients' well-being clinic to deal with flu vaccines and other forms of preventative care to free space during the day for other patients. By giving those two groups weekly clinics, the doctors have seen great improvements in other areas of their practice. They have been able to see more of other patients, and they do not have these problems in greater number than before. Asthma is an increasingly common condition in modern society.

Those doctors, and many like them across the Province, took the initiative and made fundholding work for them. However, as usual the Government, instead of investing the money where it is needed, will restructure and shove this bit and remove that bit, and, lo and behold, we will have a new and improved "primary care service".

Doctors in my constituency have contacted me with complaints about the restructuring of the primary care sector of the Health Service. GPs have been told that this new scheme will be the answer to their prayers. Doctors disagree strongly. They believe that there has been no long-term vision, no medium-term plan and no short-term direction for putting the new scheme in place. Doctors have said that neither the Minister nor anyone from the Department can tell them, except in vague terms, what the strategy is. They fear that patient-focused primary care-led services are being replaced with cost-effective primary care.

The Health Service should not be about money. However, for certain conditions, a week's drug treatment can cost up to £1,000. Does the strategy take into account the

time and energy that doctors need to face the problems caused by the inadequate system that is proposed for April? Doctors fear that because of the stress and strain of implementing another of the Department's schemes for cutting corners and money, they will lose colleagues with many years of experience under their white coats.

Doctors have finally got to grips with the fundholding strategy. Many have used it to further their practices by getting more nurses and other services such as physiotherapists, opticians, dentists and counsellors to join their units and form one-stop clinics for all their family needs. Other surgeries in my constituency have looked at other areas of the profession, such as patients with heart complaints and ECG monitors. These doctors do not think that the system is broken, and wonder why the Department is trying to fix it, and fix it in a way that will leave those who are trying to work in the new system, with only weeks to go before it is enforced on them, with only vague notions of what will happen?

Doctors whom I have talked to say that we should look at the system in England, and I agree. With my concerns and those of my constituents in mind, I call for answers to be given.

Ms Ramsey: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. It is right that Mr John Kelly should call on the Chairperson of the Committee for Health, Social Services and Public Safety, Dr Hendron, to declare an interest. That is part of the procedure in the House. He was not implying that Dr Hendron did not do that deliberately. He was saying that it was right that it should be declared.

Members have said that there are concerns among the professionals about the new arrangements for primary care. I also have concerns, and after Mr John Kelly and I met the professionals last week, I agreed to raise those concerns with the Department and the Minister. Many of us are not experts on what is happening. Several Members have admitted that, without going into detail on the establishment of the new arrangements because they are not members of the Committee.

We met with people who were in favour of the new arrangements and also with people who were opposed to them. Contrary to what many are saying, there are people who are happy with the new arrangements. The Committee should have allowed those groups to give their views. When changes are in the air, hard decisions must be made. People are concerned about taking that leap of faith. They have relevant concerns, and we should take them through those changes step by step.

The Minister gave evidence to the Committee for Health, Social Services and Public Safety on Wednesday 6 March, when she gave a presentation and answered questions. In the limited time that I have, I wish to place her answers on the record. The Minister said that the objective of the new groups is to reduce bureaucracy, promote inclusivity among primary care professionals

and move resources into front-line services. She told the Committee that the groups' aim is for local people and local health professionals, using their expertise and knowledge of what is needed, to come together to ensure that those needs are met. I do not believe that anyone could oppose that.

(Mr Speaker in the Chair)

Several Members spoke about the £3 per head for administration costs and the fact that in England and Wales it is £7 or £8 per head. I could not stand here and justify any more money being spent on administration. We have all spoken about the levels of administration in the Health Service. My conscience would not allow me to argue for more spending on administration and less on front-line patient care.

The Minister answered several questions on issues that have been raised in today's debate, such as the make-up of the primary care management boards. The Minister told the Committee that she was confident that the configuration of those boards was such that no single group would be dominant and that representation would be well balanced. I agree with that, because there should be no single dominant force. If we are to tackle collectively the needs of our communities, many people should be involved.

Ms Morrice mentioned the inclusion of midwives in the guidance. That was put to the Minister, who told the Committee that two posts would be available for nurses and that the use of the generic term "nurse" did not exclude midwives and health visitors.

Concerns were raised that some nurse-led services would be lost under the new arrangements. The Minister gave an assurance that all health care provided under GP fundholding would be maintained. The Royal College of Nursing also raised that. The Committee met with that organisation on 27 February, and I asked its representative to give me an outline of the services that it thought would be lost. To date, I have not received that information. We must approach this in a mature fashion. Many groups favour the establishment of the new primary care arrangements, and we must give them the benefit of our attention.

There are concerns that another level of bureaucracy is being created that will result in yet another talking shop. We were told in the debate on the Executive's review of public administration, which, in my view, should have started a long time ago, that the Department is confident that the new groups are flexible enough to be accommodated in any wider structural change. Were we being told to delay or that GP fundholding should not be changed until the outcome of the review while, in the same debate, we were told that we need to tackle the level of bureaucracy in the Health Service?

Several issues must be taken on board. GPs are an essential part of the new plans. However, up until now,

they have not been a part of the Health Service in contractual, financial or employment terms. I commend GPs because they are doing tremendous work. However, they must be part of the group. They cannot drive the group, and they should not have the automatic right to chair the group. We can all tackle the need for services and promote health in our communities.

I commend the Minister and the Department for ensuring that community representatives and service users will be involved in the new groups. Go raibh maith agat.

1.15 pm

Mr Hamilton: I support the motion. A year ago the Minister was intent on ending GP fundholding, with no system available to replace it. At that time, the Committee for Health, Social Services and Public Safety rightly refused to back what the Minister wanted to do in the timescale in which she wanted to do it. That delayed the ending of GP fundholding for one year. The intention of the delay was to give the Minister time to take into account the findings of the primary care review and the Hayes Report and to create what has been referred to as a "seamless robe of medical care". Sadly, the Minister has squandered the opportunity given to her by the Committee and the Assembly.

In the intervening year, she has managed to annoy virtually the whole spectrum of primary care professionals, including GPs, nurses, midwives and community care staff, not to mention the Health Committee. One has only to read the minutes of evidence given to the Committee by the groups that I have mentioned to gauge the level of annoyance that has been caused. I do not understand why the situation had to arise. If every other Minister and Department in the Assembly can work closely with their Committees, why is it that relationships between the Health Department, its medical staff and its Committee are in such disarray over this?

Mr J Kelly: Will the Member give way?

Mr Hamilton: No, I will not give way.

The Committee recently took evidence from those professionals, and the view is that the Minister has made minimum primary care proposals. She has missed a golden opportunity boldly to introduce what was envisaged in 'Fit for the Future'. That system would have seen a patient-led Health Service with money for services allocated to the primary care groups and professionals close to the ground, who could decide on the most appropriate forms of medical care. That, however, has not happened, and we are faced with the creation of yet another level of expensive bureaucracy that will take money away from what it should be used for primarily — investment in patient care.

Many Members are fully aware of the overadministration of medical services in Northern Ireland. The Minister needs to make immediate plans to stand down

those organisations in order to bring about the devolution of medical funding to primary care groups.

Mrs I Robinson: Detailed guidance on the constitution, governance and accountability arrangements for local health and social care groups, and the remuneration arrangements for those groups, was issued only on 12 February 2002 for implementation by the boards by 1 April 2002.

That leaves an unrealistic six-week timeframe. Having had 12 months to do all this, the Minister has left only six weeks for those involved to establish the local health and social care groups. What a waste of a year. In the words of the Northern Ireland Multi-Disciplinary Forum

“A year of development time has been squandered, Assembly wishes ignored and, more importantly, the opportunity to change the health and personal social services to work better for the population has also been ignored.”

The Minister announced on 12 October 2001 that there was broad support for the preferred model proposed in the document entitled ‘Building the Way Forward in Primary Care’. However, the facts speak differently. The Royal College of Midwives, the Royal College of Nursing, and the British Medical Association, in common with most other professional health organisations here, did not support the proposal to establish local health and social care groups as committees of the existing boards. They saw that as adding another layer of bureaucracy to an already top-heavy structure for health care provision. That has not been helped by the failure of real dialogue between the Minister and primary care professionals.

Many GPs believe that the arrangements the Minister intends to pursue will not enable primary care professionals to improve the quality or quantity of care for patients. GPs believe that fundholding was not perfect; however, nothing is. They rightly claim that we should build on the developments of the past and on recent innovations and start to protect services that have already been introduced. Their concerns — and they are genuine — are that no direction and no real additional moneys have been identified and that there is no capacity within primary care to increase services so as to reduce referrals to hospital and facilitate earlier discharge. In my meetings with GP representatives, they have often quoted the Hayes Report’s call for primary care services to be provided more locally, so that a high-quality service can interrelate with hospitals and lead to a higher rate of successful outcomes for patients. General practitioners believe that that will not happen under the proposed system; indeed, they believe that it represents a retrograde step.

There is concern at the lack of clarity on the function of the local health and social care groups. The transition from the end of fundholding to local health and social care groups is only weeks away, yet the guidance issued to date focuses only on the establishment of the groups and is vague about their purpose and strategic direction.

Many argue strongly that these groups represent another level of costly bureaucracy choked with red tape.

Boards will constitute the committees and from April 2002 will arrange the delegation of functions to local health and social care groups. Boards will be responsible for setting up the management boards of the local health and social care groups and for ensuring that they fulfil their primary care development. In collaboration with health and social services, the boards will develop the capacity to take on responsibility for commissioning hospital and community services.

The make-up of the local health and social care groups is also a matter for concern. Where GPs and other health care professionals have had some experience in primary care commissioning, it will be a completely new exercise for many others. Why did the Minister not use the last year productively? Why were no training exercises commissioned to enable primary care professionals to participate properly in the new groups? Who will make them up? Will they be based on the bottom-up philosophy, or will they be top heavy? It is proposed that GPs will have between three and five seats on each local health and social care group management board, depending on the size of population to be covered. Potentially, these boards will include up to six community trust representatives, one acute trust representative and up to two health and social services board representatives. At least three of the community trust representatives will be from director level, making a mockery of the bottom-up approach envisaged.

Many other valid concerns have been raised by representatives of all the professions involved in primary care. For instance, why have midwives been excluded or ignored as an independent profession involved in primary care? They have failed to become eligible for seats on the health and social care group boards.

What is to happen to the employees of GP fundholders and Eastern Multifund, whose contracts expire when the new arrangements come into effect? The Minister gave public assurances in the Chamber that she would be sympathetic to the needs of those people. At the time she claimed that to lose these highly skilled people and their experience would be terrible.

Mr Gibson: I support the motion because there were many features of great merit in the proposal. At the consultation in Omagh, local care groups were considered to be a good idea. Difficulties arose about what that excellent phrase “good primary care” meant. The consultation process showed that all GPs there seemed to have different levels of aspiration. Although they welcomed the principle and the idea, they wondered how it would translate into practice.

In my area the Dunnamanagh practice caters for a large rural area that includes Ballymagorry, Bready, Magheramason and the rural hinterland attached to that

that joins with Plumbridge and moves into Foyle. The Irvinestown practice covers a great part of mid-Tyrone and is joined with County Fermanagh. The Castlederg, Strabane, Newtownstewart, Omagh, Drumquin, Dromore and Carrickmore practices have local health pathways. Joining up the whole conglomeration will not lead to concentric health pathways. It was pointed out that operating large geographical areas as one local health unit, such as in west Tyrone, will create difficulties.

The consumer aspect was also raised. Every consumer has a high regard for his GP practice, which is the first port of call for him and his family. Consumers want to protect their practices and be sure that they will not be financially decapitated by another layer of local administration, which would include a chairman, a chief executive and 18 staff who will have to be paid attendance fees for their work. The funding for that is to come from the local practice area money. People view that as another barrier between them and the provision of care by the boards. They deem that costly administration as a great enough hindrance.

I speak for an area where there is less-favoured provision to meet health requirements and which scores high on the scale of health needs, in every possible way. The idea was welcome, but the last thing consumers want is another quango between them and the delivery of services. They do not want any further curbs or restrictions, financial or otherwise, between them and the health care provision they need.

1.30 pm

To tell someone what to do, or to impose a solution, is not what is meant by consultation. The decapitation of the financial provision is not helpful. Therefore, the lack of guidance, and the BMA's and other health professionals' rejection of the plan, has left a potentially good idea in a quagmire.

I ask the Minister to re-examine the first idea for a seamless transition from the present system to one that is perceived to be good for local healthcare, but which appears to have no method of delivery. She must think again and allow time for change and for consideration of the guidance. We should learn from the mistakes that were made across the water, rather than repeat them.

In supporting the motion, I ask the Minister to give the medical practitioners the time and direction that they need to make a good job of what has always been a great primary care service in their localities.

Ms Armitage: Anything useful that can be said has been said, so, as usual, I shall take a slightly different line. I support the motion. No one can take issue with it. The motion expresses the grave concerns that the community, the Health Committee and the medical profession have.

I am slightly disappointed that several Members feel that they cannot support the motion. The Health Com-

mittee works extremely well under the fair and understanding attitude of its Chairperson, Dr Joe Hendron, and Deputy Chairperson, Mr Tommy Gallagher. The Minister is present for the debate, so I assume that she has concerns also.

Ms Ramsey: To whom did the Member refer, when she said that some Members do not support the motion?

Ms Armitage: We shall know that when the vote takes place. I am not here to name people.

Surely there is no better way to deal with concerns than to deal with them immediately, not in six or seven months' time. I do not want the issue to be fudged; enough issues have been fudged already. However, we all agree that GP fundholding will end and that we must replace it with another system.

The objective of establishing the new groups is to reduce bureaucracy and promote inclusiveness among primary care professionals. I want the Minister to state, if she can, how much money will be saved when we move from GP fundholding to local health and social care groups. Some time ago, I asked the Minister how much money would be saved if we were to cut the number of health boards and trusts. The Minister said that we would save a moderate sum. However, I was not sure what the Minister meant by "moderate", because the word means different things to different people. Therefore I asked for an exact figure, but I am still waiting. I live in hope, as always, that she will provide that figure. If we were to have fewer boards and trusts, perhaps more finance would be available for the Health Service. The Minister should have examined all moneys that are spent directly on healthcare.

Finally, the new health and care groups may have to change. Pharmacists feel that having only one pharmacist on a board is not enough. It is inadequate and unequal. However, I assume that the membership is not written in stone. I hope that the Minister will agree that if money can be saved on bureaucracy, it should go towards healthcare, which is more important than trusts and boards spending money on, dare I say, luxuries that the Health Service could do with.

The Deputy Chairperson of the Committee for Health, Social Services and Public Safety (Mr Gallagher): Foremost in Members' minds today must be the fears and concerns referred to in the motion. I acknowledge the ever-demanding workload of primary healthcare professionals — GPs, nurses, physiotherapists, midwives, and many others. They are faced with that workload at a time when resources are scarce and the public's expectations are increasing.

Members must also recognise that in the past resources for primary care have not been allocated fairly. There have been variations, inconsistencies and inequalities in the delivery of primary healthcare — for example, response

times for out-of-hour services are much longer in rural areas than in the towns and cities. Members must also bear in mind the wider picture — how the Health Service measures up to the rest of Europe. There is no doubt that Northern Ireland lags behind. In many other countries the quality of service is well ahead of the primary care currently being delivered here.

Local primary care teams have been set up in many countries in Europe and in the USA. Doctors, nurses and other professionals come together with community representatives and a wide range of other interested parties in order to deliver the service. Those primary care schemes have shown that when they are given responsibility for budgets, they are able to target resources at those who are most in need in their local areas. The new local health and social care groups that are being set up on 1 April 2002 can do the same in Northern Ireland.

However, that potential will only be realised if the Minister, the Department, the Health Committee and the Assembly ensure that the right foundation is there to tackle inequalities and deliver better standards of care to local people, regardless of where they live. If the Assembly gets primary care right, it will considerably ease the pressures that acute hospitals are presently experiencing.

That must include taking on board the valid concerns of health professionals and the general public. Accountability under the new arrangements is a major concern. The new groups will be subcommittees of the health boards. No elected representatives sit on the health boards. Members must understand, therefore, why people are concerned. Final decisions on primary care should not be left to the boards alone. There needs to be a Northern Ireland-wide steering committee involving those groups to manage the change and to build confidence in the new arrangements. Primary care needs a detailed and clear-cut timetable of what will be commissioned, by whom and when.

Local groups that will serve border areas must be able to work in a cross-border context if they are to properly address the needs of the local people. All aspects of primary care should be handled in the most open and transparent way.

There are other concerns, not least the deep anxieties about possible job losses or about the downgrading of jobs for those employed in an administrative capacity under the current GP arrangements. I acknowledge that the Minister has made some attempts to address those concerns, but more work must be done. The Royal College of Nursing, for example, does not believe that the new arrangements will support the principles in 'Building the Way Forward in Primary Care'. Those principles are designed to reduce bureaucracy, improve the delivery of the service and encourage grass-roots input into local health and social care.

There has been, as Members have said, insufficient time to digest all the new guidance that has been issued in the past few weeks. Training is a crucial issue if the capacity of the new local health and social care groups is to be maximised. We need an assurance that local primary care initiatives will continue and develop. I want the Minister to give a commitment that no services that currently operate under GP fundholding will be lost.

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety (Ms de Brún): Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. Beidh dhá fheidhm shainiúla ag na grúpaí áitiúla sláinte agus cúraim shóisialta. Ar an chéad dul síos, beidh siad freagrach as pleanáil agus soláthar cúraim phríomhúil, ach sa deireadh thiar glacfaidh siad le freagracht bhreise maidir le seirbhísí cúraim thánaistigh a choimisiniú. Sin gealltanais a thug mé; seo iad na feidhmeanna a bheidh ag na grúpaí.

Local health and social care groups will have two distinct functions. They will be responsible for planning and delivering primary care in the first instance, but they will ultimately take on the added responsibility of commissioning secondary care services. I have given that undertaking, and I shall outline the groups' functions.

Local health and social care groups will be statutory committees — not subcommittees — of health and social services boards. They will have clear lines of accountability to boards for their actions. That will be especially important when groups assume responsibility for the substantial public funds that they will manage when they take on commissioning functions.

For an organisation of that nature to deliver on such a formidable agenda, it is essential that all health and personal social services sectors be represented, including people from trusts who will be able to deliver on the plans agreed by the group. It is essential that all those who were involved in the planning and delivery of services work together from the beginning.

Local health and social care groups are more inclusive than any other model in England, Scotland or Wales. Primary care professionals and services users will co-operate for the benefit of service users in their area. The involvement of primary care professionals and others in identifying local health and social care needs, and in deciding how those will be addressed, is an essential element of the commissioning process and is critical to the new groups' success. The management boards of the new groups will be responsible for devising effective mechanisms to ensure the involvement of other stakeholders and members of the wider group who are involved at grass-roots level. That will ensure a bottom-up and inclusive approach.

It is important to recognise that the Assembly's decision to delay the end of GP fundholding for a further 12 months tied up resources that could otherwise have been devoted to developing the new arrangements. The

actual implementation process has not suffered any delay. When GP fundholding was extended last year, I agreed, when I was asked, to extend the consultation period on 'Building the Way Forward in Primary Care'. As I told the Assembly at the time, it was our intention to establish the new groups up to September 2001 as resources became freed up as a result of an end to GP fundholding.

1.45 pm

It was always the Department's intention that the resources released from fundholding would be used to meet the cost of the new arrangements. The extension of GP fundholding meant that finance, people and resources could not be made available immediately to work on the arrangements for setting up new groups. Managing and monitoring the scheme in its final difficult year has absorbed resources which otherwise would have been devoted to the development of the new groups. Nonetheless, guidance on the new arrangements was developed simultaneously, and many complex issues were resolved.

As the guidance was developed, it was also necessary to take soundings from the various stakeholders. Excellent progress has been made on the basis of the guidance issued so far. The groups' configurations have been determined, and management boards are being established. It will take time for the groups to become established properly, and they will develop at different paces. Commissioning will be a completely new experience for many of those involved in the groups. Moreover, it will take time for groups to learn to work together and to build up the experience and skills necessary to carry out effective commissioning. It is difficult to predict precisely how long it will take for all of them to be able to take responsibility for budgets for commissioning services. However, I have set a firm target for some groups to take on the commissioning of some services from April 2003.

From the outset, budgets for prescribing management costs and primary care development will be delegated to the groups, and they will begin to establish their infrastructure and to formulate their plans for the commissioning and delivery of health and social services. They will be expected to identify local health and social care needs and to draw up plans to meet gaps in services. They will use their primary care development money to commission local primary and community care services as appropriate. Next year I intend to deploy additional resources towards primary care development.

The groups must decide on local priorities, taking account of resource constraints and other factors. They will also contribute to their individual health and social services board's commissioning decisions, which will seek to reflect local dimensions.

One objective of the new arrangements is to reduce bureaucracy. Another objective is to move resources into front-line patient care. The new arrangements reduce the number of commissioning bodies from 150 — the number

of existing GP funds, plus pilots — to 15. The ending of fundholding means that there will no longer be short-term or individual case contracts. That too will reduce bureaucracy.

By holding the administrative costs of the new groups to an average of £3 per head, £2.5 million can be diverted ultimately from administration to primary care front-line services. The level of management funding here is the same as level one funding in England. Those groups were at that level when they were first established. With regard to wider structures and what might emerge from the review of public administration, the financial impact will be examined as part of that review. The Executive have agreed that that examination is necessary.

The composition of the management boards of the new groups allows for representation of key interests, without its being too unwieldy. A Member raised that point earlier today. That does not mean that any profession that is not represented on the boards, or that has less representation than desired, will not be able to contribute fully to the work of the group. The facility to co-opt others onto the management board, and the opportunities for participation at subgroup level, should provide for the appropriate involvement of all professions and interests.

Many Members have mentioned the preservation of services. I give an absolute assurance that all services provided by GP fundholders will be maintained until the new groups can decide on their future. I expect those professionals who currently provide those services to continue to do so. Most administrative GP fundholding staff will be redeployed in the service or will remain in their GP practice but engaged in other work. Initially, there will be 30 job opportunities in the new groups. The advertisement clearly states that midwives who work in the community will be eligible to apply for posts.

Boards have expressed their support for the new arrangements, and they will be held to account for their role in the development of the new groups. I will shortly discuss the general managerial structure.

Those nurses, midwives, health visitors, social workers, professions allied to medicine (PAM) staff, pharmacists and community users or representatives who self-nominate will be paid for their work on these groups. Only those who are nominated by boards and trusts will not be paid, as it would be considered part of their ongoing work. Staff on pilot schemes will remain in place until they have had an opportunity to apply for posts in the new organisations.

Fears were expressed that certain interests might dominate the group management boards. Those fears are not borne out by the commissioning pilots, which also have board and trust staff on their management boards. Board and trust representatives will fill six of the 18 places on the new management boards, and GPs will fill five places. Therefore no single group or profession will

dominate the new groups. Also, as part of their quota, boards and trusts must nominate a nurse, a social worker and a PAM representative. That means that there will be two nurses, two social workers and two PAM staff on each group. The generic term “nurses” refers to nurses, midwives and health visitors whose names are on the register of the UK Central Council for Nursing, Midwifery and Health Visiting (UKCC). The management boards of the groups must then devise effective mechanisms to ensure the involvement of other stakeholders and members of the wider local health and social care group who are involved at grass-roots level. It will be up to the management boards of the groups to ensure that there is a bottom-up approach.

As regards the figure of £3 per head of the population for the new groups, the funding here is comparable to the funding of new groups elsewhere when they were being set up and before they took on greater levels of responsibility. I believe that this figure will be adequate for the initial stages of the groups’ development, but it will be kept under review. Maintaining administrative costs at £3 per head will also enable me to divert £2.5 million to primary care services. That money will be shared with the groups, which will decide how it will be spent. It is important to note that the figure of £3 per head of the population, which amounts to over £5 million, simply meets administration costs. It will be spent on allowances for management board members, support staff and on supporting any additional infrastructure that the local health and social care groups decide to establish. It may also be used for some internal training and development. I will make additional resources available for the purpose of providing or developing primary care services.

From April 2003, local health and social care groups will be able to commission a wide range of health and social services and to draw down from boards the necessary resources. The commissioning role of the groups will grow over the years as the groups gain experience and confidence. I cannot foresee the end point now, because health and social services structures may change following the reviews of acute hospital services and public administration. Both reviews address the wider question of structures. However, I am sure that the groups will play a growing role in the planning and delivery of services and, to look at it in another way, I have put no restrictions on the way in which the groups may develop.

As regards the configurations in the Western Board area, the groups there were formulated following discussions with the primary care professions and service users. There is widespread agreement on the configurations in that area. Perhaps someone will convey that answer to the Member who raised the point but who has since left the Chamber.

On the importance of the overall allocation to health, I point out again that five sixths of the new resources for

health and personal social services have gone simply to meet inflation — the rising costs of the existing services. The remaining amounts have been insufficient to keep pace with demand. The position has been exacerbated by real reductions in baseline funding extracted over the past two decades. Moreover, any available funding has been subject to the Barnett squeeze, which has led to lower levels of increases being made available here. During the 1990s, health and personal social services spending per head grew by some 25% in real terms. In England, growth amounted to 35%. Matters have worsened since then, and the allocations for the current spending review period widened the gap.

The service needs not just more resources but greater certainty about future funding levels, which will allow meaningful long-term planning. The NHS has had the advantage in recent years of greater resources and firm baselines for the future, and I hope that this year’s spending review will give us the opportunity to achieve that and that we can work to make that happen.

The end of GP fundholding on 1 April will have no adverse impact on services. People will still go to their GP or primary care professional and receive the same services that they currently receive. It is important to reiterate that all the boards have agreed that all services currently provided by GP fundholders will be maintained until the local health and social care groups can decide on their future. We have held discussions with GPs, nurses, social workers, pharmacists, boards, trusts and others to discuss the detail of the arrangements.

The formal consultation on ‘Building the Way Forward in Primary Care’ ran from 11 December 2000 until 31 March 2001, and during that period departmental officials were involved in over 50 meetings, seminars and workshops. At that time I met the General Practitioners’ Committee of the British Medical Association (BMA) and the Royal College of General Practitioners. I met the General Practitioners’ Committee again in January 2002.

Prior to that, I was involved in a series of discussions with a wide range of health professionals and managers, including the BMA and the Royal College of Nursing, to listen to views about primary care arrangements, and there has been ongoing contact with officials. Many of the concerns that were raised have been addressed. Services will be maintained at the end of fundholding, staff will continue to be employed and professional staff will form a large part of the local health and social care group management boards. I have received a request from the BMA, the Royal College of Nursing and the Royal College of Midwives for me to meet them to discuss their concerns, and I have agreed to do so on Wednesday.

In answer to the point raised by Dr Hendron, that letter arrived by post on 7 March.

I shall proceed with the setting-up of the new local health and social care groups. The level of support

expressed during the consultation exercise last year was extensive. Recent expressions of support have come from the Association of Directors of Social Services, the advisory committee for professions allied to medicine (PAM), the directors of nursing of the four health boards, the Foyle area nurse practitioners and general practice forum, community practitioners in the Health Visitors' Association, and Armagh City and District Health and Social Services Community Forum.

Dr Hendron mentioned opposition from Dr Harold Jefferson. However, I have also received support from some of the commissioning pilots, and there may be differing opinions on that. Many of those involved in the pilots have indicated that they will support the proposals that I am putting forward. I am proceeding because of the success of the commissioning pilots on which the new groups are based. I want to put more money into front-line services so that local people and local health professionals can work together in a multidisciplinary fashion to make local decisions about local services.

The issue of a wider structural change in health and personal social services remains firmly on my agenda. In developing health and personal social services that are fit for the twenty-first century, it is important to ensure that the organisational structure is appropriate for the efficient and effective delivery of services. Structures must support the close working of all parts of health and personal social services and also facilitate communications between health and social services and education, housing and other key public services. I believe that the new groups will allow that to happen.

The Executive's wish to review public administration here, and the issues surrounding the development of acute hospital services — and the mention made there of the wider structures — provide the wider context within which any proposals for organisational change must be developed. The new groups have been set up to be flexible enough to be accommodated within any wider structural changes.

Similar groups that were established in Wales, Scotland and England were originally subgroups of existing Health Service bodies. I am aware that if the new groups are to succeed, it is essential that funding be made available for the development of primary care services. Next year, I intend to deploy additional resources towards primary care developments. I have discussed my proposals with the Committee.

The amounts will increase by £2.5 million in 2003-04 once the balance of the money currently tied up in GP fundholding management allowance has been released.

2.00 pm

In conclusion, local health and social care groups represent the best option for primary care to assume a central position in health and social services. They provide

the first important step towards a more inclusive and co-ordinated system for planning, commissioning, and delivering services. They will ensure that local people and local health professionals work together, in a multidisciplinary fashion, to make local decisions about local services. I hope that we can all work together in a spirit of co-operation, as we have been able to do on some of the wider questions, to ensure that the groups succeed. It is in the interests of patients and all the people that they do.

Dr Hendron: I thank the Minister for being present for the entire debate. I listened carefully to what she had to say. I also thank all my Assembly Colleagues who participated.

Dr Adamson mentioned early diagnosis and other important primary care issues, such as multidisciplinary groups and equality of partners in the new groups. Early diagnosis is extremely important. Mr McCarthy was positive in his comments about the need for a first-class service. However, he did say that we do not have a clear vision. He also described the way in which the groups are to be set up as quangos. Ms Morrice made positive comments, although I think that she said she was going to vote against the motion. However, I may have taken her up wrongly. If she is to vote against the motion, I do not understand why.

Mr McCartney spoke about waiting lists, which is a massive subject in itself. He said that we have the longest waiting lists in Europe. He also talked about the bureaucratic set-up in the Northern Ireland Health Service and mentioned various bodies that have expressed concern. Mr McGrady spoke from his experiences with bureaucratic structures, resources and waiting lists. He talked especially about pain and suffering, which is a key point as it happens daily. He also said that people are dying.

Dr Birnie focused on the groups themselves and on enhancing the power of the boards, which is also a key point. It is a top-down, not a bottom-up, structure. We are increasing the powers of the boards, and the Member mentioned the word "diktat" in that regard. Mr Shannon talked about cancer problems and about trying to get appointments with nurses in GPs' practices. He also mentioned the massive pressures on primary care services. We all know that there are asthma clinics, clinics for the elderly and many other clinics, but we are concerned with the overall strategy.

Mr John Kelly made some points on which I wish to comment. First, he said that I had not declared my interest in primary care. On a point of order, in January 2001, during a similar debate, I definitely declared that I retained a slight interest in primary care. I apologise if I have misled anyone in the Assembly, but if I did, I did so inadvertently. I have never gained one penny through fundholding, and, as far as primary care is concerned, I shall

not be involved in it for very much longer. However, I shall not go into that.

Mr J Kelly: Will the Member give way?

Dr Hendron: I shall not give way. I normally give way to Mr John Kelly, but not when I am summing up.

Mr John Kelly also said that we had heard from no representatives of those who are in favour — in favour of what? We are all in favour of the new primary care groups. The discussion has been going on for years, ever since John McFall was the direct rule Minister. If Mr John Kelly is saying that all the organisations that we are discussing, as well as certain other groups that I listed in my opening speech, oppose the Minister's decision, I have already dealt with them. Organisations such as the Northern Ireland Trust Nurses Association and the directors of social services, with whom we met last Wednesday, are well informed. Although they are not at the coalface, they support the new measures, just as we all support them. However, they are not querying the fact that the guidelines could have been laid down long ago. That is the key point.

Mr J Kelly: Will the Member give way?

Dr Hendron: Sorry, I am summing up. I cannot give way because I only have a few minutes left.

Mr Berry talked about turning back the clock and said that fundholding was dead. Of course, he is absolutely right. Mr John Kelly and Ms Ramsey queried having this debate in the first place. I point out to them it is only in the last six or seven weeks that details of the primary care groups have come to the people concerned, so it was impossible for the Committee for Health, Social Services and Public Safety to see every group that wanted to meet us. We have met as many groups as possible and I — *[Interruption]*.

Mr Speaker: Order. It is not in order for Members to interrupt a Member who is speaking. All Members got reasonable hearings, so I do not see why the Chairperson should not get a reasonable hearing too.

Dr Hendron: As Chairperson, I have tried to facilitate every member of the Committee, including Mr John Kelly, with regard to the people whom they wanted me to meet in the past. However, with the key date being 1 April it was impossible for the Committee to meet all the groups. The Minister and her Department should have brought the groups along with them during the last 12 months.

Mr Hamilton talked about an amendment and about an opportunity missed — most of us would accept that. Mrs Iris Robinson talked about the broad support for the Minister's original model. However, there was no broad support for that model; there was broad support for the model in 'Fit for the Future', which was brought forward by John McFall.

In 'Building the Way Forward in Primary Care - Summary of the Responses to the Consultation', the Minister refers to "respondents". As I said to her last week — if a wee man in the Cavehill had written a letter about the future of primary care, he would have become a respondent. All groups — primary care, nurses, midwives — are referred to as "respondents" and, according to the document, most of them are supportive.

Mr Gibson talked about the legacy of bureaucracy and about things being imposed. Ms Armitage's grave concern was shared by most of the Committee for Health, Social Services and Public Safety, and she wants no fudge. My Colleague, Mr Gallagher, talked about the workload on primary care, increased public expectation, resources and, above all, accountability.

The Minister described the primary care groups in detail. The Assembly supports primary care groups. Primary care-led health services are happening in these islands and in western Europe, and we agree with what the Prime Minister, Tony Blair, said about such a service. The reason for the amendment in January 2001 was to allow for a seamless transition.

The Minister said that the committees were statutory committees of the boards — I hope we are not playing with words. There was no primary legislation involved. Of course, the matter is within the statutory arrangements of the boards, but they are still committees of the boards. I hope — it will not be before the election, but perhaps following it next year — that there will be primary legislation in the Assembly to give power to the people at the front line, so that there will be a truly primary care-led Health Service in which all professionals are equal and have direct links to the community.

I will not raise the issue of the composition of the boards now. I will finish by saying that we want the best primary care for the people of Northern Ireland and that it is up to the Minister and her Department to bring people along with them. Mr John Kelly mentioned groups that we have not spoken to: all of them support the new ideas for primary care. Maybe it is not too late, but it is now over to the Minister and her Department.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That this Assembly expresses its grave concern about the future of primary care services in Northern Ireland and calls on the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to take prompt action to allay the serious concerns of the professions and staff working in Health and Social Services about the arrangements for local health and social care groups.

AGRICULTURE INDUSTRY

Mr Savage: I beg to move

That this Assembly urges the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development and the Executive to consider the implementation of measures which will sustain the viability of the agriculture industry in Northern Ireland.

It is now some 15 months since I last introduced a major motion on agriculture to the Assembly. That was on 5 December 2000. At that time, the House unanimously supported the motion, which called for more proactivity on the part of the Department to redress the sorry state that agriculture was in at that time. Unanimity is not common in the House, so, when it occurs, Ministers should always take special note.

At that time, I proposed the adoption of a farmers' early retirement and loan scheme, which — if I may paraphrase what would be a complex piece of legislation — would set out to enable older farmers to retire with dignity, a lump sum and a pension and enable young blood to enter the agriculture sector with new ideas, new perspectives and a business education behind it. The legislation that I proposed was based on the schemes currently operational in Denmark and France, so we were not in uncharted waters. Indeed, I had been in close contact with the Agriculture Ministries in both countries as well as with the appropriate directorates in Brussels and the now demised Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food in London — a Ministry axed because of its lack of proactivity.

I was enthused about the scheme from the contact that I had with its practitioners through my membership of the Committee of the Regions in the European Union. The most important feature of the scheme was that it would provide a proper and proven framework around which the farming sector could restructure itself. The need for the scheme was great in December 2000 when we were in the middle of an unprecedented crisis in agriculture — foot-and-mouth disease was still to come. However, the need for the scheme is even greater today.

Oliver Cromwell, a gentleman whom I am careful about quoting here, once said to Parliament

"No man mends his house in the hurricane season."

We may not be in a hurricane season. There may have been a slight improvement in farm incomes. I emphasise the word "slight", because I challenge the Minister and her colleagues to explain to the House how they would live on the average improved income of only £5,800 a year that farming families now receive. Although we may not be in the midst of a hurricane, we are certainly not in fair weather yet.

However small or temporary the respite between crises may be, it provides a chance for us to act decisively and not in the midst of chaos. That is why I am advocating

action now. I called for action in December 2000, and I am doing so again 15 months later. It is the duty of the Government to provide a legislative framework to enable farming to restructure. A new era for farming is slowly emerging. It is an era driven largely by Europe, where the subsidy culture will soon be a thing of the past. It is an era in which the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food's successor Department, the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, has already set out a new role for farmers as custodians of the countryside.

The collapse of the former farming economic infrastructure has been driven by powerful forces. The strength of sterling has driven down our international competitiveness. There has been a disempowerment of the farming sector, and the sector has not restructured as quickly as the food-based industries that it sustains. As a consequence, farmers have been in a poor negotiating position with the big supermarket chains and the even bigger capital that they represent. World food prices have fallen when there has been economic prosperity for every other sector of the economy.

2.15 pm

The farming sector has fared poorly compared to other sectors. People have difficulty identifying with the hard-pressed farmers. In addition, our farmers face competition from the Third World, the Far East and Europe, and trade liberalisation makes the problem worse. The report of the policy commission on farming and food was clear on the remedy for a sustainable future.

However, farming must become more business-focused. The policy commission's report said that it could become a vibrant, profitable business, attracting investment and new entrants by listening to the people who consume its products and conserving its most valuable asset — a healthy and attractive countryside.

We cannot reorganise farming into viable, healthy business-orientated, economically efficient units unless we restructure it, and that can be done only by introducing an early retirement scheme for farmers and encouraging young people who have been trained in agricultural colleagues and farms to take up the challenge and by providing Northern Ireland farming with a business plan. I am advocating both of those.

If the Minister does not introduce an early retirement scheme and provide a framework for restructuring, that is tantamount to saying that we will abandon farmers to the powerful economic forces I have mentioned. Some farmers will sink, and some will swim. That is not a recipe for ordered restructuring — it is a rout. It is an abdication of the duty we owe to an important part of our community that depends on agriculture for its living.

I remind the House of the knock-on effects of that. Only 0.9% of the British electorate is actively engaged in farming. In Northern Ireland about 85,000 people are

engaged, one way or another, in agriculture. The building trade employs only one third of that number. As an employer, farming is second only to manufacturing. For reasons of economic prudence, we should introduce an early retirement scheme and a loan scheme. Most Members would join me in doing that for common decency alone.

I do not propose to labour the details of the scheme today — Members have heard me talk about it often enough. They can read the details in the Hansard of 5 December 2000, or they can read one of the many recent articles in the press. The Minister has appointed consultants to look at this, and I want to convince the House that we need to act on it. Where is their report? We have been waiting fifteen months, and that is too long. We must not be like Nero, fiddling about while Rome burns.

I want to add some important provisos to the scheme that was set out in December 2000. We must tie the implementation into restrictions on production. Farmers are sometimes obsessed with producing more and more. What is the point of producing more, if it cannot be sold? That only drives the prices down. During the Northern Ireland Institute of Agricultural Science conference it was said that only 22% of farmers saw a need for radical change towards a market-oriented entrepreneurial culture, and that is very worrying. One of the main reasons identified for the failure of farmers is that they do not live in the real world.

The Government are sending out confusing signals. We must have a 10-year business plan for agriculture in addition to the early retirement and farm loan schemes. They are essentially two sides of the one coin, and they go hand-in-hand.

That 10-year plan cannot be definite. What can be definite in this fast-moving world? However, the plan must “best guess” the direction that world agriculture will take by using the most sophisticated tools available in market trends analysis and market intelligent methods. That is a major task.

Although the plan cannot be prescriptive, it must give farmers an idea of the realistic market options available in the next 10 years so that serious and viable planning can take place in agriculture. Only then can a proper investment climate be created. It is the duty of the Government to give a lead. However, the issues are of such dimensions that the matter should be taken on by the entire Northern Ireland Executive and not just by the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development. Given the importance of the agrifood industry as well as the agriculture sector, this is a strategic matter for the entire Northern Ireland economy.

Two avenues are open to us with regard to the financing of an early retirement scheme. Fifteen months ago, in my original submission to the Minister, I demonstrated how the scheme could be self-financing. If loans were restricted to those farmers with indebtedness of over

£20,000, that would put some £1,440 million into circulation. The total capital asset value of Northern Ireland farms is over £10.5 billion, a massive sum, compared with the total farmers’ indebtedness of some £700 million, that is less than 7% of the capital asset value of the farms. The scheme’s best feature is that it would lock the capital asset value of Northern Ireland farms at normal interest rates, which would earn the banks or financial institutions charged with the administration of the scheme some £42 million a year. The scheme itself would cost some £20 million a year to operate in the first five years, and after that the costs would diminish significantly.

Surely it is not beyond the imagination of man or Minister to tell the banks that they would generate a massive sum by simply operating the scheme and that they would be expected to plough a significant part of that back into the industry. Given the sheer volume of business, it might be possible for the banks to pay the total cost and still pocket profits of £22 million a year.

Another option might be to redesign the regional policy of the United Kingdom, using Northern Ireland, as has been done on many occasions, as a test case, to bring the scheme in on the back of a permitted soft loan European strategy within the constraints of the European Union’s Agenda 2000 regulations.

This is a matter for the entire Executive, because the issues raised involve a significant level of expenditure and strategic planning decisions. We must position ourselves in the world market in a way that ensures viability in farm size and efficiency. Adequate business planning requires imaginative leadership, and now is the time for that. Many stories have been told about what happened to the agriculture industry. Having listened to the previous debate on health, agriculture must not get itself into the same position. We are all aware of the crisis facing the Health Service. I hope that the proposal will be examined comprehensively and that with a common-sense approach, the agriculture industry can be brought back onto a level footing.

Mr Speaker: So inspiring has the Member been, that there are now twice as many Members who wish to speak on the list as there were when he opened the debate. I have, therefore, no option but to put a limit on the speaking time available to Members, which will be eight minutes.

That is not a minimum requirement for Members who wish to speak, but a maximum requirement. That limit does not apply to Mr Savage, who moved the motion, or to the Minister who will have the usual time for their winding-up speeches.

Mr Bradley: I support the motion, but I do not imply that nothing has been done or achieved by the Minister or the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development. First, we should look at when the downward spiral in farming began. The mid-1990s — 25 years into direct rule — was the beginning of the end for many farmers. The

Minister, the rest of the Executive and the Agriculture Committee have worked to deliver new hope to the farming industry, but in the three short years since it became locally elected people's responsibility to address our problems, we have had the disruption of foot-and-mouth disease.

I attended an Ulster Farmers' Union meeting on Tuesday night, and I was asked to convey publicly, on the union's behalf, its gratitude for the Minister's efforts during the foot-and-mouth disease crisis. Since November 1999, the House has experienced periods of suspension, so much has been achieved in a few working months. As a member of the Agriculture Committee, I am fully aware of the tremendous amount of work that has been done to get the agriculture industry working again. The Minister, the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development and the Committee have worked together on many important issues. Since November 1999, small farmers who were neglected for more than a quarter of a century have finally been recognised. Milk producers with a quota of less than 250,000 litres were given additional quota. The 90-head limit on the beef special premium (BSP) was removed, and new protection measures were introduced for producers with fewer than 30 heads of cattle. A new milk scheme was introduced, and beef national envelope funds were revised and split sixty-forty between suckler producers and heifer producers.

Benefits for the long-term survival of the industry inevitably come about as a result of the cross-border animal health programme that the Minister is pursuing. The introduction of the new beef quality initiative will also ensure that Northern Ireland produce is of the best quality. A vision group was established, and its action plan should be up and running by June 2002. Work is under way to secure a future for the next generation and, as the Deputy Chairperson of the Committee has said, it is the hope of many, including myself, that developments will include a combination of a new entrants' programme and an early retirement scheme.

Many other developments have taken place that are in the interests of the farming industry and broader rural issues. Those include: the reduction of red tape; the securing of funding; the backing of rural development; the Minister speaking up in Europe; support for the fishing industry; and the securing of regionalisation for Northern Ireland during the foot-and-mouth disease outbreak. So much was achieved in a short time. I support the motion, but rather than ask the Minister to consider the implementation of measures to sustain viability, I ask that she continue to implement measures that will allay the concerns of all who are interested in the future of the agriculture and fishing industries for the betterment of rural society overall.

Mr Speaker: Having only a minute until Question Time, I propose that the House takes its leisure for that time.

2.30 pm

Oral Answers to Questions

EDUCATION

Mr Speaker: Question 7, in the name of Mr McGrady, question 10, in the name of Mr Dallat, and question 20, in the name of Mr Gibson, have been withdrawn and will receive written answers.

Vocational GCSEs

1. **Mr K Robinson** asked the Minister of Education to detail what action he has taken and any plans he has made to promote new vocational GCSE examinations.

(AQO 972/01)

The Minister of Education (Mr M McGuinness): The Council for the Curriculum, Examinations and Assessment (CCEA) will offer new vocational qualifications known as GCSE double awards from September 2002. A series of seminars and workshops have been arranged to ensure that staff in schools and support agencies are fully prepared. Promotional posters, teacher and pupil information packs, and fact sheets covering each vocational area will be widely distributed. Information will also be available on the CCEA web site.

Mr K Robinson: The leading examination boards — Oxford Cambridge and RSA Examinations (OCR), Edexcel and CCEA — have all announced the launch of new GCSEs in vocational subjects to replace the existing GNVQs in an effort to give parity of esteem to practical subjects such as engineering, manufacture and design. The Westminster Government plan to designate 1,500 schools as specialist engineering schools with additional funding of £100,000 each — over £300 extra per pupil. Will the Minister extend this scheme to Northern Ireland in an effort to enhance and promote the strong tradition of engineering and manufacturing education in the Province?

Mr M McGuinness: I am prepared to consider the scheme of which the Member speaks. I have no first-hand knowledge of it, but when I have more information I will give it consideration.

Teachers' Health and Well-Being Survey

2. **Ms Ramsey** asked the Minister of Education to outline (a) when he intends to publish the findings of the teachers' health and well-being survey; and (b) what action he intends to take as a follow-up. (AQO 967/01)

Mr M McGuinness: The draft report, which was commissioned by management side of the teachers' salaries and conditions of service committee, should be ready by

the end of this month. It will be published after management side has discussed the findings with teachers' side. While the follow-up action will depend on the findings, my Department, the employing authorities and teacher representatives will be giving a high priority to the report's recommendations on a strategy for improving teachers' health and well-being.

Ms Ramsey: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. The Minister has covered part of my supplementary question. Does he have any idea, from what is in the draft report now, whether the present arrangements need to be improved?

Mr M McGuinness: The employing authorities already provide a range of in-house services to teachers, including formal arrangements with agencies providing specialist help in areas such as bereavement and relationship problems. The report will identify ways in which the present arrangements can be improved as necessary.

Mr B Bell: Does the Minister accept that stress is one of the main causes of the high levels of teachers' absence through sickness? It cost the education budget over £15 million in 2000-01. Therefore, urgent action is needed. Can the Minister tell the House what action he intends to take to deal with this problem?

Mr M McGuinness: The work that has been undertaken and the draft report, which will be ready by the end of this month, will deal with all of the issues of which the Member speaks. Then it will be a matter of the management side and the Department of Education giving due consideration to all of those issues. The issue of teacher stress and welfare is one that I regard as a top priority in my Department. I have met many representatives of the teachers' unions, and I am aware of their concerns. The report will go some way towards addressing their concerns.

Refurbishment of Youth Clubs

3. **Mr Bradley** asked the Minister of Education, pursuant to his announcement on 12 September 2000, to outline the procedures that are necessary to enable youth club committees to avail of finance to refurbish their premises. (AQO 952/01)

Mr M McGuinness: The extra finance that I announced on 12 September 2000 was for a facelift scheme to allow youth clubs to refurbish their premises. The funding was available through the education and library boards. The scheme ran during the year 2000-01, and £500,000 was released, although the initiative was heavily oversubscribed.

In September 2001 I announced that I had secured substantial additional funding of £1.5 million each year over the next three years from the Executive programme funds. That funding is to be used for health and safety works, improvement schemes, including better disabled access and the installation of computer equipment. Seventy-four

youth organisations have applied for grants so far. I encourage other clubs, particularly those in disadvantaged areas, to contact the Department to avail of the next allocation of funding in the 2002-03 financial year.

Youth club committees are also entitled to apply to the Department for financial assistance at any time under the capital schemes for youth sector. Limited funding is available.

Mr Bradley: I have just learned about the new funding. Will the Minister confirm that local divisional youth officers are au fait with the new funding? Is there an obligation on them to advise youth club committees in their areas about that funding? Is the Minister depending on those officers to promote the funding?

Mr M McGuinness: Further information on the scheme and application forms can be obtained by contacting Youth Services Branch at the Department of Education. This is an open-ended scheme, and applications can be made at any time.

Mr Shannon: I am interested in this scheme. Will the Minister indicate if funding for youth club committees will be spread equitably? What criteria will be used to ensure that all moneys are allocated fairly to the Unionist community? Have targets been set, and what steps will be taken to ensure that youth clubs in Unionist areas can source the moneys?

Mr M McGuinness: There will be equality, and decisions will be taken on the basis of need in individual areas. When I come to Question Time, I always feel regret when people come forward with questions which attempt to sectarianise a vital area of work in education. We had an example of that in relation to the schools capital building programme, and now we have it again. My administration is totally committed to treating people fairly. We have had too much injustice, unfairness, inequality and discrimination in the past — far too much for me to even begin to think that it would be a sensible way forward for my administration.

Teachers' Pay and Conditions

4. **Mr J Kelly** asked the Minister of Education what action he intends to take in relation to the proposal by teachers' organisations to hold an independent inquiry into teachers' pay and conditions. (AQO 971/01)

Mr M McGuinness: Following separate meetings with management side and teachers' side on 13 December 2001, I received a letter from teachers' side suggesting that it would be appropriate for the negotiating committee to take forward an inquiry into teachers' salaries and terms and conditions of service. Under the proposal, both sides would agree the terms of reference, the personnel and the timescales. They would also receive the report's recommendations for negotiation in the normal way.

I arranged for senior officials to meet with teachers' side on 25 February to discuss the proposal. The next step is to complete discussions with management side on teachers' side's proposal and to reach an early decision.

Mr J Kelly: I thank the Minister for his comprehensive answer. Does the Minister support the teachers' proposals for an inquiry?

Mr M McGuinness: The approach proposed by teachers' side seems to be a reasonable way forward, but I will await the views of the employing authorities before making any final decision.

Mr Hamilton: The Minister informed the Committee for Education on 16 January 2002 that he would make a decision regarding an independent inquiry shortly. We are still waiting. Can he explain the reason for the long delay, which is totally unacceptable, given that the issue was first raised in July 2001?

Mr M McGuinness: The recent proposals from teachers' side were significant. My Department had to examine them before they could be discussed with management side. I hope that the issue can be dealt with expeditiously.

PricewaterhouseCoopers

5. **Ms Lewsley** asked the Minister of Education to detail (a) the number of staff from PricewaterhouseCoopers who worked on assignment or secondment to his Department or to the education and library boards during the past five years; (b) the cost of the total fees paid by his Department and/or the boards to PricewaterhouseCoopers; and (c) what percentage of total consultancy work allocated by his Department and the boards went to PricewaterhouseCoopers over the past five years.

(AQO 955/01)

Mr M McGuinness: Today I replied to the Member's original written question, which asked for the same information. In the letter that accompanied that reply I apologised for the unacceptable delay in providing that information. For Members' benefit, I will place a copy of that correspondence in the Library.

Ms Lewsley: I thank the Minister for his answer and for the details of his letter. Was that consultation work obtained through the proper, open tendering process?

Mr M McGuinness: I explained in the letter that the information requested by the Member was not available in a readily accessible form. Although it was relatively easy to ascertain how much money was paid in fees to individual consultancy companies by the Department, it was less easy to obtain that information for the five education and library boards. When the data was received from the boards, it had to be cross-checked with data obtained from departmental sources to ensure that information was not counted twice.

There were also delays in establishing information on the numbers of consultants, as that could not be determined without undertaking a major exercise at a significant cost in staff resources. In addition, as my letter states, some of the key papers were mislaid by one of my officials, and that caused further delay.

The answer to your question about tendering is "Yes".

Green Schools Programme

6. **Mr M Murphy** asked the Minister of Education if he intends to initiate a programme similar to the green schools programme operated by the Dublin Government.
(AQO 969/01)

Mr M McGuinness: The green schools programme is one element of the European-wide eco-schools programme. I am pleased to say that over 120 schools here have already registered in the eco-schools programme since its inception.

Mr M Murphy: Does the Minister agree that the schools programme in the Southern part of this island is a superb example of improving environmental awareness at an early age? No doubt the Minister can see, as I do, increased opportunities for significant North/South links, and, perhaps, the potential for an Irish language edition of the eco-schools programme.

Mr M McGuinness: Absolutely. There is no doubt that over 750 schools, both primary and secondary, are registered with the programme operated in the South by An Taisce — the National Trust for Ireland. There is significant interest in environmental issues here also, as can be seen from the number of schools that have registered with the eco-schools programme.

The current review of the curriculum also provides an important opportunity to define how all subjects, particularly geography and science, can provide scope and opportunities for young people to become responsible custodians of their environment.

Pre-School Nursery Places

8. **Mr Poots** asked the Minister of Education what percentage of fully funded pre-school nursery places are available in each board area.
(AQO 966/01)

Mr M McGuinness: Complete data for the current school year are not yet available. However, for the year 2000-01 the percentages based on the three-year-old population are as follows: Belfast 90%; Western 73%; North Eastern 66%; South Eastern 65%; Southern 71%; and the overall figure was 72%. It is anticipated that, during this academic year, places will be available overall for at least 85% of the cohort.

Mr Poots: In his response to a previous question, the Minister talked about equality and treated with disdain those who asked questions about fair treatment.

It is clear from the figures he has given that schools in the Unionist community that are within the North Eastern Education and Library Board and South Eastern Education and Library Board areas are being discriminated against. In Downshire, which is in my constituency, only around 25% of children are being offered pre-school places. When are children in rural constituencies in those board areas going to get fair treatment and equality and be offered the pre-school places that they have been denied? Schools, including Riverdale Primary School, that have requested pre-school places have been denied that opportunity by the pre-school education advisory group (PEAG).

2.45 pm

Mr M McGuinness: In formulating their development plans, PEAGs are required by the Department of Education to give particular regard to the needs of rural areas. Prior to the expansion programme, the level of provision tended to be lowest in those areas. However, while there is a good network of nursery schools and units, pre-school playgroups and private day centres, local circumstances may be such that it is simply not possible for the intended level of coverage to be reached in some rural areas.

In some areas of the Lagan Valley constituency it has not been possible to achieve the intended level of coverage. That is largely due to local circumstances. For example, I am aware of one large village in Lagan Valley where none of the existing playgroups has applied to be allocated pre-school places. That operates to depress the overall level of coverage that can be achieved in that area. The Department is working with the South Eastern Education and Library Board PEAG to investigate what can be done to increase the level of provision in such situations.

I am also aware that there has been much discussion about the issue of statutory settings, which are established in the controlled and maintained sectors. I am aware of the view that decisions about the funding of new statutory provision have discriminated against the controlled sector. Both sectors have benefited from the creation of new nursery provision under the pre-school education expansion programme.

There are other initiatives, such as Belfast Regeneration — formerly known as Making Belfast Work — and the EU special support programme for peace and reconciliation. There are currently 155 controlled, 95 Catholic maintained, 13 grant-maintained integrated and one non-Catholic maintained nursery schools and units in a total of 264. A further 33 new projects of all management types are currently being developed. I emphasise that all pre-school education provision is open to all children. There is considerable integration of attendance in that sector.

The issue must be dealt with in its proper perspective. The Assembly must acknowledge that in certain circumstances there are particular individual situations that do not reflect the overall picture.

Mr Armstrong: Can the Minister clarify whether the fully funded pre-school places are full-time or part-time? How is that provision monitored and evaluated in order to ensure that adequate standards are achieved across all areas?

Mr M McGuinness: Pre-school provision is monitored by the PEAGs, which are attached to the five education and library boards. It is monitored consistently. The Department of Education takes a keen interest in that. Our perspective is that it is essential to provide as much provision as possible. The progress that has been made in the last several years has been rapid. The provision is monitored and inspected. If people want to ask specific questions about specific circumstances, possibly peculiar to their own constituencies, the Department will be happy to answer those questions.

Academic Selection and 11-Plus Test

9. **The Chairperson of the Committee for Education (Mr Kennedy)** asked the Minister of Education what assessment he has made of the relationship between the abolition of academic selection and the abolition of the 11-plus test. (AQO 1012/01)

Mr M McGuinness: I welcome the Member's question, because it is at the heart of the current debate on post-primary arrangements. The 11-plus test exists only because Northern Ireland has a system of post-primary education that allows grammar schools to select the pupils that they want and reject the rest.

There is clear demand for the abolition of the test, but that cannot happen unless decisions are taken on the key issue of academic selection. Retaining academic selection and abolishing the test would require some other form of selection by grammar schools. Whatever system is used, it will perpetuate many weaknesses that have been identified by research into current arrangements.

Mr Kennedy: Will the Minister accept that statements he has made in the House and in public to the effect that it is important to realise that the abolition of the 11-plus test cannot take place unless academic selection is also abolished are, in fact, inaccurate? Will he also accept that it is possible to have academic selection by other means?

Mr M McGuinness: The consultation process, which ends on 28 June, provides a golden opportunity for people to make suggestions. I have made it clear from the outset that I want people to respond to that consultation and to give their views on the Burns proposals. I have also invited people to suggest modifications and alternatives for consideration by my Department.

Today I launched a video and other consultation materials as a vital aid to discussion. This is the most comprehensive consultation on any issue since the Assembly's establishment. However, research by Prof Tony Gallagher, Prof Alan Smith, Save the Children and Prof Gardiner clearly states that new arrangements should not perpetuate the weaknesses that have been identified in their research. That is a danger.

However, the consultation is meaningful and real and offers a real opportunity for the entire community to have a say in future arrangements. We do not have a modern education system of which we can be proud. We must recognise that the arrangements put in place over 50 years ago were relevant to the last century. That system is not relevant to the needs of our children, be they from the Shankill Road, from the Bogside, from the Falls Road, from Ballymena or from Portadown. We must face that reality.

People must also face the crux issue of academic selection. We must confront the facts; only 2% of children from the Shankill Road have a grammar school education, and only 8% of children who attend grammar schools come from disadvantaged areas. Those are huge issues.

I appeal to everybody, both in the Assembly and outside, not to become involved in conflict or division on this issue. Everyone has a duty and a responsibility to rise above that. This is about more than structures; it is about putting children at the centre of our thinking and establishing an education system that will allow them to believe in themselves and to succeed.

Mr McHugh: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. I agree with the Minister that we must focus on prioritising children. Putting children first, rather than putting them forward as failures at 11 years old, is the key to the debate. Does the Minister acknowledge that academic selection is, in fact, academic rejection for the majority of children?

Mr M McGuinness: Yes, I do. The reality is that academic selection for some children means academic rejection for many more.

Moreover, research has shown that academic selection at age 11 prematurely closes down opportunities for the majority of pupils. It creates a sense of failure and results in a loss of self-esteem and confidence at a stage of their educational, social and emotional development when every encouragement should be given. Teachers have to work extremely hard to restore that loss.

We should also understand that children are individuals whose educational development progresses at different rates. We recently heard that from Prof Gerry McKenna of the University of Ulster. He made a significant point, which is backed up by Prof George Bain, the vice-chancellor of Queen's University. Only 50% of students come via A level to the new University of Ulster. Where do all the others come from? That is the big question.

That clearly shows up the extra and incredible abilities of our young people. It is important that options are kept open until a child's needs and aspirations have developed more fully.

I have heard it suggested that the idea that every child can be a success is pie in the sky. On the contrary, every child can be a success. I have been in special education schools with autistic children, and it has done my heart proud to see a child on one day being able to count to six and on the next day to count to eight. That is how success must be measured. Children have different abilities, and unless we get our heads around that, and realise that our challenge is to provide an education system which opens doors for all of our children, we will always struggle against the backdrop of an education system that is not world class and which lags behind New Zealand, Korea and many other such countries.

Mr S Wilson: I am sure that the people of the Shankill Road will be touched and pleased to hear about the Minister's concern for their children's future. It is a pity that he did not share that concern when his associates bombed their parents not so long ago.

How is the Minister's consultation video to inform the debate on the issue of post-primary education? Eighty per cent of that video is directed towards the promotion of his party political point of view and of the Burns proposal.

If the Minister rejects academic selection, on what basis does he expect youngsters to be selected for over-subscribed schools? Is he in favour of social selection based on their parents' ability to pay, their contacts, or their ability to buy a house in the proximity of the popular schools?

Mr M McGuinness: The objectives of the video and household response form are to provide clear and objective information on the consultation arrangements and on the Burns proposals, to inform the debate and to explain to people how they can respond. The video will be sent to schools, further education colleges and community groups, and it will act as an aid to discussion on the proposals. It will also be sent to public libraries and made available to the public.

The content of the video sets the context for the review by explaining why change is necessary and by referring to the weaknesses identified by the Gallagher and Smith research and the Save the Children research. The Burns proposals are explained, and answers are provided to frequently asked questions about them.

The video puts the Burns proposals in the context of the wider review of post-primary education and invites comments. The response form asks questions on key issues and includes a summary of the main proposals made by Burns, with information on how everyone can respond to the consultation.

The materials we launched this morning explain the key elements of the Burns proposals and include views and concerns expressed by a number of education professionals about the document and about current arrangements.

A wide range of views is represented. The materials serve their purpose, which is to provide information about the Burns proposals and the context of the review of post-primary education in order to stimulate discussion.

Last week, a 10-and-a-half-year-old child uttered one of the most powerful statements that I have heard in the course of this debate. During the Save the Children research, she was asked what the 11-plus meant to her. Her words were more powerful than those of any adult who has articulated his or her views on selection. She said that if she passed, she would go to a smart school, but that if she failed, she would go to a stupid school. I rest my case.

3.00 pm

Mr Speaker: Order. Time is up for questions to the Minister of Education.

HEALTH, SOCIAL SERVICES AND PUBLIC SAFETY

Belvoir Park Hospital: Radiotherapy

Mr Speaker: We will now move to questions to the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety. Question 1, standing in the name of Mr Byrne, question 3, standing in the name of Rev Robert Coulter and question 12, standing in the name of Mr Gibson, have been withdrawn and will receive written answers. Question 9, standing in the name of Mr McHugh, has been transferred to the Office of the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister. Question 17, standing in the name of Mr Conor Murphy, has been withdrawn and does not require a written answer.

2. **Ms Armitage** asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety if she has any plans for, or if she would consider, using part of Belvoir Park Hospital for radiotherapy treatment only. (AQO 961/01)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety (Ms de Brún): Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. Ag teacht le Tuarascáil Campbell, soláthrófar seirbhísí radaiteiripe ón lárionad réigiúnach ailese atá le tógáil ar shuíomh Ospidéal Chathair Bhéal Feirste, áit a mbeidh fáil ar raon iomlán seirbhísí géarliachta agus seirbhísí tacaíochta diagnóiseacha. Níl aon phleananna agam Ospidéal Pháirc Belvoir a úsáid do sholáthar seirbhísí radaiteiripe ó bheidh an lárionad nua ailese tógtha.

In line with the Campbell Report, radiotherapy services will be provided at the regional cancer centre, which is to be constructed on the Belfast City Hospital

site, where a full range of acute and diagnostic support services will be available. I have no plans to use Belvoir Park Hospital for the provision of radiotherapy services once the new cancer centre has been constructed.

Ms Armitage: I understand what the Minister has said, but I ask her to reconsider. Some £600,000 has been spent on Belvoir Park Hospital already. Friends of Montgomery House have secured funding for a new magnetic resonance imaging (MRI) scanner, and they will take care of the recurring costs. If the Minister were to consider using Belvoir Park, it would be in the Department's financial interest to keep it simply as a radiotherapy treatment centre. Moreover, given the waiting lists, to do so would take some of the pressure off the new cancer centre, which may or may not be open in 2005. Belvoir Park has a good reputation, and the new cancer centre will take time to develop. Does the Minister agree that that option should be considered, given the amount of money that has already been invested in Belvoir Park and the amount of money that the Friends of Montgomery House are prepared to invest in the hospital? When —

Mr Speaker: Order. This is an opportunity for the Member to ask a supplementary question, which she has done. It is not an opportunity to make a robust case in favour of a particular view.

Ms Armitage: I would never dream of doing that, Mr Speaker.

Mr Speaker: Order. I call the Minister to respond.

Ms Armitage: I have not even asked the question.

Mr Speaker: The Member has already asked at least one question.

Ms de Brún: The Campbell Report recommended that radiotherapy and chemotherapy services should be moved from Belvoir Park Hospital to Belfast City Hospital and become an integral part of the regional cancer centre. The report recognised that changes in treatment, together with the increasingly elderly population, will require clinicians to deal with people who are likely to be more ill and suffering from complex medical problems. Therefore, the report concluded that radiotherapy and chemotherapy services should be delivered in an acute hospital setting, where there is the full back-up of acute and diagnostic services. The relocation of radiotherapy and chemotherapy services from Belvoir Park to the City Hospital will give acutely ill cancer patients direct on-site access to general and specialist physicians and surgeons. For that reason, those services are better placed at the City Hospital site.

Mr McHugh: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. What has been done to keep Belvoir Park Hospital going until the new cancer centre opens? When will the opening date for the centre be announced?

Ms de Brún: Pending the opening of the cancer centre, I am determined to ensure that cancer sufferers have the best possible treatment and care. I have made it clear that services at Belvoir Park are an important aspect of cancer treatment and that the hospital has an important and continuing role. I have underpinned current service provision by approving the acquisition of two linear accelerators at a capital cost of £3.8 million. I have also approved an investment of £550,000 for urgent remedial work to the building infrastructure and equipment at Belvoir Park, my officials are urgently considering the case for a replacement CT scanner for the hospital and I expect to announce the way forward soon.

The regional cancer centre is a keystone of the pattern of cancer services that I wish to develop. It is critical that we have a modern state-of-the-art facility, and it is my intention that that becomes a reality as soon as possible. Significant progress has been made on the Belfast City Hospital site. With regard to the cancer centre, I inherited a planned investment of some £32 million and a private finance initiative (PFI) process that had been set in motion by the previous Administration. Last year, the trusts and clinicians involved said that a state-of-the-art facility was needed that incorporated new and emerging technology and that advances made in patient care and treatment must be built on, so I had to decide whether the original proposal was adequate. The trusts and clinicians made the case that the rapid evolution of the concept of a cancer centre meant that the original proposal was no longer adequate. My Department and the Department of Finance and Personnel have now approved the revised business case at a cost of £57 million, and I will make an announcement on that before the summer recess.

Local Health and Social Care Groups

4. **Mr Beggs** asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the total number of additional staff required to run the proposed new local health and social care groups. (AQO 997/01)

Ms de Brún: Beidh ar gach grúpa áitiúil sláinte agus cúraim shóisialta, a mbeidh 15 ar fad díobh ann, bainisteoir a cheapadh. Is é is dóiche go gceapfaidh grúpaí ar a laghad comhalta amháin eile d'fhoireann tacaíochta, cé gur faoi na grúpaí iad féin a bheidh sé cinneadh a dhéanamh faoin líon iomlán foirne a bheidh riachtanach. Ar an chuid is lú de, mar sin de, beidh 30 duine nua foirne de dhíth le tacaíocht a sholáthar do na grúpaí áitiúla sláinte agus cúraim shóisialta.

There will be 15 local health and social care groups, all of which will be required to appoint a manager. It is likely that groups will appoint at least one other member of support staff, although the total number of staff required will be a matter for the groups themselves to

decide. As a minimum, 30 new staff will be needed to support the local health and social care groups.

Mr Beggs: Does the Minister acknowledge that she already has a sizeable number of administrative staff in her Department, as do the health boards and trusts? Does she further accept that she has created yet another layer of bureaucracy in the Health Service through the creation of local health and social care groups without making significant reductions in other bureaucratic levels in the service? What purpose do health boards serve other than to deflect criticism from her Department? When will the layers of bureaucracy be removed so that money goes to the patients instead?

Ms de Brún: The ending of GP fundholding and the creation of local health and social care groups will not only allow local people to take local decisions about local services, it will also allow money to be moved from administration to front-line care. I anticipate that £2.5 million will be freed up and that money that was spent on administration will be spent on front-line care.

The wider structures will be addressed in discussions that the Executive will hold on the proposals and recommendations made in the acute hospitals review group's report and as part of the review of public administration. The continued existence of boards and trusts, how many there will be, what their functions will be and how other structures will fit in will be addressed in that context.

Whatever emerges, it is important to ensure that the arrangements support the close working of all parts of the health and personal social services and that the inter-connection between health and social services, education, housing and other key public services is facilitated.

From the outset, I have ensured that the new local health and social care groups will be set up and operated in such a way as to be flexible enough to be accommodated within any wider structural changes in health and social services that emerge from the planned review of public administration.

Mr McCarthy: I welcome the Minister's response to our debate earlier today. Given that the majority of people being asked to serve on these new groups are from the health professions, can the Minister assure the House that these medical people will not be required to carry out clerical or administrative work to the detriment of ordinary patients?

Ms de Brún: Compensating people for the time that they give to these boards will allow GPs and pharmacists, for example, to employ locum cover. That will ensure that they are able to carry out this work and that their other work will not suffer as a result. It is not my intention that anybody should be out of pocket because of these arrangements. I have put forward a figure of £3 per head for the management of these groups, and I will keep that under review.

Ms Ramsey: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. Can the Minister answer the criticism that boards and trusts will dominate the management boards of new local health and social care groups?

Ms de Brún: Such fears have been expressed, but they were not borne out by the commissioning pilots, which also have board and trust managements on their boards, and on which the new groups have been based. Board and trust representatives will together fill only six of the 18 places on the management board, and GPs will fill five — so no one group or profession will dominate the new groups. Also, as part of their quota, boards and trusts must nominate a nurse, a social worker and a professional allied to medicine, which means that there will be two nurses, two social workers and two professionals allied to medicine on each group. In that regard, I point out that the generic term “nurses” refers to nurses, midwives and health visitors whose names are on the register of the United Kingdom Central Council for Nursing, Midwifery and Health Visiting (UKCC).

The management boards of the groups must devise effective mechanisms to ensure the involvement of other stakeholders and members of the wider local health and social care group who are involved at the grass roots. It will be up to the management boards of the new groups to ensure that there is a bottom-up approach. I am confident that the management structure and representation on the boards are such that no group or profession will dominate. We now have a unique opportunity for primary care professionals and others, working at local level with local people, to have a way of ensuring that local people and primary care are at the centre of our health and social services.

Elective Surgery

5. **Mr Berry** asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to outline the total number of elective surgery procedures scheduled to take place in each hospital in 2002. (AQO 962/01)

Ms de Brún: Níl fáil ar an eolas atá á lorg san fhoirm ina n-iarrtar é. Ba chóir go mbeadh eolas ar mhéid na ngnáthamh roghnach atá pleanáilte do 2002-2003 ar fáil níos déanaí an mhí seo. Socróidh mé go gcuirfear é sin i Leabharlann an Tionóil agus cuirfidh mé an Comhalta ar an eolas dá réir.

That information is not available in the form requested. Information on the volume of elective episodes planned for 2002-03 should be available later this month. I shall arrange to have that information placed in the Assembly Library, and I will notify the Member accordingly.

Mr Berry: Surely the Minister will recognise again that she has failed — she has not grasped the waiting lists problem in the hospitals and the recent crisis in the Royal Victoria Hospital's fracture wards. How many

elective surgical procedures have been cancelled in all hospitals in Northern Ireland to date?

Ms de Brún: The waiting lists question is not one that can be tackled in isolation from the broader pressures on hospital services, which have seen the number of emergency admissions rising steadily over the past year or so. Regarding capacity, the only cure is more resources. We need sustained long-term action, supported by the resources and the service capacity necessary to bring waiting lists down.

On efficiency, there is a significant programme of work under way to improve the flow of patients through the system. That includes reducing the number of people who fail to keep their appointments; putting in place alternatives to hospital admission, such as physiotherapists in the community treating patients with back pain; making sure theatres are operating at maximum capacity; and validating lists to ensure that they are accurate.

In spite of our difficulties, three out of four people get treatment within three months, and 95% of those people are treated within a year. Not all the same people are waiting at the same time. The people on the waiting lists are constantly changing.

3.15 pm

I answered several questions recently about the elective procedures that have been cancelled. I refer the Member to those answers, and I will ask officials today what other detailed information they can give to the Member.

Mr Watson: Given the high level of cancellations and the emergency pressure on beds, what measures is the Minister considering to protect beds that can be solely used for elective surgery?

Ms de Brún: The service will be asked to increase the level of protected elective capacity during the next year — units that will not be affected by pressures. Altnagelvin Hospital already has a good model in place with doctors performing approximately 1,000 procedures a year. Some of the recommendations in the acute hospitals review group's report also mentioned that point, so it will be included in the Executive's discussion about proposals for the way forward in wider acute service provision. As well as that, an extra 1,000 community care places will be available next year, which will help to reduce the number of people in hospital, thus freeing up hospital capacity for operations.

Mr M Murphy: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. What actions is the Minister taking to tackle waiting lists?

Ms de Brún: In addition to the points that I have outlined in my answer to the previous Member, 262 patients have been offered the opportunity to have cardiac surgery in Glasgow or elsewhere this year rather than wait for treatment locally. For example, the Northern Health and

Social Services Board hopes that 51 patients will be treated in Scotland by the end of March, which would deal with all the board's excess.

The Royal Group of Hospitals has confirmed that by the end of March doctors there will have completed more than 700 procedures. The Western Health and Social Services Board has held additional ophthalmology clinics at Roe Valley Hospital, reducing the number of waiting inpatients from 360 to 30 and thus reducing the average waiting time from two years to six months.

Ward 8 in the Royal Victoria Hospital has been re-organised as an elective surgery ward for six months of the year and as an emergency admissions ward for the other six months. A mobile magnetic resonance imaging unit was brought in to provide a scanning service to help the Northern and Western boards reduce waiting lists there. Additional scanning capacity from a mobile unit is also available at the Royal Victoria Hospital. Those are some of the specific actions that have been taken to help individual patients — who did not have to wait as long as they otherwise might have had to.

I outlined earlier the type of work that is under way to improve the flow of patients through the system. Of course, with regard to asking and pleading for extra resources, we cannot carry out the work unless the service has the beds, staff, equipment and theatre time. To reduce waiting lists we need sustained long-term action supported by resources and the necessary service capacity.

Waiting Period for Fractures

6. **Mr Poots** asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail (a) the current waiting period for patients requiring treatment for fractures; and (b) how this compares with previous years.

(AQO 981/01)

Ms de Brún: Glactar formhór na n-othar ag a bhfuil briseadh cnáimhe isteach san ospidéal mar iontrálacha éigeandála, agus déantar iad a chóireáil a luaithe is féidir de réir tosaíochtaí clínicíúla. Bíonn a n-obráid ag formhór na ndaoine a mbaineann máinliacht lena gcóireáil faoi cheann dhá lá. Níl fáil ar eolas comparáideach ó bhlianta roimhe seo.

Most fracture patients are emergency admissions and are treated as soon as possible in accordance with clinical priority. The majority of those operations are carried out within two days.

Mr Poots: I hear what the Minister is saying, but what is happening on the ground is different. I have heard about people having to wait more than a week to have fractures repaired. We have also heard the Minister complaining today about not having enough resources. People who have to wait for up to two weeks to get fractures repaired are using much needed resources, and that creates a situation in which mismanagement is eating

into the funding that we are giving to the health and social services budget, which has been increased by 37%.

Surely the Minister can do more to ensure that patients get treated immediately and do not have to suffer undue pain and suffering and that we do not have the bed blocking that takes place as a result of mismanagement.

Ms de Brún: People who sustain fractures are first assessed at an accident and emergency department to determine whether they require surgery at a main fracture centre. If they do, they are transferred to one of the fracture units at the Royal Victoria, the Ulster or Altnagelvin hospitals. I am assured that arrangements are in place to ensure that as far as possible everyone who is assessed as requiring inpatient fracture surgery is transferred to a main fracture centre as soon as possible and within 48 hours at the latest. All patients who are admitted either directly to a main fracture centre or are transferred from a local hospital are clinically assessed at a main fracture centre, and treatment is prioritised accordingly.

It is clearly not acceptable that some people must wait a long time for this treatment. Our fracture services have been under sustained pressure for some time as a result of an increased demand for surgery, coupled with a shortage of specialist staff, such as anaesthetists and orthopaedic surgeons both here and in the NHS. I have outlined the ongoing work. In addition, in planning for the present and the future, my Department has afforded a high priority to training in this speciality. Specifically, the number of trainees in orthopaedics has increased by almost 50% in the past five years, and further increases are planned.

Mr J Kelly: Are pressures on fracture services affecting orthopaedic surgery?

Ms de Brún: Yes, unfortunately, our fracture services have been under sustained pressure for some time. Although every effort is made to minimise the impact on other services, the nature of trauma and fracture injuries is such that urgent surgery is often required. Regrettably, that has resulted in the cancellation of some elective orthopaedic surgery.

Primary Care Group Discussions

7. **Mr McFarland** asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what discussions have taken place with GPs, nurses and community care staff in the light of the Department's proposals for the introduction of primary care groups.

(AQO 979/01)

Ms de Brún: Tá moltaí ag an Roinn grúpaí cúraim phríomhúil a thabhairt isteach, agus mar sin bhí cruinnithe ag feidhmeannaigh i mo Roinn le gnáthdhochtúirí, altraí, oibrithe sóisialta, cógaiseoirí, boird agus iontaobhais.

In the light of my Department's proposals to introduce primary care groups, officials in my Department have had meetings with GPs, nurses, social workers, pharmacists, boards and trusts.

Mr McFarland: There is great excitement in the House today, because it looks as if we are going to get past question 7. With questions to the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety, that must be a record.

In spite of the debates this morning and the questions so far, I am still not clear what has gone wrong, given that all the royal colleges and medical professionals are at odds with the Minister's plan for primary care groups. Will the Minister tell us what has gone wrong with the consultation, or has she decided to take on the royal colleges as a test of strength?

Ms de Brún: If anyone is deciding to take on anyone else in a test of strength, the Member may want to look closer to home than to ask the question of me. It is certainly not my intention to do anything of the sort. I have talked to many groups, as has my Department. I detailed in the debate earlier the long programme of consultation and meetings that I have had with groups — as late as today.

Within a week of receiving a letter asking for a meeting with the British Medical Association, the Royal College of Nursing and the Royal College of Midwives, I agreed to meet those groups. The letter arrived on 7 March, and I have said that I will meet them on Wednesday of this week. There is no question but that I have spoken in detail and have sent out detailed guidance. That guidance has also been given to Committee members, some of whom have contradicted what was written in the guidance in television and radio interviews, saying that certain things would not happen when they were clearly written in the guidance.

However, I am attempting, yet again today, to ensure that I address people's concerns by telling them that the services of the GP fundholders will be maintained until local health and social care groups have had a chance to make their decisions about them. I expect the professional delivery of those services to continue and the £3 per head that I referred to previously to be sufficient for the management costs. I will look at that, and I am prepared to keep it under review.

There will be very few, if any, redundancies, and given the management structure of the groups, no individual profession will dominate them. The arrangements for the new groups are based on the proposals set out in the consultation document 'Building the Way Forward in Primary Care', which received widespread support. The configuration of the groups has been announced, and action has been taken by boards to ensure that management boards are established by April.

Macmillan Doctors

8. **Mr Shannon** asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the number of Macmillan doctors currently working in each trust.

(AQO 963/01)

Ms de Brún: I láthair na huaire, tá naonúr dochtúir Macmillan ag obair in iontaobhais na seirbhísí sláinte agus sóisialta; triúr in Ospidéal Chathair Bhéal Feirste, triúr i nGrúpa Ospidéal Ceantair Craigavon; duine sna hOspidéil Aontaithe, duine in Ospidéal Speirín, Tír na Lochanna agus duine in Ospidéal Ceantair Ailt na nGealbhan.

There are currently nine Macmillan doctors working in health and social services trusts: three in the Belfast City Hospital Trust, three in the Craigavon Area Hospital Group Trust and one each in the United Hospitals Trust, the Sperrin Lakeland Trust and the Altnagelvin Hospitals Trust.

Mr Shannon: Although I welcome the fact that there are nine Macmillan doctors working in the hospitals, will the Minister say what steps will be taken to ensure that the expertise of Macmillan doctors is made available to the other hospitals keen to use it and co-operate directly with Macmillan cancer care? Will the Minister say if any of the Macmillan doctors will be used to treat teenagers in the Royal Victoria Hospital? What steps will be taken to ensure that advantage is taken of that?

Ms de Brún: I recognise the significant contribution that charities in the voluntary sector make to providing care for people with cancer. That complements the services provided by the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety, particularly in the development of palliative care, and no group does that better than the Macmillan group. I have been honoured to attend several events where I have been able to express my thanks and gratitude for the work they have done — in keeping with opportunities to express the same thanks to other groups. They discuss with local trusts, boards and service users the best way forward and how they can help to complement the other services provided. I expect that that will continue in the same way with the Royal Group of Hospitals Trust as with any other trusts with which Macmillan works. The trusts and boards will be able to discuss the way forward and suggest proposals.

Mr Speaker: Ms McWilliams, Mr McElduff, Mrs E Bell and Mr Gallagher are not in their places.

Discussions on Primary Care

15. **Mr Douglas** asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what discussion has taken place between her Department and (a) the BMA (NI) General Practitioners' Committee; (b) the Royal College of Nursing; and (c) the Royal College of Midwives regarding the future of primary care. (AQO 986/01)

Ms de Brún: Chuathas i gcomhairle le gach grúpa sa liosta faoi shocrúithe sa chúram príomhúil sa todhchaí, agus bhuail mé le Coiste TÉ na nGnáthdhochtúirí de chuid an CMB agus leis an Cholaíste Ríoga Altranais lena ndearcadh ar chúram príomhúil sa todhchaí anseo a phlé. Tá mé le casadh leis na trí grúpaí sin le gairid.

All the groups listed were consulted about future arrangements for primary care, and I have met the Northern Ireland general practitioners' committee of the British Medical Association and the Royal College of Nursing to discuss their views on primary care here. I am due to meet all three again shortly.

Mr Douglas: Does the Minister think that it is wise to continue with her plans for primary care considering the opposition from those three groups? They represent the majority. What steps will she take to allay their concerns?

3.30 pm

Ms de Brún: In the debate earlier today on primary care the Chairperson of the Committee for Health, Social Services and Public Safety told me that those organisations are in favour of local health and social care groups. I look forward to discussing that matter with them when we meet on Wednesday. On the question of addressing their concerns, I refer the Member to my answers to previous questions today. I am proceeding because of the level of support expressed during last year's consultation on the 'Building the Way Forward in Primary Care' document.

Recent expressions of support have come from the Association of Directors of Social Services; the advisory committee of the professions allied to medicine; the directors of nursing of the four health boards; the Foyle area nurse practitioners in general practice forum; community practitioners in the Health Visitor's Association, and Armagh City and District Health and Social Services Community Forum.

I am proceeding because of the success of the commissioning pilots on which the new groups are based and because I want to put more money into front-line services and so that local people and local health professionals can work together in a multidisciplinary fashion to make local decisions about local services.

FINANCE AND PERSONNEL

Mr Speaker: Question 2, in the name of Mr Oliver Gibson, and question 9, in the name of Mr John Dallat, have been withdrawn and will receive written answers.

Public-Private Partnerships: Working Group Report

1. **Mr Fee** asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel when the report of the public-private partnerships working group will be available to the Assembly. (AQO 1007/01)

The Minister of Finance and Personnel (Dr Farren):

The working group's report on the use of public-private partnerships is due for completion by the end of March. The Executive will consider the report in early April and will subsequently decide on an early date for publication for public consultation.

Mr Fee: Public-private partnerships are having an enormous impact on the way in which public services are funded. Will the Minister tell the House what criteria are being used to determine when the public-private partnership mechanism can be used to deliver public services?

Dr Farren: We are gathering considerable experience in the application of public-private partnerships to ensure the delivery of infrastructural developments and public sector services. In that context, it was important to carry out the review that has recently taken place. Whatever options are chosen, it is essential that the use of public-private partnerships to deliver public services, where appropriate, must be affordable, deliver value for money and provide effective solutions that meet the needs of our public services in the public interest. In that sense, the use of public-private partnerships is not ideologically driven. Their use is only one way of dealing with the real needs of our public services. I trust that that summary of the general criteria will indicate the basis upon which public-private partnerships can be used to help meet our objectives with regard to our public services and the infrastructures they require.

Mr Speaker: Question 10, in the name of Mrs Eileen Bell, has been withdrawn.

Accommodation Review

3. **Mr Gallagher** asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel for an update on the accommodation review. (AQO 1006/01)

Dr Farren: The consultants carrying out the accommodation review on our behalf have identified several competing issues that require policy formulation and direction before detailed option analysis can be carried out.

Our policy decisions would be better framed in the light of comments from all interested parties. I have, therefore, given approval for the Department of Finance and Personnel to issue, for public consultation, an interim report on the accommodation review. That report is available to Members today.

Mr Gallagher: I welcome the interim report. When will the final report be issued?

Dr Farren: The interim report is being issued today for consultation, and six weeks, up until 19 April, have been granted for public comment. It will take time to come to a view based on the various issues raised in the comments that are received. Therefore it would be reasonable to expect consultants to issue their final report in June.

Mr K Robinson: I am especially interested in the Minister's announcement that the interim report is to be issued today. Does he acknowledge that, in considering the relocation of Civil Service functions, he must consider the cost implications, such as new travel costs, the efficiencies and overall costs for the new Civil Service locations? Will he bear in mind that the contents of his written replies to questions posed by me clearly show that Larne, Carrickfergus and Newtownabbey have a lower percentage of Civil Service jobs than Londonderry, Omagh and Strabane, which lie west of the Bann?

Dr Farren: Issues related to costs will have to be addressed when the recommendations that arise from this important review are being addressed. I am aware, from frequent questions posed in the Assembly, that the review excites much interest across all the constituencies represented here.

The Member highlighted certain council areas. The recommendations must be set in the context of what is feasible and what is appropriate. The Member will have concerns for whatever locations, if any, are to be identified for sections of the public service. The Department will take full account of the facilities that are available, not only in the areas that the Member has drawn to our attention but also in other areas.

Spending Review 2002/Barnett Formula

4. **Dr Hendron** asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel what discussions he has had with HM Treasury regarding the spending review 2002 and the Barnett formula. (AQO 1010/01)

Dr Farren: I have had no direct contact with Treasury Ministers on those issues as the Executive are currently considering the Barnett formula and its relationship with the 2002 spending review. However, my officials are in regular contact to ensure that we are fully engaged in all spending review processes that are under way in the Treasury.

Dr Hendron: There has been much speculation about the Barnett formula. What is the Minister's position on that?

Dr Farren: When it comes to such matters, it becomes an Executive position rather than a personal position of the Minister of Finance and Personnel or any other Minister. However, Members will accept that now is not the time to state publicly all that we have in mind for the forthcoming negotiations with the Treasury. The Department of Finance and Personnel is determined to seek a fair and appropriate outcome to the 2002 spending review. The case will be pressed at the highest levels.

Public expenditure allocations to, and consequent spending within, Northern Ireland should be based on a fair and objective analysis of our needs. The key issue is

the extent to which the Barnett formula addresses that. The Department has undertaken a detailed and rigorous scrutiny of the Barnett formula to examine carefully whether it currently meets our needs sufficiently and, more importantly, whether it will do so in the future. We cannot accept a situation where the provision for priority services such as health, education and transport is markedly less favourable than in England. That appears to be the consequence of the Barnett formula as it is currently interpreted and applied. For that reason the Department has undertaken a rigorous scrutiny of the formula, and our anticipated allocations as they are currently constructed, during the spending review.

Mr Savage: Can the Minister confirm that there may be risks as well as opportunities related to the review of the Barnett formula? How is he maximising the opportunities and minimising the risks associated with that?

Dr Farren: I made a statement to the House last week on the timetable for the Budget, which included indications of the staging of the process with regard to the spending review. I made the point that it was not a no-risk process to address, in however detailed a manner, the Barnett formula and the outcomes from its application to our spending needs.

The Department has been engaged in a needs and effectiveness evaluation across several Departments in order to test the extent to which current allocations meet the needs of those Departments. The six Departments under evaluation spend approximately 70% of the total public expenditure for which the Department of Finance and Personnel is responsible. Therefore, a good picture will emerge of how well current allocations under the Barnett formula enable us to meet needs and how effectively we use allocations. That is a large task in our preparations to address the Barnett formula with the Treasury and how it will be used to determine our allocations under the current spending review.

Senior Civil Service Review

5. **Mrs I Robinson** asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel to make a statement regarding the report he has received from Lord Ouseley concerning the review of appointment and promotion procedures to the senior Civil Service. (AQO 985/01)

6. **Mr A Doherty** asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel to give an update on the progress of the review of the senior Civil Service. (AQO 1005/01)

Dr Farren: I will take questions 5 and 6 together.

The first meeting of the review team took place on Monday 5 March 2001. Since then Members have met regularly to consider and analyse the many complex issues that have arisen. The team has also undertaken a programme of consultation with key stakeholders and other interested parties. That has taken longer than was

anticipated at the time the review team was invited to set about its work.

However, the review team has indicated that it will report to me this week. I will then bring the report, with my recommendations, to the Executive for their consideration and final decisions.

3.45 pm

Mrs I Robinson: In the light of recent media coverage on the issue of age discrimination in the United Kingdom, and following the completion of the review of appointment and promotion procedures for the senior Civil Service, will the Minister confirm that civil servants in the Northern Ireland Civil Service will now be entitled to continue working until they reach the age of 65, instead of the mandatory retirement age of 60, which is currently the case?

Dr Farren: The issue of the retirement age for senior civil servants was included in the review at the request of my predecessor, Mark Durkan. As I am just about to receive the review, I have not had the opportunity to consider what it may recommend about the age of retirement, and so I am not in a position to answer the Member's question. When the report of the review has been received, that issue, along with others, will be fully addressed. Whether we take the matter forward on its own, or as part of the other recommendations that the review report is likely to contain, remains to be decided upon. However, I can assure the Member that the review team has positively addressed the senior Civil Service retirement age issue.

Mr A Doherty: Can the Minister indicate at this stage how the recommendations contained in the report may be taken forward?

Dr Farren: As Members will be aware, the review was a Programme for Government commitment, and taking forward its recommendations is a commitment in the current Programme for Government. Exactly how they will be taken forward will depend on the nature of the recommendations and any views expressed during the subsequent consultation. Once the way forward is agreed, I anticipate that an action plan will be developed, and the views of the Committee for Finance and Personnel will be taken. I will be monitoring closely the progress on that plan thereafter.

Mr Foster: I thank the Minister for his frankness. In the review of Civil Service staff, which will, no doubt, affect other staff, does the Minister intend to move senior staff in some Departments outside of Belfast? Will he consider the movement of such staff and Departments to Fermanagh where there is currently ideal office accommodation available in the Lisnaskea area? That area has lost many jobs recently.

Dr Farren: The question is allied to an earlier one. I will answer it in the same terms. When and if we come

to the relocation of sections of the Civil Service, it will not simply be a matter of relocating members of the senior Civil Service or deciding whether to relocate to County Fermanagh, a county of considerable natural beauty. I am sure that many civil servants would be only too delighted to work and perhaps live there. The qualities of Fermanagh — not just its natural beauty but also the facilities that it can provide — will be fully considered, along with those of the areas that his party Colleague Mr Ken Robinson drew my attention to. He would have described those areas in no less laudatory terms.

Mr McCarthy: Once again, I am disappointed by the delay. We were supposed to receive a response to the question in July 2001 and then in February 2002. Now we are being told that the Executive will meet, but we do not know when that will happen, or what the outcome will be. Some people have lost out because of the delay, and more people will lose out if decisions are not made quickly. Will there be compensation for those people, and will it be backdated?

Dr Farren: The Member raises an interesting point. In answer to the first part of his question, when reviews are established they are often expected to be completed quickly. However, sometimes that expectation is not realised, because the issues turn out to be complex, and a variety of views must be considered in depth. I have been impressed by the work of the review team under Lord Ouseley, whom I had the pleasure of meeting. He gave me a progress report on the work of the review team several months ago. The complexity of the issues struck me forcibly at that time. It is far better to have a full, comprehensive report that addresses all of the issues, than one that is completed solely to try to meet a deadline. I accept that the deadline was set with the expectation that it would be met. However, we will have a full and comprehensive report.

I fail to understand what lies behind the second part of the Member's question about compensation. I have not had an opportunity to consider that issue, nor has my attention been drawn to any matter for which compensation might be sought. If, when the review is published, the Member has concerns about compensation relevant to the work of the review that he feels must be addressed, he should draw that to my attention and the attention of the Executive.

Help with Rates Campaign

7. **Mr Bradley** asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel how many people can benefit from the Help with Rates campaign. (AQO 1009/01)

Dr Farren: It is difficult to determine how many people can benefit from the Help with Rates campaign. Housing benefit applications received from the Rate Collection Agency show a downward trend. In 1999-2000, for example, the agency received just over 68,000 ap-

plications. This year fewer than 60,000 applications have been received. The current Help with Rates campaign was launched in the light of that downward trend, so that owner-occupiers would be fully aware of their entitlement to housing benefit, which is administered by the Rate Collection Agency on their behalf.

Information suggests that approximately 80% of the applications are successful. However, that percentage can vary from year to year because of changing circumstances. The benefit is led by demand. The agency's Help with Rates awareness campaign seeks to inform homeowners with low incomes that they may be entitled to help with their rates bill. The campaign will therefore increase the uptake of housing benefit.

Mr Bradley: I welcome the Minister's reply and his efforts to promote the awareness campaign. What steps are being taken to ensure that those who apply are entitled to receive housing benefit?

Dr Farren: Considerable assistance is provided through the offices of the Rate Collection Agency to draw the attention of applicants to their entitlement to housing benefit. The offices are there to provide advice about the benefit and to ensure that applicants are provided with all the information necessary to enable them to clearly establish their means. Entitlement to housing benefit is determined on a means basis.

Mr Davis: In conjunction with helping with rates, when will rural post offices and shops be entitled to receive rates reductions?

Dr Farren: The rural rate relief scheme, for which an equality impact assessment and new targeting social need (TSN) analysis have been carried out, is now being considered by Department of Finance and Personnel officials. I intend to report to the Executive on the way forward on that issue in the coming weeks.

Historic Town Centres: Upkeep of Property

8. **Mr Beggs** asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel what financial incentives are in place, such as rates rebates, to support the ongoing additional costs associated with the upkeep of property in historic town centres.

(AQO 1002/01)

Dr Farren: Rates rebates are not available to assist with the additional cost associated with the upkeep of such properties as those identified in the Member's question. There are no plans to introduce any such form of rates relief.

Mr Beggs: Will the Minister agree that some town centres are in need of urgent reinvigoration? In some towns over 20% of retail property is vacant. A range of policies may be needed to bring that property back into use and for the public to benefit from those rates. Will he consider reviewing the level of rates in order to allow for the additional costs of maintaining buildings and townscapes of historic merit, and for the re-examination

of the rating of vacant property that often causes a blight in town centres, in conjunction with a reassessment of the planning restrictions that might also exist?

Dr Farren: The cost of upkeep of all property affects their market rental values and is, therefore, reflected in their net annual value. The new valuation list currently being prepared will come into force on 1 April 2003. It will redistribute the rate burden of non-domestic ratepayers. Broadly speaking, sectors and locations that have fared well since the last revaluation in 1997 should, all things being equal, find a corresponding reduction in rate liability to the extent that any downturn is reflected in current market rental levels.

Members will be aware that a consultation on the review of rating policy is being prepared and will, it is hoped, be launched in the coming weeks. That will afford everyone an opportunity to make submissions and to deliberate on the basis of future rating policy and on whether there are questions relating to reliefs and exemptions that should be addressed.

4.00 pm

Value for Money

11. **Mr Poots** asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel how he ensures that additional funding for allocated Departments provides value for money.

(AQO 984/01)

Dr Farren: A range of measures is in place to ensure that resources used by Departments provide value for money. First, all expenditure is subject to scrutiny by the Department of Finance and Personnel's central finance group in conjunction with the Office of the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister. The Assembly and its Committees also examine expenditure. In addition, the Comptroller and Auditor General provides the Assembly, and the Public Accounts Committee in particular, with reports that identify the extent to which Departments provide value for money from the resources allocated to them.

Mr Poots: How does that analysis work for the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety? Despite a 37% increase in that Department's spending in the lifetime of this Assembly, waiting lists are higher than ever. How can the Minister account for the £110,000 that was spent on translation services as good value for money, given the current state of the Health Service?

Dr Farren: Some of those questions need to be directed to the relevant Minister. In response to an earlier question, I said that needs are being assessed. The effectiveness of the manner in which allocated resources are being spent is currently being addressed.

Mr Speaker: I must interrupt the Minister while he is in full flow because the time for questions to the Minister is up.

(*Mr Deputy Speaker [Mr J Wilson] in the Chair*)

AGRICULTURE INDUSTRY

Debate resumed on motion:

That this Assembly urges the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development and the Executive to consider the implementation of measures which will sustain the viability of the agriculture industry in Northern Ireland. — [*Mr Savage.*]

Mr Kane: The fact that this debate is required suggests a lack of feeling, of which farmers are aware, on the part of the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development for Northern Ireland's agriculture industry. Minister Rodgers claims to understand the difficulties that farmers face and claims to sympathise with them. Sympathy is simply not enough, and practical solutions seem to be a distant prospect. That is why I do not hesitate to support the motion.

Calls for an early retirement scheme are not a new phenomenon. In the difficult past few years, numerous spokespersons on agriculture have called for such a scheme. Many have gone further and added the obvious accompaniment of a fund for new entrants. The reasons for that are obvious to everyone except the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development.

As the average age of a farmer is 57, and only 7% of farmers are aged under 30, it does not take an enormous stretch of the imagination to make an informed guess on where farming is going — the Province's primary industry is heading for extinction unless we attract young people back into the business. That can only be done by instilling confidence in young people that there is a future in farming.

The chances are that an 18-year-old with the opportunity to take any kind of job outside farming will do so. Banks will not assist young people, and the Department is indifferent to the plight of young people who wish to carry on, let alone develop, a family business. We must pave the way for the older generation of farmers to retire to make way for young people, who must be given the resources to become involved in farming.

We hear so much about the size of farms. There is no better way to increase the unit size of a farm than to introduce an early retirement scheme alongside a new entrants scheme. To decide that such schemes would not constitute value for money is a short-term view of the situation, and one that I suspect is based on a study that is distinct from the circumstances in Northern Ireland.

I ask the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to consider carefully the options for funding such schemes, if she has not already done so. So much is made of the impending increase in membership of the European Union, the effects of globalisation on com-

modity prices for farm produce and the strategic purchase of produce by processors in the Province that the chance for farmers to succeed appears negligible. Unless all possible action is taken, our industry will not have a sporting chance of success. It will be doomed from the outset.

If given a reasonable chance, Northern Ireland's farmers can respond to the challenge. The beef export embargoes of the last seven years have proved their resolve. The Department and the Government must serve the farming industry by shaking off a negative and defeatist mentality and setting about the proactive development of a recovery strategy.

I support the motion.

Mr McHugh: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I welcome this debate. There have been several debates on agriculture in the Assembly, and those with no particular interest in agriculture will say that this is more of the same. However, the industry needs support, together with a great deal of thought and discussion. The debate on the future, or the extinction, of agriculture is, therefore, timely and vital, and I have no difficulty in supporting the motion.

The difficulty is in trying to find either a retirement scheme or a mixed retirement and loans system, as has been suggested. I have some concern about the use of loans. There is a place for a capital grant scheme to encourage young people into farming. On examining the South's attempt at a retirement scheme, we find that almost half of the applications came from larger farms and not from the targeted group who would have benefited from the scheme. It did little for the restructuring of farming and for making a difference to the industry by bringing people into it. Will such a scheme make a difference here? All those things must be taken on board.

The Department of Agriculture and Rural Development's vision document says that there will always be farmers and farming. That is debatable. There may be neither if the current situation is not resolved. Young people are not coming into the industry. They look at their peers and see that they will be economically much better off in one of the many jobs now available, such as construction work. Those factors come into the equation. People do not stay in farming, and older farmers have no extra help. High employment levels and the money available outside farming work against keeping the agriculture industry at its former standard. There have been changes in the last five years. The industry has been damaged by BSE and other food scares.

Sustainable agriculture should be about meeting current needs without compromising the ability of future generations to meet theirs. Social and economic sustainability within the rural community could be another way to look at the matter. Perhaps we should pay farmers for jobs other than food production, such as looking after the countryside. If we have only large farms, will the rural areas be properly taken care of? Will people from the

lowlands, for example, be prepared to farm in severely disadvantaged areas? I do not believe that they will. Only people who come from such areas will be prepared to live and work in them, so the idea of changing structures to such an extent will probably not work.

Returns on farming are critical. If milk production does not wash its own face, it will fail, as did small-scale pig production in places such as Fermanagh several years ago. When those farms' inputs became greater than their returns, they were closed down. There is a possibility that that will happen to all elements of agriculture over the next few years. If we do not do something, there will no be farms here, and we will have to import everything.

The farming infrastructure is critical. Farming has been decimated; it is in decline; and there is waste. Farmers face environmental demands, and they are also under pressure to retrain and get different skills. Furthermore, animal welfare concerns must be incorporated into farming. The Government do not provide support or capital for farmers to deal with any of those pressures. It is very expensive to maintain the infrastructure of a farm, and that must be dealt with or everyone will leave farming, and that is the last thing that we want to happen.

Reform of the common agricultural policy (CAP) is on the top of everyone's agenda with regard to the direction of policies and world demands. Grassland has been expanded in places such as Brazil and Argentina to create beef production methods. The environmental impact of that is immense. In places such as Argentina, 30% of the gross domestic product (GDP) was beef production or agriculture. However, such countries still went bankrupt. They based their outputs on the lowest sourcing and the lowest labour costs, but it did not work. Is that the direction that we should be taking? Those countries were able to work with cheap resources, such as cheaper pesticides — which they used a great deal of — and had very little or no concern for animal welfare.

There is a growing worldwide demand for food. International trade has been liberalised, and there has been EU enlargement. The notion that expanded globalisation is sustainable is nonsense. Some 13% of all air freight is food. Food, including vegetables and fruit, such as strawberries, is the largest category of air freight. A kilogram of apples has been known to produce at least its own weight in fuel emissions. What is the cost to the world, and to farming on a global scale, of the removal of rainforests to create grassland? That is happening in countries where the greatest benefit is to be had from maintaining the original environment. The demand for low-cost food, at the lowest possible prices, benefits only multinational giants. That situation cannot be sustained. We need a more localised market, which is where organic farming comes into its own. I note that the German Federal Minister of Consumer Protection, Food and Agriculture supports organic farming methods and wants more money to be invested in them. Farming and the environment have to be taken as a whole.

4.15 pm

Mr McCarthy: I welcome the Minister's presence today. I hope that she has a good pen because I have several questions that I would like her to answer.

I am not a member of the Committee for Agriculture and Rural Development. My leader David Ford has that onerous task, and he apologises that he cannot be present to contribute to the debate. However, as a representative from a constituency with a large farming community, I am only too aware that agriculture is in decline and has been for years.

Some years ago I was a member of the Agriculture Committee in the Northern Ireland Forum for Political Dialogue. I gained some insight into the industry's problems through visits to the Forum from representatives from every sector in the industry. Unfortunately, the situation has gone downhill since then. We must act now to generate a viable agriculture industry for Northern Ireland before it is too late.

The timing of the motion is somewhat premature, given that a statement may be pending from the Minister in response to the Department's vision group's report. Surely it would have been more productive to have waited for the Minister's formal response and any unique proposals or suggestions that she may have. Perhaps the Minister will give some indication of her thinking in her response. I pay credit to Ms Rodgers. As Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development, she was thrown in at the deep end. She has represented Northern Ireland well not only in agriculture but also in her other duties, including the fishing industry, despite being constrained by European legislation.

I will highlight some specific issues that the Alliance Party hopes to hear more about in the Minister's response. The Alliance Party shares the desire to have a dynamic, long-term and prosperous future for Northern Ireland's agrifood sector. Of particular interest are: the need to protect and enhance animal health status; the strengthening of the rural economy through all farming activities, including those that involve beef, crops, milk and so on; and the safeguarding of our land-based heritage and rural developments.

I draw the Minister's attention to the anxiety of farmers and landowners in the Strangford constituency. The Department of the Environment has designated the coastline of the outer Ards Peninsula and the east coast of the Irish Sea as areas of special scientific interest (ASSIs). Farmers and landowners regard that as a removal of their long-held and long-enjoyed rights, an additional worry that farmers could well do without. Perhaps the Minister's response will give some relief to those landowners and farmers.

Members referred to an early retirement scheme that could be offered to those who have served the agri-

culture industry well over the years, and who choose, at this stage, to hang up their wellington boots. Members also referred to the development of an early entrants scheme that would allow young farmers to become involved in the industry in the hope that they would enjoy a good, prosperous future.

I look forward to hearing the Minister address the vision group's findings that a climate of mistrust and hostility exists in parts of the food chain. There appears to be a lack of synergy among producers, processors and retailers. I would like to know to what degree the Minister endorses the recommendation of the vision group's report on that.

The recent arrival of multinationals in Northern Ireland has had a detrimental effect on our local food producers and has resulted in an enormous change in demand. Furthermore, Europe's dictation of food specification — size, shape, colour and so on — has had a huge impact on producers, has placed enormous stress and strain on all local producers and has caused many farmers to pack it in altogether.

Obviously, protecting and enhancing our animal health status is of the utmost importance, and, in this regard, I am sure that the Minister agrees that we need to place urgent priority on tackling brucellosis and tuberculosis.

With regard to strengthening the rural economy, the Alliance Party would emphasise the whole rural economy, which extends beyond agriculture to include non-farming activities, and I am sure that the Minister will agree. Specifically, the vision group's report recommends the establishment of a rural baseline as a rural proofing benchmark, and that is much needed — indeed, it is overdue.

Among the group's other recommendations aimed at safeguarding our land-based heritage and rural environment are the promotion and development of good farming practice throughout Northern Ireland and the implementation of the recommendations of our biodiversity strategy. I understand that both those actions require grant aid to be successful. Will the Minister commit adequate financial resources to realise these objectives?

Every person in Northern Ireland has a duty to support local agriculture. Our slogan should be "Buy the good Northern Irish products". Not only would that help to produce the best food and products, it would also help the industry remain one of our major employers. Although we all wish to support agriculture, it is certainly disappointing when the antics of some people in Ballymena threaten the whole industry because some people wish to use a few hours on a Sunday afternoon to promote their good work. Obstacles do not support proclamations of 100% support for agriculture, and 100% support should mean exactly that.

I acknowledge that the Minister has yet to make her formal reply to the vision group's report, but I look forward

to her addressing the matters I have raised. Will the Minister assure me that she will incorporate my party's specific concerns in her formal reply to the report?

Northern Ireland has lots of capacity to produce good quality food, and in view of the enormous number of people in our world who are starving today, it would be remiss of me not to ask why someone in authority cannot come up with some way of using all our land to produce food and have it despatched to those areas where people are starving to death? The Western World could do more to feed the starving. I support the motion.

Mr Douglas: I thank Mr Savage for bringing this motion to the Floor today. The agriculture industry has been in a state of flux over the past few years — indeed, since BSE reared its ugly head in 1996. Since then we have had price cuts in all commodities, and with Northern Ireland's industry being mainly grass-based, these cuts have been most severe with beef, sheep and milk.

I know that the Minister is considering the findings of the vision group's report and that she hopes to report soon on the measures she wishes to take forward. I have some difficulties with this, as there will not be enough finance to take forward all that she would like to take forward. My fear is that much more finance is needed than will be there.

I do not want to be seen as not supporting the retirement scheme, which other Members have raised, but the finance required will not be forthcoming. What is needed is more assistance for people who want to remain in, or enter, the industry. In my reply to the vision document consultation I asked for a new entrants scheme to create a larger proportion of farmers under the age of 45. This could be managed in conjunction with a low-cost loan system to enable younger farmers to acquire land or expand their business base. Also, there would be merit in awarding higher rates of grant to young farmers for repairs and environmental schemes.

Modulation money, which is increasing this year, could be used to fund this on a Northern Ireland basis. Rationalisation in the farming sector — as has happened over the years — is inevitable, whether we like it or not, so we must ensure adequate advisory and financial support so that new and existing farmers can remain viable in an ever more competitive environment.

We must not forget that if farmers were not caring for the countryside we would not see that patchwork quilt when coming back on a plane. We would have an unkept jungle, which would please the eyes of few, and we would have to rely on foreign food. I agree with Graham Wynn, chief executive of the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds (RSPB), who said at a recent conference that farming should become part of the solution for environmental improvements and not be an environmental problem.

Northern Ireland has a very good environmentally sensitive areas scheme, and there has been a very good uptake by farmers. However, it has been a victim of its own success. Although the main scheme has progressed, and farmers continue to be paid for various measures, the enhancement plan element of the scheme has been shut since 1 April 1999 because of insufficient funds to meet demand. At one time the Department lauded the scheme as the jewel in the crown.

This enhancement plan element provided farmers with more than just money to carry out environmental improvements. It also provided off-farm employment for farmers with small farms. They could develop small businesses to assist the environmental services. In my constituency the scheme provided a boost to off-farm income and made the area more attractive to tourists, thus providing another stream of income. As the scheme is partly funded by the European Commission, Northern Ireland receives additional money. I again call on the Minister to reinstate a proper financially managed scheme as soon as possible, because the Department's lack of financial management caused the closure.

We also need a scheme to upgrade existing slurry and effluent facilities on farms. Money for this should come from the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development and the Department of the Environment, because they jointly police environmental issues.

A can of worms could be opened in the light of the Department of the Environment's revisiting the issue of nitrate-vulnerable zones. I agree with the president of the Ulster Farmers' Union, who said at the weekend in 'Farming Life' that any new zones must be based on science alone. If we are to have further restrictions on the disposal of farm waste and effluent, there must be a grant to allow farmers to upgrade as necessary. No farmer wants to see pollution, but if repairs or the expansion necessary to meet proposed measurements cannot be funded, production must cease, and that is precisely what we do not want.

A Member who spoke earlier mentioned farmers hanging up their boots. A farmer never hangs up his boots, but he needs a reasonable return to survive and protect the environment. I am not sure that I agree with Mr McCarthy's statement about Ballymena. I am opposed to that. Good work is done on Sunday, so I cannot agree with Mr McCarthy's sentiments.

"Six days shalt thou labour, and do all".

I conclude by calling on the Minister to press Margaret Beckett hard to claim the final tranche of agrimony compensation from the EU, which could be given to farmers. Although it is only a small amount, it is, nevertheless, a significant amount to individual farmers, and they are entitled to the money. If the British Government had paid UK farmers all the agrimony compensation that they were entitled to in recent years, the industry

would be in a better position to compete on a level playing field. I urge the Minister to use every opportunity in the next weeks to lobby for this compensation. I support the motion.

Dr Birnie: I congratulate my Colleague, George Savage, for moving the motion on making farming and the food industry more economically sustainable.

Agriculture and the various stages of food processing represent around one tenth of regional gross domestic product (GDP). According to some definitions, it is clearly our most important economic sector. Given that, it is appropriate for those of us who do not represent agricultural constituencies to comment on the motion.

4.30 pm

I support George Savage, especially on the early retirement proposals. There are no easy solutions. The right policy for agriculture demands recognition of the external factors that bear down on the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development and her counterparts in Edinburgh, Cardiff, London and Dublin.

The first external factor is that the common agricultural policy (CAP) cannot remain in its present form. That now seems to be universally accepted. It still takes up half of the European Commission's budget. The European Union is about to be enlarged, which, in itself, is a good thing. The levels of GDP per head in the countries concerned are around one quarter of our own. Farming accounts for around one tenth to one fifth of their total labour forces, compared to roughly 5% here. Clearly, the CAP in its current form cannot simply be extended to central and eastern Europe.

Since the founding of the European Economic Community in 1957, the CAP has operated by keeping European consumer food prices — the prices that we all pay when we go into the shops to buy food — well above world levels. It has become obvious to commentators across Europe that that is not a cost-effective way of maintaining rural incomes, nor is it now sustainable. It also goes against the historic approach to food policy in the United Kingdom. For example, from the end of the Corn Laws in the 1840s through to the Great Depression of the 1930s, the UK had a policy of free trade and cheap food.

That was then followed, from the second world war to accession to the Common Market in 1973, by the so-called deficiency payment system. This system was able to deliver farming support in a more cost-effective manner than the common agricultural policy. It may well be that in the future as the CAP is dismantled, elements of a deficiency-based system may have to be, and should be, restored.

The second external factor under which the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development operates is the gradual move to global free trade in farm products. Slowly, but probably irreversibly, the three main world

trade blocs in farming — the United States, Japan and the European Union — are beginning to reduce their heavy subsidisation of consumer agricultural prices. That is a good thing to the extent that the way that agriculture has been supported in the rich economies has often acted to the detriment of the poorer countries, notably in Africa.

Annual aid to the Third World from the so-called northern economies amounts to around \$50 billion. However, the current level of total agricultural support in Japan, the EU and the United States amounts to six or seven times that — \$350 billion a year. That is a strange imbalance, and Mr McCarthy rightly referred to global hunger. If the ongoing Doha World Trade Organisation round is successful in freeing up food and textile trade, that could increase the total GDP of the world's poorer countries by around \$1,500 billion — \$1.5 trillion — by 2015 and lift an extra 320 million people out of dire poverty. Clearly, that is desirable.

In summary, we must move to a more diversified and self-sustaining economy in our rural areas. That is the implication of the global constraints under which agriculture here operates. That would be to the good of all in Northern Ireland, and it would also benefit the poorer parts of the world, whether that be Poland and Hungary in central and eastern Europe or various parts of Africa.

Mr Savage's motion points in the right direction. The House of Commons Agriculture Committee is studying farming policy in various countries, most notably New Zealand, where a radical approach has been taken over the past two decades.

We cannot be like Canute. The tide is moving against the farming policy that operated in the 1970s and 1980s, and we cannot go back to that. I support the motion and its innovative ideas.

Mr McGrady: It is with some trepidation that I follow the erudition of Dr Birnie on the macroeconomics of farming and the global track on which he led us. It was a fascinating and interesting trip. However, he distilled the whole subject when he said that we must achieve a recovery for the farming community and achieve sustainable viability in farming. I think that was the crux of his message.

I have some difficulty in speaking to this motion because it urges the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to do something. The Minister does not require urging; she has been in a very urgent mode since the outbreak of foot-and-mouth disease. However, a motion asking us to consider implementation measures for sustaining viability should have had more examples of what Mr Savage wants the House, the Department and the Executive to do. Many Members took their cause, or their exercise as we said at school, from the 'Vision for the Future of the Agri-food Industry'. I could easily list headings from the Executive summary, but that would add nothing to the debate.

Dr Birnie said that the gross domestic produce (GDP) of agriculture is one tenth of the economic contribution in Northern Ireland. In my constituency, as in others, it is much greater. Our rural community depends on the viability and profitability of the farming industry, and we require a radical view. I was pleased when I read the 'Vision for the Future of the Agri-food Industry' and even more pleased with the response from the Ulster Farmers' Union. The recommendations scored 99 out of 100; it is no mean achievement for representatives of the farming community to agree 99% with the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development. That gives us a blueprint for progress.

I can only emphasise one or two aspects of the problems we face in the aftermath of BSE and of foot-and-mouth disease. One obvious and uncontroversial objective should be to improve the control of animal disease and traceability along with the introduction of disease insurance. These require an all-Ireland mechanism and the concentration of both Governments. It is unfortunate that the irrational outburst of the leader of the UUP may make that more difficult, and that would be to the detriment of the farming industry. I hope that the common sense that prevails in the farming community will prevail in politics and will enable us to continue to address those all-Ireland requirements to sustain our farming and livestock.

There has been an enormous increase in bovine tuberculosis in many constituencies. I have mentioned that disease many times and urge the Minister to address the problem. I also want to emphasise the need for a review of the food chain concept to investigate the direction of profitability from producer to consumer. One or two studies have found the supermarkets "not guilty". I would rather employ the Scottish legal phrase "not proven". That should be looked at again.

The concept of less favoured areas, of which my constituency has a considerable proportion, should be allowed to continue with increased or modernised funding and the maintenance of the 90% safety net for at least another year.

We have all spoken of the need to restructure the farming industry. I am pleased to see that the schemes that we have discussed in the House are well articulated in the vision document, which was published by the Department and endorsed by the Ulster Farmers' Union. The most important of those schemes is the agricultural restructuring scheme. Its aim is to restructure those aspects of farming that were not delivering viability, profitability and sustainability.

I am also an enthusiastic supporter of the land management contract scheme. I know that it is a difficult scheme, but it looks at farming in its entirety — agricultural production, the custodial relationship of the farmer to the environment and the social requirement to sustain a

rural community. Those three things can best be achieved by a broad land management contract scheme.

The other aspect of modernisation is education and training. Our farming sector needs easy access to modern information, techniques and scientific interests. A one-stop shop is needed to facilitate a community that, at its grass roots, is not given to innovation. It must look again, as Dr Birnie said, at what the market requires. We have to move away from the European Union policy of rewarding quantity to a policy that rewards quality. I spoke to a farmer recently who deplored the fact that good quality strains of animals, be they beef or sheep, were rapidly disappearing from our countryside and needed to be sustained by paying for quality and not quantity.

It would be interesting if all the parties in the House could adopt a unanimous approach to the issue. They should publish their responses to the vision document so that we all can read them. The fact that the consultation period ended some weeks ago does not indicate a lack of urgency. With that simple caveat, I support the motion on the clear understanding that “diversity”, “profitability” and “sustainability” are the key words.

Mr Poots: Nobody should have a problem with supporting the motion. If the Minister were not doing what it says in the motion she would have no position to fill. The agriculture industry needs significant support and some rational and innovative thinking to get out of its current situation.

It is regrettable that those issues arise time and again, and many of the same issues are repeated because of the nature of the problems in agriculture.

4.45 pm

One of the worst affected areas is the dairy industry, which, up until now, has got away lightly compared with the beef, sheep and pig sectors. The dairy industry has been one of the hardest hit, with milk prices at around 16p per litre. That price cannot be sustained, and dairy farmers cannot withstand it for any length of time. One of the main problems for the dairy industry is debt levels. Beef and sheep farmers could not borrow large amounts of money from the bank, unless they were large operations. However, dairy farmers had the additional collateral of milk quota. Therefore banks allowed many dairy farmers to borrow six-figure sums. They anticipated that the situation would remain good for a considerable time. Unfortunately the most recent downturn has created a situation in which that is not the case. Dairy farming is in a predicament, and many people have a high level of debt. It cannot meet that debt if that situation continues.

I ask the Minister to consider cereal farming, which, in the past three or four years, has been going through a difficult period. The Ulster Farmers' Union has put forward sensible suggestions on arable aid payments and on how a deal can be done with the rest of the United Kingdom.

The suggestion is that there would be a degree of land exchange that would allow Northern Ireland cereal farmers to receive a higher level of payment for arable aid. Such a scenario would not necessarily take away from the aid that is received in the rest of the United Kingdom. I ask the Minister to pursue that further.

I have not heard much noise from the Department on what is being done to improve arable aid payments that are made to Northern Ireland farmers. I want more of the modulation money to come back to the farming community. I know that that money is destined for the rural community, but the money comes out of the pockets of the farming community in the first place. I want more of that money to go back into the pockets of the farmers for environmental schemes, for schemes that improve marketing and for schemes that improve animal health beyond the statutory limits that are set down by the Department.

I welcome the setting up of a group in my constituency called Laganside Rural Development Ltd. It will seek to acquire funding for items of that nature. I hope that the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development will give the group its full support. I welcome the support that has been received from the Department thus far, and we look forward to the support continuing when it comes to the funding of the group.

I have always been on at the Minister about the beef ban. The Department hopes to have the beef ban lifted this year, and it is essential that we get it right and win this time. People's expectations have been raised that the beef ban would be lifted, but their hopes have been dashed. No one would have thought six or seven years ago that a beef ban would still be in place in 2002. That would have been the worst-case scenario that could have been painted at the time, yet the beef ban remains in place. The Department of Agriculture and Rural Development must put all its efforts into seeking the removal of the ban, and farmers must fully support the Department in its delivery. It is essential that farmers play their part.

Brucellosis is one of the major problems in agriculture. It is anticipated that as many as 3,000 cows could be lost in a small area close to Lagan Valley. That causes us grave concern because some of our top dairy herds are being lost.

We hear much about the benefits of looking after the environment. However, these cattle are dying close to Lagan Valley Regional Park, and I am genuinely concerned that badgers in the park are spreading brucellosis. This costs the Exchequer a great deal of money; it causes considerable hardship to the people involved and causes the death and destruction of many valuable dairy cows. One must consider the benefits of the badgers and the benefits of the businesses that are being lost and weigh them in the balance. In that case, the balance would be heavily on the side of agriculture.

Mr Savage should encourage the Minister of the Environment, Mr Nesbitt, to support the agriculture industry. On Thursday his officials met the Committee for the Environment to discuss farm waste, and the officials gave a poor performance. They sought evidence from the farming community to change legislation; however, the evidence was not convincing for some of the legislation they wanted to introduce. The Department of the Environment cannot operate double standards on this issue. If it wants to introduce legislation, let it produce convincing evidence to support its proposals.

Farmers are concerned about the Minister of the Environment's second announcement on nitrate-vulnerable zones. They are concerned that if we go down this route, farmers will be crucified. Farmers are often told to do this or do that for the environment, and that is fair enough. However, what support do they receive to carry this out? It is essential that farmers receive the necessary support from the Department of the Environment if they are to carry out its requests.

Mr M Murphy: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I thank Mr Savage for moving the motion, and I should also like to support him in his early retirement scheme. If not that scheme, then some form of grant should be introduced to encourage young people to take up farming; good, strong education and training would also help. Mr Douglas mentioned low-cost loans. I do not support these as the farmer is under enough pressure without having to pay back loans. However, I fully support the early retirement scheme.

I welcome the many actions and recommendations in the 'Vision for the Future of the Agri-food Industry'. However, there are challenges to be faced in bringing together producers, processors and retailers to ensure that all sections of the production line receive a fair return for profit. The actions and recommendations on strengthening the food chain, protecting our animal health status, developing people and safeguarding heritage and environment are all worthwhile. The challenge for the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development lies in achieving the part of the vision report that states:

"It will act as the guardian of our land-based heritage and rural environment and will help underpin and sustain the social fabric of rural areas."

The number of people involved in farming continues to decline. Young people fail to enter the industry, as it is regarded as low status, and there are better paid jobs available outside farming. The British Government's policies as well as Europe's red tape are drawing farmers out of the industry.

Present policies work against the interests of the farmer in the North's changing economic environment. Factors such as the euro/sterling exchange rate, BSE, the common agricultural policy (CAP) reform and the World Trade Organisation are stated as reasons for decline.

The foot-and-mouth-disease outbreak continues to pose a significant threat and has highlighted the vulnerability of the industry. That outbreak has served to divert attention from the long-term issues that affect the industry. It is vital that that focus returns to them as soon as possible.

The Minister should apply her approach and should identify the problems and opportunities in the rural economy over the next decade. She should develop the 'Vision for the Future of the Agri-food Industry' to map out a proper strategy. There is mistrust and hostility throughout the food chain, as producers, processors and retailers do not operate as a sympathetic supply chain but work against one another. They are working to a narrow agenda, within the constraints of British Government policy, following globalisation trends and policies of large-scale production at world prices. That policy will not be sustainable economically or environmentally in this part of the island.

If we are to take seriously the problems facing the farming industry, and if we are to sustain the viability of agriculture, we must work together on an all-Ireland policy, producing a quality product, North and South.

We must remember that farmers have been the backbone of this nation, North and South. It is right that we support them by tackling the issues so that we can become a major player in the world market, providing a strong, healthy product. Go raibh maith agat.

Mr Armstrong: Our farmers are the custodians of the countryside; they have looked after and maintained our land for hundreds of years. Their work has been taken for granted by those who visit the countryside at weekends or during the summer.

After the second world war, we were encouraged to supply an excess of products to support other European countries that were unable to maintain their own people. Northern Ireland now has to compete against these EU countries for markets for our products.

Under direct rule in Northern Ireland no one made specific plans for our health, education or agriculture. It is only since the formation of the Assembly and since our present Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development took up her post that better decisions are being made to improve the situation for the Northern Ireland agriculture industry.

Our farmers need relevant guidance, and a 10-year agriculture plan is essential. Farmers have always been at the mercy of the buyer to provide products at the lowest cost possible. However, they continue to try to realise a moderate income for their family. Profits are at an all-time low, and our farming families are suffering. Over 60,000 people worked on our farms in 1999-2000. That includes 32,000 full-time job equivalents, 90% of which are provided by family members. That shows how

families have been dependent on a decreasing farming income.

Farming is no longer an appealing industry in which to be involved. There is no encouragement for the younger generation. The family farm — a heritage that we are proud of — will soon be a thing of the past.

5.00 pm

Recently farmers have had the highest rate of suicide of any occupational group in Britain. Farmers do not benefit from a 35-hour week, nor do they get a minimum wage. The industry has long been neglected from protective legislation, but not by red tape and bureaucracy. Farmers have been exploited for the gain of supermarkets and other organisations.

Many farmers plough through tough times in anticipation of a bright future. It is only through the Assembly and the commitment of the Executive and the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development that the industry can move forward with any optimism. Our agriculture industry requires a major regeneration scheme. As Mr Savage mentioned, ways must be found to encourage young farmers to remain in the industry, so that mature farmers can retire knowing that agriculture will survive.

Thanks to the work of agricultural colleges, young people with enthusiasm and new ideas wait on the sidelines, but there is no incentive for them to go into agriculture, because of low profit margins and an average wage of around £7,000 a year.

Diseases that were unknown here before we joined the EEC — not least the latest epidemic of foot-and-mouth disease — have endangered the health of our animals. If the industry is to survive, more emphasis must be placed on support for farmers with regard to environmental issues. Our farmers are conscious of the environment, and the Government must ensure a reduction in the red tape and bureaucracy and an increase in rural development funding for major capital grants schemes to support biodiversity and address source pollution. That will help us further key environmental objectives.

The development of a sustainable energy system, such as biogas and the use of anaerobic digesters, must be pursued. The creation of model farms in highly productive areas would be one way of achieving that. The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development must work with the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment and the Minister of the Environment to promote the means of converting waste products into heat and power, so that the majority of waste is no longer an unwanted and unusable surplus but a valuable component vital to the production of energy.

I urge the Minister to recognise that farmers produce good, wholesome, healthy food and, in doing so, they are the custodians of the countryside. With that in mind,

she must encourage agriculture to make it a profitable and sustainable industry, which will attract young professionals.

Mr Shannon: I support the motion. I would like to make some quick points, because I realise that time is limited.

It is time that the Department used its imagination to create innovative ideas and examine positive methods to help the ailing farming sector. We are familiar with the catalogue of ills suffered by the industry in recent years. In particular, the problems of the last six years have contributed to the hardest times that I can remember. Farmers have had to deal with BSE, foot-and-mouth disease, supermarket changes, competition and the difference in the exchange rate between the pound and the punt, to name but a few of the problems.

Those matters have combined to effect a downturn in the profitability of every holding in the Province. They have resulted in people moving from the countryside into the towns. There has been a dramatic change in the countryside. I live on a farm on the Ards Peninsula, so I have some idea of what that means. For example, there is one remaining pig farm on the Ards Peninsula — there used to be about a dozen.

The poultry industry has been decimated. Those who were involved in the poultry industry on the Ards Peninsula have abandoned it. There have been dramatic changes in every sector, such as beef, sheep, cereals, and, as Mr Poots said, dairy products.

The industry's confidence has been knocked, and the future looks bleak for many people. The Department must take stock of changes in the rural community. At the weekend, I read in one of the newspapers that a tourism course for farmers has been advertised on the Scottish Agricultural College's web site. The Department must develop imaginative initiatives to promote tourism as an alternative to farming. It must provide incentives and help with planning regulations and allow diversification and the advertising of countryside holidays.

All such initiatives would help. However, only so many people can take advantage of such opportunities. EU Directives on setting aside land and retaining the countryside will encourage them to do so.

The Assembly must ensure that finance is available for farmers and landowners. Many need to make their farms more viable, and one way of doing that is to set land aside. It may not be worked, but farmers get an allowance for ensuring that that happens. That should be encouraged, through financial or other means. Advantages and incentives have been slow to come, and that has resulted in land being lost at a crucial time.

Another worrying issue is the drifting away from farms of the sons and daughters of landowners. I refer to the previous point about planning regulations. That cannot be allowed to continue. More flexible planning regulations are needed. I am aware that that is not the

direct responsibility of the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development. However, her Department could make some overtures to the Department of the Environment and to Dermot Nesbitt.

Those who are born on farms and live at home with their parents may want to move on when they get married. In this difficult economic climate it is important that changes be made to enable them to stay on the land. There have been changes in the methods of farming. Many people are now part-time farmers who supplement their incomes through jobs in towns and elsewhere. The regulations must be changed to ensure that sons and daughters — those who want to stay on the land — can farm part-time and also earn income elsewhere. Flexibility is needed, or the rural community will become a desert, a wasteland with few people. That must not be allowed to happen.

I want to make a final point about supermarket chains and the prices that are paid to farmers. I was astounded when I heard last week that a supermarket chain was claiming that it gave fair and equitable prices to farmers for their products. That is not what I have been told by farmers who are unhappy with the prices being paid, which do not reflect the hours that they work or the high-quality goods that they produce.

Rev Dr William McCrea: Does my hon Friend agree that there needs to be a level playing field with the rest of Europe? Northern Ireland's farmers are made to comply with welfare standards and so on that are set by Europe, but other European countries do not seem to adhere to the same standards. That is a financial burden on our farmers.

Mr Shannon: The Assembly wants Northern Ireland's farmers to get fair play, but that is not happening. I thank the Member for his comments and ask the Minister to take those points on board.

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development (Ms Rodgers): The motion calls on me to consider the implementation of measures to sustain the viability of the agriculture industry in Northern Ireland. Members are aware of the many problems that have beset the industry in recent years and the impact that those have had on farmers, their families and the rural community.

Almost without exception, those problems have stemmed from events beyond the influence or control of farmers or, indeed, of anyone else in Northern Ireland. That point has been recognised in the debate by some Members. Moreover, the problems are not unique to Northern Ireland. Given the situation, it is clear that a strategic approach is vital to addressing the problems and challenges that exist now and that will exist in the coming years. It is simply unrealistic to hope that a piecemeal approach or one single initiative will solve the problems of the industry and underpin its future viability.

I agree with many of the points made by Mr Savage and, indeed, have already taken forward initiatives in most of the

areas that he mentioned. I thank Mr Bradley for his recognition of that and assure him that I will continue to advance those initiatives. However, I take issue with some of the detailed facts and figures quoted by Mr Savage. Nevertheless, I agree with him on the need for a 10-year plan with which to chart the way forward for the industry.

Indeed, the development of such a plan has been a priority of mine since day one. Members will be aware of the vision exercise that I initiated immediately after I took office in December 1999. The progress of my work was interrupted by a two-and-a-half-month suspension and then by the outbreak of foot-and-mouth disease last year. Nevertheless, the direct result of the exercise was the publication in October 2001 of the vision group's final report, which made over 200 separate recommendations covering the actions and responsibilities of both the Government and the agriculture industry.

Since then, my Department and I have been engaged in an extensive consultation process with interested stakeholders. In addition, I have held bilateral discussions with almost 30 stakeholder organisations. My Department received over 80 written responses during the consultation process. I would like to record my disappointment that Mr Savage's party, the Ulster Unionist Party, did not respond in any way to the recommendations contained in the vision group's report during the consultation process. Moreover, it is surprising that Mr Savage made no mention of the vision exercise in his opening remarks, yet he spent some time dealing with the recommendations of the Curry Report — a report which deals specifically with England and not with Northern Ireland. The vision group's report, however, deals exclusively with the needs and priorities in Northern Ireland.

(Mr Speaker in the Chair)

During the vision consultation process, the vision approach was generally accepted, although there were several differences of opinion on specific recommendations, some of which I will have to attempt to resolve. Taking account of the consultation, I am now working on an action plan. The full plan will be published in June, but I have decided to accept for implementation now several measures that gained broad support in the consultation exercise and which can be implemented within existing departmental resources.

These measures include setting up focus farms to facilitate farmer competence development; information and communications technology training and development; and off-farm training and reskilling to address under-employment in agriculture, which deals with Mr Shannon's point about the need to skill farmers to enable them to take up other employment.

In addition, there will be group-based learning approaches; a commercial horticulture strategic review; and enhanced controls to prevent the introduction of animal diseases. An all-Ireland animal and plant health

policy will also be taken forward. That is already an agreed aspiration for animal health under the North/South Ministerial Council, which will consider plant health shortly.

Enhanced resources will be devoted to the detection and prevention of fraud, and there will be an individual animal standstill policy, based on 30 days rather than the 21 days recommended by the vision group. A working group will be set up to assess the need for a food body, as recommended in the report. Finally, there will be an independent evaluation of the Erne Catchment Nutrient Management Scheme.

Mr Douglas mentioned nitrate-vulnerable zones (NVZs). Those are a matter for the Department of the Environment, not for my Department. The evaluation will enable us to assess how we can bring forward further plans to deal with other areas. Those areas will be decided on in the light of advice from the Department of the Environment as to where the greatest dangers of pollution are.

My Executive Committee Colleagues endorsed those proposals at their meeting on 28 February. That is precise evidence of the collective approach endorsed by Mr Savage in his opening remarks.

By the end of June, I hope to launch the complete vision action plan, which will provide a road map for the strategic development of the industry over the coming decade. It will also form the centrepiece of my Department's ongoing programme to assist and promote the sustainable development of the agrifood industry and the rural community that it underpins. However, I must emphasise that the vision exercise is a joint exercise between the Government and the agriculture industry. Almost 40 of the recommendations are for the industry itself to implement, and I will be expecting it to respond to them.

There is a significant amount of interest in the EU's early retirement scheme and the new entrants scheme as a means of bringing about structural change and introducing new blood into the industry. Mr Savage raised that, as did Mr Armstrong and several other Members. I have certainly not ruled out the possibility of running such schemes in Northern Ireland.

5.15 pm

However, questions have been raised about the ability of such schemes to deliver tangible and significant benefits for the efficient development of the industry. With the limited funds at my disposal, I must be satisfied that an early retirement scheme or a new entrants scheme would deliver value for money and that they would represent a better investment in the future of the industry than would alternatives. On that point, Mr McHugh and Mr Douglas placed a question mark over the early retirement scheme.

An initial review by consultants of the operation of the early retirement and new entrants schemes in other EU member states was inconclusive with regard to accruing structural improvements. For that reason I com-

missioned research into the potential economic, social and environmental benefits that might flow from such schemes. The results of that research will be available in the summer, and I will then be in a position to make an informed decision on the merits of introducing any such schemes into Northern Ireland. The Danish scheme to which Mr Savage referred is geared to meet Denmark's specific problem of farm succession. My understanding is that successors must purchase holdings from their parents or compensate siblings who are entitled to equal shares of their parents' assets. There are no such inheritance restrictions in Northern Ireland; the Danish scheme is therefore not appropriate to our circumstances.

I noted Mr Kane's assertion of a defeatist attitude. I absolutely refute the suggestion that my Department or I might be defeatist in our approach to the problems of the agrifood industry. Were that true, I would not have embarked on the vision group exercise, which is geared to meeting head-on the challenges to which Dr Birnie referred. They are outside our control, but must be met proactively, as must the opportunities they also represent.

Mr McCarthy raised several specific questions about the vision group exercise and my response to its recommendations. I have already indicated the areas that I intend to progress immediately. I still have to consider many more recommendations, including budgetary demands. I will be in a position to publish my full action plan in June. Meanwhile, I thank Mr McCarthy for the initial remarks in his speech.

The vision group exercise is not the only initiative that I have advanced to help the agrifood industry. The rural development regulation plan represents a substantial investment in the future of the agriculture industry in Northern Ireland. More than £266 million will be spent between 2000 and 2006 on sustaining farming in less favoured areas, on supporting agrienvironment measures, including organic farming and on grant-assisting the afforestation of agricultural land. That presents a significant opportunity for farmers and landowners and is a further example of my Department's commitment to underpinning the sustainable development of our agriculture industry.

With regard to agrienvironment schemes, Mr McHugh raised the issue of environmental sustainability. In the rural development regulation plan, my Department commits considerable resources to such measures as environmentally sensitive areas schemes, an organic farming scheme and a countryside management scheme. Over the seven years of the rural development regulation plan, expenditure on those schemes will total some £88 million, which is double the amount spent in the preceding seven years.

Mr Douglas raised the issue of E-Plan funding for the environmentally sensitive areas scheme. I will keep that area under review, and if funding can be secured, I will reopen the issue at the earliest opportunity.

Mr Douglas also referred to nitrate-vulnerable zones. The Department of the Environment must implement the requirements of the EU's anti-pollution Directives, and that implementation is many years overdue. The legislation has already been implemented in GB. I appreciate fully the concerns of farmers, and particularly their wish to avoid disproportionate costs. My officials are in close contact with their counterparts in the Department of the Environment to seek proportionate implementation in line with good science and objective data. I am briefed fully and in discussion with ministerial Colleagues on this.

Mr Douglas mentioned agricultural pollution and its prevention; DARD is committed to reducing pollution of that nature. The Department provides advice and training on good farming practice and has secured £6.1 million from the Executive programme funds for a farm waste-management scheme that is currently awaiting EU state aid approval.

Mr Douglas also raised the matter of agrimonetary compensation. I have always pressed — with considerable success — for the full payment of all available agrimonetary compensation. However, the compensation mechanism expired at the end of December 2001, so there is no possibility of further compensation packages being triggered as a result of currency movements. There is, however, a possibility that residual second and third tranches of previously triggered compensation packages may be available in the dairy, beef and sheep sectors. We will not know the position on this until the EU makes its assessment, which is expected in April.

Mr McHugh and Dr Birnie raised the common agricultural policy (CAP). The forthcoming mid-term review of the Agenda 2000 agreement is yet another of the many challenges that the farming community faces and a further source of uncertainty. We do not yet know the extent of the changes that the EU Commission will propose later this year. The CAP is facing significant pressures arising from events such as the enlargement of the EU and the World Trade Organisation (WTO) talks, to which Dr Birnie referred.

We cannot simply ignore those matters in the hope that they will go away. Nor can we ignore the fears, needs and aspirations of the agriculture industry and the rural society that it underpins. My officials and I are engaged in discussions with our counterparts from the other devolved Administrations and Whitehall on the UK's approach to the forthcoming mid-term review. Northern Ireland's interests are being clearly articulated, and we are stressing the importance of keeping the needs of agricultural and rural communities to the fore.

We cannot prevent change, nor should we want to, but we must manage it in such a way that the industry has the time and help that it needs to adapt to and exploit the opportunities that change inevitably brings. We must avoid marginalising and alienating sections of

the rural community and undermining the stability and viability of the rural economy.

Mr McGrady and Mr Poots mentioned brucellosis, and Mr McGrady spoke about tuberculosis (TB). I am fully aware that brucellosis and TB continue to be serious problems in Northern Ireland. A review of all aspects of the control measures for both diseases is currently under way and should be completed soon. The review group is considering what additional or different measures might be deployed to reduce the incidence of those diseases. As Mr McGrady noted, economic viability and economic and environmental sustainability demand that the industry adapt to reflect the changing demands of the market place and the farmers' increasingly important role as custodians of the countryside.

Because of the continuous need for change, investing in and developing the skills and education of people in the industry must be a key part of any strategy for sustainable development and viability for the agrifood industry and rural economy. Therefore, through the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development colleges, I have continued to invest in developing education programmes and facilities, with a particular emphasis on lifelong learning for those who already work in the industry. I noted Mr Armstrong's comments on biomass, and I agree that there is potential for a cross-departmental approach to waste.

Mr Shannon spoke about initiatives to promote tourism. He will be aware of the natural resource rural tourism programme, which is now on-stream, and of the support that is available for developing rural tourism. He also raised the issue of planning regulations. The vision group's report recommends that planning regulations be examined. That too is a cross-departmental issue, as the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development does not have sole responsibility for them. However, I am very conscious of the matter.

The UK Government are working hard to ensure that other EU countries comply with welfare standards, thus creating a level playing field.

I hope that I have given some indication of the broad range of measures that I am already pursuing to enhance further the future viability of Northern Ireland's agriculture industry. It is important that those measures are integrated into an overall strategy, and that is what I hope to achieve when I launch my full vision action plan in June.

As I have already said, there is no point in reacting to issues as they arise or in dealing piecemeal with the industry — strategic action is required. The vision action plan will be a strategy devised to develop the industry over the next 10 years. It will maintain the viability of rural areas and the farming community in a way that meets the challenges and the opportunities ahead. Rather than ignore those challenges, we must manage and exploit them to our advantage. It is only through working together to

a common strategic agenda that the industry can secure its future survival and prosperity.

Mr Savage: I thank the Minister for giving up her afternoon to participate in the debate. As with all agriculture debates in the House, there have been many valuable contributions from all sides. The Minister has already dealt with many of the issues raised, to which I shall add my contribution.

As Mr Bradley also said, I emphasise that I in no way denigrate the Minister's efforts. I have the greatest respect for her, and I shall support her in any way that I can. However, taking action in one area does not meet the need for action in other areas. The Minister has done a good job during a crisis, and her management and skills, and those of her officials, leave us confident in and satisfied with her work.

I welcome Mr Kane's support. His analysis of the powerful world pressures on commodity prices and his call for the Department to devise a recovery strategy are issues that we must all bear in mind, issues that are near and dear to our hearts.

I welcome Mr McHugh's support for the motion and his constructive remarks on the pressures that drive young people off the land and on the future of localised markets. I also welcome his realistic approach to the failures of the scheme that operates in the Republic. We do not want to go down that route, although I emphasise that our proposed scheme is very different from that in the Republic. Our scheme is modelled closely on those employed in other countries that are part and parcel of Europe. We are also part of Europe, so we have much in common with those other countries.

I cannot accept Mr McCarthy's comment that the motion is premature. The Minister will respond to the vision group's report in her own way. She will respond to that report alone, not to the early retirement scheme proposal. I have warned of the dangers of adopting a bitty approach to our agriculture problems. The Committee for Agriculture and Rural Development deals with pressing issues from week to week, and the Assembly must take strategic decisions and look at the bigger picture.

I welcome Mr Douglas's support and his remarks on the use of modulation money to advance many of the schemes. My Colleague Dr Birnie made useful comments on the relative economic importance of agriculture to our economy and on the need for common agricultural policy reform. It is especially welcome when an Assembly Member who does not represent a rural area speaks in an agriculture debate. Farmers sometimes feel that our Assembly and Parliaments are cold houses for them.

Sometimes people do have much time for these debates, because they think that farmers are only interested in getting their own ends. I assure Members that farmers only want to produce the best in whatever sector their outlets might be.

5.30pm

The House needs to get a handle on these issues if it is to implement the schemes. As the Minister realises, people are coming through our agricultural colleges. There is no use educating people if you have no job for them, and the Department has to take this seriously. If there is no agriculture industry here, there is no call for you people. This is one thing that we are serious about.

Mr Speaker: I remind the Member that when he says "you people", he is referring to the Speaker. It may be that he does not want to change the remark.

Mr Savage: I apologise, Mr Speaker. I do not mean to denigrate you in anyway.

Mr Fee: On a point of order, Mr Speaker. The Member might have been accurate in what he said.

Mr Speaker: No doubt, there might be plenty of support for it in the Chamber.

Mr Savage: I welcome the comments of Mr Poots and especially his demand for innovative thinking, which is at the heart of the matter. I acknowledge Mr M Murphy's comments of support. I welcome the comments of my Colleague, Mr Armstrong, on a 10-year agriculture plan for recruiting young people into farming by developing alternative income sources and the need for the Assembly to take the lead in developing that policy. Mr Shannon's account of the decline in farming from real life examples is right, and it is time to take stock. Now is the time to act, when we have a period of relative calm without an immediate crisis.

Although acknowledging all these contributions, it is important not to lose sight of the real reason for the motion. Many serious points have been raised here today, and I know that the Minister is a listening Minister. She takes on board what we try to put across, and I am putting things to her as I see them. We must take things seriously.

When we emerge from this period of recession I would like to see a thriving agriculture industry. As the Minister said, this can only come about with everybody's help. Although my party may not have responded to one point that she made — and we may have overlooked that — I assure her that it is very much in the thoughts of all our people.

Another important matter that was raised today is the health and safety of our industry. If we can keep Northern Ireland disease-free, we have a future, and everybody has to play a part to ensure that happens. I thank the Minister again for giving up her afternoon. We may not see eye to eye on many issues, but ultimately we have something in common — we want to see a thriving agriculture industry in Northern Ireland. I thank Members for their support. I hope that the points raised will bear fruit in the days to come.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That this Assembly urges the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development and the Executive to consider the implementation of

measures which will sustain the viability of the agriculture industry in Northern Ireland.

Adjourned at 5.34 pm.

NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

Tuesday 12 March 2002

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

Members observed two minutes' silence.

NORTH/SOUTH MINISTERIAL COUNCIL

Food Safety and Health

Mr Speaker: I have received notice from the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety that she wishes to make a statement on the meeting of the North/South Ministerial Council in its food safety and health sectoral format, held on 27 February 2002 in Dublin.

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety (Ms de Brún): Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. Ba mhaith liom tuairisc a thabhairt don Tionól faoin Chomhairle Aireachta Thuaidh/Theas a tháinig le chéile mar chruinniú earnáileach i mBaile Átha Cliath Dé Céadaoin 27 Feabhra 2002. Bhí gnóthaí a bhain le cur chun cinn shábháilteacht bia agus le comhoibriú ar cheisteanna sláinte faoi chaibidil ag an chruinniú.

I ndiaidh domh féin agus don Uasal James Leslie, Aire sóisearach in Oifig an Chéad-Aire agus an LeasChéad-Aire, bheith ainmnithe ag an Chéad-Aire agus ag an LeasChéad-Aire, d'freastail muid ar an Chomhairle a tháinig le chéile den cheathrú huair mar chruinniú den Earnáil Sábháilteachta Bia agus den Earnáil 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 Sábháilteachta Bia agus Daoine Scothaosta air, ag feidhmiú ar son Rialtas na hÉireann.

Tá an ráiteas seo, a cheadaigh an tUasal James Leslie, á thabhairt ar a shon chomh maith.

Fuair an Chomhairle tuarascáil chuimsitheach ar an dul chun cinn i riarachán agus in obair an Bhoird um Chur Chun Cinn Sábháilteachta Bia.

Thug an Chomhairle dá haire dul chun cinn an bhoird agus é ag ullmhú plean ilbhliantúil trí bliana a bheas á chur faoi bhráid na Comhairle lena cheadú ag an chéad chruinniú eile i mí an Mheithimh, agus fosta ábhar thuarascáil bhliantúil agus cuntais an Bhoird um Chur Chun Cinn Sábháilteachta Bia don bhliain 1999-2000.

Thug an Chomhairle dá haire fosta an dul chun cinn i gcuid réimsí eile, lena n-áirítear naisc idir saotharlanna a fhorbairt agus comhaltachtaí taighde a dhámhachtain. Cheadaigh an Chomhairle go gceapfaí beirt bhall bhreise ar an Choiste Chomhairleach Eolaíochta agus go nglacfaí leis na scálaí leasaithe tuarastail don chéad ghrúpa de 20 ball foirne a fostaíodh.

Chuir feidhmeannaigh ón Roinn Sláinte agus Leanaí taispeántas i láthair na Comhairle faoi fhorbairt na straitéis sláinte 'Cáilíocht agus Cothú', a seoladh i mí na Samhna seo caite.

Fuair an Chomhairle tuarascálacha breise faoin dul chun cinn i ngach ceann de na cúig réimse comhoibrithe san earnáil sláinte. I measc na dtosaíochtaí a aimsíodh le haghaidh comhoibriú bhí seirbhísí taismí agus éigeandála, pleanáil le haghaidh olléigeandálaí, comhoibriú ar threalamh ardteicneolaíochta, taighde ar ailse, agus cur chun cinn sláinte.

Sa réimse seirbhísí taismí agus éigeandálaí, thacaigh an Chomhairle leis an chomhoibriú leanúnach trasteorann sna seirbhísí ospidéal atá á mhaoirsiú ag Grúpa na Seirbhísí Ospidéal Réigiúnach Thuaidh/Theas. Thug an Chomhairle dá haire fosta an comhoibriú ar conas seirbhísí trasphlandála orgán a fhorbairt ar bhonn uile-oileáin; tá sé beartaithe ag na feidhmeannaigh faoi seach eolas a mhaltú le linn dóibh seirbhísí duán a athbhreithniú sa Tuaisceart agus sa Deisceart.

Sa réimse pleanáil le haghaidh olléigeandálaí thacaigh an Chomhairle leis an dul chun cinn go dtí seo i bhforbairt clár de chúrsaí pleanála trasteorann le haghaidh éigeandálaí, freagairtí comhpháirteacha ar thaismí bóthair agus an dul chun cinn i gcuid nithe eile. Thacaigh an Chomhairle fosta leis na réimsí breise oibre a d'aimsigh meithleacha a bhí ag obair ar nithe eile ar nós prótacail chumarsáide.

Maidir le comhoibriú i ngnóthaí ardteicneolaíochta, cheadaigh an Chomhairle moladh go mbunófaí scéim iniúchta fisice radaiteiripe Thuaidh/Theas le comhoibriú a chur chun cinn idir ionaid radaiteiripe sa Tuaisceart agus sa Deisceart. Thug an Chomhairle dá haire fosta go bhfuiltear ag forbairt creata ar bhonn leanúnach le measúnú a dhéanamh ar fheidhmiú tomagrafaíochta astaithe posatrón ar bhonn uile-oileáin agus go bhfuil ceardlann/seimineár faoi na forbairtí is déanaí san ardteicneolaíocht á heagrú ag an ghrúpa comhpháirteach um theicneolaíocht sláinte.

Thug an Chomhairle dá haire go bhfuiltear ag leanúint den chomhoibriú sa taighde ar ailse mar chuid den chomhaontú tripháirteach a chuimsíonn an Institiúid Náisiúnta Ailse sna Stáit Aontaithe Mheiriceá agus na Ranna Sláinte sa Tuaisceart agus sa Deisceart. Thug an Chomhairle dá haire go háirithe an obair atá ar siúl ag grúpa na gclárlann comhthaighde agus é ag leagan amach tosaíochtaí le haghaidh taighde comhoibritheach agus ag caighdeánú bhailiú sonraí.

I dtaca le cur chun cinn sláinte, thug an Chomhairle dá haire an dul chun cinn go dtí seo i dtionscnaimh éagsúla a ceapadh leis an tsláinte a chur chun cinn. Orthu sin bhí meastóireacht ar an fheachtas faoi aigéad fólach, tionscnaimh in éadan chaitheamh tobac, tionscnamh faoi chothú, agus tionscnamh uile-oileáin le sláinte san áit oibre a fhorbairt.

D'aontaigh an Chomhairle go mbeadh an chéad chruinniú eile san fhoirm earnáileach seo aici sa Tuaisceart i mí an Mheithimh 2002.

D'aontaigh an Chomhairle ar théacs na teachtaireachta a eisíodh i ndiaidh an chruinnithe. Cuireadh cóip den teachtaireacht i Leabharlann an Tionóil.

I want to report to the Assembly on the meeting of the North/South Ministerial Council held in sectoral format in Dublin on Wednesday 27 February 2002. The meeting considered matters relating to food safety promotion and co-operation on health issues.

Following nomination by the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister, Mr James Leslie, junior Minister in the Office of the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister, and I attended the fourth meeting of the Council in the food safety and health sectors. Mr Micheál Martin, the Minister responsible for the Department of Health and Children, and his colleague Dr Thomas Moffatt, Minister of State with responsibility for food safety and older people in the Department, represented the Irish Government. This statement has been approved by Mr James Leslie and is also made on his behalf.

The Council received a comprehensive progress report on the administration and work of the Food Safety Promotion Board (FSPB). The Council noted the board's progress on the preparation of a three-year multi-annual plan, which will be submitted for approval to the next Council meeting in June, and the FSPB's annual report and accounts for 1999-2000.

The Council also noted progress in several other areas, including the development of laboratory linkages and the awarding of research fellowships. It approved the appointment of an additional two members to the scientific advisory committee and revised remuneration scales for the initial tranche of 20 staff.

The Council received a presentation from officials in the Department of Health and Children on the development of the health strategy, 'Quality and Fairness – A Health System for You', which was launched last November.

The Council received further reports on progress made in each of the five areas of co-operation in health. The priorities identified for co-operation include accident and emergency services, planning for major emergencies, high-technology equipment, cancer research and health promotion.

With regard to accident and emergency services, the Council endorsed the continuing cross-border hospital

co-operation overseen by the North/South regional hospital services group. It also noted co-operation on assessing the potential for the development of organ transplantation services on an all-Ireland basis, and that respective officials plan to exchange information during the reviews of renal services, North and South.

The Council endorsed the progress to date on the development of a programme of cross-border emergency planning courses, joint responses to road traffic accidents and several other matters. It also endorsed further areas of work identified by the working groups on issues such as communication protocols.

In relation to co-operation on high technology, it approved a proposal to establish a North/South radiotherapy physics audit scheme to develop collaboration between the respective radiotherapy centres. It also noted that a framework for assessing the operation of positron emission tomography on an all-island basis is still being developed and that a joint workshop seminar on emerging high-technology development is being organised by the joint health technology group.

The Council noted ongoing co-operation on cancer research as part of the tripartite agreement, which includes the National Cancer Institute in the USA and the Health Departments, North and South. In particular, it also noted the work carried out by the joint research registries group on the setting out of priorities for collaborative research and the standardisation of data collection.

With regard to health promotion, the Council noted progress to date on a range of health promotion initiatives, including the evaluation of the folic acid campaign, anti-smoking initiatives, nutrition and the development of an all-island workplace health initiative.

The Council agreed that its next meeting in these sectoral formats would take place in the North in June 2002. It agreed the text of the communiqué issued following the meeting, and a copy of that has been placed in the Library.

The Chairperson of the Committee for Health, Social Services and Public Safety (Dr Hendron): I welcome the Minister's positive statement. I was particularly interested to hear about the co-operation on accident and emergency and cancer services. The Committee's recent report on cancer services in Northern Ireland highlighted the need for further investment. The co-operation on cancer research under the tripartite agreement with Dublin, Belfast and Washington is important for attracting the best cancer specialists and maintaining the world-leading cancer research currently being undertaken in Belfast. The co-operation between the ambulance services is welcome, and the Assembly will have a debate on the Ambulance Service later today.

What is the framework for assessing the operation of positron emission tomography (PET) on an all-Ireland

basis? The Minister played a significant role in getting high technology into the Royal Victoria Hospital, although it will take some time to establish.

Ms de Brún: I thank the Member for his welcome to the statement, which strikes a positive note on ongoing work. The framework for assessing the operation of PET technology on an all-island basis is in development. People are familiar with CAT (computer-assisted testing) and MRI (magnetic resonance imaging) scans. PET technology is a major new development in medical imaging, and I want to see everyone benefiting from advances in modern technology, particularly imaging. I am content that the joint health technology group should examine the feasibility of PET technology. The development of PET clinical scanning services is a highly appropriate area for North/South co-operation.

10.45 am

Dr Birnie: Strand two of the Belfast Agreement speaks of

“the adoption of common policies, in areas where there is a mutual cross-border and all-island benefit”.

Can the Minister tell the House what precise mutual benefit there is in the development of an all-island workplace health initiative? It is not clear to me what that would be.

Ms de Brún: Given that the Member's Colleague Sir Reg Empey expressed his willingness to have an all-island initiative, he will be able to give the Member even more detail on the matter than I can.

With regard to health promotion, it has been found that considerable savings can be made in economies of scale in ventures such as the folic acid public awareness campaign and other television campaigns. Rather than reinventing the wheel in two different parts of the island, we can co-operate by using work that has already been developed in one area and, therefore, share the cost. One area bears the cost of developing the awareness campaigns, and the other contributes to, or pays for, the cost of television advertising. That has been useful. In progressing such work, some people may be further forward than others. That allows us to learn about, and share, best practice. All those aspects will be progressed in the discussions.

In addition, Members will be aware that consideration is being given to the appointment of dedicated programme managers for the Health Promotion Agency in the North and the Health Promotion Unit in the South. That will progress the work programme on an all-island basis. The work being done here by the ministerial group on public health, and the work being undertaken by the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment on the occupational health forum, will feed into the considerations on the work being undertaken on workplace health on an all-island basis.

Ms Ramsey: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. I too welcome the Minister's statement. I wish to return to a point made by the Chairperson of the Committee for Health, Social Services and Public Safety. Given that cancer services were debated in the House last week, and that today the situation facing the Ambulance Service will be debated, can the Minister tell the House how those two areas of co-operation are being developed? In addition, can the Minister update the House on the validation of qualifications for health professionals on the island, which was also the subject of a debate in the House?

Ms de Brún: If I do not answer all the Member's questions now, I will write to her.

With regard to cancer services, the Department has established links with the National Cancer Institute in the United States and the Department of Health and Children in Dublin to create a cancer consortium. The North/South Ministerial Council allows for ministerial oversight of the work that is being progressed through those arrangements. The arrangements afford world-class links to our research community, and the enthusiastic involvement of the National Cancer Institute is in part a response to the quality of the research that is already being carried out here. Through the consortium, the research and development office here has secured two jointly funded three-year epidemiology fellowships, which are linked to the Belfast and Southern cancer registries.

The close co-operation and collaboration of the registries will, for the first time, make data available on the incidence of cancer throughout the island of Ireland. The consortium is also fostering an exchange programme among the three partners, as well as a major clinical trials initiative. That will enable cancer patients throughout the island of Ireland to participate in clinical trials. The consortium also allows us to take part in international conferences. One such conference will take place in the Royal Victoria Hospital in October 2002.

The feasibility study on the all-island helicopter service has been jointly commissioned, and a report is expected in June 2002.

Work is also being undertaken on the response to road traffic accidents. That will include work on ambulance and hospital services in border areas to ensure maximum co-operation to the benefit of all patients in those areas.

I am afraid I have forgotten the final point.

Mr McCarthy: I welcome co-operation in all areas of food safety and health. The Minister may have already answered my question about accident and emergency services. Members have mentioned the provision of an all-Ireland air ambulance, and the Minister has just mentioned it.

Will the excellent co-operation and businesslike manner in which the North/South meetings have taken place be able to continue, given the unnecessary, offensive and

stupid remarks about our cross-border neighbours made by David Trimble at the weekend?

Mr Speaker: I am not clear that the second question related much to the Minister's statement, but the Minister may wish to respond to the first question.

Ms de Brún: With regard to the first point, the advertisement inviting tenders for a feasibility study on the costs and benefits of an all-Ireland helicopter emergency medical service (HEMS) was placed in national newspapers, North and South, during the week ending 26 January 2002. Fifteen tenders have been received, and they will be evaluated. The aim is for the evaluation exercise to start in mid-March, and it will be completed by the end of June 2002.

The North/South Ministerial Council has overcome barriers and difficulties to date, and I am sure that it will continue to do so.

HEALTH AND PERSONAL SOCIAL SERVICES BILL

Second Stage

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety (Ms de Brún): Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. Molaim go dtugtar a Dhara Céim don Bhille Sláinte agus Seirbhísí Pearsanta Sóisialta.

Tá dhá aidhm ag an Bhille measardha goirid seo. Ar an chéad dul síos, soláthróidh sé cúram altranais saor in aisce i ngach cás tríd chúram altranais saor in aisce a chur ar fáil dóibh sin atá i dtithe altranais. Tríd an bheart thábhachtach seo, má cheadaíonn an Tionól é, is ar bhealach níos cothroime a mhaoineofar cúram fadtéarma feasta. Ó mhí Dheireadh Fómhair 2002 caithfear le cónaitheoirí thithe altranais ar an dóigh chéanna leo sin atá faoi chúram ina dtithe féin. Soláthrófar seirbhísí sláinte de réir riachtanais agus beidh siad saor in aisce nuair a bheas siad á soláthar; ní bheidh siad ag brath ar acmhainneacht chun íoctha.

Sa dara háit, tríd an Bhille seo beifear in ann comhlacht áitiúil nua a bhunú le tacú le forás gairmiúil an altranais agus an chnámhseachais anseo — an Chomhairle Chleachtais agus Oideachais don Altranais agus don Chnámhseachas. Imríonn corradh le 20,000 altra cláraithe agus tuairim is 5,000 ball foirne tacaíochta ról barrthábhachtach agus iad ag soláthar cúram sláinte agus sóisialta do dhaoine anseo. Oibríonn siad i gcuid mhór rólanna agus suíomh, lena n-áirítear na hearnálacha deonacha agus neamhspleácha. Is é aidhm na gairme, a oibríonn i dtimpeallacht chúram sláinte atá ag síorathrú, cúram ardcháilíochta a sholáthar go seasta; cúram a fhorbraítear agus a thugtar cothrom chun dáta ar mhaithe le hothair agus le húsáideoirí seirbhíse. Leis seo a bhaint amach, caithfidh na struchtúir a bheith ann le tacú leis an ghairm, go háirithe sna heochair-réimsí seo leanas: dea-chleachtas, oideachas leanúnach agus foghlaim saoil, agus scoth feidhmiúcháin.

I beg to move

That the Second Stage of the Health and Personal Social Services Bill (NIA 6/01) be agreed.

The aim of this short Bill is twofold. First, it will provide for nursing care to be free in all settings by extending free nursing care to people in nursing homes. This important step will, with the Assembly's consent, make the funding of long-term care fairer.

From October 2002, nursing home residents will be treated in the same way as those who are cared for in their own homes. Any nursing care that they require will be provided according to need and free at the point of delivery, not on the basis of ability to pay.

Secondly, the Bill will enable the establishment of a new local body — the Northern Ireland Practice and

Education Council for Nursing and Midwifery (NIPEC) — to support the professional development of nursing and midwifery. Over 20,000 registered nurses and an estimated 5,000 support staff play a vital role in the delivery of health and social care to people here. They work in a wide variety of roles and care settings, including the voluntary and independent sectors. The aim of the profession, working in a constantly changing healthcare environment, is to strive to provide consistent, high-quality care that is updated and developed for the benefit of patients and service users. To achieve this goal, it is essential to have structures in place that support the profession, particularly in the key areas of best practice, continuing education and lifelong learning, and excellence in performance.

In the debate on care for the elderly on 27 February 2001, I provided an overview of how England, Wales and Scotland had separately responded to the report of the Royal Commission on Long Term Care for the Elderly, and I gave an indication of my intentions in this regard. More recently, in the debate on 21 January 2002 on care in the community, I was able to report progress on a range of significant initiatives that I have taken over the past year. I remarked on the interim findings of the community care review, on work undertaken by my Department on carers, and on the imminent introduction of legislation to help support carers better.

I also anticipated the legislation that would be needed to transfer residents with income support preserved rights to care management by health and personal social services in April 2002, together with the resources to fund their care. Furthermore, next month I will introduce a three-month disregard on the value of a resident's former home when he or she permanently enters a care home. I referred to this proposal in the debate on 27 February 2001. These changes to the charging rules for residential and nursing home care are evidence of my commitment to making long-term care for older people more responsive to individual circumstances and fairer for anyone who needs continuing help and support from health and personal social services.

Health and social services were given priority in the Budget statement of Monday 3 December 2001 on the Executive's revised allocation proposals for 2002-03. This will enable the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to tackle some of the current serious problems in the community and hospital sectors. Additional funding will be allocated to community care in the next financial year. In particular, £4.5 million will be provided for the introduction of free nursing care from October 2002, subject to the successful passage of the Bill.

It is estimated that there are approximately 2,000 residents currently paying the full cost, or most of the cost, of nursing home care. Those residents will benefit initially from the introduction of free nursing care. In order to qualify, residents will be required to have an

appropriate assessment of their nursing care needs. The assessment process will be fair and easy to understand, and will involve the minimum of bureaucracy.

I asked the chief nursing officer to set up a group to advise me on an appropriate assessment process. This group of health professionals is involved in the development of an assessment tool, which will be ready by October 2002. The development process will include the preparation of associated guidance for, and the training of, nurse assessors to carry out assessments.

With regard to the measures required to provide free nursing care, the Bill will provide that the cost of time spent by a registered nurse in giving nursing care to residents of care homes will not be subject to charges for that care. Nursing care, for this purpose, is tightly defined as

“any services provided by a [registered] nurse ... and involving —

(a) the provision of care, or

(b) the planning, supervision or delegation of the provision of care,

other than services which ... do not need to be provided by a nurse so registered”.

Therefore, from next October the cost of nursing care will be removed from the nursing home residents means test. The means test will then apply only to personal care costs and accommodation costs.

When Members resolved, at the end of the debate on care for the elderly on 27 February 2001, that the Executive should implement the recommendations of the Royal Commission on Long Term Care for the Elderly in full, they laid particular emphasis on the provision of free personal care.

11.00 am

I brought the Assembly's resolution to the attention of the Executive on 3 May 2001. The Executive decided that an interdepartmental group should be established to examine the costs and implications of introducing free personal care here, drawing on the findings of the Scottish care development group. That interdepartmental group has been established, and its work is continuing. It is to report its findings to the Executive by the end of June 2002. The Executive will then consider if free personal care is affordable and if it should be implemented here.

I now turn to the proposed creation of the Northern Ireland Practice and Education Council for Nursing and Midwifery (NIPEC). Although individual organisations that deliver healthcare will support the development of their own nursing and midwifery staff, the creation of the new body will facilitate a much needed mechanism to develop consistency in the standards for achieving best practice, education and performance in nursing and midwifery. The new local body will also be able to support the work of the new four-country nursing and

midwifery regulatory body — the Nursing and Midwifery Council — and will work locally on its behalf.

In addition, NIPEC will work alongside other local professional bodies to take forward multi-professional initiatives. In the development of the proposals for the establishment of NIPEC, a consultation paper was issued in August 2000 to a wide range of individuals, groups and organisations. Responses to the consultation, and subsequent meetings held with a range of stakeholders, indicated broad support for the proposals, particularly from the profession locally.

The establishment of the new body is an important step forward for the largest group of staff within health and social services. NIPEC will make a significant contribution to the development of nursing and midwifery, ultimately improving the quality of care provided for patients in hospitals and for service users in the community.

The Bill provides for a body corporate to be known as the Northern Ireland Practice and Education Council for Nursing and Midwifery, which shall have the duty to promote high standards of practice among nurses and midwives and in their education and training. It shall also promote the professional development of nurses and midwives. A schedule to the Bill provides for the proper governance and control of the new body.

Members will have points to raise, and I will try to answer as many as I can when winding up the debate. If I cannot respond to a particular matter today, I will write to the Member concerned.

The Chairperson of the Committee for Health, Social Services and Public Safety (Dr Hendron): I welcome the introduction of the Health and Personal Social Services Bill. The Bill has two provisions, the first of which covers free nursing care, as the Minister stated. The other provision covers the establishment of the Northern Ireland Practice and Education Council for Nursing and Midwifery (NIPEC).

We have learnt that the Bill will provide for free nursing care for elderly people who live in nursing homes. The measure will cost approximately £9 million each year. The introduction of the measure has been deferred to the end of October 2002 due to lack of money in the Department's budget allocation.

Currently the cost of nursing care for residents of a nursing home is included in the cost of their place in that home. If they are treated as residents of a nursing home, they may have to pay for their care. If the community nursing service treats them in their own home, or if they are treated in hospital, their care will be supplied free. That raises the question of equity of treatment, an aspect that the Minister has sought to address in the Bill. Residents of nursing homes who are in need of care and their families will welcome the revision.

The Committee for Health, Social Services and Public Safety will wish to explore the provision during its deliberations in the Committee Stage. Members will consider how it compares with similar action being taken in England, Scotland and Wales.

The other provision contained in the Bill establishes NIPEC. I welcome any measure that supports the effective professional development of nurses, midwives and health visitors, and improves the quality of care provided to patients by those professionals.

However, I am concerned that the proposal will create a new non-departmental public body in addition to the Nursing and Midwifery Council, due to come into existence in April. Members of the Committee for Health, Social Services and Public Safety will be interested to hear from the Department on the rationale for the new body. The Committee looks forward to considering the provisions of the Bill during the Committee Stage.

Mr Berry: I will try to be as brief as possible — even briefer than the Chairperson of the Committee for Health, Social Services and Public Safety.

I welcome the Bill. I also welcome the opportunity that the Committee will have to discuss it in greater detail. However, I have one or two concerns about the issues, which I hope will be addressed.

Although every Member of the Assembly welcomes free nursing care, there were concerns some months ago regarding homes in England. Some of them were abusing free nursing care and were taking part of the money. It was not being properly distributed and was not, therefore, going directly to the people who needed it. Although I am not suggesting that that would happen in homes in Northern Ireland, I have some concerns. What action does the Department intend to take to ensure that that problem does not arise here?

Free nursing care for the elderly is welcome. However, there are major concerns that nursing homes are grossly underfunded. I am aware that an extra £3.5 million is being provided for nursing homes in this year's Budget. However, that must run alongside free nursing care. It is all right to provide free nursing care, but if nursing homes across the Province are closing, that is a matter of grave concern. What is the Department's long-term strategy for dealing with the gross underfunding of nursing homes? I welcome the Bill, and I look forward to examining it closely in the Committee.

Ms Ramsey: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. Like other Members, I will also attempt to be brief. I welcome the vision of the Bill and the commitment of the Minister. I commend the Minister for taking the Assembly's arguments back to the Executive on the need to introduce free nursing care. Members are aware that that is a start. I appeal to the Minister to take the

argument to the Executive that there is a need to look at the provision of free personal care for the elderly.

I do not want to sound negative. A start has been made, and we are on the right road. I also welcome the idea of setting up the new body for nurses and midwives. However, I, like the Committee Chairperson, look forward to the detailed scrutiny of the Bill by the Committee. I commend the Bill to the Assembly.

Mr McCarthy: I too welcome the Minister's statement. Free nursing care for the elderly is an issue that I am familiar with, and I have wanted to see it brought to a successful conclusion. Some time ago, Mr Nigel Dodds and I brought the issue to the Floor of the House. We had the unanimous support of the Assembly at that time. This morning's statement represents real progress. It is a positive aspect of having a local Administration and a local Minister to make decisions. No doubt the Assembly will have to study the ins and outs of the provision in detail.

I also welcome the fact that a group has been set up to examine the issue of free personal care. That issue has been another area of concern, given the division between nursing care and personal care. I am delighted to hear the Minister say that the group has been set up. She has had more success in setting up a cross-party group than I have had. I wish her good luck, and more power to her elbow. I hope that when the group reports to the Executive in June, the Executive will be receptive and see the need for free personal care along with nursing care.

This is a big subject. The Assembly must do what it can. It has the opportunity to look after Northern Ireland's elderly people, who have been crying out for a long time. That is just one aspect of the issue. There are many others. I fully support the Bill and look forward to a successful conclusion.

Ms de Brún: I thank Members for the interest that they have shown in the debate on the Bill. I will deal with a couple of the points that they have raised.

There is no overall increase in the number of non-departmental public bodies (NDPBs) within my Department. Although the Northern Ireland Practice and Education Council for Nursing and Midwifery (NIPEC) is to be established as an NDPB, an existing one, the National Board for Nursing, Midwifery and Health Visiting for Northern Ireland, is to be stood down on 31 March 2002. Therefore, there will be no overall increase in the number of NDPBs associated with nursing and midwifery. I am sure that, as the Chairperson of the Committee for Health, Social Services and Public Safety said, they will want to pursue that point further at Committee Stage.

NIPEC's role is to promote the development of nursing and midwifery in the areas of best practice, post-registration education and performance. With regard to best practice and practice development, NIPEC will

gather information on evidence-based best practice, review how it can best be applied and disseminate details to health and social care commissioners and providers. That will help to enhance the standards of nursing and midwifery care of patients throughout the service and to develop consistently high standards of care of patients and other service users.

NIPEC will be involved in quality assuring the standard of nursing and midwifery education. It will contribute to ensuring that nurses and midwives are appropriately trained before they treat and care for patients. NIPEC will also be able to assist organisations to improve the performance of nursing and midwifery teams and the quality of nursing care of patients in general. It will be a source of advice and will be able to assist organisations in that area directly. By supporting the development of the nursing and midwifery professions, NIPEC will help to improve the care provided to service users and the wider community.

On free nursing care, I note the points raised by Mr Berry about the difficulties facing nursing homes. Indeed, as he said, that is why I put extra money in the Budget proposals to address that. However, that is a subject for another day and not specifically related to this legislation.

Ms Ramsey and Mr McCarthy mentioned free personal care. My Department has previously estimated the annual cost of providing free personal care for people in nursing and residential care homes here to be around £25 million. However, the interdepartmental group on personal care, which will advise on the costs and implications of providing free personal care, is expected to refine that estimate as part of its work. The group expects to report its findings to the Executive by the end of June this year and will seek to take full advantage of work that has already been done on free personal care in Scotland.

If I have not fully covered any area that has been raised in the debate, I will write to the Members involved. I thank Members for their interest in the debate.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That the Second Stage of the Health and Personal Social Services Bill (NIA 6/01) be agreed.

CARERS AND DIRECT PAYMENTS BILL

Further Consideration Stage

Mr Speaker: I draw the attention of the House to the fact that the short title of the Bill was the Personal Social Services (Amendment) Bill before it was amended at Consideration Stage on 4 March 2002.

Clauses 1 to 12 ordered to stand part of the Bill.

Schedule agreed to.

Long title agreed to.

Mr Speaker: That concludes the Further Consideration Stage of the Carers and Direct Payments Bill. The Bill stands referred to the Speaker.

AMBULANCE SERVICE

Mr Fee: I beg to move

That this Assembly recognises the pressures on the Ambulance Service and calls on the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to address the inability of the service to meet published response times in rural areas.

I am pleased to be able to raise what is an important issue not just for people in rural border areas, such as my constituency, but right across Northern Ireland. The motion was laid before the Business Committee in October 2001, so there is no particular significance in its timing.

11.15 am

I appreciate that the Minister has initiated a consultation exercise on her plans to implement a newly-revised Ambulance Service. I want to take the opportunity to impress upon her the urgency of proper resources, organisation and support for the service. People's lives and welfare are at stake, and the service is currently in complete disarray.

I preface my next remarks with the hope that no one thinks that I am criticising in any way the personnel at the coalface who provide ambulance cover and care services for patients. It is remarkable that they manage to sustain the service given so many organisational and administrative failings across four board areas.

The context of the motion is simple. The old target for responding to emergency incidents was inside 21 minutes. I live in Crossmaglen, and it is impossible to get there from Daisy Hill Hospital in that time. I know men and women who have driven emergency vehicles and tried their damndest to get to road traffic accidents or cardiac and other emergencies in the required time, but it is physically impossible. That goes for a large part of my Newry and Armagh constituency, from the Ballsmill area through Glasdrummond to Creggan, Crossmaglen, round to Cullyhanna and on bad days even to Newtownhamilton. There are between 10,000 and 15,000 people who are permanently outside the safe response time for accident and emergency vehicles. I am sure that the situation is the same in the Augher/Clogher valley and in parts of Fermanagh and the Glens of Antrim. Until recently, it applied to substantial parts of the Mourne area. Many people are, therefore, without the basic emergency medical cover recommended by the old Operational Research Consultants standards, and those people will be even further disadvantaged by the strategic review of the Ambulance Service and the new implementation strategy.

Resources will be discussed later in the debate. However, although they are important, resources are not the key issue. The strategic review of the Ambulance Service published in 2000 recommended that 50% of all 999 calls could be reached in under eight minutes. That could

be achieved by improving the availability of accident and emergency ambulances, and no additional resources were required.

That is what this is all about. Currently the service is so poorly organised and strapped by bureaucracy that even with existing resources the necessary service and response times are not achieved. The general public is probably not aware that the Ambulance Service in Northern Ireland is not classified as an emergency service, and neither is it treated or funded as such. Were the Fire Authority to ask for money to provide a service or the police to ask for money for training or new personnel or whatever, it would come from central funding, and there would be no quibbling. That funding is ring-fenced.

The Ambulance Service does not work that way. It has no single budget or single source of finance. It must sell the boards the number of miles travelled, the numbers of incidents dealt with and journeys made. It is impossible to manage a service in that way. If a core budget is not guaranteed year-on-year, and administered by a central authority, staff cannot be properly trained, the estate cannot be properly managed, and the fleet cannot be properly developed. If I ask the Minister to take any action as a result of this debate, it will be to look at the funding arrangements for the Ambulance Service and to put it on a par with the other emergency services, so that it can prepare, plan and manage the service.

I now make a plea for my own area. The original strategy published in 2000 recommended that an additional 20 ambulance centres be established. In the Minister's revised implementation programme, that figure was reduced to nine, in addition to the two that have already been developed. That will leave a substantial part of the North of Ireland without the necessary cover, and it will continue to leave substantial parts of areas such as south Armagh beyond the eight-minute response times. Sections of the community in Fermanagh, Armagh, Antrim and Down will be left outside safe response times for the foreseeable future. Surely that is not what the Minister or the Department intends. It is certainly not what communities need or want.

Why was no meeting held anywhere in Newry, Armagh or south Armagh as part of the consultation exercise? Why, at the meeting held in Banbridge, was there no mention of any additional ambulance centres for the broad swathe of land around the border?

This process has been ongoing since the review of ambulance services was commissioned by John McFall in October 1998. The review was published in 2000, and the implementation document was then produced. That document is out for consultation at the moment. Ambulance services exist to respond to immediate life-threatening situations. If parts of the problem can be clearly identified and solved before the review is finished, I ask the Minister to do that.

There are problems with the fleet, and I ask the Minister to renew her bids for money to upgrade it. There are also problems with the dispatch and communication systems. Until the review is complete, will the Minister ensure that all software, hardware and technology is properly tested in a Northern Ireland context? England had months of poorly recorded or missed 999-calls. I hope that the preparatory work has begun, but I do not see many signs of that.

Ambulance staff and paramedics are misused. We must address a system that allows highly trained people with well-equipped ambulances to provide, for want of a better term, a taxi service. People must be brought to day-care and outpatient services, but the resources of the ambulance and accident and emergency services should not be drained by a job that others could do.

In going through some papers for today's debate, I was shocked to realise that there is no guarantee of a trained paramedic in any ambulance dispatched. It is shocking that our accident and emergency services might dispatch an ambulance without a paramedic to a road traffic accident or to someone with an ectopic pregnancy or someone having a heart attack. We must address that urgently before we deal with anything else.

Mr McElduff: I beg to move the following amendment: Insert after "rural areas":

"and further calls on the Executive to provide sufficient funding to allow for the early implementation of the Strategic Review of Ambulance Services."

Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. Ba mhaith liom tacaíocht a thabhairt do rún John Fee agus cúpla pointe eile a chur san áireamh fosta.

I commend John Fee on tabling the motion, and I would like to add to it. I attest to the experiences of people living in rural areas, such as County Armagh, which Mr Fee also outlined. I am aware of the particular difficulties experienced by people living in areas of pronounced rurality such as County Tyrone, south Derry and County Fermanagh with regard to ambulance provision. They often have to make their way to hospital in private vehicles or neighbours' vehicles. People living in rural areas such as Cranagh on the Tyrone/Derry border also share that fear and anxiety when trying to access essential health services, and, unfortunately, the response times are not being met.

I share concerns about the downward revision of the targets set by the Department and the Minister. Everyone would like to see improved response times and improvements in survival rates, and that is at the heart of the overall ambulance review.

In tabling the amendment, my Colleague, Ms Ramsey, and I wish to draw attention to the most fundamental issue of all — resources. We are highlighting the link between Ambulance Service improvement and the adequate

provision of resources. The Minister has often stated publicly that it will be a long haul to remedy past funding failures. There is a recognised lack of capacity in the Health Service. We must put that capacity back into the service and, specifically, into the Ambulance Service.

We need a commitment to long-term planning arrangements. Last night, the key message from the chief executive, Mr Lindsey, and the chairman, Mr Bradley, of the Western Health and Social Services Board was that there is a need for certainty about future funding levels.

While I welcome the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety's presence today, I would also like to have seen Mr P Robinson attend. In order to have joined-up government, the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety, the Department for Regional Development and other Departments must work closely together. Rurality and poor roads infrastructure go hand in hand — they are virtually synonymous. The combined efforts of Executive Ministers are required to address that problem, and I hope that Mr Robinson will join those Ministers in making the case for greater funding and for greater emphasis to be placed on improving rural roads infrastructure. Those issues are central to the overall problem that has been highlighted in the motion.

To achieve more effective and efficient ambulance provision, cross-border co-operation must be strengthened — in fact, the border must simply disappear. People living in parts of the North can access hospitals in Sligo and Cavan more easily than they can access hospitals in a more northerly location. Therefore, while I agree with virtually all of Mr Fee's sentiments, I would like the Executive to match that vision with resources.

The Chairperson of the Committee for Health, Social Services and Public Safety (Dr Hendron): I welcome the opportunity to participate in this debate. The pressures faced by the Ambulance Service in meeting its responses times are of vital importance to all Members, their families and their constituents.

Every person in need of an emergency ambulance should expect equity of access to ambulance services. That means a speedy response time and proper equipment.

11.30 am

The improvement of service provision is of fundamental importance to my Committee. The Committee will have failed to do its job if it does not seek answers when a public body such as the Ambulance Service falls short of its key targets. I stress the admiration that my Committee and I have for the staff of the Ambulance Service, who do an incredibly difficult job extremely well with limited resources.

The Health Committee has considered the pressures faced by the Ambulance Service on many occasions. Most recently, Members examined the implementation plans of the Department of Health, Social Services and

Public Safety for its strategic review of the Ambulance Service, 'Mapping the Road to Change: A Strategic Review of the Northern Ireland Ambulance Service', which sets out a phased programme of improvements to ensure that response time targets can be met in the future.

Committee Members also met recently with the chairperson and chief executive of the Northern Ireland Ambulance Service to discuss concerns about the ability of the Ambulance Service to meet, at the very least, the standards set for England, Scotland, and Wales. We should strive to meet not only the standards set in these islands but the best international standards. The public deserves no less.

We have heard that the Ambulance Service is not meeting its response time targets. Only 50% of calls are responded to within the eight-minute target time in the Eastern Board and Western Board areas, and the performance rate for the Northern Board and Southern Board areas is that only 46% of all calls are met within eight minutes.

Within those figures, there is considerable variability of performance across local government district areas. The problem affects rural areas hardest, especially remote areas. This problem was recognised by the Minister and her Department when she undertook the strategic review of ambulance services. The Committee welcomes the Minister's proposals to improve response times, and it will monitor their implementation to ensure that the Department acts without delay to improve services.

Fundamental to the problems facing the Ambulance Service are the resources needed to do the job. The lack of adequate resources affects the number of ambulances and crews available and their ability to meet the response targets. Only two thirds of the emergency ambulance fleet have paramedics on board. The public should expect a paramedic on every emergency ambulance. Funding also affects areas such as training, communications and morale.

However, it is not only about extra resources; it is also about the efficient use of existing resources. One example is the need for improved co-ordination of emergency ambulance services across the four health boards. The emergency co-ordination centre at Knockbracken Healthcare Park in Belfast handles work for the Eastern Board and the Northern Board. The centre should be used as a template for a regional emergency co-ordination centre, which would help the service to use its resources more effectively to meet targets.

Funding comparisons have pointed to a significant difference in the money available per head of population. Northern Ireland receives £14.50 per head, Scotland, £20 per head, and Wales, £22 per head. That difference must be redressed. The Minister's most recent bid, for £6.2 million to resource the implementation of the strategic review of the Ambulance Service in 2002-03, failed.

The emergency Ambulance Service is a cornerstone of the Health Service, and the public needs to be reassured that lives are not being put at risk due to the inadequate funding of this service. The service needs an adequate level of resources if it is to meet the performance standards, and the Health Committee will give its full support to the Minister in her efforts to obtain a fair proportion of funding for the Health Service and for ambulance services.

UNISON has sent a paper to all Members, and I want to highlight one point that is made in it:

“There remains no awareness in the implementation document of an understanding of how poverty-related health and TSN issues need to be incorporated in targeting resources towards individual districts or groups of districts. This is particularly relevant when local government boundaries are under review in the review of public administration.”

I have made my final point on several occasions. Having been involved in primary care as a GP for many years, during all sorts of troubles, I have never known any ambulance driver to hold back in an emergency situation, no matter how much violence there was on the streets. I have great admiration for them.

Rev Robert Coulter: I support the motion and commend Mr Fee for moving it at this time. For far too long the Ambulance Service has been regarded merely as patient transport and not as an emergency service, but the time has come when we must look on the Ambulance Service as a pre-hospital healthcare service. It will be an essential part of the review of acute hospitals. It is a healthcare provider that makes life better for patients in many different ways.

Emergency care can be influenced heavily in the pre-hospital phase. There is great talk about the “golden hour”, but it is coming down to the “golden half-hour”. In England and Wales it has been recommended that the time from when a call is received until the patient is at the door of an accident and emergency department should not exceed 30 minutes. According to the equality impact assessment of the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety, published in November 2001, the performance figures from some local government districts are: Carrickfergus 14%; Banbridge 18%; Limavady 30%; Moyle 33%; North Down 30%. And so it goes on. Is 14% an acceptable figure? I do not think so.

Standardisation of performance is necessary, taking rural and urban areas into account. It is easy to set times and to accept that the Ambulance Service is clinically meaningful. However, we must ask ourselves whether those times are operationally achievable. If they are not, we must ask ourselves how we can make them operationally achievable.

Modern technology is available. Have our ambulances been fitted with automatic vehicle location? It is easy to send ambulances to different locations, but if an ambulance

is answering a call that is not an emergency and then has to be diverted to an emergency call, surely it makes sense that it should be fitted with an automatic vehicle location system. Satellite direction to homes is another absolute must for the future. How much time is lost because ambulances cannot find the exact location of an accident or a home where there has been a cardiac arrest?

I am glad that digital radio will be installed in ambulances. As Mr Fee said, there are many radio black spots in our country, but in order to have an ambulance service that can achieve the set times, there must be total coverage. That point is important. However, any equipment for ambulances should be properly tested in a Northern Ireland context before it is purchased.

I thank the Minister for her response, which I received this morning, to my question on stretcher beds. Many of the stretchers in ambulances are unacceptable, and it will cost a tremendous amount of money to replace them. Therefore, it is imperative that all equipment in ambulances should be properly tested before it is installed.

I also ask the Minister to take on board the difference between the retirement age of Fire Service personnel and ambulance personnel. The work of an ambulance crew can be heavy and stressful. Many ambulance personnel, when they reach the age of 63 or 64, find the work extremely heavy. They are unable to carry out the work as they should because their backs are being strained and so forth. In the Fire Service, one can retire at an earlier age.

I do not want to repeat many of the points that have already been made. Suffice it to say that the annual report of the Ambulance Service is correct when it states that this is a matter of life and death. Therefore, priority must be given to ensuring that the Ambulance Service is the best in the United Kingdom.

Mr Berry: I support the motion in the name of Mr John Fee and welcome the fact that the motion has been tabled. It is an important matter that must be debated.

Health Committee members met the chief executive of the Northern Ireland Ambulance Service several weeks ago. Indeed, the Committee meets regularly with Ambulance Service staff, who highlight the problems that they face. The motion outlines not only the pressures that they are under but also the response times in rural areas. The Ambulance Service is under immense pressure at times.

Within the Health Service as a whole, we are back once again to the issue of resources. Much of the document ‘Mapping the Road to Change: A Strategic Review of the Northern Ireland Ambulance Service’ outlines the need for more funding and more resources. We must zoom in closely on those issues. The Chairperson of the Committee for Health, Social Services and Public

Safety referred to the funding comparison per capita, where Northern Ireland is the lowest, followed by Scotland and Wales. I trust that the Department will take that issue on board, because it must be addressed.

Rev Robert Coulter raised the issue of the impact of acute hospital reorganisation. All those aspects and issues are most important, so that we get the Ambulance Service right not only for the needs of the people who will use the service but for the needs of the staff who are currently under immense pressure.

Delegations from the Ambulance Service have repeatedly made it clear to us that the funding allocation was totally inadequate to meet the needs of staff training, fleet replacement and prioritising investment within the service. Another major issue that was brought before us was the communications system, which also needs investment. When Committee members met departmental officials, we were glad to learn that, under the Executive programme funds, allocations have been provided for two key Ambulance Service developments in 2002-03. One of those relates to the introduction of digital trunk radio to improve communications between the Ambulance Service control, ambulances and hospitals.

(Mr Deputy Speaker [Mr J Wilson] in the Chair)

An important issue for the Department to take on board is the possibility of examining the amalgamation of the Fire Service and the Ambulance Service. When the Committee met the chief executive of the Ambulance Service and his colleagues, it was stated that there was a need for a joint approach in relation to the communications of those two important emergency services. One needs to work with the other. The Department must examine the possible amalgamation of those services, in addition to the amalgamation of the communication services. That would help both organisations, and it would also help to address the emergency needs in our community. That would also help with the implementation of a rapid response scheme that would provide for faster responses to emergencies, particularly in rural areas.

11.45 pm

In introducing this motion, Mr Fee outlined the needs of rural communities and the concerns and problems associated with response times. The amalgamation of communication services could be addressed to deal with that problem. Staffing and staff training were also outlined.

Violent attacks on Ambulance Service staff is one of the biggest issues that the service has had to face recently. Rev Robert Coulter referred to the retirement age of 65. Many staff have to work 12-hour shifts, coping with manual handling and stressful situations. The retirement age in the Fire Service is 55. Eight per cent of sickness absence in the Ambulance Service relates to exhaustion, back trouble, stress, violence and age-related problems. The Committee has been told by departmental officials

that those issues will be taken on board. Those important staffing issues must be addressed immediately. A person of 65 years of age who has to deal with equipment in an ambulance can be under severe pressure, and the sickness rate proves that.

The level and extent of training must be improved. There is a shortage of paramedics, and an ongoing training programme for new staff and a refresher course for existing staff must be addressed.

Members will be strongly opposed to attacks on Ambulance Service staff, and all staff who work in the Health Service and the public sector. It is sickening to think that the people who need the service are at risk because of those attacks on staff that make the response times impossible to meet. Like other Members, I condemn the attacks on Ambulance Service staff.

When the Committee met the Department it learnt that money was being provided to deal with the raising of awareness in schools. The Committee was glad to learn that a pilot community education programme has been funded through the Department to raise awareness. Education programmes in schools will address the importance of the Ambulance Service and its work.

The Fire Service has an education programme in schools to highlight the importance and the need for that emergency service. About a month ago, concern was expressed to the Committee that there was no such programme available in the Ambulance Service. Members were glad to learn from the Department that that issue is being addressed, and we trust that it will have a positive outcome for the betterment not only of the Ambulance Service but also the whole community.

Fortunately, those attacks have stopped, and we trust that we will not hear of any more attacks on the Ambulance Service, the police, the Fire Service or any other people in the community.

Response times in rural areas are another major problem, and other Members have highlighted the issue well. Unfortunately, Northern Ireland is falling behind Great Britain in basic standards of service provision, fleet maintenance and training. That is due to a lack of funding, and it will affect our ability to meet the standards for response times to emergency calls. Our constituents deserve better, and the Ambulance Service deserves better. The service is working under extreme pressure due to a lack of funding, and the Department must address that issue not only for the sake of our constituents but also for Ambulance Service staff. We commend the staff of the Ambulance Service for working under such extreme pressures. We must represent them to the best of our ability. I trust that all the issues mentioned will be taken on board and that action will be taken on many of the concerns that have been raised. I support the motion.

Mr McCarthy: On behalf of the Alliance Party, I want to put on record our thanks and appreciation to all members of the Ambulance Service who have served the entire community through years of murder and mayhem and who have been in the forefront of picking up the pieces, whether as a result of bombing, shooting, car accidents or other incidents. They have done, and continue to do, a superb job. As Mr Berry said, we hope that the recent and ongoing assaults on the Ambulance Service will cease immediately so that staff can get on with what they have been trained to do.

I hope that by having a debate on the Ambulance Service we will contribute to the overall well-being of everyone in the community and see co-operation between all those involved in the Ambulance Service. We are grateful for Mr Fee's motion.

The emphasis is on rural areas such as the Strangford constituency, which I represent. As I understand it, the eastern division is classified as rural and, therefore, must meet the performance standards for a rural area. The acute hospital services review recommends that there should be a significant increase in investment in the Ambulance Service. The Minister has endorsed detailed plans to secure improvements to the availability and quality of the Ambulance Service throughout Northern Ireland. We wish her every success in her endeavours.

I shall highlight some figures that emphasise the need to introduce a medical priority despatch system. Presently, calls to the Ambulance Service are not prioritised. Prioritisation has been introduced in all ambulance services in England, but not in Northern Ireland. The Alliance Party endorses its implementation here, starting with a pilot in the Eastern Health and Social Services Board area.

The targets in England for non-prioritised calls are the same as for Northern Ireland. Within each board area, 50% of all emergency calls must be answered within eight minutes. In the Eastern Health and Social Services Board area, 95% of all emergency calls must be answered within 18 minutes, and within 21 minutes in the other three board areas. The two regions compare similarly. Our four health and social services boards are not the best, but they are not the worst. In handling over 35,000 emergency calls, the Eastern Health and Social Services Board responded to 62.7% of those within eight minutes and 96.9% within the 18 minutes to 21 minutes target.

In order that the implementation proposals can improve response time, the new medical priority despatch system must be introduced. I appeal to the Minister and her Department to launch a public awareness campaign to emphasise the equality implications for patients in the new patient care services.

The strategic review implementation proposals go further than the exercise in England by establishing targets for local government districts. That decision is to be

welcomed, and it will provide more detailed and honest figures and evaluations of performances. The Alliance Party supports any proposals that can get an ambulance to where it is needed in as short a time as possible and hopes that additional accident and emergency vehicles and crews will operate in outlying rural areas such as Saintfield, Killyleagh and Portaferry. Portaferry is at the tip of the Ards Peninsula, and anything that will reduce precious time in an emergency must be provided. I appeal to the Minister to ensure that those proposals are implemented as soon as possible.

I was pleased to hear the Minister say this morning that progress is being made on the all-Ireland air ambulance service.

I support the motion.

Mr Boyd: I wish to place on record my personal appreciation, and that of my party Colleagues, to the Northern Ireland Ambulance Service for its dedication and professionalism in serving the entire community with impartiality and displaying great courage over many years.

It is appalling that there are those in society who are prepared to attack ambulance staff and other members of the emergency services as they carry out their duties. The attacks must stop, and the courts must deal adequately with those who are guilty of such disgraceful attacks. There are an alarming number of attacks on ambulance staff and other staff inside and outside hospitals. This escalating problem must be effectively addressed. In 2000-01 reported incidents of violence against ambulance staff totalled 71, in comparison with 43 in the previous year. It is vital that the general public supports the Ambulance Service and helps to eradicate the attacks.

The speed of response of ambulances to accident and emergency situations is critical at the time of a call and at attendance at the scene. There is concern, however, that some response targets are not being achieved. In the financial year 2000-01 two of the four health board areas — the Northern Board with 47% and the Southern Board with 42% — did not achieve the 50% target for accident and emergency ambulances to arrive at the scene in eight minutes. It is vital that, in emergencies, intervention and treatment for life-threatening conditions such as cardiac arrest begin as quickly as possible after the onset of the arrest. The targets of 95% of accident and emergency ambulances reaching the scene in 18 minutes for urban areas and 21 minutes for rural areas were not achieved in three of the four health board areas in 2000-01: the Northern Board with 94%, the Southern Board with 92% and the Western Board with 94%.

There were over 71,000 emergency calls in 2000-01, and the responses that were not achieved within the performance standard amount to several hundred in some areas. The times for each ambulance station over the quarter ending 31 December 2001 for response at the scene in

eight minutes have a wide variance. In the Eastern Board area, the highest response rate is Ardoyne station at 71%, and the lowest is Downpatrick at 35%. In the Western Board, the highest response rate is Altnagelvin station at 59%, and the lowest is Castlederg at 37%. The Northern Board also has a large variance. The highest response rate is Antrim at 58%, and the lowest is Ballymoney at 32%. In the Southern Board, the highest response rate is Newry station at 53%, and the lowest is Craigavon at 30%.

It is clear that some response times must be improved and greater consistency achieved, particularly in rural areas. The necessary resources must be made available, and measures must be put in place to achieve the required improvements in response times as a priority.

Mr Shannon: I support the motion. It is important to examine what the Ambulance Service offers.

A wíð be for pitten forrit ma consarn that, for aw the unanimous council uphauld for upsettin an ambulance outstation on the Airs Peninsula, the Halth Meinister haesna setten oot onie plans for sicna ploy.

The Norlin Airland Ambulance Service haed an apen forgaitherin in the Strangford Airms Hotel in the Newtown no lang syne for ti gae ower its propones for the haill Province an for the airt o Airs Burgh Council in parteiclar. It is clair that the Ambulance Service haes been in sairious want o siller in bygaen yeirs, gettin nae mair nor about £14 for ilk indwaller, an makkin compare wi Scotland an Wales the differ's neir £10 a heid. Deed, thir feigurs is e'en mair flegsum whan we tak the Fire Service. The Govrenment maun gie the dounhauden Ambulance Service the siller it's wantin that sair.

Airds Burgh Council haes been threipin for an outstation on the Airs Peninsula thir 12 yeir, an that needcessitie haes cum til the fore as the population haes growne. The loanins o the Airs Peninsula is jaggit an nairrie, an the maist fek o fowk's bydin in the kintra an spreid oot. In the simmer the nummer indwallers fair gaes up, bi sae mukkil as 20,000. The tyme taen winnin til the steid o an accident in the laicher Airs Peninsula is up a lang wey, an the nummer lyfes tint haes growne flegsum.

12.00

I am concerned that, despite unanimous support from the district council — and I wear two hats for this — for the provision of an ambulance outstation on the Ards Peninsula, there have not been any plans for one under the current Health Minister or in the current Ambulance Service proposals.

We are here today to discuss rural needs in relation to ambulance provision. The Northern Ireland Ambulance Service recently held a public meeting in the Strangford Arms Hotel in Newtownards to outline its proposals for the Province as a whole and for the Ards Borough Council area in particular. The Ambulance Service has been

seriously underfunded over the years, and we were given dramatic figures at that meeting. We spend only £14 per person, as much as £10 less than Scotland and Wales. When compared with the Northern Ireland Fire Authority, the figures were even more dramatic.

The Government, and the Department, must take steps to provide the funding that the hard-pressed Ambulance Service is desperate for. For 12 years Ards Borough Council has pressed hard for an outstation on the Ards Peninsula. It knows the needs and tries to reflect them. That commitment, and the need itself, has grown as the population has increased. The roads of the Ards Peninsula are, by nature, twisty and narrow, and the population is predominantly rural and widely spread. In the summer, the population grows by as many as 20,000 people, so it takes even longer to get to an accident on the lower Ards Peninsula, and that could result in a dramatic increase in the number of deaths.

It seems that the major reasons for the inability of the Ambulance Service to upgrade and provide better and more efficient services are money and manpower. As the problem continues and the Ambulance Service in the Province falls further behind, it could well be time to consider some short-term assistance. There is an organisation called ProParamedics, which is a professional, experienced group that is willing and able to assist. It has trained and expert staff, who already assist at a number of venues in the Province. It has come into being because the Ambulance Service and St John Ambulance — a voluntary group — have not been able to assist due to financial and manpower restrictions. Staff resources are already being squeezed.

I request that ProParamedics be fully considered if substantial manpower and funding are not made available immediately. It says that it can offer a service at a much better and competitive rate and be there within the prescribed time to meet all emergencies. It is available. Even if full training took place today for Ambulance Service personnel, they might not be ready to take up their posts right away.

Problems are further exacerbated because ambulances are able to take only one injured person to hospital at a time; in serious accidents the numbers of ambulances needed increase greatly. The pressure is on the Ambulance Service, and a fair and positive response for outstations or rapid-response units must take place — not, as we have been told, at a predetermined location; there has to be a full and fair look at the entire Province.

I call on the Minister and the Ambulance Service to create a rapid-response centre and outstation on the Ards Peninsula, which has already been justified by its needs. The outstation or rapid-response method could work effectively for the peninsula, perhaps working out of the health centre in Kircubbin. Again, I put that forward as a suggestion. It would be a clear and direct way of trying

to help. There is a centre there that could be made available, and it could well be the outstation or rapid-response centre for the peninsula.

It is, therefore, disappointing that the commitment we sought from the Ambulance Service for the outstation has not been forthcoming. Perhaps the Minister can confirm that no decisions have been made, that nothing is pre-determined, and that the outstation for the Ards Peninsula is still in the running. The Department said that there would be three pilot schemes for the Province but suggested that other places would probably be chosen. On three occasions it mentioned three places: the Sperrins, the Glens of Antrim and Fermanagh. I am not saying that any of those locations should not get the outstations, but the Ards Peninsula needs one more than most.

The outstation is crucial for people there. It is imperative to ensure a shorter response time for accidents and injuries, and I implore the Ambulance Service and the Department to review the situation and ensure that there is a pilot scheme for the Ards Peninsula. So far they have failed to deliver any sort of assurance to elected representatives. There is still time, and opportunity, to ensure that the Ards Peninsula gets its much needed and long overdue ambulance provision. Time, effort and need demand it.

The Minister for Health, Social Services and Public Safety (Ms de Brún): Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Gabhaim buíochas leis an Uasal Ó Fiach as an ábhar seo a thabhairt os comhair an Tí. D'éist mé go cúramach leis na tuairimí a léirigh Comhaltaí agus tá áthas orm deis a bheith agam sa díospóireacht seo na fadhbanna atá ag an tSeirbhís Otharcharr a mheas. Is cuid dhílis na seirbhísí sláinte agus pearsanta sóisialta í an tSeirbhís seo, agus tá gá le soláthar éifeachtach éifeachtúil otharcharr má tá beo go leor daoine gortaithe agus breoite le sábháil gach bliain.

I thank Mr Fee for bringing this matter to the House. I have listened with interest to the views expressed and welcome the opportunity that the debate has provided to consider the problems facing the Ambulance Service, which is an integral and important part of health and personal social services, as has been stated in the debate. Efficient and effective ambulance provision is essential if the lives of many injured and sick people are to be saved each year.

The key performance measure for the Ambulance Service is its ability to meet clearly defined response standards. The current targets for the service are to respond within eight minutes to 50% of all emergency calls, to respond to 95% of all emergency calls within 18 minutes in the Eastern Board area and within 21 minutes in all other board areas. As has been made clear these standards are met only in the Eastern and Western Board areas, and within them there is considerable variation in performance. It is no coincidence that the areas in

which the Ambulance Service fails to meet current response targets are mainly, though not exclusively, rural areas.

The implementation plan and the strategic review of the Ambulance Service contain a series of measures to reduce the differentials between urban and rural areas, to improve overall response times and to improve the quality of responses by the provision of enhanced staff training. The plan sets out clearly the need for fundamental investment in the service if it is to make these improvements, and it is specific on what is required and the likely costs. Several Members took up that point.

However, there has been, and continues to be, significant investment in the Ambulance Service — over the last three years, over 100 new vehicles have been put on the road. Significant investment has been made in new equipment and in the training and development of staff.

One of the recommendations of the implementation plan is that there should be additional response points for accident and emergency ambulances to enable the travelling time to incidents to be reduced. Four additional response points are on stream, and more are planned.

The recommendation of the strategic review for 20 more locations was not supported by any statistical information. The issue is revised and revisited in the proposed implementation plan, based on computer-modelling of locations and response times. I can confirm that 11 additional locations are proposed and that consultation meetings have already identified alternative locations based on local knowledge.

I am also pleased to confirm that, as well as additional resources for the coming year, an additional £300,000 will be made available next year to begin the medical priority despatch system — a protocol which will help ambulance control staff to determine whether an incident is life-threatening and thus use existing resources more effectively; to improve the 24-hour on-call arrangements for responses to major incidents; to put in place measures to address problems with attacks on ambulance staff, including a trial programme to help prepare crews to deal with potentially violent situations; and a pilot community education programme for children and young people. That is on top of the additional £1 million already available to the Ambulance Service for 2002-03 for training and developing paramedics and other staff.

I have also secured a total of £3.2 million for digital trunk radio systems and rapid responder schemes, £1.1 million of which will be available to the Ambulance Service in 2002-03. The introduction of digital trunk radio provides for clearer and more secure communications between ambulance control staff and the other emergency services and will have many benefits in relation to the quality and timing of responses to emergency calls.

In that respect, I noted the points that Mr Berry made about closer communication systems and working together.

Recent discussions and work have focused on closer co-operation between the Fire Service and the Ambulance Service. That is one of the reasons why the two services were put into the same Department — the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety — when the new arrangements were made.

I note with some regret that Mr Berry kept talking about what he had heard from departmental officials when he was quoting the responses that I had given to him face to face, when I met with him and his Committee colleagues in order to discuss budget proposals. Given that I had the professionalism to provide those responses, I hope that after this morning he will remember that they came from me.

The rapid responder schemes will have a particularly important role in improving the response in rural areas. There will be four rapid responder four-wheel drive vehicles — one in each of the board areas — each driven by a paramedic. Those vehicles will be situated in areas where the response times are particularly poor because of rural isolation or poor road networks. In addition, plans have been developed for pilot first responder schemes in rural areas, under the remit of the North/South Ministerial Council (NSMC). Those schemes will train people from the community in basic life-saving skills, so that they can provide support in the vital minutes that it takes for an ambulance to arrive on the scene.

Although I have concentrated on speed of response, which is of obvious significance, simply improving response times will not improve clinical outcomes for patients. Increasingly, the focus has been turning towards the quality of care that Ambulance Service personnel provide before a patient arrives at hospital. Recommendations in that area include improvements in training and development and the introduction of clinical audit procedures and systems. Ambulance Service is continually examining ways to improve the quality of service that it delivers. Over the past three years I have been able to make over £3 million available for Ambulance Service modernisation. I have also secured over £3 million with which to improve Ambulance Service communications and to pilot rapid-responder schemes.

The provision of those measures — the additional ambulance locations, the rapid-responder schemes, the introduction of first-responder schemes and the strategic deployment of ambulances — as identified in the implementation plan, are measures specifically designed to improve response times in rural areas. However, the extent to which various measures can be initiated — including the provision of paramedics — depends largely on the availability of the additional resources. The Chairperson of the Committee for Health, Social Services and Public Safety has already mentioned that my most recent bid was not met. However, I assure Members that, as they requested this morning, I will continue to bid for resources for that important aspect of my Department's services.

The issue of roads was raised this morning. However, it is not within my remit and is a matter for the Minister for Regional Development.

Public consultation meetings took place in locations with the poorest response times in each board area. As part of the consultation process departmental officials offered to meet with any group wishing to air their views in that way. Several meetings have taken place in response to such requests. Those are continuing, even though the formal end of the consultation period was 15 February 2002. A request from Newry and Mourne Health and Social Services Trust was made at the end of last week. Arrangements are currently being made for that meeting.

In relation to the question about ambulances being used as a taxi service, the strategic review report highlighted the inappropriate use of accident and emergency (A&E) vehicles in the transport of patients to and from hospital appointments. The proposed separation of the management of A&E and patient care services (PCS) and further investment in the A&E and PCS fleets will ensure that A&E vehicles will not be diverted away from emergency calls.

The Ambulance Service is also aware of the need to make the public aware of what the medical priority despatch system will be, and it will introduce a public awareness programme. The Department will provide appropriate support to ensure that public concerns about the medical priority despatch system are addressed effectively.

12.15 pm

Bob Coulter mentioned the retirement age for Ambulance Service personnel. That is not locally negotiated but is carried out in England as part of the normal negotiations on pay and conditions of service.

Violence against ambulance staff is of great concern to us all. The Ambulance Service has been in discussions with staff-side representatives about the measures it could take to minimise the risk to ambulance crews. I will meet representatives from UNISON to discuss that issue in the near future. In the meantime, my officials and Ambulance Service management are looking at initiatives to better protect staff and preclude further attacks, such as more robust windscreens in vehicles and community education projects, which I mentioned earlier.

Direct comparisons with response times of other ambulance services are not possible. The performance of GB services is measured on the basis of emergency calls categorised by level of urgency, and GB ambulance services are required to respond to 75% of life-threatening — or category A — calls within eight minutes.

The recognition of the Ambulance Service as an emergency service was mentioned. Ambulance services are provided to ensure that people who are ill can access health services under the provision of the Health and Personal Social Services (Northern Ireland) Order 1972.

The accident and emergency ambulance service is generally perceived as an emergency service, but my officials are investigating what benefits, if any, would result from formally recognising it as such.

As regards regional funding, the proposed new commissioning arrangements are intended to result in a co-ordinated, corporate approach to the development of the Ambulance Service. Health and social services boards currently negotiate with the ambulance trust individually. The new model is based on a single commissioning group, including representatives from the four health and social services boards. Through that group, new service developments will be agreed on a regional basis.

Important though the recent and planned investments are, as is the work that we have taken forward to date, they fall short of the full implementation plan. There is a significant additional cost to implementing all measures proposed in the plan. For example, to achieve a 50% response rate to all emergency calls in all board areas within eight minutes will require a recurrent minimum allocation for ambulance services of £3 million a year.

To meet other more ambitious response time targets, additional funding of £8 million a year would be required for the first two years, with a minimum of £5 million a year thereafter. That is against a background of a limited departmental budget and the continuing pressures across the whole spectrum of health and personal social services. Therefore the speed at which improvements can be achieved will depend on the level of additional funding available. The Chairperson of the Committee for Health, Social Services and Public Safety referred to the fate of bids that I made this year.

Responses to the consultation on the implementation of the strategic review are being collated and evaluated. I will, in due course, feed the key messages from that back to Members. However, on the basis of the consultation so far, people clearly have genuine concerns about the need to improve the Ambulance Service, and response times in particular. In that respect, I welcome today's debate on those issues.

Significant investment in additional ambulances and crews is required to improve response times. I have sought every opportunity to provide additional funds for the Ambulance Service and will continue to do so. Indeed, I will continue to press and to take every opportunity to try to secure and provide additional funds for this vital service. I recognise that, even in these times of pressure on services overall, the Ambulance Service must be seen as a key element in providing effective and equitable healthcare for everyone.

Ms Ramsey: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I too commend Mr John Fee for moving this motion, and I will add to the reasons outlined by my Colleague, Barry McElduff, for moving an amendment to it. I also take the opportunity to commend and thank

the Ambulance Service staff for their years of hard work and dedication and to point out that the level of attacks on staff has increased and must stop. The Committee for Health, Social Services and Public Safety discussed the matter last week.

The debate was mature and informed and covered the issues faced by the Ambulance Service. I agree with John Fee that the ring-fencing of money must be examined and that the Ambulance Service cannot develop without a proper budget and funding, and I will come back to that later. The basis of the amendment is that many of the services in the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety cannot operate without long-term strategic funding.

I agree with the many Members who referred to the poor response time in rural areas. We must compare that with the time taken to respond in urban areas. With regard to a joined-up, collective approach, I commend the Minister for Regional Development for his presence throughout most of the debate. I hope that he and his officials will read Hansard closely and take note of what has been said about the roads infrastructure.

The Health Service has been underfunded for years. Sadly, it has reached a stage where money is scarce and different parts of the sector are fighting each other for it. That must be examined. The need for £57 million to build a new cancer centre was discussed as recently as 5 March. Earlier today we spoke of additional money for free care of the elderly. We have talked recently about money needed for children's services, community care, the acute sector, the Fire Service and the Ambulance Service. One is no more important than the other, but the list is endless, and I apologise if anything has been missed.

Health was made a priority in the Programme for Government, and that fact must be addressed. The Executive have said that they will deal with health as a priority, and it must be impressed upon them that proper long-term funding is necessary. It is sad that lives are at risk if the Executive do not commit resources to resolving the matter.

I thank the Minister for her attendance at the debate and for the statement she made earlier regarding North/South co-operation. The all-island accident and emergency service mentioned earlier today is an example of that. That service would improve the situation in the border counties.

With regard to the point about the infrastructure, the Department for Regional Development appealed to the goodwill of farmers concerning the gritting of roads. That collective approach and response solved some of the problems.

I agree with the Chairperson of the Committee for Health, Social Services and Public Safety that it is important for the Ambulance Service to meet response times. It

is pointless to specify such times if the will to meet them is not there, but its absence is again linked to underfunding.

I agree with Joe Hendron that the Committee welcomes the Minister's proposals to improve response times. As he says, health boards must co-operate to improve the response times of ambulances. He also pointed out that the Minister had made a bid for £6.2 million for the Ambulance Service. That bid was not approved by the Executive. Again, I must ask whether that demonstrates that health is a priority for the Executive, because it does not seem so to me.

I agree with Bob Coulter that the Ambulance Service is sometimes seen as a personal bus service or patient transport service. I also agree that we must consider the retirement age for ambulance personnel and take on board the Minister's comments. The Committee must look at that closely, because it is decided and negotiated in England.

Paul Berry mentioned the need for more funding and resources. As a fellow member of the Committee for Health, Social Services and Public Safety, I support him. We are all aware of the lack of funding for the service, and we should not have to decide to fund certain provisions to the exclusion of others. Like Paul Berry, I welcome the Minister's announcement of the setting-up of the education scheme to tackle the ongoing attacks on Ambulance Service personnel.

I agree with the Minister that the Ambulance Service is an important part of the remit of the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety. She said that in most cases, the Ambulance Service fails to meet its targets in rural areas. The problem must be tackled urgently. The Minister highlighted the additional investment, which resulted in around 100 new vehicles and new equipment. Some £300,000 has been allocated to the dispatch system. I welcome that as a positive step forward, but I do not think that it is enough, even taking on board the constraints with which the Minister is faced. Everyone who has taken part in this debate has shown that there is a problem of underfunding.

I thank John Fee for ensuring that the motion reached the Floor of the House. I am pleased that there is general agreement that adequate funding is crucial to improving, not only ambulance response time, but the service as a whole. I hope that all parties will continue to support the Minister in her efforts to obtain adequate funding for the service.

Mr Fee: I thank the Minister for taking time to come here today and for her fairly comprehensive overview of what is happening in the Ambulance Service. I also thank Members for taking part in the debate. We are all singing from the same hymn sheet, so I will not go over all the details that have been discussed.

The Minister talked about providing equitable health-care for the whole community. That is basically what the debate is all about. Under various pieces of legislation we have made it illegal to discriminate on the grounds of age, gender, political or religious views, disability or sexual orientation. We should probably have written into the legislation that there must also be equity between rural and urban dwellers.

When I tried to make that point to a senior health board official, he insultingly and facetiously said that he supposed that I wanted an acute hospital in every village in south Armagh. My response is not publishable. However, the thrust of it was that I did not, but that if we could not have acute services on everyone's doorsteps, we would have to rely on the people who provide the ambulance, GP and primary care services in those communities.

In my area, certain acute services have been removed from Daisy Hill Hospital and some hospital services have been closed in Armagh. GP out-of-hours schemes have been created that have reduced the number of GPs available at weekends and evenings. These schemes rely on the Ambulance Service as a back-up. In that context, the Executive as a whole must make the Ambulance Service a priority.

It is also for that reason that my Colleagues and I will not oppose the amendment — if it gets the Executive's attention, so much the better.

12.30 pm

There is a remarkable urgency about this, because a great deal of consultation is necessary, and the proposals and the implementation strategy must be tested against various models. Nonetheless, this issue should have priority over all others.

The Minister has said that this issue will be examined. As with the Fire Service and the Police Service, the Ambulance Service should be a discrete, stand-alone centrally funded emergency service, and the sooner we achieve that the better. I thank the Minister and Members for their attendance and comments.

Question, That the amendment be made, put and agreed to.

Main Question, as amended, put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That this Assembly recognises the pressures on the Ambulance Service and calls on the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to address the inability of the service to meet published response times in rural areas and further calls on the Executive to provide sufficient funding to allow for the early implementation of the strategic review of ambulance services.

The sitting was suspended at 12.31 pm.

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

2.00 pm

Motion made:

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

DANGERS OF THE BANGOR TO BELFAST ROAD

Ms Morrice: I want to thank you, Mr Deputy Speaker, for being able to have this debate today. I also want to thank the Minister in advance for his patience and for being here to listen to what is an important issue.

Exactly one year ago this month, a young woman, Orla Hewitt, lost her life in a horrific accident on the Belfast to Bangor road. It was a Friday evening. She was driving home from work on her own, and she was hit by a lorry crossing the carriageway. Her life was not the only one devastated that day. Her four-year-old daughter was left without a mother, and her parents, her partner, her family and her friends all have to suffer the terrible consequences of this for the rest of their lives. I had the privilege of knowing Orla, and this debate is by way of paying tribute to her and her family and all the other families who have lost loved ones in tragic circumstances on our roads. I want to do more than pay tribute. I want to use the mandate that I have been given to press for positive change to reduce the terrible toll of death and destruction on the roads.

The debate is about the Belfast to Bangor road, believed to be one of the most dangerous roads in the country. It is said that people are taking their lives in their hands when they use this road, and the figures I have gleaned recently bear this out — they are nothing short of shocking. Ten people have been killed on this 10-to-11-mile stretch of road over the past three years — yes, 10 people on this small stretch of road over the past three years. If those people had died as a result of paramilitary activity, there would be uproar. However, this is a different type of terror that stalks us, and it is just as shocking, just as horrific and just as devastating for the families of the victims. Some might argue that, given the high volume of traffic on this road — and the statistics show that something in the region of 39,000 vehicles per day use it, which certainly is high — relatively speaking, the number of fatalities is low. However, everyone will agree that one death is one too many.

The figures for the period 1998-99 to 2000-01 show that 270 people were injured on the Belfast to Bangor road, of whom 42 were seriously injured. Serious injuries can include brain damage, loss of limbs and other horrific outcomes that statistics cannot possibly describe.

Over a three-year period 270 people were injured, that is, 90 people injured on this short stretch of road each year. I am sure the Minister and everyone will agree that this is totally unacceptable. The cost, in terms of human tragedy, is far too great to calculate, and the Minister has heard me on many occasions referring to the cost to the economy of the casualties and deaths from road accidents. However, if those calculations are correct with regard to emergency services, healthcare, loss of income and productivity, the cost of those killed or seriously injured on the A2 since 1998 must surely go into tens of millions of pounds. That is why I cannot accept as justification the excuse that traffic-calming engineering works to slow down the speed of traffic are too costly.

I paint a bleak picture. However, on the positive side, it does not have to be that way, because we have the power to change the situation. That is why a debate of this nature is valuable. The Assembly can channel the anger and frustration of families, road safety groups, local councillors who have campaigned for years for something to be done, road users who are sick and tired of facing those dangers daily, and the emergency services who have to witness and deal with those tragic events into a positive outcome. Devolved government gives us the power to do something. The road is dangerous; it must be made safe.

In preparation for the debate, I spoke to many people who are closely involved — the police, road safety campaigners, people who live and work in the area and people who use the road regularly. There is general agreement that one of the most dangerous parts of the road is the stretch between Ballyrobert — which is at the Crawfordsburn turn-off — and the entrance to Holywood.

The road is best described as a dual carriageway without the safeguards. It is a four-lane highway with nothing separating the traffic. Many Members have used that road on many occasions and are aware of the dangers. The lanes are far too narrow. The speed limit is 50 miles per hour, and a car can stop dead in the outside lane to turn right, whether it is going to or coming from Belfast.

It is sheer madness to allow that to continue; therefore, I am proposing several actions to make the road safe. First, a central crash barrier should be built to separate the lanes of traffic and to prevent people from turning right off the main highway. Secondly, the speed limit should be reduced to at least 40 miles per hour on the stretch between Ballyrobert and the outskirts of Holywood. Currently, the route runs down from a dual carriageway with a central reservation and a speed limit of 60 miles per hour into a road with a speed limit of 50 miles per hour and absolutely no safeguards between the oncoming flows of traffic.

There should also be more rigorous enforcement of the speed limits along the road. For example, new ideas

and new legislation should be examined to allow fines to be used to pay for enforcement projects. I will go into that issue in more detail later. Better signage is also needed, and I suggest the use of the speed-reducing strips that are on many dual carriageways to reduce cars' speeds as they come to an intersection. Those measures would be valuable in reducing the speed of traffic on the road.

There is no doubt that excessive speed is a major killer on the Bangor to Belfast Road. It is treated as a speedway, which is why new ways of policing speed limits must be examined. There is such a thing as a "netting-off" scheme, where revenue from fines is used to pay the cost of, for example, new high-tech speed camera schemes. That should be seriously considered, even as a pilot project, for this stretch of road. Apparently, the project has worked successfully in Nottinghamshire. We should try to adopt the best practice exemplified elsewhere in the United Kingdom, in these islands and in continental Europe.

There are many other dangerous points along the stretch of road, including the Rathgael junction on the outskirts of Bangor and the Croft Road junction at Holywood. Parking also poses problems. There are no parking restrictions whatsoever, or occasionally there is a double yellow line. A red line warning that parked cars will be towed away would be a valuable introduction. Time does not permit me to detail other aspects of that issue. I want to give other Colleagues a chance to speak their minds on the issue.

I have spoken about the actions that can be taken to reduce the number of people killed and seriously injured on the road. In my call to the Minister for progress, I am also sounding a serious warning. A time will come — and it already has come in the United States — when families of victims test through the courts whether the authorities have done enough to protect road users. We must be conscious of that. The time has come for an end to buck-passing between Departments; they must now augment the strategy and resources for road safety. Much more money is needed for road safety, whether for use by the Department of the Environment, the Department for Regional Development or the Police Service's Traffic Branch. The time has come for action, and I am not just talking about the Bangor to Belfast road; I am talking about roads throughout the Province.

I spoke to a police inspector who said that there must be sea change in the culture that accepts that accidents are inevitable. No level of deaths on the roads is acceptable. Zero tolerance is imperative. The time has come for action so that no more families must bring flowers to the Bangor to Belfast road. I rest my case.

Mr McFarland: I thank Ms Morrice for bringing the debate to the House. This is an opportunity to discuss a serious problem in north Down. The Bangor to Belfast road has been in its present configuration for about 40 years.

I went to school in the area, and I can recall walking about a mile along that road to church on Sundays. At

that stage it was a heavily used road, and it has remained in much the same state and configuration since then, with some modifications.

2.15 pm

Traffic flow on the road has increased dramatically over the years. The 'Family of Settlements' document shows that Bangor has had a 20% increase in its population in the past 20 years, and since a majority of people in north Down work outside the area — many of them in Belfast — the traffic flow along that road has increased dramatically.

The road is dangerous. There are four lanes — two each way — closing at what can be a combined speed of 120 miles per hour. Although there is a 50 miles per hour speed limit on the road, most drivers tend to travel about 60 miles per hour and some even faster than that. There are high speeds and high volumes of traffic on a road designed 40 years ago for a much lower volume of traffic. Ms Morrice has already described one of the main difficulties on the road. On the stretch of road between Cultra and Craigavad there are a series of right turns, and some of those arrive as a surprise to the unwary driver because they have just driven over the brow of a hill. Unless drivers know the road, they can suddenly find that the traffic in front of them in the outside lane has stopped dead. Drivers try to cut in, and that leads to accidents.

Action of some sort must be taken to do away with the threat to life described by Ms Morrice. Some years ago I saw a plan for a new motorway on the Craigantlet side in the hills parallel to the road. The difficulty is that the price of land in Northern Ireland is so high that there is no possibility that the Department would be able to buy the land, let alone afford the money to build a motorway. There was another cunning plan to build a parallel motorway on the lough shore side. However, the cost of those motorways is clearly prohibitive, and it is unlikely that they will be built.

What can we do? One solution is to reduce the volume of cars. Colleagues in the House will be aware of the regional development strategy and of the regional transportation strategy currently being developed by the Department for Regional Development. They will also know from previous speeches made in the House that the Bangor railway line is being relaid and that it is to be hoped that there will be new trains on that line next year as a flagship for the way ahead in public transport. That will allow the Department to encourage commuters to leave their cars in a park-and-ride and travel to and from Belfast by train. If all goes well, that should reduce substantially the volume of traffic on the road. However, that will not do away with the problem.

Ms Morrice identified various actions, and I agree with most of them. Right turns must be banned, and that is something that can be done fairly easily. Some thought would have to be given as to how people who live on

the opposite side of the road get home. One option would be to construct one or two new crossover bridges. That would be expensive, but traffic volume will increase in the future — although that could be reduced by public transport — so we must start looking 10 years ahead and construct those bridges to allow people to get back over the carriageway and have access to their homes.

The idea of an Armco barrier is attractive on the fast sections of the road, and provided that there are crossover areas, that could be managed. Clearly it is not suitable where people travelling away from Belfast need to get to the Craigantlet side. They must be able to get into their houses somehow. So that is perhaps a combination and a development of possible solutions.

It may be possible to introduce rush-hour speed limits. Experiments on the M25, where 60 miles per hour speed limits were introduced, showed that traffic travelling at a constant pace produced a much larger volume of traffic going safely through a given point at a particular time. There may be a case for introducing some form of rush-hour speed limit.

I oppose Ms Morrice's contention that there should be low speed limits at all times on the Bangor to Belfast road. During the day, when there is a much lower volume of traffic, it would be unfair to interfere too much with the rights of the motorist to drive at a normal and sensible speed, provided that the right-turn risks are taken away. That would not be as much of a problem in such circumstances. Actions must be taken that would lead to a suitable compromise so that there is not too much interference during the day, but that deal with problems at difficult times.

I urge the Minister to re-examine the problems on the Bangor to Belfast road. Action must be taken now, because the projections and the problems will get worse unless there is a plan to deal with them.

Mr McCarthy: I shall speak briefly on the motion for two reasons. First, as a frequent user of the Bangor to Belfast road, I know the problems associated with it and the volume of traffic that it carries. Secondly, in the enforced absence of my party Colleague Mrs Eileen Bell, a Member for the constituency in which the road lies, we would not wish the voice of Alliance to go unheard by default.

Coming from the Ards Peninsula, I hope that I can be forgiven for comparing roads in my area with the Bangor to Belfast road and for saying, as gently as I can, that some people do not know when they are well off. The Bangor to Belfast road has been a major problem for many years. It was a problem in the days when the volume of traffic was but a small fraction of the present cavalry charge. Experts have often considered the problem, and alterations have been carried out as a result of their studies. The camber has been improved on some of the more dangerous bends. The road was widened slightly where it was possible to do so. A section of dual carriage-

way was built at the Bangor end of the road. However, the problems persist.

There are too many cars for too narrow a road. Speeding seems to be the norm, and unfortunately serious accidents are inevitable. Widening the road is not possible where it is most needed, and no amount of campaigning will overcome that fact. The entire Northern Ireland block grant would be needed to compensate the adjoining land-owners for eating into their front gardens, never mind the cost of the construction. The Alliance Party would support any agreed solutions that would make road safety a priority in order to cut down on fatalities.

Perhaps the matter is being examined from the wrong angle. Should we not try to reduce the volume of traffic instead of trying to accommodate it? Should we not try to improve driving standards and to cut down speeding on the Bangor to Belfast road? Ms Morrice spoke about that issue.

I am glad that the Minister for Regional Development is with us today. I am sure that he will listen to what I have to say on this issue. Modest investment in the A20 from Portaferry to Newtownards would improve road safety on that road. The experts tell us, however, that many people in a similar situation will give up the use of their cars if they are provided with an acceptable, reliable and dependable form of public transport. We should seek to have improved bus and rail services that the public could have more confidence in, and which would surely stop many drivers from killing themselves and, indeed, killing or injuring others, through excessive speeding and lack of attention when using this very busy road.

Safer driving and a lighter volume of traffic would benefit everyone, and those goals are attainable. On behalf of my Colleague Eileen Bell, I fully support every effort being made by the Minister and the Department for Regional Development to provide a good safe passageway on this road, thereby saving lives.

Mr Boyd: Although I am not a Member for the North Down constituency, I would like to make a few points, because I travel along the road regularly, having relatives in Bangor.

The dangers of the Belfast to Bangor road are well known. Many people use the road to travel to the north Down coast, which is a popular area for day trips, especially at Easter and during the summer months. However, the road is, sadly, only one of many in Northern Ireland that has accident black spots and many fatalities. My sympathy goes out to all those who have lost loved ones on our roads. However, in listening to the debate and what has been said about greater use of public transport, I think that there is some hypocrisy, given that most Assembly Members use cars. I take the point, but traffic volumes will not decrease — if anything, they will increase.

Unfortunately, the Patten Report on policing has had a detrimental effect on policing resources. Recently, there have been reports that the police traffic branch for the Greater Belfast area, which includes the Belfast to Bangor road, will be cut back. This decimation of police traffic branch resources will, sadly, almost certainly result in more accidents on the Belfast to Bangor road and on many other roads. Driving standards will deteriorate on all roads throughout Northern Ireland due to a lack of on-the-ground policing. We need adequate policing resources to police our roads properly and to catch those drivers who are intent on careless and reckless behaviour, and who endanger not only themselves and their passengers but also all road users.

The penalties for motoring offences are hopelessly inadequate, particularly for those who are guilty of causing death or serious injury. Several constituents who have lost loved ones have contacted me in the past few years, and I am sure that most Members have come into contact with relatives who have lost loved ones as a result of careless or reckless driving. Their pain is then compounded when those who are guilty of causing the deaths receive totally inadequate sentences. In some cases they receive only suspended sentences. Sentences must be tougher, and magistrates must be provided with the necessary legislation to deal with such offenders.

The proposer of the motion, Ms Morrice, is quite right in saying that the speed limit is too high on stretches of this road. However, the speed limit must be enforced to reduce the speed. The greatest deterrent is to have a visible police traffic branch presence on the road. I have travelled on the Belfast to Bangor road about six times in the past couple of months and, through no fault of the police, I have yet to see a police vehicle sitting by the roadside. Unfortunately, there will be more accidents and fatalities on that road, and elsewhere, unless more resources are put into the police traffic branch, rather than reducing its resources.

The Minister for Regional Development (Mr P Robinson): First, I congratulate the Member for North Down, Ms Morrice, in securing an Adjournment debate on this subject. I thank her for raising the matter and for bringing it before the Assembly. It is a matter of considerable importance in its specific content and in the general issue that it raises.

2.30 pm

I apologise to Ms Morrice, as my Colleague Sammy Wilson indicated that he would like to take part in the debate. I regret to inform the House that his mother passed away at lunchtime today. I am sure the House would like me to convey its condolences and sympathy to him and his family.

I assure the House that road safety is one of my Department's top priorities. I am fully committed, along with the Roads Service and other agencies, to doing all

that I can to reduce the number of people killed and injured on our roads. I assure the House that I take the views expressed seriously, as well as the suggestions that have been made. I will give an initial response to some of those issues; however, the Department will have to look at some of them, particularly at a technical level. I hope, in due course, to respond more fully to Members who have raised specific points.

I was aware that the timing of today's debate was significant to the Member for North Down, Ms Morrice, as it is almost a year since her friend was tragically killed in an accident on the Belfast to Bangor road. I extend my condolences to the family and to Ms Morrice.

I was somewhat disappointed by the Member's speech. It lacked one important ingredient: recognition that there are causes of accidents that have nothing to do with roads or the conditions thereof. That was rectified in the speeches of Mr McCarthy and Mr Boyd. I want to place on record, although I shall not comment on it as the matter is sub judice, that someone will be appearing in court as a result of the case that was the spur to Ms Morrice raising the issue, and there will be an attempt to prosecute for driving without due care and attention.

I have a different number for fatalities, although that is not the key issue — it depends on where one believes the Belfast to Bangor road starts and ends. However, of the six fatalities that I am aware of in the three years mentioned by the hon Member, every one was the fault of the driver of a vehicle. Inattention, diverted attention, excessive speed and driving without care are causing the accidents. People, not roads, cause accidents. That was missing from the hon Member's speech. She said that "we have the power to change the situation" — if the "we" is the community as a whole, I agree, because it ultimately comes down to the people behind the wheel as to whether we can change it and the impact that we can have.

Taking the advice of the Member for North Down, Mr McFarland, I will speed up at this stage to place on record what the Roads Service has done on the Belfast to Bangor road. It is a main arterial route into Belfast, and it has a two-way traffic flow of almost 40,000 vehicles per day in some sections. Therefore, it is an important trunk road and commuter route.

Safety along that route is of particular concern. Therefore, the Roads Service has been active in carrying out several schemes, specifically directed at improving road safety, over the last year or so. I hope the House will allow me to outline some of these schemes, indicating the work undertaken.

First, high friction surfacing has been applied to almost all the signal-controlled junctions along the route, including the Sullivan Place and Shore Road junctions in Holywood, Tillysburn and, most recently, the Ballysallagh Road junction near Bangor. High level cantilever traffic signals were replaced, and additional signal heads on high poles

have been provided at Cultra Station Road and Station Road, Craigavad. Safety improvements to prevent right-turning accidents have been undertaken at two junctions on the dual carriageway between Holywood and Belfast. Significant lengths of cycle track have been provided from Tillysburn to Holywood and from Ballygilbert to Springhill, near Bangor. We have resurfaced one and a half miles from Cootehall Road to Springhill, which has improved the skidding resistance of the road surface.

The urban traffic control system has been extended to cover 10 signalised junctions on the A2. The system continuously monitors the traffic signals for faults 24 hours a day, seven days a week. Maximum efficiency is ensured by altering the traffic signal timings to cater for the variety of traffic flows throughout the day. We have installed closed-circuit television cameras to monitor traffic flows at three additional junctions. The timings of traffic signals at Seahill junction were altered to create gaps in the traffic flow for the benefit of residents turning right at the nearby Larch Hill junction.

In January last year, we installed speed camera traffic signs along the entire route to support the police campaign of an increased level of speed enforcement on the road, in a bid to reduce the level of accidents.

Ms Morrice: I was interested in the Minister's remark that it is people, not roads, who cause accidents. He went on to list a host of actions carried out to make roads safer. Will the Minister not agree that safer roads can prevent accidents?

Mr P Robinson: There are steps that we can take and have taken, to control people's behaviour and how they drive. I will address the specific issues raised by the hon Member. I also want to talk about some further safety improvements in the pipeline.

Roads Service officials have been developing a solution to the road accident problems at the junction of Rathgael Road and Old Belfast Road. That junction has the worst history of road accidents on the A2. The Roads Service has commissioned consultants to undertake a traffic study on the A2 Bangor ring road, Rathgael Road and Balloo Road. As a result of that study, junction improvements including the installation of traffic signals will be carried out in the forthcoming financial year, at a cost of £200,000. Roads Service also plans to resurface a section of road between Whinney Hill and Ballygrainey Road in the year 2002-03, at a cost of £600,000. That will contribute to road safety by maintaining good skidding resistance on the road surface.

For the longer term, as Members will be aware, my Department is developing a regional transportation strategy. Safety is one of the strategy's five key objectives, with an estimated outcome of a reduction in accidents of 5% from the current level. During the discussion on the regional transportation strategy, the Member who tabled the Adjournment debate today missed the point that

without the intervention contained in the strategy, accident rates would be expected to rise by 14% over the current level by the year 2012. We are planning for a reduction under the strategy.

The outworking of the regional transportation strategy will be through transport plans that will make more specific proposals for the actions illustrated in the strategy.

The Bangor corridor is being dealt with through the preparation of the Belfast Metropolitan Transport Plan. That work involves the consideration of transport corridors, including the Belfast to Bangor route. Investigations will be carried out, using a multi-modal-study approach and the resultant recommendations will include measures for improving public transport and the road network in the Greater Belfast area.

There is a truism in the Member from Strangford's comments about paying more attention to getting people off the roads and into other modes of transport, rather than having to deal with the impact of greater traffic flows. The Belfast to Bangor route seems to be ideally placed for that, in light of the investment that is being made on the railway. There is a new station; new track is being laid; and new trains are coming onto that line. Undoubtedly, that improved service should attract people to use an alternative mode of transport. I hope that the Member will encourage her constituents to do so.

The basic argument that I have advanced is that the Department has provided a new, completely modernised station. I was there about a week ago. The Department is currently providing new track, and I hope that that will be completed soon. It has already set the contract for 23 new trains. I do not think that anyone could have expected the Department to progress so far in the short space of time since devolution.

That is not an immediate solution. However, if the hon Member wants an immediate solution, she has not provided any to the House today. The proposals that she has put forward will take even longer than what I have suggested.

Ms Morrice: How long will it take to change the speed limit to 40 miles per hour?

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order, order.

Mr P Robinson: It is not a case of simply throwing out a suggestion and believing that, automatically, because the figures on a pole along the Belfast to Bangor road are changed, that will make a difference to the behaviour of drivers. A reduction of the speed limit would not necessarily mean that there would be any driver improvement. By and large, drivers who cause accidents are not the ones who obey the speed limit restrictions on roads.

However, the proposed measures will be used to inform the statutory process — to develop the Belfast metropolitan area plan, which is being led by the Department of the Environment. The draft area plan is due for publication at the end of the year. I hope that I have demonstrated

the Department's promotion of improvements on the Belfast to Bangor road, particularly over the past year or so. I assure Members that I will continue to give high priority to road safety engineering in the future, on that route and on others, as far as is practical and affordable.

I want to deal with some of the specific issues that were raised during the debate. Ms Morrice made reference to erecting what she described as a "crash barrier" — which, I believe, departmental officials refer to as a "central safety fence". She may not be aware that any type of central safety fence or barrier must be set back from passing traffic by a certain minimum distance. The width of the barrier, together with the minimum distance required on both sides, amounts to a significant part of the central reserve — normally an absolute minimum of two metres.

That would require the removal of one of the four existing lanes, which would result in a catastrophic loss of capacity and severe congestion. Alternatively, the carriageway could be widened by the width of one lane, but reference has been made to the likely cost and disruption that would be caused by the acquisition process.

Ms Morrice: What about the cost of the deaths?

Mr P Robinson: If the hon Lady would allow me to address the issue, I could then deal with the other matters that follow from it.

Apart from the cost, and the disruption that it will cause to her constituents in that area, the installation of a safety fence will impede private access along that part of the route. Unlike modern dual carriageways, there is insufficient space in which to do a U-turn at the next available public road junction.

2.45pm

Even if we were to contribute to the cost involved, using such a proposal to resolve some of the issues would give rise to a further safety hazard at another point along the road. Road engineers and safety experts must take account of the overall capacity of the road and the likely result of any measures they take.

Right turns were mentioned. One of the hon Lady's Colleagues has been exercised about a right turn into the Culloden Hotel. My officials were willing to accompany her to speak to the hotel proprietors about the issue. From the Department's point of view, having no right turn would encourage people to use the traffic lights a little further down the road. My officials are still willing to talk about it, but the hotel owners will have a strong view on it. If a right turn were banned, the hotel owners would appeal against it. The issue is not as simple as it might first appear.

A new road was suggested, and the cost difficulties of such a road were discussed. We are dealing with the regional transportation strategy and the area plans. Ultimately, the Assembly would have to fund such a route. If we looked for a track for such a road in the Craigavad/Cultra area, there might be an objection or two, thereby

prolonging the process. I hope that the rail network would have new trains running by the time that process would be completed.

Having given an off-the-cuff response to many of the issues that the hon Lady raised, I will consider them in more detail. I sympathise with the need to control speed. My personal belief is that it is an issue of enforcement. I told her Assembly Colleague so when she and my Colleague, the Member for South Belfast, discussed the Saintfield Road area with me.

One permanent speed camera will do more to reduce speed than many rumble strips and other features that my Department could implement. Ultimately, whether people feel that they can get away with breaking the speed limit determines how hard their foot goes on the pedal. I must agree with the Member for South Antrim that enforcement becomes a key issue. As a result of political exercises, the police do not have the manpower to put a car on the road to slow traffic on the Belfast to Bangor road, or on any other roads around the country.

I have driven many times in other parts of the United Kingdom. One difference in areas where there are great problems in enforcing speed limits, is that there are constant reminders of speed limits that drivers cannot ignore. Drivers may look at the road in front and not see the signs beside them, but large circles on the road reinforce the speed limit. I have asked my Department to consider that measure. While I think such measures might be useful in reinforcing the message, road and safety engineers might have other reasons to suggest that they are not advantageous and might do violence to the overall principle of road safety.

The House would be doing a grave disservice to the people of Northern Ireland, particularly those touched by tragedy of road accidents, if it perpetuated the myth that road accidents can be eliminated only by better roads. Any road safety professional, whether among traffic police, road safety educators, the Royal Society for the Prevention of Accidents (RoSPA) or highway safety engineers, will say that the best way of cutting accident numbers is for each road user — particularly drivers — to take a personal responsibility for using roads safely. Road users can do that by keeping to an appropriate speed, driving with due care and attention, using seat belts and following the adage "Don't drink and drive".

Of course, my Department will do what it can to improve the sites where there are accident clusters and where steps can be taken to control drivers. It is right to do that, but it is not realistic to expect that highway engineering alone is the answer to the scourge of road accidents.

In conclusion, I am sure that the House will join me in supporting the police, who must enforce the road traffic laws, and in exhorting all road users to take personal responsibility for road safety.

Adjourned at 2.50 pm.

NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

Tuesday 19 March 2002

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

Members observed two minutes' silence.

ASSEMBLY BUSINESS

Mr Speaker: I understand that there is a difficulty with the annunciator system this morning. The scroll bar, which advises of matters such as ministerial statements to the House, is not working. I draw that to Members' attention because three such statements are to be made this morning: a statement on the February monitoring round from the Minister of Finance and Personnel; a statement on the British-Irish Council environment sector from the Minister of the Environment; and a statement on the North/South Ministerial Council tourism sector from the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment. I want to ensure that Members are not unaware of those because of the technical problem with the scroll bar. I understand that our technicians are trying to resolve the problem, but I trust that Members will ensure that their Colleagues are aware of it.

PUBLIC PETITION

Newtownstewart Bypass

Mr Speaker: Mr Hussey has begged leave to present a public petition in accordance with Standing Order 22.

Mr Hussey: I beg leave to present a petition on behalf of 1,517 residents of Newtownstewart and its hinterland in my constituency of West Tyrone. The petition has the support of all Members who represent that constituency, and of the members of Strabane District Council and Omagh District Council. I declare my membership of Strabane District Council.

The signatories of the petition are concerned that the present design of the junction of the Douglas Bridge with the Gortin and Plumbridge roads on the Newtownstewart bypass — currently under construction — may create an accident black spot. The petitioners emphasise that they have no desire to delay work on the Newtownstewart bypass. However, they ask the Minister to investigate the potential for an alternative layout at the named junction. The Minister has been made aware of the anticipated difficulties and has undertaken to consider them. The petition emphasises the broad concern about this matter in the Newtownstewart area.

Mr Hussey moved forward and laid the petition on the Table.

Mr Speaker: I shall forward the petition to the Minister for Regional Development and a copy to the Chairperson of the Committee for Regional Development.

PUBLIC PETITION

Closure of Women's Advice Centres

Mr Speaker: Ms Morrice has begged leave to present a public petition in accordance with Standing Order 22.

Ms Morrice: I beg leave to present a petition on behalf of the representatives of 22 women's centres in Greater Belfast. More than 80 women have signed the petition, which highlights the funding crisis that women's advice centres are facing. Many of those centres are threatened with closure because of lack of funding. If that happens, a wealth of experience and an important service to the community will be lost.

Ms Morrice moved forward and laid the petition on the Table.

Mr Speaker: I shall forward the petition to the Office of the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister and a copy to the Chairperson of the Committee of the Centre.

ASSEMBLY BUSINESS

Mr Poots: On a point of order, Mr Speaker. Last Thursday, it was announced that Her Majesty would confer city status on two of the Province's towns, Newry and Lisburn. Is it in order for the Assembly to congratulate those towns? As a representative of what is now Ulster's second city, I feel it would be appropriate for us to do so.

Mr Speaker: The Member knows very well that, although it would be in order for the Assembly to debate such a motion, such a motion is not before the Assembly. However, it is clear that the Member, who represents the area, has taken the opportunity to make his views on the matter known.

FEBRUARY MONITORING

Mr Speaker: I have received notice from the Minister of Finance and Personnel that he wishes to make a statement on the February monitoring round.

The Minister of Finance and Personnel (Dr Farren): On behalf of the Executive, I wish to make a statement on public spending allocations for 2001-02 following the February monitoring round.

The Executive have decided on some reallocations of expenditure for the short time that remains in this financial year. Those reallocations make use of the resources available from changes in the estimated requirements of Departments that arose in the February monitoring round.

At this late stage, we are primarily concerned with making the necessary changes to estimated requirements and the fine-tuning of allocations, rather than with any policy change or new priorities. As the spring Supplementary Estimates have been finalised, there is limited scope to increase departmental allocations.

Departments have surrendered some money due to new reduced requirements, and some unusual factors have arisen that affect spending power. Net routine reduced requirements amount to £31.2 million. In addition, three special factors have emerged, to which I shall return later.

Members will recall that, in deciding the Budget for 2002-03, we assumed that we would be able to carry forward some spending power from 2001-02. That was largely dealt with in the September and December monitoring rounds, but the first £13 million of new money from this round was required to confirm the spending plans of Departments in 2002-03, as approved by the Assembly in December. Thus the routine amount available for the normal business of Departments was £18 million.

Departments have lodged bids for additional resources in this monitoring round totalling over £6.9 million, and the Executive have agreed that they should all be met. They are mostly relatively minor "tidying-up" allocations to a few Departments. As the spring Supplementary Estimates have already been finalised, there is limited scope for increasing spending allocations in 2001-02, so the small number of bids is not surprising. Once they have been covered, we will be left with £11.3 million of routine savings that cannot be spent in 2001-02 and will be carried forward into 2002-03.

Several Departments have indicated that the savings that they have declared in this round relate to issues for which provision will be required in the next financial year. Those bids for "carry forward" will have to be considered on their merits in the first reallocation exercise of 2002-03. It is likely that there will be more end-year flexibility money that will be identified only when provisional out-turn data become available in May. I will make proposals for distributing end-year flexibility

money that is not already committed for an agreed purpose to the Executive in the June monitoring round.

I said earlier that three unusual factors have arisen. First, we have been able to confirm a change to the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety's resource budget that will allow us to use £23.9 million for important priorities early in the new financial year.

Secondly, the Department of Education has re-phased the expenditure profile for the Classroom 2000 project, which means that some £9.9 million of spending will be accounted for in 2002-03 or 2003-04 instead of 2001-02. However, the timing of the project will not be affected.

It would not be appropriate to treat those unusual items as part of the routine monitoring round, and they will be carried forward as part of the end-year flexibility money. The provision for Classroom 2000 will be required in future years and will be held until confirmation of the detailed requirements is received so that work on the project is not impeded.

The third special factor is that the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment is completing a review of the spending requirements for its programmes for 2002-03, which may lead to some material adjustments to its plans from those approved in the Budget in December.

Having taken account of those factors, the Executive have decided to use the remaining room to manoeuvre from this monitoring round and the £23.9 million that has become available from the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to augment the Executive programme funds and to address some immediate funding issues early in the new financial year. The Executive will be considering proposals on that soon after Easter. Given the scale of resources now available to us for 2002-03, there are strong arguments for taking early decisions on their allocation before the June monitoring round to allow for effective planning and spending.

In considering the scope for action available to us, we must take account of the new inescapable pressures that we will face in 2002-03 including, for example, the £10 million pressure for Harland & Wolff plc employers' liability insurance claims.

10.45 am

However, I emphasise that these are only some of the factors we will need to consider, and no decisions have yet been made. Also, the circumstances that have given rise to the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety issue require further analysis, not least to determine the likely position in 2002-03 and beyond.

The £23.9 million technical reduced requirement from the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety arose through the complexity of the conversion to resource budgeting, and the saving came to light through improved understanding of the new rules on resource budgeting. Following the action taken a year ago to

correct trust deficits, the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety implemented measures to strengthen the financial performance of the health and personal social services, such as recovery plans to address underlying problems and contingency plans to ensure income and expenditure balances in-year.

The Department has advised me that trusts are forecast to break even this year. That achievement was assisted by the substantial in-year additions that the Executive provided for health. In this improved context, it transpired that the public expenditure cover required to provide the planned level of services in 2001-02 was £23.9 million less than had previously been understood.

The reasons for this are complex. I will not burden the House with a detailed explanation of the Department's funding policies or the accounting transactions which have given rise to it, although I will be glad to discuss this in more depth with the Committee for Finance and Personnel. The good news is that we will be able to make fresh use of this £23.9 million in 2002-03. Some adjustments may also be made for 2002-03 and 2003-04. However, I will not be able to confirm that until the Department of Finance and Personnel and the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety have completed further work. It will be important to make prudent provision for health trust finances.

The outcomes of this monitoring round again demonstrate the need to address a pattern of underspending which then leaves room to manoeuvre; this has occurred in successive monitoring rounds. It is a matter of particular concern that Departments have surrendered such large sums at this stage, when it is too late for them to be used in the spring Supplementary Estimates.

Mr Durkan and I have both commented at length on underspending. I will not labour the point now, other than to reiterate my commitment to a thorough and robust review, the outcome of which I will report to the Assembly. This exercise will include recommendations on how to agree a long-term approach to the problem of underspending across all Departments. This may include, for example, incentives for Departments to improve the quality of estimating — at all times bearing in mind the need to focus on Programme for Government priorities and public service agreement targets.

I wish to report one further item to Members. On 20 December 2001, the Chief Secretary to the Treasury announced increases in provision for schools in England, and the resulting Barnett consequential for Northern Ireland is £663,000 in 2002-03 and £995,000 in 2003-04. Although this addition to the Northern Ireland departmental expenditure level is the result of a decision to increase spending on education in England, it is of course for the Executive to decide how the resources should be spent here. However, recognising that education is one of the

Executive's key priorities, we have agreed to allocate the 2002-03 share to the Department of Education now.

Although it would not be normal practice to allocate resources for next year during this year's in-year monitoring process, we have concluded that this approach will allow the Department of Education to plan to make the best possible use of the available resources at an early stage. However, we have agreed that we should retain the £995,000 for 2003-04 as room to manoeuvre for allocation in the course of the Budget 2002 exercise.

I invite the Assembly to note the relatively minor reallocations that have emerged in this monitoring round. I ask Members to note that, taking account of some unforeseen — and unforeseeable — developments, we will now be able to consider some additions to allocations for 2002-03, including some through the Executive programme funds early in the new financial year. I also ask Members to note my intention to return to the Assembly, having rigorously examined the issue of underspending and how to better plan departmental spending.

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 is important that the issue of room for manoeuvre and the amount of money available this time be examined.

Will the Minister give a breakdown of the funds and how they will be allocated? How much will be used for particular spending, and how much will be added to the Executive programme funds (EPFs)? How do the Executive intend to undertake the process of allocating EPFs, as current rounds have all but been suspended during the review? My Committee has pointed out that the whole issue of EPFs is in question because it is not dealing with new spending and the new bidding process; it is dealing with reallocation of existing funds.

As regards the review of the monitoring process, I welcome the Minister's concern about the amount of money that keeps coming up in monitoring rounds due to overbidding or underspending by Departments. How will that be dealt with? I welcome the opportunity for the Committee for Finance and Personnel to become involved in that review.

Dr Farren: I will endeavour to answer as many of the Member's questions as possible. However, Hansard will remind me if I overlook one or two, and I will reply to them in writing.

I have said that, taking the various special factors into account, the Executive will use non-allocated funds that have emerged from the monitoring round to augment the EPFs and address immediate funding issues early in the new financial year. However, I am unable to say precisely how the funds will be allocated within the EPFs. We will not consider proposals until soon after Easter, as I have already made clear.

We recognise that the EPFs have been undergoing a detailed review and that the Committee for Finance and Personnel has provided important and helpful assistance to the review. I acknowledge that contribution. The points emerging from the review will be taken on board in any new allocations from the EPFs.

I acknowledge the Member's point about underspending, and that he has made that point on behalf of the Committee many times. The review of underspending trends is under way, and I hope to return to the Assembly and the Committee with the outcome of that as soon as possible. I have said — if only in broad terms — that we want to encourage Departments to be more precise in forecasting for their budgetary allocations. A greater degree of flexibility may well become available to Departments if we can be assured that they will be more precise in their approach to some aspects of their budgeting than has yet been apparent.

The bids are detailed in the table that has been circulated with my statement, so I do not need to detail them explicitly now. All Members can see where the money has been allocated. Since all the bids are being met, the allocations indicate the nature of the bids themselves.

The Deputy Chairperson of the Committee for Finance and Personnel (Mr Beggs): Following the question about the allocations identified in the monitoring round, the Minister referred to what the Executive consider to be the "immediate funding issues" that face the Administration as we start a new financial year. Will he detail these? Do they reflect the three big priorities previously identified by the Executive and the Assembly — health, education and the transport infrastructure deficit?

Secondly, can the Minister assure us that there will be no negative impact on any of the aims and targets in the Programme for Government as a result of the easements that have been identified in the Department of Education and the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety? In particular, £9.9 million has been made available by re-phasing the Classroom 2000 project. Can the Minister confirm that that project will still be implemented on schedule?

Mr Farren: There are short answers to most of the questions that the Member has raised. The Programme for Government will not be negatively affected. The pressures that I have referred to are well-known pressures in the three areas that the Member has identified — health, education, and roads and transport. As everyone knows, those are the main areas where major pressures exist, and the Executive will be making the kinds of allocations that are referred to here to address them.

I can assure the Member that Classroom 2002 will not be affected. In reallocating funds to different years in the manner I described, I am addressing the re-phasing of

the expenditure, rather than the implementation of the project itself

Ms Lewsley: The Minister said that he intends to address financial planning in Departments in the hope of reducing underspending. Can he say when he will make his recommendations to the Executive and the Assembly, and what they might be?

11.00 am

Dr Farren: We will be looking at incentives that may allow more flexibility in how Departments handle their allocations. However, the Executive have not had firm proposals, and until they do and those proposals are discussed and approved, I will not be able to bring them to the Assembly.

Mr Poots: The Department of Agriculture and Rural Development handed back money allocated to brucellosis compensation. That is astonishing given the rise in brucellosis and the Department's inability, in some cases, to deal with it because of an apparent lack of money.

The Minister said that he was concerned about Departments handing money back. His former Department, the Department for Education and Learning, has handed back £2.3 million from New Deal. Was that the money that was allocated to enable single parents to get education and help with childminding some time ago?

The Department for Regional Development handed back £2 million in additional receipts from the Water Service. Where did those receipts come from? Also, can the Minister say where the £1.8m from the capital budget for roads has slipped from?

Dr Farren: The Member should direct his questions to the relevant Ministers for detailed response. Departments can find that they cannot spend all their allocations in the time available, and underspending occurs. Significant underspending causes concern, and that has led to a review to find out what underlies the planning process in Departments. I hope that that will give rise to more effective planning and forecasting in Departments. I could provide a general response, but I do not have the details available, so I will reply in writing.

Mr B Hutchinson: The Minister's statement was on accounting issues, and he has explained that, so can he answer those questions in the first instance, and then Members can ask the relevant Ministers?

I am surprised that £23.9 million has come back from the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety. The Minister said that certain circumstances arose around resource budgeting. Has he asked, or considered asking, the Auditor General to look at that? I am surprised that his Department has not had any indication from the Auditor General about how resource budgeting will affect the Assembly in the next three or four years.

I am surprised also that the Comptroller and Auditor General has not given him information about the implications of all budgeting here over the next three or four years, given that we continually add things on.

Secondly, I am astonished that trusts are breaking even. As a representative for North Belfast, I can assure the House that the North and West Belfast Health and Social Services Trust has been under-resourced for several years. The Minister will probably tell me that that is a matter for Ms de Brún; however, it was Dr Farren who presented the budget. Are those efficiencies the result of cuts in services or improvements to them? I am concerned that there are not enough speech therapists or physiotherapists in North Belfast. Some older people in the constituency have been waiting for 18 months for adaptations to their homes.

Dr Farren: As I said, the £23.9 million saving by the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety relates to a technical reduced requirement to deal with the complexity of the conversion to resource budgeting. The Executive are still relatively inexperienced in the new approach to budgeting, and it is especially complex for the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety, because it has by far the largest departmental budget. It is, therefore, unsurprising that technical issues will arise in that Department. The saving came to our attention through the Department's improved understanding of the new rules for resource budgeting.

It is not a case of the Department's not spending its money. Rather, it is an outworking of the transition to resource budgeting, combined with the positive steps taken by the Executive and the Department to address the difficult issues related to health trusts. I emphasise that the planned level of services has been delivered in 2001-02. However, our improved understanding of the implications of the complex conversion from cash to resource budgeting has been achieved at a lower cost to our overall spending power, and has provided welcome room to manoeuvre. We will decide how best to use those funds in the plans that I will introduce after Easter, particularly in those related to the Executive programme funds.

Ms Morrice: Let us hope that the new accounting procedure that has led to the discovery of £23 million can achieve the same in all the Departments. It is like winning the lottery 23 times over. Let us hope that it is not another mistake, and that that money actually exists.

I am pleased that the Minister shares my concerns about the amount of underspend, particularly at the astounding backlog of £2.3 million in New Deal funding. My Colleagues on the Committee for Enterprise, Trade and Investment will wish to examine in more detail the £17 million underspend in that Department.

Although it is good that we have additional money, I am unimpressed by how it is being spent. Why have issues that have come to the Floor, such as women's advice

centres, Tor Bank Special School, integrated education or road safety not been included? Members argue for such provision daily, yet money is not being reallocated for those purposes. Some £11 million remains to be spent. Will some of our demands be met in those areas that matter?

Dr Farren: The Member will be aware from my statement, and from the information on the £6.9 million that has been bid for and allocated, that all the bids that Departments have made are being met. That is the simple truth of the matter. The allocations that can be made relate to the nature of the bids. Given the amount of money available to us, we have been able to meet all the bids, and those are detailed.

Some of Ms Morrice's other questions must be directed at those who have responsibility for the services to which she refers. As I said earlier, it is necessary to address questions of detail to the Ministers who have responsibility for the services that Members are concerned about. I have referred to the general level of underspend on several occasions this morning, and previously. We intend to come back to the Assembly at an early stage and identify how we intend to deal more strategically with forecasting, so that we do not have a continuation of the levels of underspend that have been reported in monitoring rounds to the Assembly.

Mr McCartney: The allegation is that the £23.9 million of underspend by the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety came about due to the Department of Finance and Personnel's lack of understanding of the rules that it introduced. The Minister states:

"This arose through the complexity of the conversion to resource budgeting, and the saving came to attention through improved understanding of the new rules on resource budgeting".

That shows that someone somewhere along the line did not understand the rules under which they were operating. As a result, £23.9 million that was available to the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety was not spent. Does the Minister not think that that is totally inconsistent with his suggestion that the planned level of services has been delivered? A planned level of services delivered by the Department that has underspent by £23.9 million is one of the most parlous in Europe.

The Minister is avoiding responsibility for any departmental efficiency, but the public will say that the Department has not spent £23.9 million that was available to it, whether it was for technical reasons or otherwise. The Minister is saying that the planned level of service has been delivered, but the level of service delivered is absolutely disgraceful.

Under the Barnett formula additions, there is money available for the Department of Education. The Minister has decided that the Department of Finance and Personnel will retain nearly £1 million of the amount that is being given specifically for education by central Government under the Barnett formula, and the Minister will lump it

into the general kitty to be used for any purpose that his Department may decide. Money that is given to education by central Government should be ring-fenced for education, which is not delivering a product that is anything to write home about.

11.15 am

Dr Farren: I thank the Member for his question; however, I leave his comments to be addressed by the Ministers responsible for those services. As regards allocations to the Department of Education, Members have to, and do, appreciate that Barnett consequentials are allocated at the discretion of the Executive. That is what devolution brings with it — authority and the right to allocate additional resources as the Executive and the Assembly, in approving what the Executive recommend, see fit.

On this occasion the Executive recommend that the first of the Barnett consequentials be directed to the Department of Education — the second may also be. However, that matter needs to be discussed in greater detail in the budgetary planning by my Department when making recommendations to the Executive and the Assembly.

If the Assembly were merely a channel for allocating money on a similar basis as it is allocated across the water it would have no authority over its expenditure. The Member would have many questions to ask about such an automatic type of public expenditure allocation. That is not what devolution is about. However, I assure the Member that, given the Executive's identification of the priorities of health, education, roads and transport, education will receive due and adequate consideration in the allocation of that Barnett consequential, as it will in all our allocations.

The £23.9 million, which is causing the Member concern, was an available spending capacity. Had winter pressures, for example, been similar to those we have experienced, the money might have been drawn down. At the stage it was identified to us, it was not possible to make use of the money in that manner or in any other. The money provides us with additional room for manoeuvre, and, as I said, it will be allocated early in the new tax year. I will return to the Assembly after Easter when plans for the Executive programme funds will be finalised. This £23.9 million will make a significant contribution to those funds.

Dr Birnie: Will the Minister place on record the situation as regards easements made by Departments that are outside departmental expenditure limits? I ask this question because the Department for Employment and Learning has made easements in the past four monitoring rounds in its annually managed expenditure of £11.66 million. What can that money be used for? If it is not being spent in the current financial year, is it lost to

Northern Ireland? In reply to a question I asked on the December monitoring statement, the Minister said:

“we are examining the underspending patterns across Departments to see what lessons can be learnt and what advice can be given on budgetary planning.”

The Minister referred to the rigorous examination of such underspend. When will that examination be complete?

Dr Farren: I trust that it will be completed soon. I shall return to the Assembly with the outcome of the review on underspend. I hope that our strategic approach to forecasting in Departments will reduce underspend. Beyond that I can add nothing at this stage.

Underspending in annually managed expenditure does not benefit Northern Ireland; it reverts to the Treasury.

Dr Hendron: The Assembly appreciates the massive pressures on the Health Service and the Minister’s statement that special circumstances have created underspend in it. People on waiting lists and the overworked staff, who are under constant pressure, may find that difficult to understand or to accept. Will the Minister give a detailed explanation of how the reduced requirement arose? I understand the points made about resource budgeting and the fact that there is much more to the problem, and I appreciate that that is in the Health Minister’s remit.

Bearing in mind the state of the Health Service, is it the Minister’s opinion that this is likely to happen again next year?

Dr Farren: There are no certainties about the future. We have acknowledged that departmental forecasting is rigorous in relation to underspends generally. However, the Northern Ireland Assembly is not the only legislature that experiences underspends. There are underspends in Westminster, and they cause Members similar concerns. That imposes obligations on my Department and on all Departments to review their planning and forecasting procedures, and these are being considered and accepted. I cannot guarantee that we will not have underspends in Departments, should similar circumstances arise. I can, however, give an assurance that we shall do all in our power to work with Departments to ensure that forecasting and spending plans are rigorous and that we will address the problem.

The Executive and I are fully aware of the difficulties and pressures that the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety is experiencing. We are anxious to address those concerns as effectively as possible.

Mr Savage: There has been some slippage, but I am concerned about accountability, and I am glad that we are not throwing good money after bad.

I am concerned that the Budget does not provide for the restructuring of the agriculture industry. I am happy to wait for six months for a substantial scheme to emerge that will contribute to that restructuring. I am glad that good money is not being thrown after bad and would

prefer to wait for proposals for which the Assembly would be accountable.

Dr Farren: I trust that bad money is never thrown around, which good money follows. I hope that good money will always follow good money. However, that is a matter for judgement.

I hope that Mr Savage appreciates the nature of the statement and the tidying-up exercise that the Executive are engaged in. The issues he raises relate to the policy of the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development. I have deflected certain questions to the Ministers who are directly responsible for Departments. However, I recently heard the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development say that in the summer she would publish detailed plans of her Department’s policies. The expenditure that the Member anticipates will be signalled through those plans rather than in any statement of mine.

BRITISH-IRISH COUNCIL:

ENVIRONMENT

Mr Speaker: I have received notice from the Minister of the Environment that he wishes to make a statement on the British-Irish Council meeting in its environment sectoral format, which was held on 25 February 2002 in Edinburgh.

The Minister of the Environment (Mr Nesbitt): I wish to make a statement about the second meeting of the environment sectoral group of the British-Irish Council, which was held in Edinburgh on Monday 25 February 2002. The statement has also been agreed by my accompanying Minister, the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development.

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

Following nomination by the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister, Ms Rogers and I represented the Northern Ireland Executive at the meeting, which was hosted by Mr Ross Finnie MSP, the Scottish Executive Minister for the Environment and Rural Development. It was chaired by the Rt Hon Mr Michael Meacher MP, Minister for the Environment in the UK Government. The Irish Government were represented by Mr Noel Dempsey TD, Minister for the Environment and Local Government. The National Assembly for Wales was represented by the Minister for the Environment, Ms Sue Essex. The Government of the Isle of Man were represented by the Hon Pamela Crowe MHK, Minister of Local Government and the Environment. The States of Jersey were represented by Senator Nigel Quérée, President of the Planning and Environment Committee. The States of Guernsey were represented by Deputy Roger Berry, President of the Board of Administration. A full list of delegates is appended to the communiqué that was issued after the meeting. I have placed copies of the communiqué in the Library for Members' information.

The proceedings opened with a warm welcome from the host, who then gave a short presentation on the key issues with regard to waste management, because the Scottish Executive are taking the lead on that item. All delegations agreed that the issues he identified were matters of serious and growing concern. They also thought that there was considerable scope for the Administrations to co-operate, especially in sharing best practice and on research. The group agreed to set up a working group of officials from member Administrations in order to examine the many important waste management issues that they face and to identify scope for co-operation. The working group will present a report of its findings to the next sectoral meeting.

11.30 pm

The group also discussed Sellafield and radioactive waste, prompted by a draft paper prepared by the Irish and Isle of Man Governments. Ministers exchanged views on the discussion paper, and the concerns of those Administrations with coastlines on the Irish Sea were recognised. I emphasised the widespread concern in Northern Ireland about emissions from Sellafield, despite the fact that our extensive monitoring programme shows there to be no significant impact.

Officials from my Department have also 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 also consistently demonstrate low radioactivity levels on the Irish coastline. That work has been published in several reports and presented at international conferences.

I drew attention to public concern about the safety and security of the Sellafield plant and shared with ministerial colleagues the assurance that I received on those matters from Mr Brian Wilson, Minister of State for Industry, Energy and the Environment. I informed the group of this Assembly's recent motion on Sellafield, which attracted cross-party support. I also expressed my view that the British-Irish Council is the most appropriate forum for making representations about Sellafield.

The group agreed that the exchange of views had been useful and that Sellafield and radioactive waste should be given more detailed discussion at the next sectoral meeting. Michael Meacher recognised the concerns expressed and that something must be done. He also committed himself to bringing forward a UK strategy in the spring to deal with that matter. The Irish and Isle of Man Governments were committed to bringing forward a more definitive paper, based on the draft paper that was presented on 25 February.

The next item of business was a paper from the United Kingdom Government drawing attention to a proposed regional seas pilot study as part of the review of marine nature conservation. The study will examine the effectiveness of existing systems for marine nature conservation and make recommendations for improvement. The Irish Sea was selected for the pilot scheme as it has the advantage of engaging all UK Administrations, as well as the Governments of Ireland and the Isle of Man. Members agreed that it was a worthwhile project and indicated their interest in participating in the study.

The group also considered a progress report from the working group on climate change impacts, adaptation and vulnerability. The meeting noted with satisfaction the progress made and agreed that the working group should continue to ensure that realistic assessments of potential climate change impacts are made for all areas

of Britain and Ireland. It was also agreed that the working group should report to the next sectoral meeting.

On behalf of the Northern Ireland Executive, I offered to host the third environment sectoral group meeting, which will probably be held this October, in Belfast. The group accepted my offer.

The Chairperson of the Committee for the Environment (Rev Dr William McCrea): The Minister's statement raised several issues that I would like to comment on, but I must limit myself to two.

Last Tuesday the Minister gave the opening address to the annual convention of the Sustainable Development Commission. Was the important subject of sustainable development discussed, or even mentioned, in Edinburgh? The Programme for Government that was published in February 2001 set a target of June 2001 for the publication of proposals for a Northern Ireland sustainable development strategy. The Committee still eagerly awaits to be consulted on those proposals. When will they be published? Will the Minister consider putting sustainable development on the agenda of the British-Irish Council's next environment sectoral meeting, to be held in Belfast?

Can the Minister give some details of the discussions that were held on waste minimisation? Note that I did not say, "waste management", but "waste minimisation." What lessons does the Minister feel Northern Ireland can learn from the Scottish experience?

Mr Nesbitt: Mr Deputy Speaker, I congratulate you on your appointment. This is the first time that I have spoken while you have been in the Chair. I noticed the changeover but did not wish to mention it during my speech.

I thank the Chairperson of the Committee for the Environment for his comprehensive question. I shall deal with it appropriately.

Sustainable development was not dealt with substantively at the British-Irish Council meeting. However, I share the Chairperson's view of its importance. The seminar that I attended exercised my mind on the necessary complementarity of protecting the environment and having a sustained, developed economy. Those two elements can be viewed as mutually exclusive, but the aim is for them to complement each other. That theme of protecting the environment while developing the economy is very important. It permeates the Programme for Government and goes to the heart of the Department of the Environment's work. I say openly and positively that I shall consider whether sustainable development should be on the agenda for the next meeting.

"Minimisation" is an important word; it means that the creation of waste must be minimal. However, that is only one element of what must be done. More waste must be recycled, and more must be recovered. There are very clear targets, and I do not know at this stage whether they

can be met, but we shall endeavour to meet them. Some £2 million has been provided to assist councils in this financial year, with a further £7.4 million next year. No doubt, further questions will be asked on the issue, but I hope that my answer has been comprehensive.

The Deputy Chairperson of the Committee for the Environment (Ms Lewsley): I welcome the Minister's statement, but I am disappointed that he did not tell us that, at the meeting, he moved away from the Executive's thinking and criticised the Irish Government's legal challenge to the Sellafield plant. Does the Minister agree that to use the British-Irish Council meeting to express his own views so forcibly, despite what the Executive had agreed in advance, was both inappropriate and a breach of ministerial protocol?

Mr Nesbitt: I welcome that question. The British-Irish Council exists to make all possible efforts to resolve the elements of conflict. Therefore, an element of the British-Irish Council deals with Sellafield. The Irish Government were the first to mention the court case at the British-Irish Council meeting. My point was that the first meeting of that Council was in December 1999, and the next meeting was almost one year later, in October 2000. We waited almost one and a half years before the next meeting, which dealt with highly important environmental issues. Given the length of time that had elapsed between meetings, the necessity to resolve the conflict, which is what the British-Irish Council is about, and the Irish Minister saying that he was going to court twice, I said that British-Irish Council meetings were the appropriate forum to resolve conflict. I meant to cause no offence to any party or individual, but my statement accorded with my interpretation of the situation.

Mr McClarty: Will the Minister advise the House what impact the commissioning of the Sellafield mixed oxide (MOX) plant will have on the Northern Ireland population?

Mr Nesbitt: The purpose of the MOX plant is to create new energy — not to dispose of energy. It has been in initial operation since December 2001, but to allow for full working, that decision must be made. The Member asked about its impact on Northern Ireland, which is an important consideration. We must adopt measured tones. We must examine the facts before we make statements that can hype up a community in one way or another.

I have examined the scientific evidence presented to me, and it is clear that the workings of the MOX plant were examined over many months before it became operable. The word "microsievert" refers to measurement of the level of activity that hits us. The estimation is that the operation of the MOX plant will expose us to 0.002 microsieverts, which is two thousandths of one unit and equivalent to two seconds on board a transatlantic flight. However, on average, Mr and Mrs Citizen of Northern

Ireland are hit by 2,500 microsieverts of radiation each year. That is the scientific evidence that has been presented to me, and I want it to be examined in more detail.

Friends of the Earth has commented on the scientific evidence. I met its representatives and put the statistics to them. We will meet again, because in situations which the people of Northern Ireland and my home county of Down find emotive and sensitive, and in which scientific evidence has been presented, we must ensure that we examine the issues in a measured and controlled fashion, rather than in an emotive way.

Mr McElduff: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. The Minister is urging caution over Sellafield; I urge that we wake up to Sellafield. Recently, I visited it with TDs from Dublin as part of an interparliamentary body. A sign on the wall in the control room of the MOX plant read “23 days since last minor accident”. The target is 42 days, because that is the record number of days without a minor accident. When the Minister speaks with representatives of British Nuclear Fuels Ltd, will he determine what constitutes a minor accident?

Mr Nesbitt: I plan to visit Sellafield in the near future, and Michael Meacher has invited me. At the meeting in February, he gave a commitment to implement a strategy in the spring to reduce the emissions from Sellafield. An agreement was reached at the 1998 ministerial meeting of the Oslo and Paris (OSPAR) Commission, and we must ensure that those commitments are met.

The British-Irish Council environment sector group will meet again in October in Belfast to consider the views of the Government of the United Kingdom. It will also consider the comments of the Governments of the Republic of Ireland and the Isle of Man, who are to bring forward their document in its final form. Prior to that meeting, I will visit Sellafield to see what is happening. Therefore, to acknowledge the Member's point, we have woken up to Sellafield.

I ensured that all the Assembly's concerns were expressed at the last British-Irish Council meeting. I took note of the commitment given by Michael Meacher, who is the Minister responsible for Sellafield. In waking up to Sellafield, we must carefully analyse what Sellafield is doing to the environment. We must be clear on that.

11.45 am

There has been only one habit survey outside the area directly affected by Sellafield. A habit survey charts the way in which people work and how Sellafield may affect them. In 2000, the habits of 871 people from areas between Belfast and Carlingford Lough were examined. According to scientific evidence, if an individual were to eat 100 pounds of fish a year, swim in the Irish Sea for 100 hours a year, or work on the coast for 1000 hours a year — those people would be most exposed to

Sellafield — he would be exposed to 18 microsieverts a year. By comparison, everyone is already exposed to an average of 2,500 microsieverts each year.

We talk about waking up to Sellafield, but we must wake up to radioactivity. One of the biggest sources of radioactivity in Northern Ireland is radon, which seeps up through the ground. Only 23% of people in Northern Ireland have taken advantage of the free test for radon in their homes. We must wake up to more than Sellafield; we must wake up to radioactivity in general in Northern Ireland.

I cannot be specific about what constitutes a minor accident at Sellafield. However, I will examine the matter, and I will ask that question when I visit the plant. I hope that I have answered the questions comprehensively.

Mr Ford: Mr Deputy Speaker, I congratulate you on your appointment. I trust that that means that you will be kind to me today and in the future.

Dr McCrea asked the Minister about sustainable development. Before the next meeting of the British-Irish Council, which he is due to host in October, the world summit on sustainable development will take place in Johannesburg. I understand that the UK Government will be represented at that summit but that the devolved regions will not, despite the fact that they are responsible for sustainable development. Since he probably has not done so, will the Minister undertake to discuss with the Scottish and Welsh Ministers, Mr Finnie and Ms Essex, the opportunity to secure direct representation of the devolved Governments in Johannesburg?

There has been much discussion about Sellafield. Rather than use British Nuclear Fuels Ltd's BNFL-speak to address the people of Northern Ireland, will the Minister undertake that, following his examination of Sellafield, he will discuss with the other devolved bodies, the Irish and Manx Governments, how the matter can be approached in October to take into account people's fears? People are not concerned about how many microsieverts they may be exposed to when the plant is working normally, but about what might go wrong at Sellafield, given past accidents.

What are the waste issues of serious and increasing concern that Mr Finnie identified?

Mr Nesbitt: Whoops. The rigour of Mr Ford's questioning almost made me fall over.

I am conscious of the representation of devolved regions at the world summit in Johannesburg. Recently, I presented a cheque to a primary school in Ballymena for its work on sustainable development. One pupil from that school will attend the summit in Johannesburg.

Mr Ford: Will the Minister be going to Johannesburg?

Mr Nesbitt: The Member asked a question, so he should let me answer it.

The Deputy Chairperson of the Environment Committee, Ms Lewsley, highlighted the importance of our being represented at the summit. The position is clear: the decision on who will represent the United Kingdom Government is in the Prime Minister's hands. Scotland will be represented, and I am unsure about Wales. However, I am considering whether this devolved Administration should be represented and, if so, who should represent it.

Mr Ford said that I gave "BNFL-speak" on statistics. I refute that. The statistics that I gave were produced by our Department. Much collaborative research on emissions levels has been conducted by Northern Ireland bodies and by the Irish Government, and those results show a minimal emissions level. I did not say that that was the end of the story — quite the reverse. I said that I take on board the statistics, and that I am conscious of the sensitive nature of this matter. I have discussed the issue with Friends of the Earth, which has been the most outspoken opponent of Sellafield. I shall have further discussions with it and with others because we must fully understand the problems in this highly sensitive area, which involves much scientific and statistical data, rather than make statements of political hype. That is something that I, as Minister of the Environment, will not do.

Mr Ford's third question was about waste, and that is a serious matter. There are several issues. For example, we put too much waste into holes in the ground. We recycle only about 6% of waste in Northern Ireland, compared to other parts of Europe where more than 40% is recycled. Less waste must go into landfill and more must be recovered and recycled, and we must produce less waste. We could recycle 60% of all waste as reusable biodegradable material. Those elements must be considered. A waste management strategy is in place, and three groups of councils are drawing up waste management plans. This is an important issue, and I have tried to deal with some of the concerns.

Mr O'Neill: As it is only the Minister's second opportunity to answer questions in the House, he can be forgiven for overlooking my Colleague Patricia Lewsley's question on ministerial protocol. I offer him the opportunity to address that in his response.

Will the Minister clarify his position and that of his Department on the health and security issues arising from the continuing operation of the inherently dangerous Sellafield plant? Given that the Department is collecting statistics and information, will the Minister consult members of the County Down fishing fleets and ask them why they will not fish in certain areas of the Irish Sea because of the deformed species to be found there? How many microsieverts are responsible for producing such deformity?

Mr Nesbitt: I am not sure whether Mr O'Neill wishes me to comment further on the matter raised by Ms Lewsley. I feel that I have sufficiently answered that question, so I

shall not return to the matter unless Mr O'Neill specifically wishes me to do so.

The Member couched his question on health and security issues arising from Sellafield in a reference to the County Down fishing fleet and the deformed species that are being caught. That is the type of language that I do not wish to use. I have made it clear in my statement that I have concerns about the matter, especially as I live in County Down. I am not a fly-by-night in this matter. Health concerns us all.

That is why I have said in almost every one of my answers that we must be measured in our tone, examine the position clearly and reach a measured judgement on where we go from here. I do not want a Sellafield in my backyard — of course I do not. However, realpolitik dictates that I am where I am today. I have a Sellafield and a new mixed oxide (MOX) plant, which opened in December 2001, at my back door, and total responsibility for that lies with the United Kingdom Government. The United Kingdom Government will bring forward proposals in April, to be discussed again in October, and that is the best forum for trying to resolve the conflicts attached to Sellafield.

Security is a concern. Indeed, the ships bringing the substance to be dealt with at Sellafield, or a September 11-type catastrophe at Sellafield, may be of greater concern than the emissions from the MOX plant. These concerns were expressed, and we sought assurances from the United Kingdom Government, which were given. I am not saying that I accept them totally, and I do not know the details, but the Government have given an assurance of increased security.

With regard to the ships, a separate company has been operating them for 20 years, and they have travelled 3 million nautical miles without any problem. Each crew member has to be qualified one level above what he is operating on at any time, and there are many and varied examples of safety, navigation and security measures in the working of those vessels. The shipping used to transfer the material is of the highest order of any shipping in the world. Of course there are risks — one does not deny that — but there is a comprehensive brief on the level of safety and security on those ships that sail back and forth to Sellafield trading their wares.

Mr Savage: Does the Minister support the introduction of an aggregates tax in Northern Ireland, and was that discussed at the British-Irish Council?

Mr Nesbitt: I appreciate how an aggregates tax would fit in with protecting the environment, which we are discussing. The issue was not specifically discussed at the British-Irish Council, but I mentioned it. This is an example of how tax regimes can change in the United Kingdom fiscal unit without account being taken of our land border with a neighbouring state, which is an important matter that is not common to any other part of

the United Kingdom. I mentioned the tax, but the British-Irish Council did not discuss it. However, it was taken on board.

Regarding the aggregates tax, I am aware of the cross-border impact on quarry owners in that area. I am also aware that we have negotiated a derogation for aggregates used for concrete blocks, pipes and such like, for one year — it will be introduced progressively from 2003-04 onwards.

12.00

There is no derogation for virgin aggregates. However, we are negotiating with the Department of Finance and Personnel to make the case that must be made in that, as I said at the outset, Northern Ireland is unique in having a land border with another country whenever it comes to fiscal measures which are uniformly applied throughout the United Kingdom. Of course, the European Commission must be allowed to have their say on these aspects as well, so the jury is still out on full implementation of some elements of the aggregates tax.

Dr O'Hagan: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. The Minister referred to the joint studies that officials from his Department have carried out with the Radiological Protection Institute of Ireland and University College, Dublin. Can he detail the level of access that his officials have to Sellafield? Can he also assure the House that officials from his Department have unlimited, unhindered access to Sellafield for monitoring and scrutinising purposes? Go raibh maith agat.

Mr Nesbitt: I am not sure if I heard that correctly about uninhibited access for officials to monitor what is taking place. I cannot give a definite answer on the level of access to Sellafield. However, the irony is that people are not concerned about the inner workings of Sellafield so much as about emissions from it that affect people in Northern Ireland. You do not need to go to Sellafield to feel what the emissions may be. I hope that I make myself clear.

I will give an example of the level of examination: sediment, seawater, seaweed and fish are examined regularly for radioactivity, as are the air above and the sand below. People too are checked to see if they are affected by where they work, by what they do and by radioactivity. Officials do much to examine the impact of Sellafield.

With regard to the inner workings of Sellafield, I will be going there to examine as best as I can what is happening. However, Mr Wilson, the Minister of State for Energy and Industry, has said that information about security there cannot be divulged, and I can understand that.

Mr Beggs: Sellafield and radioactive waste were discussed at length at the British-Irish Council meeting. Living in, and representing, the coastal constituency of East Antrim, I have a question reflecting environmental concerns. Does the Minister's Department monitor the

effects of Sellafield's discharge around the coast of Northern Ireland? If so, are the findings made public, and are they easily accessible to the public and public representatives?

Mr Nesbitt: The impact of Sellafield is monitored regularly. The findings are made public, and they are made available at various conferences. I said earlier that we should not be hyped up, and I am not saying that the Member is hyped up — quite the reverse. However, part of the reason I mentioned the measurement of 2,500 microsieverts in comparison with the measurement of 18 microsieverts a year for people who work many hours on the coast is to raise awareness among Assembly Members and the greater public that these elements are surrounded by great sensitivity. At the same time, scientific and statistical evidence relating to the argument is being brought forward. We have a responsibility to examine such evidence, put it to all concerned and see if we can reach a measured judgement on its validity. I will ensure that that happens. I can only say to the Member that if the information is not easily accessible I will endeavour to see what can be done to make it more accessible. All the information I have quoted is in the public domain; it has been made known through various seminars and it includes the work being done in Southern Ireland.

Dr Birnie: I thank the Minister for his comprehensive statement. Just as in today's questions, much attention at the meeting was given to radioactive emissions from Sellafield into the Irish Sea. Does the Minister agree that emissions from non-nuclear power stations would also be worthy of discussion at the British-Irish Council in its environment format? I ask this question because it looks as though the UK will achieve its Kyoto Protocol target in reducing the level of so-called greenhouse gases, as measured in 2010, relative to the 1990 level of production. However, the Republic of Ireland, which has raised such a fuss over Sellafield, sadly seems to be on track for a substantial growth in the level of carbon emissions from its power stations.

Mr Nesbitt: Emissions that can come from other forms of electricity generation were not mentioned at the British-Irish Council meeting. However, they are relevant to the question asked by the Chairperson of the Committee for the Environment about sustainable development. We must have a twin approach — protecting the environment while ensuring that the economy prospers. Other emissions, such as car exhausts, for example, must be borne in mind at the appropriate forums.

NORTH/SOUTH MINISTERIAL COUNCIL:

TOURISM

Mr Deputy Speaker: I have received notice from the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment that he wishes to make a statement on the North/South Ministerial Council meeting in its tourism sectoral format held on 22 February 2002 in County Fermanagh. I remind Members who wish to ask questions of the Minister of the Speaker's ruling — it is expected that such Members be present in the Chamber for the Minister's statement as a matter of courtesy.

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment (Sir Reg Empey): The fifth meeting of the North/South Ministerial Council in tourism sectoral format took place in Killadeas, County Fermanagh, on Friday 22 February 2002.

Following nomination by the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister, Ms Bairbre de Brún 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 Ms de Brún and is also made on her behalf.

Mr Andrew Coppel, chairperson of Tourism Ireland Ltd, presented a progress report on developments since the last Council meeting in this sector. Mr Coppel reported that, in addition to the launch of the 2002 marketing programme in Dublin and Belfast on 7 November 2001, launches took place in London, New York and Toronto, and further launches are planned for Germany and France. Campaigns are now under way in key target markets.

The chairperson also reported that it is hoped that Tourism Ireland Ltd will occupy its new headquarters premises in Bishop's Square, Dublin by June 2002 and that the office in Coleraine will be occupied by October 2002. Temporary premises are in operation in Dublin and Coleraine.

The company intends to expand its tourism marketing partnership arrangements to include a broader participation by industry in Northern Ireland and in the South. Market industry consultative groups are also to be formally established in each main market. Those arrangements will be a vital input into the work of Tourism Ireland Ltd and will help a participative approach with the industry. The Council welcomed Mr Coppel's report and commended the progress made since November.

The chief executive of Tourism Ireland Ltd, Mr Paul O'Toole, gave the Council a formal presentation on the

company's corporate plan for 2002 to 2004 and its operating plan for 2002.

The company's corporate plan states that its two key goals are to increase tourism to the island of Ireland and to support Northern Ireland to realise its tourism potential. The principles underlying those goals will be to reach out to consumers in the international marketplace and to encourage business linkages between the tourist industry and the travel trade in target markets. The corporate plan anticipates 5% compound growth in tourism to the island of Ireland, with 8% compound growth for Northern Ireland for each of the three years 2002, 2003 and 2004.

The company's operating plan for 2002 is aimed at ensuring that Tourism Ireland Ltd delivers on its mandate. Mr O'Toole acknowledged that 2002 would be a challenging year. Consequently, the company's efforts during the year will be focused on three main areas of activity: securing business through implementing ambitious, innovative marketing programmes; establishing the necessary marketing capabilities and communications infrastructure to take the company forward in a new and dynamic environment; and building and motivating a team of tourism professionals to work with industry partners.

A major component of the 2002 plan is to develop better performance measures for the tourism sector and the company.

The Council approved the company's corporate plan and proposed marketing activities in 2002. The Council also confirmed its wish to see Tourism Ireland Ltd play a leading role in the development of the tourism industry on the island of Ireland, and it restated the importance of the industry to economic growth in both parts of the island.

The Council agreed that its next meeting in tourism sectoral format would take place in May 2002.

Dr Birnie: I thank the Minister for his statement. He outlined that the projected growth through the corporate plan would be 8% compound growth for Northern Ireland for each of the years 2002, 2003 and 2004. Those targets are commendable, and I hope that they will be achieved.

What are the likely implications for the growth in employment in tourism in Northern Ireland? Hitherto, our sector has been smaller than might be expected, and growth in employment would be desirable.

Sir Reg Empey: The Member is correct that those are commendable targets, and I will give a flavour of what the figures mean. Approximately 1.3 million people visit Northern Ireland annually from outside the island. When Tourism Ireland Ltd was established, specific reference was made in the December 1998 statement that the company would have to pay particular attention to Northern Ireland's needs, bearing in mind the problems of the last 30 years. Consequently, although the overall target for growth in visitor numbers is 5%, there is a

specific target for Northern Ireland because extra emphasis will have to be put there, given that we have further to catch up.

On growth over the three-year period of the plan, the 8% compound growth in visitors coming from outside the island to Northern Ireland would mean approximately 300,000 additional visitors. Given that our contribution to gross domestic product (GDP) from tourism is approximately 2%, compared with between 6% and 7% in both the Republic and Scotland, it is clear that we have a huge mountain to climb.

12.15 pm

I do not have figures at hand that indicate how that will project into numbers of people employed. However, it is clear that, with respect to the numbers of additional visitors to the island coming to Northern Ireland, we are looking at an increase of one quarter on our current position. That does not mean that 25% more people will be employed. There is still a great deal of slack to be taken up in the sector. I shall be happy to write to the Member to give him our economists' assessment of the likely impact.

Dr McDonnell: I welcome the Minister's statement and the fact that we are slowly but steadily getting the tourism industry moving. That is something that many of us have hoped for. I trust that that hope and confidence is well placed. The words in the Minister's statement that particularly excited me were:

"Building and motivating a team of tourism professionals to work with industry partners".

Will the Minister expand on that? It strikes me that a great deal of training and organisation will be required. It is not just about the young person providing refreshments or a meal in a bar or restaurant. All too often, tourists tell me that our providers at the microlevel are thinking only of what they can get out of the tourists, rather than how they can serve the tourists and bring them back. Training and motivation is, therefore, very important. The Assembly must look at that as a long-term investment. We have to condition our players, from the top to the bottom of the Northern Ireland tourism industry, to think about developing repeat business. That is something that we will come back to on a regular basis.

Sir Reg Empey: That was indeed a significant part of the statement. The quality of the product that we offer to visitors is directly related to the motivation of the team who deliver that service. I have attended all of these meetings alongside the Minister for Employment and Learning. That Department, in conjunction with CERT, the Republic's tourism training agency, has been developing programmes specifically aimed at owner-providers, who find it difficult to find the time to receive training. That programme has been running for 18 months and has been very well subscribed.

Two things have to take place. A partnership has to be built with the industry. There is no point in having the marketing structure provided by Tourism Ireland Ltd with nothing else happening. The product as a whole has to be improved so that there is something to market. We all accept that there have been shortcomings, and we understand why. Those who have been brave enough to invest in facilities have been let down by the unfortunate arrival of foot-and-mouth disease last year and also by the continuing background noise of civil disturbance. That has greatly affected the industry and left it at one third of its capacity. I have often made that point in the House.

I assure the Member that tourism, through its wider involvement with Tourism Ireland Ltd, is conscious that it must embark on a quality management scheme throughout the industry. People have higher expectations in the challenging markets that lie ahead. They are no longer prepared to accept substandard services and facilities, and we are conscious of that. I assure the Member that it is one of the guiding principles that is focusing the minds of Tourism Ireland Ltd as we move forward with marketing.

Mr Gibson: Before I come to the question relating to consultative groups, the participative approach to the industry, the securing of business through marketing programmes and the infrastructure, I thank the Minister for last week bringing to Omagh the new advanced factory, for the occupants that will take it up and for the prospect of 200 jobs in west Tyrone.

With regard to the Minister's statement, what is available for the farming community in west Tyrone by way of diversification into the tourism industry? There may be another blow to west Tyrone, so how will that community be involved? The Nestlé factory employs about 200 people and buys milk from many farmers. The milk industry is in depression and is under threat of possible rationalisation. I know that this may not be the Minister's direct responsibility — *[Interruption]*.

Mr Deputy Speaker: I see the Minister smiling. Like me, he is probably wondering where the question is.

Mr Gibson: What help can now be offered by way of diversification to farmers who are suppliers, and to workers in that industry, by way of the possibility of cross-border tourist trade?

Sir Reg Empey: The Member gets nine out of 10 for ingenuity in that question. With regard to the Nestlé factory, enquiries are currently in hand on that. Rural tourism was not part of the agenda for the North/South Ministerial Council on this occasion. It is a matter in which my Colleague in the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development, myself and others have a keen interest, Mr Deputy Speaker, but I think that you will have to concede that that is possibly a question for another day.

Mr Deputy Speaker: I noticed that the questioner was smiling, I was smiling, and the Minister was smiling, so perhaps it was not the occasion for an argument.

Mr McElduff: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Cuirim fáilte roimh ráiteas an Aire. I welcome the fact that the meeting took place in Fermanagh towards the end of February. Last year tourism in Ireland was severely damaged by foot-and-mouth disease. This year it appears that tourism in Ireland will be affected by foot-in-mouth. Can the Minister comment on the potential damage caused to tourism in Ireland, North and South, by the remarks of his party leader in describing the rest of Ireland as a "pathetic, sectarian, mono-cultural and mono-ethnic state"? Last year it was foot-and-mouth disease, but this year it appears that foot-in-mouth will have devastating consequences for tourism in Ireland.

Sir Reg Empey: Mr Deputy Speaker, you are aware that again that is not a relevant question, but the Member may reflect that if he and his colleagues stick up posters around the countryside trying to intimidate young Catholics from joining the Police Service, that might also have an impact on tourism.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Before I call Mr McMenamin, I have to say that my patience is now exhausted with this type of questioning. I will not accept it.

Mr McMenamin: I welcome the Minister's statement. I also welcome the setting up of a team of tourism professionals with industry partners. However, does the Minister agree that it is vital that businesses throughout Ireland be euro-friendly in order to facilitate visitors coming from the South and from Europe?

Sir Reg Empey: Like it is with everything else, the tourism sector is at the front line. Through the Northern Ireland Euro Preparations Forum, my Department has been working, and continues to work, to ensure that this and other industries make appropriate provisions to handle currency from wherever it comes. The hospitality sector is probably at a more advanced stage in its involvement with the euro than is any other business. I have not received any complaints that visitors are having difficulty. However, if Members are aware of any, I am happy to be advised so that we can take whatever steps are necessary. Much travel to Northern Ireland, or to any destination, is booked in advance in the currency of the country from which the person departs. Therefore, we are talking about ordinary spending money. The availability of bureaux de change in Northern Ireland, and at our airports, is the same as everywhere else. The evidence I have at my disposal is that the tourism sector is further advanced than any other. However, if Members have contrary information, I am willing to take it up with the concerned facilities.

Dr O'Hagan: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. A Member mentioned earlier the 8% compound growth for the years 2002-04. How was that

figure arrived at, given that the North of Ireland closes down for a substantial period at the height of the tourist season in July, and given the increased sectarian tensions and attacks that are associated with Orange marches? Have those factors been taken into account when arriving at the figure of 8%?

Sir Reg Empey: A target is a target, and, like all targets, it is the best estimate that the professionals in Tourism Ireland Ltd could come up with. Tourism Ireland Ltd has set itself what it believes is an achievable target. Our industry is only one third of the size that it should be, which is a direct result of the community's being in turmoil for 30 years. It is the only significant reason that I can think of for our current predicament. I have made it clear on several occasions that if the community continues to behave in the way that it does from time to time, especially in the summer months, that will continue to have a negative impact. However, the problem did not begin yesterday; it goes back decades, and we must deal with that legacy. That is why so much effort must go into marketing.

The figure of 8% was based on several factors. First, Tourism Ireland Ltd has a specific remit to do more to help Northern Ireland because of its background, and that was contained in the December 1998 statement to which I referred earlier. Secondly, it must look at where we are now. Although figures for the current year are not yet complete, it is obvious that we shall have slipped back in the previous year because of foot-and-mouth disease, September 11, et cetera. Tourism Ireland Ltd has tried to set a goal for the industry that is based both on the huge increase that there will be in marketing spend and on the fact that the marketing spend is being targeted at areas in which greater potential for growth exists. It must give the industry something to aim for. That situation is subject to change as a result of repercussions from external events. However, Tourism Ireland Ltd drew a balance between what it would like to see and what it felt was achievable. That is its professional judgement at present. I cannot second-guess that judgement, and I am prepared to accept the target, work towards it and hope that it will be exceeded. However, as the Member will be aware, that depends on events.

Mr O'Neill: I welcome the Minister's statement and congratulate him and his Department on the work and progress that they have made. I am, however, concerned about the wording of the Minister's statement. He said:

"The Company intends to expand its Tourism Marketing Partnership arrangements to include a broader participation by industry in Northern Ireland and in the South."

Does the Minister mean that there is an identified need to introduce a better balance between Northern Ireland and the South, and can he give some details about the market industry consultative groups and how they are to be established?

12.30 pm

Sir Reg Empey: That reference relates to a balance within the industry. When the board was formed there was a belief that not all sectors were represented at the level and to the extent that they should have been. At that time, Dr McDaid and I received a significant amount of correspondence, which expressed concern that some of the smaller businesses were not involved. When forming the board we had to make a judgement. It was its first time out, and, because it was to be focused on international marketing, it had a changed management role. We took the view that a person with change management skills was needed to help a significant business get started and established. We recognised that, to be totally representative, the board would have to be larger than the present board, and our view is that that would be unmanageable.

As a whole, the sector has a number of component parts, all of them important. It was decided that, to move away from having only the big battalions represented, people would have to be involved and participate at a different level. There are so many different sectors; for example, we have the regional tourism organisations (RTOs) in Northern Ireland. They are critical groups. In the Republic, Dr McDaid has an advisory group feeding information to him and his Department and Bord Fáilte. We need to develop the sector by involving those who participate in it, so that they have feedback into the marketing campaign and all sorts of activities.

We were trying to achieve a better balance with the industry — not a better balance North/South, but a balance within the sector. That means greater participation and involvement by the small as well as the large businesses. We were conscious that the initial board suffered from the fact that some of the smaller sector people felt that they were not getting a fair share, so we are attempting to deal with that perception by involving more people, and in doing that, we hope that people will feel part of the policies and campaigns that are being implemented. There is no point in having a marketing campaign if the product is not there to match it.

Mr Wells: The Minister is aware that we will be welcoming him as a tourist to Kilkeel on Friday. However, unlike Mr Gibson, I am not going to use that as a hook on which to hang a question totally unrelated to his statement.

The Minister is aware that the use of the Tourist Board's overseas marketing budget has been shrouded in controversy recently, and corporate hospitality has come under the microscope. Is he convinced that the necessary budgetary controls are in place for Tourism Ireland to ensure that this is never raised again, bringing tourism here and in the Irish Republic into controversy?

Sir Reg Empey: I am sure the Member does not wish to mix controversy with reality. One side of the argument

has been put, but because of protocol and the procedures of the Public Accounts Committee, the other side has not. The Member must wait until May to have that question answered.

With regard to the substantive point, while it was not part of the business of the North/South Ministerial Council in February, I can advise the Member that the board and the North/South Ministerial Council are conscious of their responsibilities. Both the Department of Finance and Personnel and the Department of Finance in the Republic are involved directly. The Northern Ireland Audit Office is the auditor of Tourism Ireland Ltd. Both Finance Departments are clear that normal financial accountability features will apply — Tourism Ireland Ltd will be subject to the same standards as we apply to any public body in Northern Ireland. Therefore the Member can be assured that accountability for money will remain clear to the House, via the Minister of Finance and Personnel and me.

Tourism Ireland Ltd has internal procedures, which will be always subject to review. The Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment has set out a code of practice, copies of which are available in the Assembly Library. At a previous NSMC meeting — when the company was set up — it was agreed that that code of practice would establish the necessary protocols.

Ms Morrice: I thank the Minister for his valuable statement.

In the context of the February monitoring round, which was announced today by the Minister for Finance and Personnel, was there a reason for the £2 million underspend by Tourism Ireland Ltd last year?

Can the Minister give us details on the additional funding allocation of £1 million that was made to the Northern Ireland Tourist Board's foot-and-mouth disease tourism recovery strategy in the February monitoring round?

Sir Reg Empey: I will deal with the latter point first. After the foot-and-mouth disease outbreak last February the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment moved as quickly as possible to introduce measures to salvage what was left of last year's tourism season. Last spring my Department conducted a rigorous marketing campaign through the Tourist Board, which cost around £1 million. That was part of the recovery programme that the Executive launched at that time, alongside the scheme to compensate people for loss of revenue. It was designed to get throughput into local businesses. It was widely welcomed by the industry and made a significant contribution.

There is no problem regarding the underspend. The time that it took to set up the compensation body, to acquire premises and to employ staff was such that the personnel were not in place. There were also difficulties with trade unions, particularly in the Republic, regarding

the transfer of employees from Bord Fáilte to Tourism Ireland Ltd. The establishment of premises was delayed. The combination of those events meant that the budget was not spent.

This year's budget is the first that the Department will spend primarily on marketing. It will be its first season out. Last year, the company was not sufficiently advanced to spend its budget. There was a protracted labour dispute, which is now resolved. Consequently, it was decided that the money would be returned to the Executive at the earliest opportunity — so that it could be reallocated to the benefit of other Departments — rather than at the end of the year when that opportunity would have been lost. I am sure that the Member approves of that procedure.

The sitting was suspended at 12.40 pm.

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

2.00 pm

CHILDREN (LEAVING CARE) BILL

Second Stage

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety (Ms de Brún): Molaim go dtugtar a Dhara Céim don Bhille Leanaí (Ag Fágáil Cúraim).

I nDeireadh Fómhair 2000, sheol mé tuarascáil dar teideal 'Promoting Independence: a Review of Leaving and After Care Services'. Bhí an tuarascáil, a cuireadh amach ag Foireann Chigireachta na Seirbhísí Sóisialta, bunaithe ar shuirbhé ar sholáthar fhágáil cúraim agus soláthar iarchúraim ar fud na n-iontaobhas uilig i 1999. Ba é príomhchinneadh an athbhreithnithe go mbíonn daoine óga atá ag fágáil cúraim faoi mhíbhuntáistí i dtaca le hoideachas, fostaíocht, tithíocht agus tacaíocht theaghlaigh de. Fuair an tuarascáil gur gá le tacaíocht níos fearr ó ghníomhaireachtaí na hearnála poiblí.

Idir 1996 agus 1999 d'fhág thart ar 670 duine óg idir 16 agus 18 cúram. Ní raibh ach 16 bliana ag beagnach 25% acu ag fágáil cúraim dóibh. Den chuid eile, d'fhág breis agus 50% acu cúram sular shroich siad 18. Tá na daoine óga seo atá ag fágáil cúraim ar na daoine is leachailí inár sochaí, agus tá dúshlán mhóra futhu. Caithfidh siad déileáil leis an chumha; caithfidh siad obair a fháil; agus caithfidh siad fáil amach cé leis a ba chóir dóibh dul i dteagmháil ar lorg cuidiú. Ó nach bhfuil tacaíocht theaghlaigh ag mórán de na daoine óga seo, is fadhbanna móra iad na fadhbanna seo a chuireann faoi mhíbhuntáiste iad.

I beg to move

That the Second Stage of the Children (Leaving Care) Bill (NIA 5/01) be agreed.

In October 2000, I launched a report titled 'Promoting Independence: A Review of Leaving and Aftercare Services'. The report, which was produced by the Social Services Inspectorate, was based on a survey of leaving and aftercare provision across all trusts during 1999. The review's main finding was that young people leaving care experience a range of disadvantages in education, employment, housing and family support. The report concluded that there was a need for a better level of support from public agencies.

Between 1996 and 1999, some 670 young people aged between 16 and 18 became care leavers. Almost 25% of those young people were aged only 16 when they left care. Of the remainder, over 50% left care before reaching the age of 18. Young care leavers are among the most vulnerable

young people in society, and they face several major challenges. They must cope with issues such as loneliness, finding a job and knowing whom to contact for help. For many of those young people, who lack family support, those are major problems that place them at a disadvantage.

The report noted that the range of accommodation into which young people move after leaving care is varied, and provides different levels of support and supervision. On leaving care, 35% of young people returned home, and 35% moved into their own accommodation, were discharged to semi-independent living or were admitted to hostels. The remaining 30% either went into other unspecified accommodation or were not accounted for by the trust that had been looking after them.

Trusts already have arrangements in place to provide leaving and aftercare services. The Bill aims to help to further promote the life chances of young people who are looked after by trusts as they make the gradual transition from care to independent living. The introduction of the Bill meets a commitment in the Programme for Government to introduce legislation to help to support young people who are leaving care.

In March 2001, the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety published a consultation document titled 'Proposals for a Children Leaving Care Bill'. I am pleased to say that the proposals received general support, and I thank all the organisations that responded.

The Bill itself is fairly short. Members have a copy of the explanatory and financial memorandum, which describes the Bill's provisions. The new legislation is intended to form the basis for new and improved leaving and aftercare services, building on the existing statutory provisions in the Children (Northern Ireland) Order 1995. I will outline the main features of the Bill.

The support provided by trusts to young people in care, and to those leaving care, should be equivalent to that which young people should receive from good parents.

When the new legislation comes into operation, every young person aged 16 or over being looked after by social services and who satisfies certain criteria will have a pathway plan and a personal adviser. It is important that young people be helped to plan their future to enable them to achieve their aspirations. The pathway plan will be crucial to the new arrangements, as it will map out the road to independent living. It will address issues such as accommodation, education, training, career plans and the support to be provided by the trust.

We will want young people to be directly involved in drawing up their plans, together with other interested parties. The plan will be reviewed regularly so that it develops with the young person's changing needs and ambitions. It will continue in effect until the young person reaches 21, and beyond that if the young person is in a

programme of education or training that takes them past that age.

The Bill also introduces a new duty requiring trusts to arrange for each eligible young person to have a personal adviser. Many young people are unaware of the services available to them and how to access them. Under the new arrangements, it is essential that young people receive the necessary support and assistance in a co-ordinated and easily accessible way. It is intended that the personal adviser will act as a single point of contact for the young person and will provide general support and advice.

The adviser will be involved in preparing the young person's pathway plan and will be responsible for overseeing its implementation. The adviser will be expected to keep in touch with the young person after he or she has left care. By making the appointment of the personal adviser a statutory requirement, we wish to emphasise our belief that young people leaving care should have access to someone who is committed to their long-term well-being. The personal adviser will occupy a role similar to that of the parent of a child who has left the family home — in other words, someone who is there to provide support.

The Bill will simplify arrangements for the financial support of 16- and 17-year-olds who leave care. Clause 6 lays the foundations for the new financial regime. At present, young people who leave care at 16 can claim social security benefits and receive some additional support from trusts' aftercare services. Rather than be dependent on a confusing mix of social services support and social security benefits, the Bill provides that the trust will normally be the primary source of income for young people leaving care at 16 or 17.

Clause 6 will remove the access that these young people previously had to income support, jobseeker's allowance and housing benefit. The resources currently deployed by the Department for Social Development in relation to means-tested benefits will be transferred to the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety and allocated to trusts to support these young people.

However, the Bill recognises that lone parents and children with a disability have special needs. Under the new arrangements, 16- and 17-year-old lone parents and certain disabled young people who are in care, or who are care leavers, will remain eligible for income support. Regulations will set out those groups excluded from the restriction on benefit payment.

The Bill also provides that the responsible trust must continue to keep in touch with a care leaver until he or she is at least 21, and must continue to provide a personal adviser and a pathway plan.

For young people leaving care at 18, a new set of arrangements will apply until age 21. Trusts will have a duty to provide general assistance in cash or in kind.

They will also have a duty to provide assistance with costs associated with employment, education and training until the young person reaches the age of 21, so long as his or her welfare requires it. When the young person reaches that age, he or she will generally be assumed to have entered the adult world.

However, continuing support in education and training is important, and where a course or training programme has already commenced it would be unfair for that support to cease. Accordingly, the Bill provides for assistance from the trust, if necessary, for a young person in education or training before age 21 until the end of the agreed programme of education or training, even if that takes the young person past the age of 21.

In addition, the Bill empowers trusts to assist care leavers with the expenses associated with any education or training programmes that they begin after the age of 21. Although not couched as a duty, the provision will give a further safety net to 21- to 24-year-olds who failed to take up education options earlier.

The Bill represents a broad framework for the further development of services for those who are leaving, or who have left, care. The needs of those vulnerable young people can be met only if the relevant agencies and individuals work together. Detailed guidance will be needed to promote a consistent approach by trusts and to address matters such as needs assessment, the role of the personal adviser, the development of pathway plans and accommodation and education issues.

There are some examples of good practice through collaboration between statutory and voluntary agencies that deal with young care leavers. In order to build on that, it is intended that the guidance and regulations under the new legislation will be developed on an inter-agency basis, and that a regional group, involving key players in the statutory and voluntary sectors, will be established to facilitate implementation. The legislation will provide the impetus for those developments, and I commend the Bill to the Assembly.

The Chairperson of the Committee for Health, Social Services and Public Safety (Dr Hendron): I welcome the Bill. As the Minister said, it addresses a real social problem. It deals with large numbers of young people who, often through no fault of their own, have had to spend their childhoods in care. Those children are young and vulnerable, and many are forced to fend for themselves when they are only 16 years old. They must find themselves somewhere to live and a job, which can be difficult even for a young person who is brought up in a loving family. Young people who are in care must do without the support of a stable family background, and often without any educational qualifications.

The Minister explained that the Bill seeks to improve the life chances of young people who are looked after by the health and social services trusts as they leave care to

live independently. It will place new duties on social services to assess and to meet their care and support needs until they are at least 21 years old. It also seeks to simplify the arrangements for their financial support.

Helping young care leavers to become responsible adults can only benefit them and society. Although I welcome the aims of the Bill, I am sure that the members of the Committee for Health, Social Services and Public Safety will wish to examine its detail to ensure that it will do exactly what it says it will do. For example, there are questions to be asked about the ability of trusts to provide the assessments and to meet the identified needs, and we must examine how the financial support arrangements will work in practice. Members want assurance that it will be an effective Bill that will make a real and positive difference to the lives of young people who live in care. I look forward to considering the Bill during its Committee Stage.

Rev Robert Coulter: I welcome the Bill. Members will agree that young people in that age group need the support that is outlined in the Bill, because it is a difficult age at which to be thrown out into the world, with all its problems and temptations. What format will the training for advisers take? Who will agree the best way to implement a pathway plan? Will each adviser formulate his or her own plan, or will a standard pathway be set?

2.15 pm

I am glad that the issue of financial support has been dealt with in the Bill. It will remove many of the concerns that young people have about finding employment while they are keen to continue with education. Having worked in the education field with people of this age for nearly 20 years, I understand their concerns.

The Committee Chairperson mentioned the responsibilities of trusts. Where will trusts that are already strapped for cash find the extra finance? What arrangements will be made to ensure that trusts are held accountable for their duties, as set out in the Bill? What arrangements are being made to ensure that uniformity of approach will be achieved in all trust areas?

I will support the Chairperson in examining all aspects of the Bill at Committee Stage. However, I am glad to support the Bill as it stands.

Ms Ramsey: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Like the Committee Chairperson and Bob Coulter, I welcome the ethos of the Bill. I place on record the commitment of the Minister to ensure that children who fall under her remit top the agenda in the Assembly and in the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety.

The Chairperson said that young people leaving care are among the most vulnerable in society, and the Minister also mentioned that. We are aware that young people

leaving care are disadvantaged in several areas, including education, training, jobs and housing. The purpose of the Bill, as both the Bill and the memorandum state, is to improve the life chances of young people who are looked after by trusts as they move to independent living.

The Bill places a duty of care on the trust that last looked after the young person, rather than on the trust for the area that they live in. That will ensure that services follow the young person to ensure that he or she does not fall out of the loop. This measure provides continuous care.

The new arrangements will have implications for trusts, which — dare I say it — will need extra resources to implement the new arrangements. The Children (Northern Ireland) Order 1995 was seen as a forward-thinking piece of legislation and was welcomed by most, if not all, children's organisations. However, the additional money was not always made available to implement the provisions of the 1995 Order, and that had a knock-on effect on some boards and trusts.

I welcome the additional £400,000 a year for the pilot projects. We are always calling for additional money, and we should commend the Minister in this case, even though it is only a small sum for pilot projects.

We are aware that children in care and those leaving care have special needs and problems. Like the Committee Chairperson and Rev Robert Coulter, I look forward to dealing with the Bill in more detail at the Committee Stage. Go raibh maith agat.

Mr O'Neill: I welcome the Bill because it addresses a commitment in the Programme for Government and because the need for such measures has been clearly identified. I hope that the Minister, the Department and the Committee will rigorously examine the legislation in order to determine its practical outworkings. The Bill provides an opportunity to eradicate one of the most distressing areas of the homelessness problem.

Members have already expressed concern about certain issues. For example, the proposed new article 34C of the 1995 Order contains the phrase “shall take reasonable steps”. Who will decide that the steps are reasonable? What criteria will be used, and how will the matter be judged?

The phrase “keep in touch” is used. I hope that those words are not used in the way that some of my family members use them, when they promise to keep in touch and subsequently nothing is heard from them for a long time. It is a loose phrase, and I would like the Committee and the Department to examine further its meaning in order to ensure that it is used to a good end.

The pathway plan and the personal adviser proposals are sensible and laudable, but those powers must be exercised somewhat more rigorously if they are to be effective. As the Minister said, the legislation deals not

only with 16- and 17-year-olds but also with the 17- to 21-year-old bracket. That area could be fudged, because it leaves it up to the relevant authority to decide when to cease its duty — any time before the individual turns 21. That will lead to differing performance levels. That aspect of the legislation must be examined and clarified.

In general, the attempt to avoid repeat homelessness — which has become a real phenomenon in this sector — could be helped by such proposals. I would like the problem of repeat homelessness to be eradicated because it causes great distress, especially to young people.

I welcome the approach to financial assistance suggested in the legislation. However, we must ensure that it is effective. I hope that through Committee procedures and the outworkings of the legislation, there is an opportunity to examine in detail the rent issues, especially in the private sector. What structures are in place to help individuals who, unfortunately, cannot cope with the financial constraints that have been placed on them? Quite often, those people drop out of the system altogether. More clarity is needed in that area.

Finance is an issue that rightly concerns everyone. I welcome the additional funds that will be made available, but we should consider the full effect on the public purse should that issue not be addressed. Is it possible to find out what the cost will be to the Health Service and other services, and to the public purse in general, if the many problems created by homelessness manifest themselves later in people's lives? A few pounds spent wisely on insuring that those problems are dealt with now could mean major savings to the public purse in the future.

I hope that at the various stages of the Bill, particularly at Committee Stage, an undertaking will be given to consult with the homelessness agencies that have worked so hard to try to deal with these problems. We can benefit from their experience and ensure that this legislation is as effective as possible.

Ms de Brún: I thank Members for their interest and for the points that they have made. My officials and I wish to ensure that the Bill is effective, and I look forward to working with the Committee on the later stages of the Bill. The new arrangements will be supported by resources already deployed in this area of work, and by resources transferred from the Department for Social Development in relation to benefits.

We anticipate providing around an additional £500,000 in the coming financial year in preparation for the legislation. Further resources are likely to be needed as more young people become eligible for the new arrangements.

Under the Executive's programme and the social inclusion community regeneration fund, to which Ms Ramsey referred, some £1.2 million is being provided to develop leaving and aftercare schemes over three years,

including the current year. Although not directly connected, this will include befriending and mentoring schemes and supported board and lodging schemes to provide young care leavers with a greater choice of accommodation and support and advice on health matters, to develop drop-in centres and to engage volunteers, including former care leavers, to raise awareness of leaving and aftercare services.

(Mr Speaker in the Chair)

We will be consulting on regulations and guidance, and I assure Members that we want to include organisations connected with and working on behalf of the homeless as part of the consultation. The personal adviser will provide a key link between a young person, social services and other agencies and will have an important role in preparing the pathway plan. The detailed functions of the advisers will be addressed in the regulations and guidance that we will consult on. The pathway plan will be agreed between the personal adviser and the young person, and the Department will provide detailed guidance on how this will be conducted. Training for personal advisers will be part of the implementation process and the overall strategy for implementation, and will be drawn up by the interdepartmental group that I referred to earlier.

We intend to establish monitoring arrangements through the regional implementation group involved in the development of regulations and guidance, and it is envisaged that the voluntary sector will have a role in monitoring the operation of the new legislation. We recognise the concerns about variation between trusts, and the new legislation will be an opportunity to ensure a much higher degree of uniformity, so that the same level of support will be available in all areas.

I hope I have addressed the points raised by Members — I am not clear if others had issues that they wished to raise. My officials will also study this and provide any outstanding answers.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That the Second Stage of the Children Leaving Care Bill (NIA 5/01) be agreed.

2.30 pm

Oral Answers to Questions

THE FIRST MINISTER AND THE DEPUTY FIRST MINISTER

Mr Speaker: Question 6, in the name of Mrs E Bell, and question 11, in the name of Dr Birnie, have been transferred to the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety and will receive written answers. Question 9, in the name of Ms Lewsley, question 10, in the name of Mr Dallat, and question 16, in the name of Mr McGrady, have been withdrawn and will receive written answers.

2001 Census

1. **Mr McElduff** asked the Office of the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister if any researchers commissioned by the Office have had preliminary access to the 2001 census statistics; and to make a statement.

(AQO 1016/01)

The Deputy First Minister (Mr Durkan): No researchers had, or will have, any preliminary access to the 2001 census statistics. Census statistics are not made available before official release. The 2001 census returns are in the latter stages of processing, and it is planned that the first results will be published in August 2002 in parallel with the results for England, Wales and Scotland. Census reports will be laid before the Assembly in accordance with statute.

Mr McElduff: Will the Deputy First Minister comment on research evidence, produced by Dr Shirlow recently and commissioned by the Office of the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister, which exaggerates the number of people who allegedly fled from housing estates in Belfast as a result of sectarian violence? Will he also comment on the First Minister's call for a referendum, which gives the impression that he saw hopeful signs in preliminary research?

The Deputy First Minister: Officials immediately contacted Dr Shirlow about the reports. He said that he had been reported incorrectly and undertook to correct this in subsequent media interviews.

Dr Shirlow's work, which has been queried and contested by Mr McElduff, was not commissioned by the Office of the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister. It was commissioned by the Belfast Partnership Board, and it focused on north Belfast in 1999. The project commissioned by the Office of the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister looked at different parts of

the city: Short Strand and Ballymacarrett, and was from September 2001 to February 2002.

I do not believe that the leader of the Ulster Unionist Party — who made his point in that capacity — was saying that he had access to statistics. Many political representatives have speculated on what the census might reveal, not least members of Mr McElduff's own party. I prefer to concentrate on the politics of consensus rather than the politics of the census.

Mr Shannon: Will the Office of the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister say how many census forms were issued and how many were returned? I am aware that some forms were not returned because people felt that the form contravened confidentiality. How accurate will the 2001 census statistics be as a result?

The Deputy First Minister: Questions on the conduct and details of the census fall to the Minister of Finance and Personnel. I am tempted to respond, as the person who was Minister of Finance and Personnel at the time of the census. We were content that we had a high rate of return. Various actions were taken to follow up in cases where forms were not returned. That was the subject of various answers in the House and various indications to the Committee for Finance and Personnel.

Rev Robert Coulter: Does the Deputy First Minister agree that speculation on the census outcome is based more on party political scaremongering than hard fact? Does he therefore agree that such speculation is unhelpful and is a distraction?

The Deputy First Minister: In my previous reply I referred to the difference between the politics of consensus and the politics of the census. There is not much point in speculating as to what the census figures will reveal. It is also important that we do not lose sight of the important range of information that the census will give us, and it is unfortunate that people seem to look at the census information only in relation to one subject — religion.

People are extrapolating their own political calculations and assessments from that. We should do the census the honour of waiting for the information it gives us, rather than speculating on those results.

Executive Agenda

2. **Mr Paisley Jnr** asked the Office of the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister to detail the issues on the agenda for the next meeting of the Executive.

(AQO 1015/01)

The First Minister (Mr Trimble): The next meeting of the Northern Ireland Executive is planned for 28 March. It is not our policy to disclose in advance the issues that will be raised at Executive meetings.

Mr Paisley Jnr: Does the First Minister intend to raise the issue of a border poll at the next Executive meeting, given that that has recently received some press speculation in this country? Does he agree that the best way to proceed would be to hold it now, rather than to link it to anyone's party-political election campaign? Then we can reaffirm the existence of the border, as opposed to putting in place institutions that deny and demean the existence of the border.

The First Minister: I do not intend raising that issue at an Executive meeting now, because it is a matter for the Secretary of State. I am sure that the parties represented here are perfectly capable of making their own representations to the Secretary of State.

With regard to the Member's point, I agree that it would be desirable to put an end to political speculation and scaremongering as soon as possible. In the circumstances, the Member will agree with me that the best and earliest practicable opportunity will be May of next year.

Mr O'Neill: With regard to the effective meeting and working of the Executive, can the First Minister tell us the requirements of the ministerial code regarding one Minister's criticising another? Did he comply with it when, as First Minister, he criticised Colleagues? Will he take an early opportunity to apologise to them for his breach of the code?

The First Minister: I am satisfied that I acted entirely in accordance with the nature of my role and the code.

Mr Maskey: I am sure that many Members are aware that the First Minister will normally act in the capacity of his role — that role being the Ulster Unionist Party leader, as opposed to the First Minister. Given his recent disgraceful and partisan comments — particularly those about the South of Ireland, which have received worldwide attention — will he confirm whether this matter was raised at the Executive meeting this morning? Alternatively, since he is supposed to represent most of the people here in his capacity as First Minister, does he intend to raise it at a future meeting of the Executive?

The First Minister: Proceedings at Executive meetings are confidential. Consequently, it would be improper for me to make any reference to what was said round the table. It would be equally improper for anyone at that meeting to brief or give interviews to the press about the subject matter. I am sure that the Member would entirely agree with me on that point.

European Convention

3. **Dr McDonnell** asked the Office of the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister what plans it has to address important issues being raised by the European Convention recently established under the chairmanship of Giscard d'Estaing.

(AQO 1062/01)

The Deputy First Minister: The European Convention held its first meeting in Brussels on 28 February, and it is expected to continue its work for about a year. The Convention will inform the thinking of heads of government at the intergovernmental conference in 2004. We attended a Joint Ministerial Committee meeting in London on 7 March and agreed arrangements for briefing the devolved Administrations and for contributing Northern Ireland views to the development of the UK position in the Convention. There should also be scope for conveying Northern Ireland views to the Convention through the Committee of the Regions and the Convention's parallel forum. We are closely following the work of the Convention and the wider debate on the future of Europe. Consideration is being given to the best means of developing that debate here to ensure that we fully address those issues of particular relevance to us.

Dr McDonnell: Will the Deputy First Minister assure us that the Assembly will have a maximal input, and in particular, that the Committee of the Centre will be able to make a full contribution to the European Convention?

The Deputy First Minister: Through its parallel forum the Convention has invited substantive contributions for the attention of its members. Those will deal with the future of the European Union and reform of the treaties and, particularly, with the issues addressed in the Laeken declaration. It is intended that organisations not directly represented in the Convention, including sub-national and regional authorities, will contribute to its work in that way. In addition to that, we will take into account the views of Members of the Assembly, and particularly the Committee of the Centre, when putting a Northern Ireland dimension to the Convention, the parallel forum or the UK Government.

Mr Savage: Will the Deputy First Minister say what efforts are being made to liaise with other devolved Administrations to ensure that regional voices are heard at the Convention?

The Deputy First Minister: The First Minister and I attended a Joint Ministerial Committee meeting in London on 7 March. We discussed with representatives of the Welsh and Scottish Administrations how best to work together on that. That was also subject to wider discussion in the Joint Ministerial Committee with Ministers of the UK Government. We are aware of various mechanisms that other regions are using — the so-called “constitutional” regions — to consider the work of the Convention and how best to influence it. We will further consider how to track and contribute to that work.

Fuel Smuggling

4. **Mr B Bell** asked the Office of the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister what representations have been made to HM Government to tackle the practice of selling smuggled fuel, which is both damaging to our

economy and a major loss of revenue for the UK Exchequer. (AQO 1025/01)

The First Minister: Primary responsibility for dealing with illegal smuggling activities lies with Customs and Excise. Ministers here have made representations to the Treasury on several occasions during the past year about fuel duties and smuggling. The then Deputy First Minister and I raised this at a meeting with the Chancellor in January 2001 and at our follow-up meeting with the head of Customs and Excise. Sir Reg Empey and Mr Mallon wrote to the Financial Secretary in October 2001 again pressing that further reductions in fuel duty would be welcome along with continuing attempts by Customs and Excise to combat illegal fuel smuggling, which damages legitimate fuel retailers and is a source of income for paramilitary groups.

It is important that every effort be made to tackle smuggling head on and to address the fuel duty differential between the United Kingdom and the Republic of Ireland. We welcome the recent discovery by customs officers and the guards outside Dundalk of what appears to be the largest diesel-washing plant ever encountered. That shows the extent of the threat posed by that illegal trade to security, the environment and the Exchequer.

Mr B Bell: I take a close interest in the misuse and smuggling of fuel because of the damage it causes to legitimate petrol retail outlets in Northern Ireland. I discussed the matter last week with the Chairman of the Public Accounts Committee (PAC) at Westminster and the Comptroller and Auditor General, Sir John Bourne, in the context of the ongoing PAC inquiry there.

With reference to smuggled fuel, does the First Minister welcome the Secretary of State's appointment of Prof Goldstock as a special adviser on organised crime, and what representations will he make to the professor about the appalling level of organised crime in Northern Ireland?

The First Minister: I congratulate the Member on the work of the PAC on that and on discussing it with his opposite number across the water. It is important that people realise that this problem is not confined to Northern Ireland. The equipment and technology used to wash diesel and to make it available on the black market exists in GB too, and there is reason to suspect that the gangs engaged in that business here have extended their operation across the water as well. It is important that that degree of co-operation exists.

2.45 pm

At the same time, I welcome the appointment of Prof Goldstock; he will complement the work of the Northern Ireland Organised Crime Task Force. He is a distinguished expert on crime, with extensive experience gained from his 13 years as director of the New York State Organised Crime Task Force. One hopes that the appointment will

highlight how far organised crime and racketeering have infiltrated society, and how society as a whole needs to respond to it. It is not enough to leave the matter to the police or to Customs and Excise. All civil society has a responsibility to deal with organised crime.

European Affairs

5. **Mr Gibson** asked the Office of the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister if it intends to give a lead role in European affairs to one of the junior Ministers.

(AQO 1014/01)

The Deputy First Minister: We recognise the increasing importance of European matters in much of the Executive's business. It is important that the Office of the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister shows clear ministerial drive to draw together and implement an Executive-wide approach to maximise its role. The two junior Ministers have played a central role in the process and in developing a strategy to provide a co-ordinated cross-departmental approach to the European Union. Such an approach should also incorporate the views of Northern Ireland representatives on European bodies and the wider community.

A coherent and co-ordinated approach will facilitate us in our aim of ensuring that Northern Ireland takes its place as an active region of Europe, and that it participates appropriately and effectively. Any future changes in ministerial roles and responsibilities will be communicated to the Assembly.

Mr Gibson: How does the Office of the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister reconcile that reply with the ever expanding and ever more costly all-Ireland bodies and harmonisation activities? How can that be reconciled with last week's outburst by the First Minister, especially when he has pledged, through the Belfast Agreement, to create union with the European Union member state that he has criticised?

The Deputy First Minister: I am not sure that I can reconcile the question with the issue under discussion. The Member has made several points. In my reply to the original question, I emphasised how the Executive deal with European Union matters and I stressed the need to address all those issues in the interest of Northern Ireland. Equally, we pursue all our responsibilities and all the opportunities that arise under the Belfast Agreement in the area of North/South co-operation, not only through the implementation bodies' work, but in the other sectoral fields of the North/South Ministerial Council and, indeed, more widely. That includes dealing with some of the implications of European Union issues, which is something on which the First Minister and I have previously reported. We have reported on such matters as the institutional format and various plenary meetings of the North/South Ministerial Council. It is precisely in the context of many of the European Union issues that

have been generated that it makes sense to co-operate and co-ordinate thoughts and approaches with the South.

Mr A Maginness: I welcome the Office of the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister's emphasis on the importance of European affairs to Northern Ireland. I also note, however, that the Programme for Government gives a commitment to the establishment of a European Union forum. What consideration are the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister giving to the monitoring of the European Convention, which has already been established and which was referred to earlier, and to mirroring the National Forum on Europe, which has been set up in the Republic? Can the Deputy First Minister offer a timescale for the establishment of a European Union forum?

The Deputy First Minister: In an answer to a previous question, I said that we hoped to track the work of the European Convention fully. We have already been exploring, with other regions, how we might best influence the Convention's work. That was discussed at the Joint Ministerial Committee meeting earlier this month.

The Office of the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister is committed to ensuring that a wide range of sectors in Northern Ireland society have the opportunity to influence European Union policy, and that includes the work of the European Convention. We are considering how best to achieve that. We do not want to restrict the contribution that interested parties could make to the European Convention because there are many other wider issues as well. The Member rightly refers to the commitment to a forum in the Programme for Government, and we hope to set out our plans in greater detail in the next couple of months.

Travelling Community

7. **Mr Byrne** asked the Office of the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister what contacts it has had with other Departments regarding the issue of traveller contact sites.

(AQO 1060/01)

The Deputy First Minister: The Minister for Social Development is responsible for policy on traveller sites. The Office of the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister has had contact with his Department on some related issues, including responsibility for transit sites, provisions outlined in the draft housing Bill and illegal encampments.

Mr Byrne: In Omagh there are two permanent accommodation traveller sites, one in Ballynamullan and one in Tattykeel. However, occasionally we have a problem with transit travellers who come to the Gortrush industrial complex. Will the Minister agree to expedite proceedings to address the problem of establishing transit traveller sites in provincial towns such as Omagh, or other towns across Northern Ireland, which have this problem?

The Deputy First Minister: As I have stated, traveller accommodation is a matter for the Department for Social Development. The Minister for Social Development is minded to transfer responsibility for traveller transit sites to the Housing Executive, and provision to facilitate this has been made in the draft housing Bill. The First Minister and I agree with this approach, and we were eager to see it. It is important to ensure that appropriate and sufficient accommodation is provided for travellers throughout Northern Ireland.

Review of the Parades Commission

8. **Mr Dalton** asked the Office of the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister whether a formal reply has been made to the review of the Parades Commission.

(AQO 1029/01)

The First Minister: We have not jointly replied to the review on the Parades Commission.

Mr Dalton: Does the First Minister agree that the improvement of community relations and the economic regeneration of Northern Ireland will be helped only by a complete and robust review of the Parades Commission legislation? Does he agree that the current legislation should be replaced with a fair and common sense approach based on proper respect for the principles and human rights contained in articles 9 and 11 of the European Convention on Human Rights?

The First Minister: I would add article 17 to that catalogue. These are matters to be addressed, but the first points that the Member made about what could be achieved in tourism, economic matters and community relations show the prize for everyone in Northern Ireland if we can find a way of resolving this issue so that it does not continue to pour so much poison into community relations and to damage in so many ways prospects for the development of tourism. Whether the review on community relations can contribute to achieving that goal is another matter, but it is not something that we can hive off to other people. We all ought to be aware of what could be achieved, particularly with regard to community relations, if our society could come to an accommodation on how to deal with the issue.

The Chairperson of the Committee of the Centre (Mr Poots): Is it not amazing that Mr Trimble, the First Minister, has stated today that the Office of the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister has not put in a response to the review? He then says that the matter will have to be dealt with. If the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister cannot agree a response, there is little hope for an agreed response in Northern Ireland. Surely their failure in this instance is evidence of a failure of their Office to operate, and their inability to work together, to bring forward issues.

The First Minister: I find it difficult to treat that “crocodile tears” question in any way seriously. There is

a serious issue here. The Member knows very well the extent to which the issue is divisive. I stated in my response to Mr Dalton’s question the desirability of getting our society to resolve the matter. Mr Poots cannot sit on the sidelines on it.

Official Visits to the USA

12. **Mr Beggs** asked the Office of the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister to make a statement on the recent meetings held in Washington with the American Administration. (AQO 1031/01)

The First Minister: We met President Bush during our visit last week to Washington to attend functions arranged by the United States Administration and other organisations as part of their St Patrick’s week events. We updated him on progress with devolution and expressed our thanks for ongoing support from the US Administration. At a subsequent meeting with the US Secretary of State, Colin Powell, we reflected on recent developments, progress by the Executive and the assistance and expertise that might be available through the US Administration in carrying out some of the major policy reviews.

Mr Beggs: How useful did the First Minister find the Northern Ireland Bureau in Washington to be during his recent trip to the United States? Does he believe that the bureau is doing everything necessary to promote Northern Ireland?

The First Minister: The highlight of our trip in February was the reception to mark the expansion of the Northern Ireland Bureau and its relocation to downtown Washington, where it is easily accessible and a marvellous “front window” for Northern Ireland. It is hoped that that will expand the bureau’s work and effectiveness in promoting Northern Ireland. On that occasion, and last week, we had the pleasure of meeting the Scottish Executive’s sole representative in Washington. We look forward to co-operating with her and with other regional officers in the city. That is one of the many ways in which we can take advantage of the connections that are made as a result of devolution throughout the UK.

Mr S Wilson: When in Washington, did the First Minister meet anyone from the Irish Republic? If so, did he convey to them his thought that they were members of a “pathetic, sectarian state”?

The First Minister: We were all interested to see the speed with which the Democratic Unionist Party sprang to the defence of the Irish Republic in that respect. We thought that that was an interesting development, and it is a strange development if the DUP has changed its policy on how the party should view the Irish Republic.

Age Discrimination

13. **Mr M Murphy** asked the Office of the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister what steps are

being taken to introduce a single equality Bill to outlaw age discrimination and establish an age directorate within the Equality Commission. (AQO 1024/01)

The Deputy First Minister: We are determined to tackle age discrimination, and early next year we will issue for consultation our proposals for doing that. We intend that the legislation will be in operation before the deadline of 2006 that was imposed by the EU Directive. Many complex issues must be addressed, and we will take account of expert advice and comments.

Mr M Murphy: Further to that, when does the Deputy First Minister you expect to establish an age director in the Equality Commission?

The Deputy First Minister: As I said, we will present our proposals next year. We need to recognise the different lines of responsibility and accountability that would be relevant to the appointment of an age director. Our Department will consider any proposal for the funding of an age director in the Equality Commission.

Racial Inequality

14. **Mr McMenamin** asked the Office of the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister to outline (a) any progress made on the Programme for Government's commitment to tackling racial inequality; (b) if the relevant agencies have been consulted; and (c) the time-scale for the strategy document to be published.

(AQO 1061/01)

The First Minister: In fulfilling our Programme for Government commitment, we are developing a policy to tackle racial inequality with the assistance of Departments, statutory agencies — including the Equality Commission — and voluntary bodies. That is being carried out through the promoting social inclusion working group on ethnic minorities, with a view to implementing it this year. The voluntary agencies represented on the group are the Northern Ireland Council for Ethnic Minorities, the Chinese Welfare Association, the Indian Community Centre and the Multi-Cultural Resource Centre. Before the Executive agree the document, we intend to have a full and open consultation, which will include minority ethnic voluntary organisations.

3.00 pm

Mr McMenamin: Who will the members of the working group be, and what is the rationale for their selection?

The First Minister: I am not in a position to supply that information. I will write to the Member giving him details.

Review of Public Administration

15. **Mr McClarty** asked the Office of the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister if a panel of independent

experts has been appointed to oversee the review of public administration. (AQO 1030/01)

The Deputy First Minister: The Executive are currently identifying experts with the level of expertise, experience and credibility necessary to take on a prominent role in an exercise of this scale and complexity.

We are seeking to appoint a small number of high-level experts to mentor and monitor the review team throughout the process. These people are likely to be experts in governance and organisational change. They will work closely with the core team in order to help shape the strategy for the review of public administration and actively participate in comparative studies and consultation exercises. They will also have a direct line to the Minister should there be a difference of opinion between them and officials.

Mr Speaker: Unfortunately Mr McClarty will not be able to ask a supplementary question, because the time for questions to the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister is now up.

CULTURE, ARTS AND LEISURE

Mr Speaker: Question 3, in the name of Mr McGrady, question 4, in the name of Ms Lewsley, and question 10, in the name of Mr Dallat, have been withdrawn and will receive written answers.

I have also been advised that the scrolling function on the annunciators is operating in a hiccupping fashion at present. I am keen to ensure that all Members are aware that, immediately after Question Time, there is to be a statement from the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure on Belfast's bid to be named European Capital of Culture.

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

Tax Incentives

1. **Mr McElduff** asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure if he will consult with Dr Jim McDaid TD, Minister for Tourism, Sport and Recreation and with Ms Síle de Valera TD, Minister for Arts, Heritage, Gaeltacht and the Islands to lobby for tax incentives on an all-Ireland basis for sportspeople and artists; and to make a statement. (AQO 1021/01)

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure (Mr McGimpsey): Northern Ireland is part of the UK tax system, and benefits from significant fiscal subvention from the Treasury to finance public spending. It would be entirely inappropriate to break parity with the UK tax system to create an all-Ireland tax incentive scheme for sportspeople and artists. Therefore, I have no plans to discuss all-Ireland tax incentives for sportspeople and artists with Dr Jim McDaid TD or Ms Síle de Valera TD.

Mr McElduff: Many sportspeople and artists in the North disagree with the Minister's view of the relevance of this matter. Will he explore the positive initiatives that Minister Michael D Higgins took during his tenure as Minister for the Arts, Culture and the Gaeltacht? Will the Minister talk to Mr Michael D Higgins and others who have approached this question positively, and will he make a statement?

Mr McGimpsey: I assume that Mr McElduff is referring to the Republic of Ireland's Taxes Consolidation Act 1997. That Act does not exempt artists, for example, from taxation, although it does allow certain exemptions for elite artists and sportspeople who are already high earners. I take the view — although Mr McElduff does not share it — that people should not have a special tax regime to themselves simply because they are high earners or are wealthy. Everyone should pay appropriate rates of tax. We should not create special rates of tax for people who feel that they are paying more than they should because they are high earners.

No one from Northern Ireland has said to me that sportspeople and artists are facing special disadvantage in Northern Ireland or in the UK. If they did so, I might consider some form of lobbying on the tax regime. The taxing authority comes from London and we are beneficiaries of large subventions. It would be appropriate to carry out any lobbying in London, and not with Republic of Ireland Ministers in Dublin.

Lisburn Library

2. **Mr Poots** asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure what progress has been made on the private finance initiative scheme to provide a new library in Lisburn. (AQO 1051/01)

Mr McGimpsey: When the Member asked about library provision in Lisburn in November 2000, I reported that the South Eastern Education and Library Board was exploring the possibility of providing a new library under the private finance initiative (PFI). I am pleased to be able to tell the Member that there has been progress. The South Eastern Education and Library Board set up a project board to continue that progress. It produced an outline business case that examined options for the provision of a library and associated costs, which the Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure approved in February 2001. That approval enabled the project board to initiate the PFI procurement process by advertising in the Official Journal of the European Commission (OJEC) so that it could assess potential private sector interest in a PFI project. The project board has shortlisted companies to be invited to negotiate.

Mr Poots: I welcome the news that companies have been shortlisted. When will work commence on site? When will a library that is fit for Ulster's second city replace facilities that are fit only for a village?

Mr McGimpsey: The South Eastern Education and Library Board has prioritised Lisburn. The previous Administration directed the project along the PFI route, which is why it is continuing as such. Progress has been made.

I am aware of the need for a library for Lisburn and of the need for support. However, Lisburn library has a capital cost of £3.4 million, which is more than the Department's entire capital budget. PFI is a possible means of covering the investment deficit. If it does not do so, the Department will examine appropriate alternatives.

Mr Davis: Given that Lisburn has become a city and that that takes in its outlying areas, what progress has been made as regards Dunmurry and Moira libraries?

Mr McGimpsey: My Department inherited a capital investment programme for libraries throughout Northern Ireland that was in serious deficit. Little money had been spent on libraries, including Lisburn's, for several years. Lisburn library is now the top priority of the South Eastern Education and Library Board; Bangor library is its second highest priority and Newtownards library its third. However, all three priorities need to be addressed quickly. Moira and Dunmurry libraries are in poor condition also — they are inadequate and require capital investment. An economic appraisal of Dunmurry library will be conducted next year, and one is planned for Moira also.

Golden Jubilee

5. **Mr Gibson** asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to comment on the uptake of grants for HM The Queen's Golden Jubilee celebrations. (AQO 1020/01)

Mr McGimpsey: Details of the Department's Golden Jubilee non-lottery grants scheme were released in October 2001; there were two deadlines for applications. By the initial deadline of 30 November 2001, 11 applications had been received, 10 of which were eligible for funding. By the second deadline, which was extended to 1 February 2002 due to the postal strike, 261 applications had been received. Those applications are currently being assessed and will be passed to the Golden Jubilee advisory panel for approval. All applicants will receive postal notification of the success or otherwise of their application by the beginning of April. In addition to the non-lottery grant scheme, groups have until 31 August to apply for funding through the lottery's Awards for All scheme.

Mr Gibson: Given the poor response as regards applicants, and upon reflection after the debate that took place on 19 February 2002, does the Minister concede that he should have responded positively to the request to give every primary schoolchild in Northern Ireland a memento of the Golden Jubilee? Will he consider a change of heart?

Mr McGimpsey: I do not know if it is deliberate, but Mr Gibson is being disingenuous in asking that question. I have asked myself on several occasions, including in response to Mr Gibson, if I believed that every school-child had a right to a memento of the Golden Jubilee. The answer is "Yes." Only a couple of weeks ago, I gave that answer to Mr Gibson and others when I said that a range of options for a memento of the Golden Jubilee are being considered. Those options include bursaries for schools, CD-ROMS and mementos such as medals and cups. Mementos seem to be the preferred option, but I will continue to consider the others. Discussions are at an advanced stage, and I will announce my plans to the House in due course.

Mr O'Neill: It is somewhat disappointing for the Minister to have to announce that the uptake is not quite what he or, indeed, the House would like to see. Does the Minister agree that such a celebration could be perceived as monocultural? As such, it would contrast starkly with the multicultural, multinational, worldwide and city-wide celebrations of St Patrick's Day. Does the Minister agree that every effort should be made to support and finance properly all St Patrick's Day parades in Northern Ireland to achieve a similar outcome? In that context, does he believe that the First Minister's recent comments at the UUP party conference were helpful?

Mr McGimpsey: I counted four questions. I will begin with the first. Mr O'Neill said that the uptake was disappointing. It is not disappointing, in so far as the budget is heavily oversubscribed. I can make a strong argument for the fund to be increased. The uptake is related only to the number of celebrations that will take place; it is not about money. The sums are small amounts of seedcorn money to allow some groups to proceed with their planned celebrations. However, I am certain that many events will go ahead whether or not they receive support. The Member should not hang too much comfort on the current numbers, because undoubtedly they will continue to rise.

The Golden Jubilee celebrations are not monocultural. They will cover 54 countries. The celebrations are regional, national and international and go to every corner of the world. The Golden Jubilee will be celebrated throughout almost the entire Commonwealth. I remind Members that the Commonwealth contains the world's oldest democracy — our own — and the world's largest democracy — India. It contains some of the richest and poorest countries in the world, and covers almost one third of the entire population of the globe. There will be celebrations to mark the Golden Jubilee throughout the Commonwealth and, indeed, beyond. The Commonwealth cannot be much more multicultural or multi-ethnic than that.

St Patrick's Day has been supported widely in many areas, especially in the United States, as well as in Ireland. London had its first St Patrick's Day celebration at the weekend. St Patrick is part of our shared heritage,

and attempts to politicise St Patrick have done that heritage no service whatsoever. Although some problems in Belfast appear to have been resolved, it is sad that the city does not have a St Patrick's Day parade that is seen as being shared properly by the entire community, both in Belfast and throughout Northern Ireland. That issue must be addressed.

The question about the First Minister is political. He is on record as saying that the Irish Republic is a pathetic, sectarian state. That is his view. It is up to Members on the opposite side of the House, if they are genuine in their own political vision and philosophy, to persuade him that that view is wrong.

3.15 pm

If a Unionist believes that the Republic is a sectarian state, and if the opposite side of the House really believes what it says, it is its job to persuade him otherwise and not to take the high-handed, high-horsed approach of requiring him to apologise for his views or for being a Unionist.

Sports Clubs

6. **Mr J Wilson** asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure what assistance can be given to sports clubs that are facing high rates bills as a result of having professional coaches on their staff. (AQO 1052/01)

Mr McGimpsey: Rates bills for sports clubs are not a matter for the Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure. They are determined by the Valuation and Lands Agency of the Department of Finance and Personnel. However, I appreciate the financial pressures faced by sports clubs as a result of having professional coaches on their staff, together with the possible implications in respect of current rating legislation. I understand that the Valuation and Lands Agency is considering the position of sports clubs that employ professionals, either as coaches or as players. I do not wish to anticipate the outcome of that evaluation, but it would not be appropriate for me to engineer a scheme specifically designed to assist clubs that face high rates bills. I encourage sports clubs to make full use of the assistance that is available through the Sports Council for Northern Ireland and, where possible, to take advantage of new Government-backed financial and tax relief opportunities that have recently arisen. Those were explained in the consultation paper, 'Promoting Sport in the Community', issued by Her Majesty's Treasury.

Mr J Wilson: I thank the Minister for his reply. However, as he has responsibility for sport, does he not share my concern and the concern of some sporting clubs that, by trying to improve their standards, those clubs may bring about their own demise when faced with hefty rates bills?

Mr McGimpsey: Assistance is made available to sports clubs, primarily through the Sports Council for

Northern Ireland and its safe sports grounds scheme, club sport capital funding, and such club development initiatives as Clubmark, Coaching Northern Ireland, et cetera. A raft of measures is available for community amateur sports clubs.

Until now, I have never heard it said that the very existence of sports clubs is threatened by their having to pay rates as a result of having the money to employ professional coaches and players. The Valuation and Lands Agency regards a club as a profit-making organisation if it employs professional coaches and players, so the club is liable for rates. The Valuation and Lands Agency and the Department of Finance and Personnel are currently evaluating that legislation to judge whether that interpretation is correct. We must wait for the outcome of that evaluation before examining any possible legislative changes. I repeat that other opportunities are available that outweigh the problem of a rates bill.

Mr M Murphy: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. My local GAA clubs pay very high rates. Given that they provide training facilities for youths on a non-profit-making basis, does the Minister not agree with me and with Mr Wilson that those clubs should be encouraged, and that the imposition of high rates bills is of detriment to them? Go raibh maith agat.

Mr McGimpsey: My understanding is that the GAA is rated as an amateur association and, in general, does not attract rates. The specific application of legislation is a matter for the Valuation and Lands Agency. The agency is currently examining the legislation. Therefore, it would be more appropriate to address that type of question to the Minister of Finance and Personnel.

Mr Hilditch: I declare an interest at the outset. Once again, I draw the Minister's attention to the close season of May, June, July and August, during which high rates are still charged despite the fact that sports grounds cannot be used because of annual maintenance. Has the Minister spoken to the Minister of Finance and Personnel about that?

Mr McGimpsey: The short answer is that I have not had discussions, either with officials from the Department of Finance and Personnel or with the Minister, about the close season. The issue relates to how the Valuation and Lands Agency (VLA) applies the legislation. I advise Colleagues to read the Chancellor's proposal for promoting sport in the community, which allows for tax exemptions or tax relief for clubs in respect of fundraising or income made from property rental.

I also advise the Member to read the Charity Commission's statement. It proposes to offer charitable status to clubs that are genuinely amateur. Those clubs that are granted charitable status do not pay rates. Therefore, apart from the options available from the VLA, there are ample avenues to be explored. Clubs must make the best use of the many opportunities that are available to them

from bodies such as the Sports Council for Northern Ireland and the Charity Commission, and also from the Chancellor's proposal. Clubs should also attempt to negotiate with the officials in the VLA who are considering the legislation.

Sir Samuel Ferguson

7. **Dr Ian Adamson** asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to consider the promotion of the works of Sir Samuel Ferguson, the nineteenth-century poet and antiquarian, as an example of our shared inheritance in this Golden Jubilee year. (AQO 1058/01)

Mr McGimpsey: One of the Department's aims is to promote and celebrate individual creativity. The Arts Council of Northern Ireland decides how much support should be given to a particular artist. Although there are no plans to promote the work of Sir Samuel Ferguson, some of his manuscripts are accessible publicly in the Linen Hall Library.

In the current year, the Department has set aside funds to promote the Golden Jubilee celebrations, which are aimed primarily at community events rather than at the promotion of individual artists. The closing date for applications was 1 February 2002. Although no such applications were made, the promotion of individual artists is not ruled out.

Dr Adamson: Will the Minister consider the creation of themed libraries, for example in the city of Lisburn, relating to the three masterpieces of Ulster and Irish literature — Ferguson's 'Congal', Seamus Heaney's 'Sweeney Astray' and Flann O'Brien's 'At Swim-Two-Birds' — that emanate from the seventh-century Battle of Moira?

Mr McGimpsey: Dr Adamson's suggestion is interesting, and is worth expansion and discussion because themed libraries might be a way to inform new generations and to increase the knowledge and understanding of our shared literary heritage. The library in Lisburn is the responsibility of the South Eastern Education and Library Board, and the Member should argue the case for a themed library with its officials. Aside from honouring Sir Samuel Ferguson, whom Yeats described as the finest Irish poet of the nineteenth century, I am sure that Members can think of several other appropriate ways to use our libraries and museums to create better knowledge and understanding.

Townland Names

8. **Mr McCarthy** asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure, pursuant to AQO 845/01, what discussions he has had with other Departments to make use of the proposed common address file to facilitate the use of townland names in correspondence. (AQO 1054/01)

Mr McGimpsey: The Ordnance Survey of Northern Ireland represents my Department on that project, and there have been several discussions with other agencies, including the Valuation and Lands Agency, the Land Registers of Northern Ireland, Planning Service, Water Service, Roads Service and Environment and Heritage Service. In addition, discussions have been held with the Northern Ireland Housing Executive, Consignia and representatives of district councils. Those involved agreed on the need to include townland names in addresses, and I look forward to Departments' agreeing to use townland names in their correspondence.

The common address file is a simple means by which Departments identify the appropriate townland name for any address in Northern Ireland. The file will make it much easier for Departments to use this valuable element of our cultural and linguistic heritage in their correspondence.

Mr McCarthy: As the Minister said, townland names are a vital part of our rich heritage that must be promoted at every opportunity. Last year, my motion to preserve those names was supported unanimously. I am glad to hear that the Minister has been speaking to other Departments about this. However, I am disappointed to see letters addressed to my constituents without townland names. Will the Minister raise this with his Executive Colleagues at the next Executive meeting on 28 March?

Mr McGimpsey: The Executive have pre-empted Mr McCarthy by agreeing to fund the common address file, which is being developed by the Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure and the Public Record Office. We all agree on the need to include townland names in the address record. We are only beginning to develop the system. To date, discussions have been technical, but they will advance as we make progress.

The common address file will be launched this summer, and we will take steps to implement it so that townland names will be included in addresses as they are recorded on Ordnance Survey maps, which record whether the origin of a name is English, Irish or Ulster-Scots. The names are unique to Ireland and Northern Ireland — they do not exist on the mainland. The file is the best way to provide them, and the funding has been agreed.

Mr Armstrong: Does the Minister agree that the introduction of postcodes led to the decline in the use of townland names and that many people still prefer to use those names in their address?

Mr McGimpsey: By introducing postcodes in the early 1970s, the Post Office was responsible for the greatest undermining of the use of townland names for generations. Many people still insist on using them, but the decline in their use is one of the factors that prompted us to ensure their inclusion in the common address file. Had we continued as we were, they would have disappeared.

Motor Sport

9. **Mr Paisley Jnr** asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to detail the issues of a motor sport nature that he intends to bring to the next meeting of the Executive. (AQO 1023/01)

Mr McGimpsey: I do not intend to bring any motor sport issues to the attention of the Executive at present. As the Member is aware, the governing bodies of motor sport — the Motorcycle Union of Ireland (Ulster Centre), the Association of Northern Ireland Car Clubs, Northern Ireland Karting Association and the Motorcycle Racing Association — have been working with the Sports Council for Northern Ireland to develop a strategic plan for two- and four-wheeled motor sports. The plan, which will map out the governing bodies' vision for the future of the sports, is currently subject to public consultation, which will end on 12 April 2002 when the Sports Council will advise on the way forward. I am unable to comment further at this stage.

Mr Paisley Jnr: Given what the Minister has said, we will not have a premier motor sports facility by the end of this Assembly's term — sad news for everyone involved. How will the failure to deliver on this expectation, which was heightened after the tragic events of recent years, be explained to those who have taken a great interest in achieving something tangible for motor sports in our country?

3.30 pm

Mr McGimpsey: As far as a premier motor sport facility is concerned, that is a matter for the motor sports industry. It is not for me to impose a solution, whether Mr Paisley Jnr agrees or not. Expectations have not been raised by the Sports Council for Northern Ireland, by my Department, or by the governing bodies of motor sport.

We must look to the governing bodies that are working on a strategic plan for two- and four-wheeled vehicles. It is wrong to look at a premier motor sports facility in isolation. The governing bodies are examining several aspects of the industry, including future vision, the key milestones to be achieved by 2007 and the feeder plans that are coming in from various parts of motor sports to promote image, events, funding, participation, training, venues and facilities, sports management, relationships and administration. Those aspects are all part and parcel of this issue. A holistic approach is needed. It is not enough to spend large sums of money on a premier motor sports facility in the hope that that will cure the problem — it will not. Only those involved in the sport know and have an understanding of what the sport needs.

We look forward to the consultation period ending on 12 April and to taking the next steps. I will be listening to the views of the motor sports industry on future facilities. There are a range of options including Nutts Corner, Kilroot and Ballycarry. Those options can be

explored if the motor sports industry chooses to do so and if the resources can be found.

Mr Neeson: Is the Minister aware of the enthusiasm that greeted the display of the model for the proposed project at Kilroot at the recent motorcycle show?

Madam Deputy Speaker: I must ask the Minister to respond in writing as time is up.

AGRICULTURE AND RURAL DEVELOPMENT

Madam Deputy Speaker: We move now to questions to the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development, Ms Rodgers. I advise Members that Questions 1, 3, 6 and 15, in the names of Mr John Dallat, Mr Séamus Close, Mr Eddie McGrady and Ms Patricia Lewsley, have been withdrawn and will receive written answers.

Botulism Research

2. **Mr K Robinson** asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development whether she has any plans to increase or more specifically target spending on research and development into animal health and disease in the light of current problems with botulism.

(AQO 1046/01)

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development (Ms Rodgers): I am well aware of the increased number of suspected cases of botulism in cattle in Northern Ireland in recent years. My officials are already engaged in the laboratory examination of carcasses and samples and have begun a detailed farm investigation into the possible causes of the problem; they are visiting affected farms and providing veterinary public health advice to herd owners. They have also alerted all veterinary practices and divisional veterinary officers in Northern Ireland to this problem, issued detailed guidance on methods of diagnosis, had discussions with the Food Standards Agency and made representations to the Veterinary Medicines Directorate to improve the availability of a suitable vaccine to protect cattle at risk since no vaccine is currently licensed for use in the UK.

Finally, in the light of the well-recognised worldwide difficulty in confirming a diagnosis of botulism, my veterinary scientists have already initiated collaborative work with a laboratory in England to develop improved methods of diagnosis based on novel and specialist technology developed at the Veterinary Sciences Division.

Mr K Robinson: I thank the Minister for her full and frank reply. However, will the Minister tell the House how many botulism cases are under investigation in Northern Ireland, where those cases are located, if there are any geographical clusters in those locations and if a common cause, or range of causes, has been isolated? Furthermore, taking into account the risk to human

health from some forms of botulism, will the Minister assure the House that no risk to human health exists at present?

Ms Rodgers: During the past three years, suspected cases of bovine botulism have been reported to the Department from approximately 98 farms, including 41 farms in 2001.

Veterinary Service Division vets have visited 46 such farms and have carried out detailed epidemiological investigations on 31 affected farms during 2001-02. The epidemiological findings suggest a link to poultry waste in 90% of the 31 farms. Twenty-one affected farms were situated within 500 metres of poultry houses. Poultry litter had been spread on the pasture used by affected animals for grazing on three farms, and on fields adjacent to the grazing on two farms. A further two farms had poultry litter stacked on the premises. I cannot give precise details regarding areas, but the area around Donaghcloney and Banbridge is one area where there have been many cases.

Regarding health implications, I was quite distressed recently to read what seemed to be a briefed piece of journalism in my local newspaper. It clearly implied that there could be serious health risks. I want to lay this to rest as it could have serious implications for the industry. It is a matter for the Food Standards Agency, but, as far as I understand it, the danger to health is remote. In case there should be a danger to health, farmers who have cases of botulism are advised not to put their cattle into the food chain. That is merely a precautionary step. My understanding is that the possibility of implications for human health is remote. However, this is a matter for the Food Standards Agency.

Vision Exercise

4. **Dr McDonnell** asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development what progress has been made on the development of an action plan for the vision exercise; and to make a statement. (AQO 1040/01)

Ms Rodgers: I discussed the consultation exercise with the Committee for Agriculture and Rural Development on 22 February, and my Executive Committee Colleagues endorsed my approach on the way forward at their meeting on 28 February. Last Monday in the Assembly I announced the implementation of 11 measures that had broad support in the consultation exercise and can be implemented within the existing budget. An action plan covering most of the remaining recommendations will be published in June 2002.

Dr McDonnell: I want to probe this a little further. Will the action plan include a new entrants or early retirement scheme?

Ms Rodgers: I understand the interest among farmers and others in new entrants and early retirement schemes.

The vision steering group, among others, raised questions about value for money in respect of an early retirement scheme. For this reason, in the first half of the year I commissioned a consultancy study to review the evidence. The study was inconclusive, coming down not strongly, but nevertheless, in favour of an early retirement scheme and against a new entrants scheme.

In making decisions on these subjects, I need to exercise extreme care, as an early retirement scheme would use up virtually all the uncommitted modulation receipts and Treasury match funding available to me. There must be clear evidence of the benefit to taxpayers and the agrifood industry as a whole, as well as to the recipients of scheme money. I have, therefore, commissioned research to be carried out by Queen's University Belfast and University College Dublin to examine the possible economic, social and environmental benefits of such schemes. A report is due in July 2002, and once I have the report I will make a decision on the recommendation in the vision report for a new entrants scheme.

Incidentally, the vision report did not recommend early retirement. It recommended facilitation of early retirement — but not an early retirement scheme — and a new entrants scheme. At present, I have not ruled out either scheme, but the new entrants scheme has been recommended and has support in parts of the industry. It would probably use up fewer resources than an early retirement scheme. However, at this stage I have not made a decision either way, and I will not do so until I am in possession of all the implications.

Mr McHugh: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Much of the vision document is dedicated to animal health and animal health targets being met, not only by farmers but also by the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development. How can the vision be realised if the Department is not meeting its present animal health targets, for example, the removal of brucellosis reactors in a particular timescale in areas such as south Armagh?

Ms Rodgers: I am aware of the problems caused by the increase in brucellosis, and I have told my chief veterinary officer that I want him to consider the eradication of brucellosis as a priority.

At the moment, veterinary and ancillary staff are being recruited to deal with the problem. This is in addition to the recent appointment of new evaluation officers. Additional staff have been moved into the three high-incidence areas around Armagh, Newry and Enniskillen.

The Department is reorganising staff at markets and abattoirs with a view to providing extra resources for brucellosis duties. Additionally, the use of a bulk milk-sampling programme in dairy herds has allowed additional staff to be allocated to the high-incidence areas. I am pleased to say that the backlog in removing animals has

now been cleared due to an additional abattoir. From now on we should be able to meet our targets.

Farm Waste Disposal

5. **Mr Savage** asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development what steps she has taken to ensure that farm slurry and effluent waste is dealt with effectively and safely. (AQO 1033/01)

Ms Rodgers: I understand how important it is to ensure that farm waste and slurry is dealt with properly to reduce the risk of pollution. I have secured £6.1 million from Executive programme funds for a targeted farm waste management scheme. The proposed scheme is aimed at minimising farm source pollution, which is contributing to water quality problems. It will be targeted at watercourses that agricultural pollution most affects.

I have also secured £0.9 million for a nutrient management scheme. The proposed scheme is aimed at minimising the contribution of agriculture to the phosphate overload in soils, which is contributing to the eutrophication of fresh water in Northern Ireland. It is likely that the scheme will be targeted at farmers in parts of the Lough Neagh catchment. I will announce the details of both schemes as soon as state aid approval from the EU Commission has been obtained. Until then I cannot give a definitive date for the opening of the schemes or announce the first catchments to be targeted.

Mr Savage: The Minister will be aware of the possibilities of transforming farm waste into electricity for the national grid using anaerobic digestion systems that are similar to the model in the south-west of England and involve groups of farms in the production of green energy. This would help Northern Ireland to meet its green energy quotas; something we are at present failing to do. In the light of this, what action has the Minister taken to nurture and develop such schemes in Northern Ireland?

Ms Rodgers: The lead responsibility for energy matters lies with the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment. However, my Department generally supports the development of renewable energy sources such as anaerobic digestion, which is a method of extracting useful amounts of methane from stored livestock slurries for use as an energy source.

My departmental officials have provided information and advice to a small number of anaerobic digestion projects in Northern Ireland. Recently, a person approached me about the issue; therefore I am aware of it.

Young Dairy Farmers

7. **Mr Gibson** asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development what opportunities exist for young farmers wishing to set up a dairy farm. (AQO 1017/01)

Ms Rodgers: Young farmers wishing to set up a dairy farm must first secure a milk quota and a milk licence authorising the use of the premises for the production of milk for human consumption. To this end my Department provides guidance on the standard required before such a licence may be issued.

When I visited a dairy farm earlier this month, I emphasised the vision report recommendations, particularly those concerned with up-skilling, reskilling, information and communications technology, benchmarking and challenge programmes.

3.45 pm

All those will be of interest to the younger members of the industry. Support is also available from my Department in the form of training courses to develop the knowledge, understanding and skills required, and on how to apply best practice. I have also asked for primary research to be undertaken on the potential economic, social and environmental benefits of an early retirement scheme and a new entrants scheme. I expect to receive the results in the summer, and I hope that that will provide a basis on which to make a decision on the way forward.

I want to advise that the wider issue of financial support for the dairy sector falls under the common agricultural policy. Recently, I strongly lobbied for the existing support measures for export refunds to be fully used to help support exports of milk powders by Northern Ireland processors. However, any direct support to the dairy sector would have to be agreed with the EU in advance and would prove extremely difficult under the state aid rules.

Mr Gibson: I thank the Minister for a full reply. I am not sure that I could recommend to many of my young constituents that they embark on a career in the dairy industry, because the acquisition of quota is now not always a financially profitable move.

I ask the Minister to consider another concern in west Tyrone. One of the longest established dairy companies has been Nestlé in Omagh. It has recently been taken over by Lakeland Dairies. Although there is some verbal guarantee that the jobs of over 100 people, and the farm collections, will continue, there is concern. The Minister is probably aware of that, but will she give us a guarantee that she will monitor the new situation? This is one of the few industries left in Northern Ireland. Nestlé had a broad base; was involved in world markets; was into powered milk; and had the means of utilising large quantities of milk and many milk products. Will the Minister monitor the situation for us in the future?

Ms Rodgers: Clearly, I would be concerned about anything of that nature — of any commercial decisions that would affect dairy farmers. I know how dependent the dairy farmers in that area are on Nestlé. However, the issue is not one for my Department but for the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment.

Mr Armstrong: The Minister will understand that the milk industry is currently not very profitable, with the price of milk coming down to below 15p a litre. Has the Minister been in contact with any EC Commissioners or members about how they could possibly increase profitability in the dairy industry?

Ms Rodgers: Mr Armstrong will be aware that I have been in touch at all stages, through ministerial meetings in London and through the EU Commission, to keep the UK Minister and the Commissioner informed of the serious difficulties encountered by the dairy industry in Northern Ireland because of our dependence on exports. Due to effective lobbying by the industry itself and by me, we have managed to raise the export refund from 300 euros to 500 euros. I will continue to keep the matter under review. I will depend considerably on the industry to keep me informed of all the details, as it has done in recent months, so that I can continue to make the best case for the industry. I can assure the Member that I continue to ensure that both the Commissioner and the UK Minister are fully aware of the problems that concern the industry here because of the reduction in milk prices.

Early Retirement/New Entrants Scheme

8. **Mr A Doherty** asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development when she expects to have the results of the independent study into the merits of an early retirement and/or new entrants scheme for Northern Ireland; and to make a statement. (AQO 1065/01)

Ms Rodgers: I expect to have the results of the study in the summer. Once I have the report, I will decide whether to implement the recommendation in the vision report for a new entrants scheme and will consider the need for an early retirement scheme.

Mr A Doherty: My supplementary question is equally succinct, but crucial: is money available for such schemes?

Ms Rodgers: I thank the Member for his pertinent question. Under the rural development regulation plan, modulation receipts and match funding may be used for the introduction of an early retirement scheme. However, such a scheme would use up virtually all our uncommitted funds. I would, therefore, need to be certain that it would be beneficial in restructuring the industry and would benefit the whole industry.

A new entrants scheme might be financed through match funding only. I understand the interest of farmers and others in such schemes, but there must be clear evidence that they will benefit taxpayers, the whole agri-food industry and recipients of scheme money.

Deliberate Introduction of Diseases

9. **Mr Paisley Jnr** asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to detail any advice she has

received about the deliberate introduction of diseases into the NI herd. (AQO 1018/01)

Ms Rodgers: Several brucellosis cases in which there is a suggestion that the normal spread of the disease did not occur have come to the attention of the Department. Questions arise of how the disease was spread. Some cases will never be resolved, but in cases where sufficient evidence has been gathered by the Department's investigation unit, details are forwarded to the Police Service of Northern Ireland (PSNI) and/or the Department of the Director of Public Prosecutions (DPP) for the consideration of fraud charges. Two such cases exist at present.

On the wider front, the Department is working on a counter-fraud strategy, which will seek to promote an anti-fraud culture in which there are greater efforts to deter, prevent and detect fraud.

Mr Paisley Jnr: In cases where there is insufficient evidence that brucellosis could have been deliberately introduced by injecting a herd, or in any other way, will those farmers be compensated urgently, as they have lost their herd and their livelihood?

Ms Rodgers: If there is insufficient evidence, or if it cannot be proved that fraud occurred, the Department will take the necessary steps to deal with that situation. However, until it has dealt with the cases that it is investigating, it will not be able to make any further decisions.

Rural Development Funding

10. **Mr Kane** asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to outline any plans she has to (a) simplify the application process for farmers applying for rural development funding; and (b) appoint specially trained staff in her Department to assist farmers in applying for rural development funding. (AQO 1043/01)

Ms Rodgers: I am aware that many farmers have difficulties with the application form for the new round of structural funds programmes. In an attempt to address those problems, which are common to many applicants not just farmers, my Department has produced a user-friendly signposting brochure to guide applicants through the various measures. It provides comprehensive guidance notes with the application forms and has held workshops on the rural development programme, at which the application process was explained. The process, which was developed to meet the requirements of the programme and the European Commission, is based around a centralised applications database. It also makes provision for applicants to use a fully paper-based form.

Although I do not have the discretion to change the electronic process, my officials have arranged for manual application forms to be made available to those who do not have access to the Internet. Moreover, my officials in both the rural development and rural enterprise divisions

are available to help those who seek assistance or advice in completing the application forms. I am aware that assistance and advice is also available from the main agricultural organisations in Northern Ireland, and I am sure that they will continue to do everything that they can for their members.

Mr Kane: Will the Minister concede that one of the recommendations of the vision report is to reduce red tape for farmers? Does she realise the extent of farmers' difficulties in making rural development applications, a fact borne out by the level of farmer's applications for funding in comparison with community group applications?

Ms Rodgers: I am aware of the need to reduce the red tape. Some steps have been taken to shorten the integrated administration and control system (IACS) forms. However, we must abide by the European regulations. We do not have discretion or flexibility in applying the criteria that are insisted on. I am aware of the difficulties that farmers encounter. However, those difficulties do not concern the filling out of forms; rather, they concern the process of deciding on a project or how to start one. That is more to do with capacity-building and enabling farmers to apply for projects that fall outside normal farming practices, such as looking after livestock. I am aware of that, and I am looking for a way to build capacity, as we have done in the past, to ensure that farmers are encouraged to benefit from all the possibilities.

Ards SPA/ASSI

11. **Mr McCarthy** asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development what steps she is taking to ensure that local farmers are not disadvantaged by the proposed SPA/ASSI in outer Ards. (AQO 1037/01)

Ms Rodgers: The designation of special protection areas (SPAs) and areas of special scientific interest (ASSIs) is the responsibility of my Colleague, the Minister of the Environment. I understand that most of the proposed SPA/ASSI in outer Ards are on the coastal foreshore, and that relatively little agricultural land is affected. Farmers with land situated in such designated areas may qualify for financial remuneration from the Department of the Environment for any changes to normal farming practice.

I understand that the Department of the Environment is considering the introduction of a management of sensitive sites scheme, which may provide for payments as a result of the extra costs incurred in managing a site to enhance its environmental value. Farmers in, or adjacent to, such designated areas, are also eligible to apply to join the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development's countryside management scheme. We would, of course, ensure that there was no duplication of any aid provided by the Department of the Environment.

Mr McCarthy: In view of the anxiety that the proposal has created for farmers and landowners in the

Strangford constituency, will the Minister ask the Minister of the Environment to extend the consultation period with those concerned parties?

Ms Rodgers: I normally consult the Department of the Environment on all issues that affect rural and farming communities. However, the Member's question should be raised with the Minister of the Environment, because it is not a matter for my Department. It lies with the Department of the Environment.

Mr McCarthy: The Minister is responsible for farmers, and it is farmers who are affected.

Ms Rodgers: However, the Member refers to a matter that is another Department's responsibility. It would be wrong for me to answer the question. I suggest that the Member put his question to the Minister responsible.

Next NSMC Meeting

12. **Dr Hendron** asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to outline (a) the date of the next meeting of the North/South Ministerial Council in agriculture sectoral format; and (b) whether she expects to make progress on the development of common animal health strategies at that meeting. (AQO 1042/01)

Ms Rodgers: The next meeting of the North/South Ministerial Council in its agriculture sectoral format is likely to take place on Friday 19 April. At that meeting, I shall expect to make progress on the development of the North/South animal health strategy. I expect it to be able to arrive at a common approach on controls on imports of livestock and meat products from Great Britain, and on controls on passengers at ports and airports.

I also expect to note progress by the official groups that are charged with looking at areas of mutual interest such as bovine tuberculosis, brucellosis, BSE, scrapie, and sheep and pig identification. All those issues will be important building blocks in the all-island animal health strategy.

Dr Hendron: When will the common animal health strategies be finalised and announced?

4.00 pm

Ms Rodgers: I expect the strategy to be ready by the end of the year.

Brucellosis

13. **Mr Poots** asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development what resources are being dedicated to the eradication of brucellosis. (AQO 1049/01)

Brucellosis in South Armagh

14. **Mr Fee** asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to detail (a) steps being taken to

combat bovine brucellosis in Northern Ireland and, in particular, South Armagh; and (b) any discussions that have taken place with the Irish Government on this issue.

(AQO 1048/01)

TB and Brucellosis Reactors

16. **Mr Byrne** asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development what steps she has taken to speed up the removal of TB and brucellosis reactors from NI farms.

(AQO 1041/01)

Brucellosis and TB

19. **Mrs E Bell** asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development if she will make a statement on the control of brucellosis and TB. (AQO 1034/01)

Ms Rodgers: I understand that questions 13, 14, 16 and 19 have been grouped together. With your permission, Madam Deputy Speaker, I will answer those questions as they relate to brucellosis and tuberculosis.

I appreciate that in some cases there have been delays in removing brucellosis and tuberculosis reactor animals from farms. However, steps have now been taken to alleviate the situation through the appointment of additional evaluation officers and the use of another slaughter plant for cattle in the over-30-months scheme. Occasional delays may still occur, but it is hoped that the arrangements in place will ensure that those delays are minimal.

The existing good co-operation with our counterparts in the South is being enhanced through the working group on brucellosis and tuberculosis established under the North/South Ministerial Council. This more formal and structured footing should be of benefit to both Departments in controlling and eradicating brucellosis. In addition to headquarters staff dealing with brucellosis policy, there are currently more than 50 veterinary field and ancillary staff working on brucellosis. They are supported by administrative staff at divisional veterinary offices and also by laboratory personnel.

The Department of Agriculture and Rural Development continues to deal with brucellosis and tuberculosis through testing programmes. An annual test is carried out for tuberculosis, and biennial blood testing is required for brucellosis. Where infection is found, an intensified testing regime is applied around the infected premises.

Concerns at the level of brucellosis have led the Department to take additional measures. First, we have increased the frequency of testing from biennial to annual in the more heavily infected areas of Armagh, Newry and Enniskillen. Secondly, we have introduced a blood-sampling programme for cows being slaughtered under the over-30-months scheme, and we have introduced a bulk milk-sampling programme. Reviews currently being undertaken by my officials will examine

all aspects of the control measures for both diseases and consider whether further or different measures may be introduced.

Mr Poots: Is it not the case that brucellosis was virtually eradicated in Northern Ireland until an import of infected cattle from Cork, which contributed to the current outbreak? Will the Minister confirm that only six staff from the Ards veterinary office, which covers the Lagan Valley area where there is a particularly bad outbreak, are currently working on brucellosis? Many of those staff are still engaged in work on the foot-and-mouth crisis.

Madam Deputy Speaker: Order. Once again the clock has beaten us, so I must ask the Minister to reply in writing to the supplementary question.

CAPITAL OF CULTURE

Madam Deputy Speaker: I have received notice from the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure that he wishes to make a statement on Belfast's bid to be named European Capital of Culture.

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure (Mr McGimpsey): I want to explain why it is so important that we do everything in our power to help Belfast to win the title of European Capital of Culture in 2008. First, I firmly believe that we have an excellent chance of winning the nomination. I do not see Belfast as somewhere in the middle of the field or at the periphery of the competition. I see Belfast as a front-runner, well placed to lift the prize. I continue occasionally to meet people who do not take our bid seriously, and they include not only the naysayers and those who wear their cynicism as a badge of pride, but those who simply cannot imagine Belfast as a capital of culture. Therefore, I want to talk a little about why Belfast has the potential to be a capital of culture and why it should be formally recognised as such.

There has been some misunderstanding about the term "culture". When we refer to our bid — and this applies equally to the other cities — we are being inclusive, and we include all strands of life that have shaped this city over the years. I am talking about the warp and the weft that have made up the fabric of our city and shaped the character of its inhabitants. We are not taking an exclusive approach. We are not trying to exclude everything that does not obviously encompass art, literature and music. I do not mean to diminish those things in any way — as Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure, I would not allow that to happen. However, I recognise that culture is much more than high art. As I have said before, if we allowed ourselves to be corralled by those constraints then the same cities would be competing for the title year after year. It would end up as Buggins's turn and the concept would become meaningless.

When I say that all of us have contributed to the culture of the city and have been shaped by our collective experiences in it, am I being all things to all men? I am not. I am saying that every man, woman and child can be enriched by living here. Not to take advantage of the possibilities this could bring would be to betray the potential of Belfast.

I want to turn to the huge potential of the bid. We will not be campaigning to win the title for the sake of it. That will not be the objective. As I have said before, we have no intention of investing money and effort to admire a gong that might hang in the city hall. Belfast City Council recognises that and is working with my Department to ensure that the process is inclusive and that maximum benefit comes our way. The Lord Mayor of Belfast and I agree that at the heart of the bid lies the

fact that the total benefits add up to more than simply the sum of the parts. The capture of this award will be a catalyst and will drive a process that will bring the people of Northern Ireland together, not just the people of Belfast. It will bring Ministers in the Executive together to work for tangible benefits for all our people. I will return to that point in a moment.

I have mentioned spending money, and there is no getting away from that. Winning the title involves investing resources. There is much talk nowadays about strategy. Everyone seems to have a strategy for something or other. It is a pity that the word is so overused, because it then becomes devalued and meaningless. Our investment in the push to win the title is a true strategic effort because, if we win, there will be real benefits for everyone in years to come.

Our bid has three themes, and there are objectives associated with each theme. I will not take up time by giving a line-by-line rundown on all of them; however, I want to give a few examples of how this undertaking has tremendous potential to profit us all. One of the themes is titled 'Made in Belfast'. This theme aims to establish a vibrant creative economy and make Belfast a centre for investment as a global cultural destination. It will celebrate the best of Belfast's cultural and creative expression at home and abroad and safeguard its heritage and traditions on which to create new common ground.

'Through the Eyes of a Child' will involve the development of policies and projects that put the city's concept of creativity to the forefront of formal and informal education. It will enable children to play a full role as citizens and enhance the personal skills and job prospects of young people by developing their creativity and cultural awareness. By focusing on children it will create new audiences for cultural activities.

'Life Without Walls' will make reconnection and inclusion core principles in the physical development of Belfast. Through our artists, opportunities will be created for dialogue and expression that will build understanding and trust. The capacity of under-represented groups to become fully engaged in the European Capital of Culture process will be developed. We will engage in relationships and dialogue with Europe and with the wider world and explore our common cultural heritage.

There will be specific projects under these themes, and I wish to give a few examples. 'Through the Eyes of a Child' will associate the home of C S Lewis in east Belfast with a centre called 'Jack's House.' This will take the form of a pavilion designed by an internationally renowned architect with a gallery space, a woodland area, simulated weather and many other features that will be inspired by the imaginative landscapes in the writer's 'The Chronicles of Narnia'.

The 'Made in Belfast' theme will include, among other things, the redevelopment of the Cathedral Quarter. This

will go a long way to putting the heart back into the city by creating a nucleus of creative activity in an area that comprises some of the most fascinating cultural heritage of the city, as well as encompassing some of our best architecture. That area of Belfast should be striving artistically and economically.

Among the projects associated with the 'Life Without Walls' theme will be a series of initiatives that will culminate in the removal of the 23 peace walls in Belfast. That will involve many parties working closely together, including Government agencies, community organisations and, most important of all, residents. The wall between the Shankill and the Falls areas has stood for 33 years and is, in places, 30 feet high. Those walls make people feel safer, but they are negative measures. They cut across and destroy the urban fabric; they reinforce a culture of separation, and they must come down eventually.

First, local residents must regard the walls as having no purpose. That daunting task will require people's belief and confidence in our need to live in a connected city. Under the aegis of the European Capital of Culture bid we will work with the people who live in the shadow of the walls to create secure and sustainable communities.

That is a sample of the projects that will be tackled under the European Capital of Culture banner. They are large in concept, in execution and in the scale of their long-term benefits. Some initiatives will involve capital works, many will involve communities, and all will involve courage and creativity. However, the projects will not overwhelm us, and we will rise to their challenge.

All that work will cost money. Our bid to become European Capital of Culture has come together only in recent weeks, following intensive widespread consultation on its content. That has meant that only now can we refine the projected costings. Further work remains to be done in that regard. Preliminary analysis of the costs by Imagine Belfast 2008, covering the period up to and including 2008, is around £147.5 million, split between £90 million in project spend and £57.5 million in capital.

Based on the experiences of previous Capitals of Culture, those costs could be met from such sources as Northern Ireland public expenditure, the private sector, European structural funds, local government and, potentially, the Department of Culture, Media and Sport. An estimated £100 million of Executive funding will be required over the period to 2008 to meet the aspirations of the bid. Some of those costs are already contained in Departments' allocated resources, and some of the activities will require additional specified funding, which could be sought through the normal supply and Executive programme funds procedures.

My Department will liaise closely with other Departments, including the Department of Finance and Personnel and the Office of the First Minister and the

Deputy First Minister, over the next few months to identify the costs of the tasks. When that is done, the overall proposal will be subject to a full economic appraisal in the usual way. That will identify a range of options and associated costs for consideration by the Executive.

The public expenditure implications of our bid, if successful, will need to be considered along with the Executive's other public spending priorities in the 2002 Budget and beyond. The Executive's endorsement at this stage of the Capital of Culture bid does not imply that they will allocate additional resources to every activity identified in the bid. The final public expenditure costs will have to be considered and specifically approved by the Executive later. Proposals that are not already provided for in existing plans will have to be considered in the usual way, against other competing bids.

In summary, I emphasise that the rewards inherent in the process are enormous. The essence of our bid lies in its strategic potential, and there will be tangible and intangible long-term gains in return for money invested. Some of the developments under the Capital of Culture banner would happen anyway, but the title will increase their focus and impact. All the proposed schemes contained in the bid will be of international standard, imaginative and daring. Each scheme will have the potential to make at least as great a difference to Belfast as Glasgow's title made to it. Crucially, when we progress this initiative, the Executive will be seen to be effective, because it will be seen to be working together for everyone.

4.15 pm

This undertaking goes far beyond art, culture and leisure and will touch almost every facet of our lives. The title itself will do little for Northern Ireland. Northern Ireland will gain through the things that it will do to win the award and the things that will happen after it has won it. The bid is not about Belfast's winning a piece of parchment or a brass plaque. It is about winning recognition as a city of culture in a region of culture. The benefits will permeate across the Province. This is a huge opportunity for us, and I urge the Assembly to seize it and support the bid.

The Chairperson of the Committee for Culture, Arts and Leisure (Mr O'Neill): I join the Minister in welcoming the programme for the bid. It contains some of the most imaginative and innovative ideas that I have come across, and Members who read it carefully and think about what it involves will see its potential to do remarkable things. Clearly, it has the potential to increase cultural tourism and promote community morale and understanding. Interestingly, it also has the potential to create self-confidence for the community and the Assembly — in what we are, who we are and where we all come from. That is as important as any other work that is done here, and Members should give their full support to the bid.

However, there are a few questions that I want to ask the Minister — and, through him, the Department — that I hope will reflect some concerns that have arisen in the Committee's deliberations and that will surely arise again. Forgive me if they are mundane. For example, it is important that the House knows what steps the Minister has taken to ensure that budgetary arrangements are in place to provide for the bid. We have known for some time that we would be involved in this. In practical terms, it will not be possible to do much until the bid has been successful or until we know how much money is available, but I hope that some preparation has been made to ensure that work on the bid will not require a fresh start. The Minister said that some elements in the Department's budgetary arrangements are available and could be used. In that respect it will be interesting to know whether a financial plan has been prepared.

Madam Deputy Speaker: This is an opportunity for the Member to question the Minister; it is not an opportunity to talk. Will the Member ask the question that he wants to ask the Minister?

Mr O'Neill: I have just completed the second question, and I would like to ask two more — if Madam Deputy Speaker will permit me to do so.

Madam Deputy Speaker: Yes, if you will be more concise.

Mr O'Neill: Indeed. Can the Minister confirm that each element of the bid will be subject to a case-by-case financial assessment, and will the Department of Finance and Personnel and other Departments be involved in those assessments? Does the Minister have any details of the long-term financial benefits that other cities have enjoyed as a result of becoming the European Capital of Culture? Those are important issues. We want to make as effective an approach as possible from all sides. There is great potential in Northern Ireland, and Belfast in particular, to make a successful bid.

Mr McGimpsey: I thank Mr O'Neill for his full support. I appreciate and understand the need for discipline in the process. In the next part of the bidding process, Belfast will put its name into the competition. That must happen by the end of March.

The Department's specific role is to support Belfast City Council, as it is making the bid. Indeed, I welcome the Lord Mayor, who is in the Gallery. His office is the focal point of the bid. The Department believes the bid to be well worth supporting, and we are here to reinforce and sustain it as best we can. The council has set up a company called Imagine Belfast 2008. Officers from the company are also in the Gallery. Imagine Belfast 2008 has brought together the details of the bid and is taking it forward one step at a time.

As I said, the next step will be the first formal stage in the process. Bids must be submitted by the end of

March. Several other cities will be competing for the title. Shortlisting will occur in the autumn. By spring 2003, roughly 12 months from now, one city will be declared the winner. That decision will be made by the Department for Culture, Media and Sport in London and the Prime Minister, and will eventually be ratified in Europe in the summer of 2003.

Even if Belfast were to be successful at every stage of the process, it would still be 18 months before it could be declared Capital of Culture. It is a step-by-step process, and Members must understand that it is not possible to detail every facet of the bid, particularly the financial aspects. However, the Member is correct in that there has been some preparatory work.

The Member mentioned the experience of other cities. That is an important point, and the experiences of other cities are being considered. As I said, each element of the bid will be subject to a full economic appraisal, which will be carried out this summer by the Department of Finance and Personnel. Each element and bid that may arise from the process will be scrutinised by the Department of Finance and Personnel under the normal processes, and there will also be a case-by-case assessment.

Glasgow is the best example as far as financial benefits that other cities have experienced are concerned, because it is the only other UK city that has been a City of Culture, as it was called in 1990. Belfast has much in common with Glasgow in 1990. It was in a post-industrial age. Glasgow had a reputation as a tough, no-nonsense, straight-talking city. It was not a city that many people visited at that time. In 1990, Glasgow had 1,200 tourist beds in hotels and guest houses. There are now 12,000 such beds.

Glasgow is now the third most visited city in the UK. It has managed to attract large investments in the creative industries and is one of the country's leaders in that field. Glasgow is an example of what can happen when a city is designated European Capital of Culture. The city has seen very real benefits.

Dublin is another close neighbour that was a European City of Culture. It too saw tremendous benefits. However, Dublin did not face the same challenges or difficulties as Glasgow. Glasgow is one city that has demonstrated the real, tangible and long-term benefits that can come out of an effort to be designated in this way. Belfast can gain at least as much as Glasgow, not least because it gives us an opportunity to alter completely the perception of Belfast throughout the world. Over the next six years and beyond we can totally alter the somewhat negative image of Belfast through this process. For "Belfast", also read "Northern Ireland". This is a city of culture in a region of culture, but, because of the rules, the application has to be centred on Belfast. However, given the size of the city and the size of the country, things will spill over. There will be tangible benefits for the whole of Northern

Ireland, and one of the biggest of those is that we can change our image.

Dr Adamson: I too welcome the Minister's statement and commend the visionary approach of Imagine Belfast 2008. I was particularly pleased to see that there will be a C S Lewis centre in east Belfast. Can the Minister ensure, given that the east Ulster area was the cradle of the earliest vernacular literature in Western Europe, that the Ulster and Norse sagas which inspired 'The Chronicles of Narnia' will be given a proper place in Jack's House?

Mr McGimpsey: As I said during Question Time — and I did not realise this until I looked into the matter — 'The Chronicles of Narnia' are the best-selling children's books in the world. As Dr Adamson said, there is a connection between C S Lewis and east Belfast. One of the major themes of the Belfast bid is 'Through the Eyes of a Child', and one of that theme's two projects is Jack's House, which is about unlocking the imagination and creativity of our children.

'Vernacular City' is part of the 'Made In Belfast' theme, and it celebrates Ulster, Irish and ethnic languages. Imagine Belfast 2008 has consulted widely, and this has resulted in ideas coming from the community, from the bottom up and not from the top down, across the city. 'Vernacular City' and 'Through the Eyes of a Child' are two of the themes that have emerged.

Mr Paisley Jnr: I too welcome the Minister's statement, together with his commitment, and that of the Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure, to the project. It is important that we congratulate the organisers for their vision and join with other Members in wishing them success and expedition.

The Minister identified three themes about Belfast and, taking Belfast as an acrostic, I hope that they lead to something which is beautiful, energetic, lasting, festive, about everyone, strong and telling. I am glad that the capital of Northern Ireland is not Lisnagunogue, because an acrostic on it would be even longer.

Does the Minister intend to prioritise the three identified themes — given that some projects will require more resources than others for implementation — or will resources be spent evenly across the board?

With regard to the 'Life Without Walls' theme, the Minister will be aware that people with genuine fears live behind those walls in Belfast. Where people have good cause to have such fears, can the Minister assure us that nothing will be done to treat those people in a way that is not sensitive to the reality of their fears?

4.30 pm

Mr McGimpsey: I am grateful for Mr Paisley Jnr's comments and expressions of support. City Hall officials and imagine Belfast 2008 are responsible for the detail and progression of the bid. They are taking a holistic rather

than a priority approach. They see that each aspect of the bid is dependent on the other aspects and that the overall benefit will be greater than the sum of the benefits of the individual parts.

It is important to note that the bid is aspirational. However, one emerging theme coming through Imagine Belfast 2008 is the concern about the peace walls. People are saying "Imagine Belfast without peace walls: would it not be wonderful if Belfast were reintegrated and reconnected?" The Member is right to say that this project may be the biggest of all. It also impacts strongly on the fears of local communities, and nothing must be done to lessen their confidence. Therefore plans to remove the peace walls are aspirational. They must be worked on. Peace walls will remain in place until the communities living either side of them decide that they are of no value and are no longer wanted. The Department accepts and supports that reality.

The walls must come down one day — we want to take them down, and we want to reconnect the city. People from the Shankill and the Falls say that they remember being able to go back and forth between the areas. It is a myth to say that there was never a connection because as recently as one generation ago there were strong physical connections between the areas.

The removal of the walls is a theme that is coming across strongly. However, I repeat that it is an aspiration, and it is dependent on the communities that rely on the peace walls for their security. It will be for those communities to determine when the walls will come down, and that will happen only when they decide that the walls are no longer of value.

Mr McCarthy: On behalf of the Alliance Party, I support the Minister's leading the campaign for Belfast's bid to be the Capital of Culture in 2008. At this point, I should declare an interest. Shona McCarthy, the chief executive of Imagine Belfast 2008, is my niece, which suggests that it is highly likely that the bid will be successful. I am sure that the Assembly wishes Shona, Tom Collins, Michelle Rusk and their colleagues every success in their work with Imagine Belfast 2008.

The Minister's statement is wide-ranging and justifies the effort that everyone is making to ensure success. Members are aware of how much Belfast has progressed in recent years, and we hope that more progress can be made to make it a modern, dynamic and cultural city that no longer needs peace walls.

The watchwords of Imagine Belfast 2008 are "innovation" and "creativity". Is the Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure content that everything is being done to fulfil those important aspects of the bid? Are as many people as possible contributing to the effort?

Madam Deputy Speaker: I thank the Member for declaring his interest.

Mr McGimpsey: I thank Mr McCarthy for his declaration of support and his comments.

Mr McCarthy and I share the view that creativity and innovation should be at the centre of the bid. To illustrate that, the watchwords of the bid document are "inclusiveness", "creativity" and "innovation". For example, 'Jack's House', where children will be able to hear stories in their original languages, will be a sanctuary for stories, myths and legends. The 'Giant's House' will be a creativity centre for children under five years of age. It will demonstrate the value that is placed on children's creativity, recognising that the years nought to five are fundamental to children's development, and helping them from an early age is a strong theme of the bid document.

Mr B Hutchinson: I declare an interest as a member of Belfast City Council and of the development committee that has direct responsibility for the bid. I congratulate Marie-Thérèse McGivern from the development department at city hall for her leadership and direction in getting us this far. I also congratulate Shona McCarthy from Imagine Belfast 2008 for her imagination and organisation.

Does the Minister plan to encourage the private sector to understand the relevance of the bid? For many years, in Belfast, it has been difficult to get the private sector to take an interest in any project from which it will not make money. It is important that the private sector become involved in this project. Has the Minister discussed the matter with any other Departments to help them to understand the importance of the bid?

Mr McGimpsey: I agree that it has been difficult to secure private sector finance for projects. Companies and organisations have tended to allow the public purse to pick up the cost. We can all think of several instances where that happened. However, in this case, private sector finance is not simply a possibility — it is essential. If we cannot secure private sector finance, the bid cannot be carried completely using other types of funding, such as public funds, lottery money and European money. I hope that there will be a budget line from the Department of Culture, Media and Sport. The public sector is a key factor. Although Budget money to date is only a fraction of what we will need, that support is encouraging because it shows that the public sector is prepared to put its money where its mouth is. It recognises that the project has great business potential and that there are major gains to be made from supporting it.

The Imagine Belfast 2008 budget so far has consisted of £500,000 from the Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure, £300,000 from Belfast City Council and £250,000 from the private sector. The private sector is an important source of the funding received to date. That can be seen as recognition by the private sector of the importance of the bid. Considering the experience of other cities, such as Glasgow, and the work that must be done to prepare the ground, we envisage substantial private sector invest-

ment, comprising 10% of the entire budget. Imagine Belfast 2008 estimates that figure to be £14.75 million. I have no doubt that the people involved with the project will be successful. For example, Dennis Lience of First Trust Bank is acting as part of the Imagine Belfast 2008 board and has taken on the responsibility for sourcing private sector finance. He has been successful to date, and I trust that he will continue to be so. However, until the bid is in, we must take one step at a time. It is right to focus on the private sector, because it has been disappointing in the past. However, given the experience of other cities, that will not be the case in this instance.

Mr Byrne: I too welcome the Minister's statement and support the bid by Belfast to become the European Capital City of Culture in 2008. Will sporting organisations such as the GAA be included in the events of the year if the bid is successful? I acknowledge the Minister's and the Lord Mayor of Belfast's recognition of the importance of Gaelic sport to Belfast. Is the Minister aware that the Ballinderry Shamrocks won the all-Ireland Club Championship in Thurles on Sunday?

Mr McGimpsey: I am aware that the Ballinderry Shamrocks won on Sunday, and, like Mr Byrne, I congratulate them on their victory. One of the themes underpinning Imagine Belfast 2008 is "One Belfast", a key part of which is sport. The Gaelic Athletic Association (GAA) is a key sporting organisation and one of the biggest in Northern Ireland, so I do see it playing an important role in this.

Our bid is to be a Capital of Culture in a region of culture. Participation will not stop at Glengormley or before we reach Lisburn. The bid will affect all of Northern Ireland. People who live in or represent areas outside Belfast should take comfort from the fact that when people come to Belfast it will be to visit a capital of culture in a region of culture — everyone can benefit.

The reason it is a one-city bid and not one joining with other cities is that that is what is laid down in the rules from the Department for Culture, Media and Sport. We must deal with the situation as it stands, and the rule is one city per bid. I am sure that the GAA will want to play a major part in this as will the governing bodies of other sports.

Mr McClarty: I fully support Belfast's bid to be European Capital of Culture and hope it will be successful. The Minister has touched on the subject of my question. How do he and the Department propose to convince those who believe that many think that Northern Ireland ends at Glengormley that their areas will benefit from Belfast's success too?

Mr McGimpsey: Many of Northern Ireland's attractions lie outside Belfast. Although Belfast is the catalyst for this bid, many benefits will ensue, including increased tourism. I have mentioned the benefits that Glasgow accrued as a result of gaining the title — the number of

beds in the city for tourists increased from 1,200 to 12,000 over 10 years.

We must focus on a total change of image. This is a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity for Belfast and Northern Ireland to counter the negative image that has been gained and, to an extent, earned over the past generation. It is an opportunity for all of us to rise above that and create a new image for Northern Ireland and the city — an image of self-esteem and civic pride that can put the heart back into the Province.

4.45 pm

Areas such as Armagh, Londonderry, the north coast and the Giant's Causeway, Fermanagh and the lakes will benefit from this. A package can be offered that will include all of Northern Ireland. People will not simply stay in Belfast; they will visit all of Northern Ireland. As this issue is progressed and the bid evolves, all of Northern Ireland will become involved, and all areas will examine how they can benefit from the campaign and how they can support it.

Mr Hilditch: In support of the bid, can the Minister further develop Mr Byrne's angle? Is there a niche within the three identified themes to highlight the city's deep and rich sporting culture that brought our communities through the darkest days of more than three decades of troubles? Indeed, sport sometimes broke down the community barriers.

Mr McGimpsey: I agree with Mr Hilditch that sport is not simply sport, and the sporting tradition is not simply a niche. Sport will play an important part in the process by helping to create a successful bid and the conditions and environment in which the city, and Northern Ireland in general, will thrive. Self-esteem, civic pride and changing attitudes are intrinsic parts of the campaign, and sport, as a deliverer of those aspects, has played an important role in the past, and will continue to do so.

Mr A Maginness: I welcome the Minister's creative and imaginative statement. In particular, I welcome the theme of Life Without Walls. In my part of the city, which is divided by many peace walls, it is to be truly welcomed. I appreciate the Minister's response to Mr Paisley Jnr about the aspirational nature of Imagine Belfast 2008. I hope that aspiration will ultimately be translated into the demolition of those peace walls, and that people will be able to live in safety and security without those walls.

I congratulate the Minister for highlighting that theme. It is the first time that I have heard from the Despatch Box — from either side of the Chamber — that objective of bringing down the walls of division in Belfast. What steps will be taken to demolish the peace walls?

Mr McGimpsey: Life Without Walls is probably the most challenging of all the themes. As I said to Mr Paisley

Jnr, demolition cannot be undertaken without the agreement of the communities who live on either side of those walls.

As far as a first step is concerned — making that physical connection in the city — we have probably already taken it. We have it here, we are discussing it, and we will continue to discuss it. We are aware that the peace walls are in the most disadvantaged areas, areas that have suffered the most in the troubles in Belfast. Reconnection and inclusion are core principles of the bid and the physical development of Belfast. That requires a discussion, a conversation and a debate among the communities on either side of the peace walls.

That is a challenge. However, we accept that some day those walls must come down and that some day those communities must reconnect. Through this bid we are taking the first step, but we are very much guided by the communities. The walls will come down when the communities living on either side of them have decided that the walls are of no further value to them. That is the objective we seek, and I have no doubt that Mr Alban Maginness and Mr Billy Hutchinson, and others who represent those areas with the most peace walls, will play an important role, along with the communities that they represent.

Mr Davis: The Minister's statement is important. Coming from the new city of Lisburn, I want to assure him, Belfast City Council and Imagine Belfast 2008 that they will have the support of their new neighbouring city. However, out of 19 people in the Chamber this afternoon 15 come from constituencies outside Belfast. The other four represent constituencies in Belfast, and I sincerely hope that as time goes on more and more voices will be raised to ensure that Belfast obtains the bid.

As a member of the Committee for Culture, Arts and Leisure I was impressed by the presentation given by the Imagine Belfast 2008 team. As time goes on, the pressure must be stepped up to ensure that all of Northern Ireland supports the bid.

Does the Minister intend to keep the Assembly informed of the financial situation as we approach 2008?

Mr McGimpsey: I thank Mr Davis for his pledge of support from the city of Lisburn. It is very welcome. It is important to continue to stress that it is not simply about Belfast but about a European Capital of Culture in a region of cultures and that all of Northern Ireland will benefit.

Keeping the Assembly and the Committees apprised of the situation is a key part of the process. I will make regular reports to the Executive Committee, and a full economic appraisal of the bid will be carried out during the summer. I also intend to report regularly to the Committee for Culture, Arts and Leisure, and I undertake to do the same to the House to ensure that everybody is fully informed of each step.

Belfast City Council will lodge the bid before the end of March, and then the process will have properly begun. My Department's role and my role will be to support the city fully and to ensure that all parts of Northern Ireland mesh into it, become part of it and appreciate the benefits and advantages.

Mr K Robinson: I too support the bid for European Capital of Culture. I must declare two interests, since Glengormley has been mentioned twice, and I am a Newtownabbey councillor. I declare that interest, and I also declare an interest as someone who was born and bred in Belfast and who is proud of that.

I listened to the Minister talk about innovation and creativity. I am glad that he did not mention expansion in his deliberation. I would like an undertaking from him that, in this bid to become the Capital of Culture, Belfast will not attempt to expand into neighbouring boroughs such as Newtownabbey, or even as far as Glengormley.

Secondly, sport has been mentioned on several occasions. I hope that the Minister will ensure that an invitation is issued to Benfica this time, so that when they return to Belfast the "Glens" can beat them, instead of drawing with them.

Glasgow has been mentioned several times. The city was, to quote Rab C Nesbitt, "sartorially sandblasted" and looks the better for it. 'Glasgow Smiles Better' was the catchphrase used. I would like to think that the Minister and the Lord Mayor will bring that enthusiasm and expertise to the city of Belfast and expand not only the culture in the city but right across Northern Ireland. I congratulate them for presenting this programme this afternoon.

Mr McGimpsey: Mr Ken Robinson is right to focus on Glasgow and on the benefits that Glasgow has enjoyed. As far as Benfica coming back to play the "Glens" is concerned, the Lord Mayor, Jim Rodgers, is a strong supporter of the "Glens". I have no doubt that he would support that project.

I am not sure where Belfast will end up as far as the review of local government is concerned. That is a different topic. If Belfast manages to take in Glengormley, it will be acquiring a priceless asset.

Mr Savage: I want to congratulate our Minister for presenting this project today. As I listen to him — he is such a persuasive man — I realise that no one could vote against these proposals. It is interesting to note the heavy squad that he has brought with him today. Our Lord Mayor is in the Gallery, and he is also a persuasive gentleman.

I agree with everything that they say, and I wish them all the best in their endeavours. I support the Minister in everything that he is trying to do, and I will support him

in every way in furthering Belfast's bid to become European Capital of Culture.

5.00 pm

However, I want to fire a shot across their bows. One of the things that is always thrown at me when I go back to my constituency is the impression that as long as everything is all right in Belfast, to pot with everybody else. Many other projects are being developed in Northern Ireland. I hope that they start to spread their wings a bit. Northern Ireland is a big place. We must involve many of its locales if we want Northern Ireland to regain its rightful way of life. There have been many tragedies over the years. We hope that we have seen the back of them; we are looking forward. One of the big issues is that this venture is going to succeed; I am concerned about the next one. I wish Belfast and our Minister all the best, and I hope that the next ventures will extend across the Province.

Mr McGimpsey: I repeat that this is something that will benefit all of Northern Ireland. I also take on board Mr Savage's remarks about spreading ventures across the Province in successive initiatives. My Department is making progress. We have a limited budget, but we are making progress in supporting this bid and several other initiatives that impact positively — not simply in Belfast but outside the city.

Most Members who have taken part and have attended have been Members from outside Belfast and the response has been universally positive. That says much for Colleagues' understanding of the aims of this bid and of our aims for Northern Ireland society.

RAILWAY SAFETY BILL

Committee Stage

The Chairperson of the Committee for Regional Development (Mr A Maginness): I beg to move

That, in accordance with Standing Order 31(5), the period referred to in Standing Order 31(3) be extended to 24 May 2002, in relation to the Committee Stage of the Railway Safety Bill (NIA Bill 3/01).

The Railway Safety Bill had its Second Stage on 26 February and was referred to the Committee for Regional Development on 6 March. Although the Bill is primarily technical in nature, it is, nevertheless, an important piece of legislation. The Committee is anxious to ensure that it carries out its responsibilities and conducts a rigorous scrutiny of the legislation. To that end, the Committee agreed that it needed to call several witnesses, some of whom are railway safety experts. It is therefore important that the Committee has sufficient time to consider its evidence.

Other Committee work pressures, such as the regional transportation strategy, have been building up. That has added to the difficulty of considering the Railway Safety Bill within the prescribed 30 calendar days. On behalf of the Committee, I am seeking an extension to 24 May to allow sufficient time for the Committee to consider the Bill and report 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 24 May 2002, in relation to the Committee Stage of the Railway Safety Bill (NIA Bill 3/01).

TOWARDS SUPPORTING PEOPLE FUND

The Deputy Chairperson of the Committee for Social Development (Ms Gildernew): I beg to move

That this Assembly expresses serious concern about the implications of introducing a new system for funding housing support costs and calls on the Minister for Social Development to secure commitments from the Executive to ensure that financial allocations for the "Towards Supporting People Fund", due to be introduced in April 2003, are guaranteed and will be maintained at levels not less than currently provided through housing benefit.

I apologise for Mr Fred Cobain's enforced absence. The Committee has been seeking to have this debate for some weeks. I am glad that the Business Committee has recognised the importance of this debate.

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

Health and, to a lesser extent, education have dominated the political headlines recently, and justifiably so. They are the key to the well-being of people and deserve resource allocation priority. However, social issues go beyond health and education. If we are to tackle ill health we must adopt cross-departmental approaches to poverty, unemployment, housing and fuel poverty.

When Mr Maurice Morrow was the Minister for Social Development he said that supported housing was a very effective and valuable service for many people in the north of Ireland. Housing-related support services are essential to enable people to live stably and independently in their own communities. As a result of court rulings, there are plans to change the way those services are funded. It is our job to ensure that those services are not diminished in any way.

The Minister has announced his intention to introduce a housing support Bill in the Assembly later this year. The law is to be changed so that housing benefit, or the transitional housing benefit scheme, will only deal with bricks and mortar in future. A fund is to be established to provide what are known as housing support services.

Members will know that the Committee for Social Development has just finished taking oral evidence for its inquiry into homelessness. Many witnesses expressed concern about the move away from demand-led and guaranteed funding to what is essentially a bidding situation for the fund. Some of those who gave evidence said that they disputed the formula for calculating housing costs, as distinct from support costs. The split between rent and support is critical, as that will be the basis for determining the size of the fund.

The Housing Executive is reviewing the position in relation to the formula that is currently applied, and I welcome that. However, housing support is an essential service and, as such, it must be properly and fully funded.

The people who rely on those services are among the most vulnerable in our society. The Assembly will be judged on how it protects their needs.

Those needs may be of a short-term or long-term nature. Those in need may be elderly, or women fleeing domestic violence. They may have learning disabilities or mental health problems. They may be young, or leaving care or an abusive home. They may suffer from alcohol or drug addiction. We might recognise them in the street, or we might not. However, they are all individuals with different needs.

We must ensure that services are provided efficiently and effectively. Housing support has a variety of funding streams. I do not deny that it makes sense to rationalise how money is delivered. I agree with moves towards consistency of provision and high-quality services. To bring funding streams together seems to be sensible. However, development moneys have been made available elsewhere for new and remodelled services. Some £138 million has been ring-fenced in England for the implementation of the Towards Supporting People fund. We have no such ring-fenced budget, and, to date, no funding has been allocated for the implementation of the Towards Supporting People fund in the Six Counties. We lag behind in plans to implement the new system, in which funding is no longer guaranteed. Some cynics might suggest that that is an attempt to save money. What is certain is that the most vulnerable and needy people in our society will be affected.

Who speaks for the vulnerable and the needy? Who in the Chamber has a social conscience? My Colleagues on the Committee for Social Development represent a range of different political persuasions, but they all have a social conscience. The Committee has presented the motion to the Assembly today. The issue is a serious one, and I hope that all Members present will support the motion. To do otherwise would be to turn our backs on the most vulnerable people in our society.

People who rely on housing support services need to be reassured. Providers of services must understand what funding will be available in order to plan those services. The voluntary sector already offers practical advice, guidance and support to those providers. Indeed, a common theme for the majority of respondents to the consultation was that the voluntary and community sector provides a valuable service in that area and must be supported accordingly. That sector needs and deserves adequate funding to deliver that help.

Money must be made available urgently in order to plan the introduction of the new system. It is vital that the size of the fund be calculated, and it is critical that it be got right. Needs in the housing sector are growing, and we must increase provision. Sadly, we must also improve standards, and it is our collective responsibility to do so.

The terms of the motion are clear. It affirms that the Assembly is concerned about the implications of the new system, especially with regard to the need to plan and introduce the system, which requires investment for development purposes. Money has not yet been allocated for that purpose.

The motion also calls on the Minister for Social Development to secure commitments from the Executive to ensure that financial allocations for the fund are guaranteed and will be maintained at levels not less than those currently provided through housing benefit. I suggest that the Minister work with his Colleagues on the Executive in order to bring that vital area of concern to the fore, and to secure funding for this critical need. I quote from a Council for the Homeless briefing paper that was issued in response to today's motion:

"In order to deliver Supporting People we need to be supporting people."

A LeasCheann Comhairle, I commend the motion to the House. Go raibh míle maith agat.

Mr O'Neill: I support the motion, and I support the comments of the Deputy Chairperson. The Committee has serious concerns about several aspects of the proposal. We have continuous concerns about funding and its implementation, and nowhere more so than in the Assembly.

The most particular concern is the proposal to ring-fence the funding that groups bid for annually. As the Deputy Chairperson said, this puts the most vulnerable groups in an invidious position — in a ring together, fighting for their share — and that is not the way to approach this sort of problem. The only realistic way to deal with those groups is to have demand-led funding, which we had in the past. We all want devolution to make a difference. We are responsible, and this is an opportunity to make a difference here by installing an equitable support system. Some of the most vulnerable people will lose out if the funding is not adequately structured.

There are groups that currently lack adequate funding, most noticeably those bodies caring for the homeless. We do not need to go over this again — the startling figures for homelessness are enough to convince everyone that this is not a diminishing problem, but a growing one. If the problem were in any other sphere it would be regarded as out of control. Reducing resources will not solve the problems; we must ensure that resources are there to support the people who are working to solve the problems. Ideally, funding support should go hand in hand with a holistic approach towards dealing with vulnerable people.

There is a need for interdepartmental bodies to deal with young people leaving care; those with direct responsibility especially need to be involved. This morning we discussed young people leaving care and the need for a holistic and interdepartmental approach to ensure that no one falls out of the net. We must support people with a wide

range of difficult social problems or physical and mental disabilities, those who are affected by domestic violence, ex-offenders and young people in care.

I am also concerned about the timescale. The Department has just over a year to make the transition. The supply has not yet been mapped, and the gaps in the current system have not been identified. We cannot possibly meet demand without a realistic picture of what is required and how it can be met, so we need this quickly. We talk about parity for various reasons when it suits us, but I am concerned that in Britain a three-year period was laid down for introducing the system. We will not allow that to happen here. We must pay attention to that and handle matters in a more structured way so that if we have to face these changes, we do it in a way that will not affect those who are most vulnerable. While an assessment of support services is welcome, it is no good if money is not there to sustain the service.

5.15 pm

Dr Birnie: I want to make some remarks on the motion, which I broadly support, as Chairperson of the Committee for Employment and Learning. While this is an area primarily for the Department for Social Development, and we are pleased to see the Minister here, there are overlapping concerns with a number of other Departments, including the Department for Employment and Learning.

The principles of the fund are probably good, though the devil is in the detail, and that concern is reflected in the motion. Success in this area requires interdepartmental and inter-agency work, and that will involve the Department for Social Development, the Department for Employment and Learning, the Department of Education, to a degree, and the Department of Health. The aim should be to enable individuals to live a settled life, and I hope that that is what the Towards Supporting People fund is about.

In many cases, this means training in the broadest sense. Some of the training in living a settled residential life may be delivered through the Department for Employment and Learning, though some will come through the Department for Social Development, the Department of Health or the Department of Education. For example, basic adult education such as learning to read, write and count must be developed into learning how to budget and handle debt and so on, in order to avoid problems which can easily lead to chronic homelessness.

Everyone wishes to see the impact of the so-called benefit and poverty traps reduced. The Committee for Employment and Learning is aware of that impact, especially with regard to long-term unemployment. Some long-term unemployed become homeless — there is a relationship between those two severe social problems.

In the past the Department for Employment and Learning and its predecessor, the Department of Higher and Further Education, Training and Employment, had a direct relationship with some charities and worked well in many cases to alleviate homelessness, for example through ACE schemes. ACE is no longer there. Instead we have New Deal for the long-term unemployed, and some participants in New Deal are homeless. No New Deal scheme is dedicated specifically to the homeless in the way that other New Deal schemes are dedicated to other categories of socially excluded individuals. That is a question that should be considered in future by the Department for Employment and Learning.

Looking at the motion from the perspective of the Committee for Employment and Learning, it seems that the role of that Department is to prevent homelessness by enabling individuals, through their participation in the training system and the labour market, to handle a settled, residential life and to earn a reasonable living. The Committee is anxious that the Department for Employment and Learning, in co-operation with the other Departments that have a role in this, continues, as far as possible, to prevent this problem from growing. I support the motion.

Mr Shannon: I support the motion. However, I want to begin with a question. Can the Minister clarify whether a ring-fenced budget can deliver the service necessary? How will it deliver the benefits to people in Northern Ireland who need it most?

Society is changing every day, and the pressures on the young and the not so young grow greater as each day passes. We have all seen the homeless and the needy on our streets and in our constituency offices. Many of those people have underlying problems, such as drug and alcohol addiction. Some have been abused mentally and physically and are trying to restart their lives. Those people all deserve the best help available to provide them with a standard of life that many of us take for granted.

The Council for the Homeless has released figures from a survey that asked 7,500 young homeless people in the United Kingdom about their housing problems. It found that 86% of them had been forced to leave home. Family conflict is the underlying reason for more than half of youth homelessness, with 40% of young homeless women leaving home because of abuse. Those figures put the situation into perspective. Those youngsters may have problems with alcohol, drugs or solvent abuse and will find it difficult to hold down jobs. Tenancy agreements will, therefore, be hard to keep up. As a result of abuse, young women survivors' lives often revolve around aimless drift and periodic crises that propel them from flats to refuges and hostels, and even to psychiatric wards. They are not in one place long enough to be assessed for proper support and training that could, and would, help to stop the cycle.

The Towards Supporting People scheme will enable those young women to gain help for their problems. That scheme — a Government-funded programme to help the most vulnerable in society, such as those who make up the figures in the survey by the Council for the Homeless — is a good idea on paper, but it requires practical support, and that means money. England has set aside £138 million for the implementation of the Towards Supporting People fund. As usual, however, the Government at Westminster are not funding the outcomes of parity legislation in the rest of the United Kingdom. It does not make sense to legislate to bring the entire United Kingdom into line to protect its most vulnerable citizens, and then not provide the scheme with adequate funding. What other Department or programme is going to suffer because the Treasury would like our tax money to be spent on people on the mainland?

I fully support the programme, but where is the money going to come from to support it? Will Westminster provide money for the programme in Northern Ireland at a later date, and will we hear about it at a later date?

The programme will support people of all ages and prevent the overlapping of funding systems, which will take out the red tape and help more efficiently the people that it is supposed to help. The Towards Supporting People fund will also ensure that decisions are made in partnership, among the various organisations, such as the health trusts, probation boards and social workers, in order to place people in appropriate accommodation that will protect them and give them the independence that everyone is entitled to.

In just over one year, a programme will be implemented that promises to reform, restructure and produce the services that many homeless, and those in need, crave. It is a programme that everyone in the Assembly will back and support. However, as with the arrangements to follow the ending of GP fundholding in less than a month's time, it is a programme that needs to be refined and defined for those who will be working along with it. As we discussed last week, the GPs are not happy with the handover and the information that they have been given to facilitate it. That situation must not be repeated with the Towards Supporting People fund. The instigation of that process must start now to provide a durable, transparent, user-friendly and equitable arrangement for transition from housing benefit.

There are issues, such as the prevention of homelessness and support services for the homeless, that need to be addressed now. Equality issues when allocating housing, and quality assurance in housing, need to be considered. Has a framework for support been put in place? Has a comprehensive map of local services been drawn up? The gaps that are not met by those services must be charted and identified in order for action to be taken. Has a strategy for the users of the fund been set up, and have the providers been informed of changes to the

service? Are the providers acquainted with the benefits of the new system?

We return, of course, to the issue of funding. Can Westminster guarantee the funding of this programme? That is a most important issue.

Mr M Murphy: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I support the motion. I know that my Colleague Michelle Gildernew has been a driving force in the Committee for Social Development in relation to the motion.

Why has the Minister not demanded parity of esteem for the Towards Supporting People fund, when England has set aside and ring-fenced £138 million for the implementation of the scheme?

The first portion of that money was paid out in 2001. Has the Minister made a bid for an allocation to finance the scheme? If he has, what was the bid? Out of that bid, how much money was allocated to the Department for Social Development for the Towards Supporting People fund? Furthermore, is the Department required to enable local authorities and their partners to implement and deliver the programme?

Many people with a wide range of problems need this support — those with mental health problems, women who are escaping domestic violence, people with physical disabilities, people with learning difficulties, care leavers and young homeless people who may find it difficult to hold down a tenancy or to stay in one place long enough to access proper support and training because of mental health or drug problems. By supporting people, the fund will provide the means to enable those young people to settle in a new home and a new life.

Old people also need the support of the fund. Lest we forget, they were the providers from whom we benefit today. It should be payback time for them.

I support the motion.

Mr B Hutchinson: Members must realise that responsibility does not lie solely with the Minister for Social Development. The House must make a plea to the Executive to help the Minister for Social Development to find the commitment and the money with which to do this.

Several Members have highlighted the cross-cutting nature of the Towards Supporting People fund. It is important that Members remember that. The objectives of the Towards Supporting People fund are to develop higher-quality services and to increase the provision of housing support. The services that are in place in Northern Ireland are some distance behind those in the rest of the UK. Prior to the introduction of the Towards Supporting People fund, it is vital to have the funding to develop those services. The size of the pot is important, and we must allow for growth.

If the Assembly considers what funding the Department for Social Development thought that the SPED

(special purchase of evacuated dwellings) scheme would require — and even what was needed pre-devolution when direct rule Ministers were in place — nobody could have predicted that the Assembly would be spending more money now on people who had been intimidated out of their homes than was spent prior to the 1994 ceasefires. Members must remember such issues because they will arise through supporting people, and they have not been allowed for.

The Assembly also needs to increase standards of provision and to allow for new policy changes. Those are the type of issues that the Assembly must try to predict. Today, the House heard from the Minister of Finance and Personnel that, because of the changes in resource budgeting, an additional £23.9 million was found for the health budget. When policies change, the Assembly must be ready and it must have the money to deal with those changes.

Members must also remember the number of young people who leave care each year. The Committee for Social Development took evidence from several organisations. All those organisations discussed young people in care and the problems that they have in trying to ensure that those young people are rehoused and that they remain housed.

Those are four issues that the Assembly must take into consideration. If it considers those issues, it will see the implications that they will have for the size of the pot. There is also the issue of charging and means testing, which has not even been undertaken.

If we have not set a policy of charging and means-testing, how will we ever know the required size of the pot? That is a critical issue that must be resolved early on so that we can ensure that we know the implications and the size of the pot.

5.30 pm

The most vulnerable in society must be given confidence. Members should bear in mind that that is what is meant when we talk about the Towards Supporting People fund. It is about groups such as the Northern Ireland Women's Aid Federation. It is about older people in sheltered accommodation and homeless people in hostels. They are the most vulnerable people in society. They do not have the necessary will to lobby politicians to deal with the issue. We must look out for those people, ensure that they are heard and ensure that the Assembly affords them their rights. We must reassure those who need support and those who provide the services that we shall not only continue to help them, but that the level of support will get better and not worse.

There are also concerns about the split between rent and support. It has been argued that the service providers have not correctly identified the split. If we do not know the true breakdown of the split between rent

and support, the size of the pot will be inaccurate. It has already been highlighted that the Towards Supporting People fund cuts across several Departments. Although I reiterate that the Assembly should throw its weight behind the Minister for Social Development, we should also call on all other Departments to play their part in ensuring that the Minister has the necessary resources and money to deal with the problem.

Ms McWilliams: I support the motion. I am not a member of the Committee for Social Development, but I have a particular interest in the issue because of the overlap between the motion's content and the remit of the Committee for Health, Social Services and Public Safety, of which I am a member.

I am concerned that, to date, we still do not have a ring-fenced budget for a policy that I support. How can a policy be supported if the resources are not attached to it to ensure that every part of the policy's commitments will be fulfilled? In England, £138 million was set aside and ring-fenced, and a strategy was laid down. In Northern Ireland, the groups that await the Minister's answers do not know the size of the budget, when it will be ring-fenced or when it will filter down to people working on the ground. The Minister must provide those answers today.

I am glad that the debate is taking place because the phone calls that I have received from the groups have mainly been about their concerns over the effective implementation of the policy by the end of the transition period, which is April 2003. That gives us exactly one year.

I submitted a question for written answer by the Minister. In his answer, he said that he hoped that no group would suffer under the new system. However, a little more detail is needed on that today because that is not a good enough answer. We are going to effect a huge change in policy that will affect 350 voluntary groups in Northern Ireland. It will affect those who provide hostels, refuges and sheltered accommodation.

As the chairperson of the all-party Assembly group on mental health, I know of the vulnerabilities of those who suffer from the effects of drug, substance and alcohol abuse, those leaving care and those with severe mental health problems. They must be supported and cared for. What we have asked those groups to do in the past two years is nothing short of phenomenal. We have asked them to rethink the way in which housing benefit has been provided in the past, how their sectors have been managed in the past —

Mr Deputy Speaker: I am sorry to interrupt you, Ms McWilliams. I remind Members that when they are on their feet later they might not expect to be heard by a silent House, but they might expect to be heard with a little less background noise.

Ms McWilliams: It shows how passionate I am about the subject that I did not hear anybody making

any noise, but you obviously did, Mr Deputy Speaker. Thank you for your interjection.

The groups are also being asked to look at housing support for their sector. The groups tell me that they have to break down the cost of bricks and mortar, roofs and walls. They then had to break down the support and the care elements. I have been involved with Women's Aid for many years. It would be difficult to break down the cost of a refuge's bricks and mortar, of care before and after entering the refuge and aftercare — all the work to ensure an individual's freedom from the violence and abuse that she has experienced. We want to build such a community, not one that sends women back into such dreadful relationships.

Those groups have worked that out. Again, organisations have told me that they have done that without any resources. They funded all the extra administrative work themselves. In England, however, the pressure on some voluntary groups was foreseen with voluntary management. All those years ago, Margaret Thatcher screamed and pleaded for that very thing: for groups to set up self-help organisations that would return a contribution to the community.

It is a marvel that many organisations have been able to do that work, and some have probably had huge problems in doing so. The Northern Ireland Women's Aid Federation now has so many refuges that it is big enough to have a federation and a co-ordination of management. It is unfortunate that we should be proud of the fact that we have many more refuges now than when we started in 1975. Compare that to single groups, such as Sydenham House in east Belfast, which is asked to carry out that work without any support. The organisations in Northern Ireland have continued despite their lack of funding, while in England support of £750,000 per annum was given to the voluntary organisations to enable them to work through the transition.

As a result of their underfunding, many organisations submitted proposals and packages to the Housing Executive for floating support. To date they have not received a penny. I am told that that is not necessarily the fault of the Housing Executive, because it in turn relied on the Department, through the Minister, to bring the money down. If those funds had been provided, the Housing Executive could have accepted some of the groups' proposals and provided funding. Since that did not happen, those groups have had to make their workers redundant.

I, and other Members, have worked for many years with community and voluntary organisations concerned with the homeless, children in need of care and people with learning and physical disabilities. That takes much hard work and, because a little information given badly is dangerous, the last thing that we want is to have centres staffed by people without the necessary expertise and experience. We want to build up and retain that expertise and experience. We

do not want to have to make workers redundant. For example, Members may have been approached about the closure of centres in North Down and Ards.

I pay tribute to the Minister, who, for different reasons, met a group from advice centres whose funding was running out because of changes to European funding. I appreciate the Minister's undertaking to lend his support to a further meeting with a delegation this week to sort out that problem. I say to the Minister that those groups are being squeezed in all directions, because criteria for the European funding packages have been changed, and because floating support has not been put in place as intended.

I would appreciate it if at the end of today's debate the Minister could give us a commitment, so that Members could tell the groups that support will be given and that they may not have to lunge from crisis to crisis, or make more of their workers redundant. People in the voluntary sector do not want to have to tell people who have worked for a low wage over the years that they no longer have a job. Other employees who predicted that situation have left already, taking with them their experience and expertise.

Finally, this policy is an opportunity, not a threat. For the first time in my 20 years of work in that field, it is useful that instead of all the ad hoc provision between the statutory and voluntary sectors we now have an opportunity to strategise, review, evaluate and improve the quality of the provision. Quality assurance from those groups gives them back dignity, confidence and tells them that the Executive, the Assembly and the community respect them. There is also an opportunity to improve the quantity of service, should that be necessary. Over the years, new groups have come forward and problems that had not been identified now have a name; child abuse, for example.

With those opportunities in place, it is time to tell the voluntary sector that it is valued, and I hope that the Minister will say that at the end of the debate. Will the Minister assure Members that at the end of the transition period the funding will be secured, the necessary floating support will be in place, and the Housing Executive will be able to do an effective job? I hope that the programme goes from strength to strength. I strongly support the motion and the Committee for Social Development in tabling it today.

Mr S Wilson: I support the motion. The programme being developed is the result of court decisions in England and changes to the legislation there. The topic is before the Assembly because of parity legislation. It has been suggested that the Assembly should look at this issue differently, but it has no option other than to go down this route. Having said that, there are certain safeguards in doing so. Some safeguards mentioned earlier in the debate are either not realistic or may not be adopted by the Assembly, and I wish to deal with some of them.

Most Members have outlined the importance of the Towards Supporting People fund. There are approximately 800 schemes in which people who require extra help towards their living expenses are supported. These schemes help almost 13,500 people. Therefore many people are being affected by the changes that have separated the supporting element from the housing benefit element of the funding.

Many people who present themselves as homeless are in that position for reasons other than difficulty with accommodation: they often need additional support. During the Committee for Social Development's inquiry into homelessness it was significant that some groups said that up to 25% of the people they placed in accommodation would present themselves again as homeless within a year because the problem was not simply a housing one. Many people also require social support because of learning difficulties or other problems. Therefore the supporting element of housing costs is important, and the Assembly must address it seriously.

It is pointless to pretend that we can continue with the current demand-led system, because the courts have ruled against that. The system is changing in the rest of the UK, and it must change in Northern Ireland as well. Therefore the Assembly and the Department for Social Development must ensure that when the budgetary arrangements are changed, they have done sufficient work to determine the cost of the supporting element to allow for an adequate transfer of funding to the Northern Ireland Budget, and to ensure that the element currently paid in the housing benefit block is split sufficiently to ensure that there is money to maintain the supporting services.

I have no doubt that the Minister will assure the House that that work is being done and that money will be made available. If we get the baseline right, the problems that people envisage for the future should not arise. If too little money is transferred from the start to the block grant for support services, it will be a struggle throughout to ensure that there is enough money for them.

5.45 pm

Some people have suggested that money for support services should be ring-fenced. Some ask why money cannot be ring-fenced here when it is ring-fenced in England. There may not be a parallel between the situation here and that in England. The difficulty is that if money is ring-fenced for one area, we will be pressed to ring-fence money for other, equally important, areas. People can make very good cases for protecting the services that they provide.

Ms McWilliams: Social service workers appeared before the Committee to make the same point about funding for community care. Does the Member agree that they said that health resources were being drained into acute care? Because money for children's services and community care was not protected year after year, it was

simply taken from the Cinderella services to pay for the ever-increasing cost of acute care. With hindsight, it might have made sense to ensure provision for community care. Surely the same argument applies to supporting people.

Mr S Wilson: I accept the Member's point. However, we must remember that we can have an input through Committee meetings when Members can consult on budgets. We also have an input in the Budget through debates in the House, and we vote on the Budget every year. Members who feel, as Ms McWilliams does, that the Cinderella services are being squeezed, have ample opportunity to raise those concerns and put pressure on Ministers through the Committees or by amendments to the Budget.

There are problems with ring-fencing funds of any sort. First, if certain funds are ring-fenced, other groups will ask why they are not deemed important enough to have their funding protected. As Members, we face particular difficulties if we take that route. Secondly, demand may increase or decrease at any time, and flexibility is lost by ring-fencing money. I would prefer an annual debate on prioritising resources. Through Committee meetings and debates in the House we can respond to the needs of the various services. Raising such concerns and scrutinising money every year could lead to real debate about budgetary considerations and allocations.

I take on board Ms McWilliams's earlier point about dividing the housing costs from the support costs. That may not be as difficult to do as people imagine. We know the rental costs for certain types of accommodation across Northern Ireland. The cost of providing and maintaining the bricks and mortar will be covered by housing benefit — and it should not be difficult to cover that cost. The supporting element gives us the opportunity to examine and put a value on the services being provided.

I have visited some hostels and have seen the excellent work being carried out. People are often at the end of their tether when they come to hostels, having perhaps lost their home through unfortunate circumstances or due to violence in the home. I remember talking to people in a hostel on the Cliftonville Road who had gone through horrific experiences. Thanks to the support work being carried out, I was amazed at their optimism for the future. They told me how they were trying to get jobs, move into rented accommodation, and about how things would be different once they had a house of their own. Their self-esteem must have been built up as a result of the support work of those running the hostel. That work is invaluable. The Towards Supporting People fund will give us an opportunity to value such work.

Likewise, we can examine the service provided by organisations — and I can think of some examples in Belfast — that are not offering the support they should. The changeover presents us with many opportunities.

The Assembly must ensure that the transfer of funding to the block grant is at the right level so that we are not struggling to find the finance each year. Undoubtedly, the Department and the organisations providing much of the care will put in their bids and do their costings to ensure that the budget is appropriate. The Assembly must ensure that vital support services are provided for people whose problem is often social and not just lack of accommodation.

Mr M Robinson: Supporting people is a most far-reaching and comprehensive change to the funding of support services. Come April 2003, housing benefit will no longer cover the cost of support and will only finance the basic costs of bricks and mortar. It is vital that the Government ensure that voluntary agencies, such as the Simon Community, are confident in terms of the appropriate levels of funding and do not have to face an uncertain future by having to bid for funding on a project by project basis.

At present, rent from residents requiring supported housing is mainly covered by housing benefit, and, once again, taking the Simon Community as an example, this makes up for just under 50% of their total income. With the proposed changes to the housing benefit scheme, the Government must therefore ensure that the Towards Supporting People Scheme, due to replace the current system, has sufficient level of finance in place in order to sustain valuable support services such as that offered by those agencies I have already referred to.

Supporting people goes much further than housing by looking at, and dealing with, the specific needs of the individual. The supporting people proposals have signalled the Government's response to developing a more coherent funding framework for supported housing. Supported housing is delivered to tens of thousands of vulnerable people in Northern Ireland. In fact, there are 13,500 people living under 800 supported housing schemes in Northern Ireland. These include elderly people living in sheltered accommodation, people with learning and physical disabilities, those with mental health problems and homeless people. These people all have very diverse circumstances, and, through supporting people, voluntary agencies will be able to meet the very different support packages which are required.

Unfortunately the tens of thousands of people who require such support services will lose out if adequate finance is not directed into support schemes. Already many support agencies are unwilling to initiate new long-term projects due to the climate of uncertainty that exists.

The consultation paper on the supporting people fund sets out new proposals to develop a new funding framework. The results will produce greater transparency in funding, and the provision of housing support will no longer be tied to types of accommodation, but, instead, to the needs of the clients, and will also facilitate access

to financial assistance for housing support services. These proposals will go a long way in raising the priority of support services.

I think we are all aware that the Department for Social Development is under severe pressure in terms of its own budget. In 2000-01 the Department had a budget cut, and its bids for additional funds were not met. The Department has to deal with the most marginalised and vulnerable in our society, which is why funding is paramount to the success of projects launched by the Department.

We must not underestimate the role of the voluntary sector in providing support for the most vulnerable in our society. Those agencies, such as the Simon Community and Shelter, are working together for a common goal. They are providing support for people in different and very often difficult circumstances. I must also congratulate the Northern Ireland Housing Executive, which has initiated its own homelessness strategy and review of its services. The Housing Executive has stated that working alongside other agencies, both statutory and voluntary, is

“crucial to achieving success in planning and developing accommodation, advice and support services, with the overall aim of finding flexible efficient solutions to homelessness”.

As has already been mentioned, in the United Kingdom adequate funding has been provided in order to finance support schemes; £138 million has been allocated over three years for England, £15 million over three years for Scotland and £1.125 million in Wales for this financial year alone. The Government in Northern Ireland need to follow these examples if our voluntary sector is to continue to deliver support services effectively. There is no point whatsoever in introducing legislation if sufficient finance is not provided to make it a reality. Unfortunately, the reality at the moment is that without a supporting people fund thousands of vulnerable people will be unable to access the necessary support, therefore becoming further disadvantaged.

People's future should not be dependent on funding and balance sheets, but, unfortunately, finance is crucial to the success of the voluntary sector, although I would like at this stage to point out and to emphasise that the Minister has shown a commitment to the various agencies operating within the voluntary sector. In fact, only recently he launched a £250,000 initiative to help smaller community and voluntary groups.

I therefore call on the Executive to ensure that this Towards Supporting People legislation is supported with finance, at levels not less than currently available through housing benefit. The Government in Northern Ireland must ensure continuity of support for the voluntary sector, and they can do this through a long-term commitment on funding. I am the first to admit that there is no magic wand; there is only commitment, consultation, careful

planning, and, as a result, continuing progress. I hope that through this debate today positive action can be taken with regard to funding in order to underpin the implementation process and, in the longer term, the actual programme delivery.

The Minister for Social Development (Mr Dodds):

I thank the Committee for Social Development for highlighting this important issue, and I welcome the opportunity to speak.

6.00 pm

As almost everyone has said, supported housing is an effective and valuable service for many people in Northern Ireland. Of that there is no doubt. It helps people to live independently in the community, and it often complements community care provision. Many people depend on it: elderly people and those with learning difficulties are two obvious examples. Others have also been mentioned: victims of domestic violence, vulnerable young people, including those who are homeless, and people who suffer from alcohol or drug addiction.

Support comes in many different forms. It might be something practical such as helping a person to set up and maintain a home, helping someone to develop personal and practical skills or simply giving them advice on issues such as financial management. It might be more personal support, such as helping to develop social skills, giving emotional support and advice or simply befriending someone who is lonely or isolated. It might aim to ensure that vulnerable people feel safe in their homes by giving them help to establish personal safety and security or providing things like community alarms.

It is clear that many different groups depend on housing support services, and equally there is a wide range of support services. Not everybody has the same needs, and, therefore, support must be tailored to take account of individuals' needs and their circumstances.

In many cases, supported housing provision has been driven by an imaginative response from voluntary sector agencies to that wide range of needs. Many excellent schemes throughout the Province are run by hard-working, dedicated staff, often in difficult situations. I want to take this opportunity to pay tribute to all the people in the voluntary and community sectors who are involved in that important and vital work.

Needless to say, it costs a lot of money to provide these support services. One difficulty mentioned by the Member for South Belfast, Ms McWilliams, is that the current revenue funding arrangements are complex and fragmented. Many supported housing schemes are dependent on several different funding streams for a variety of different budgets, and in some cases the type of service provided has been driven more by the availability of a funding source than by the actual need of the resident.

Of course, the funding situation has been further complicated by the forthcoming changes to the housing benefit scheme. As has been mentioned in every speech, housing support services will no longer be an eligible charge under housing benefit. That is the main issue, because housing benefit is an important — though not the only — source of income for providers of supported housing schemes, and without it many schemes would be forced either to close completely or to significantly reduce the level of service to their vulnerable residents.

The Department and I were not prepared to see that happen; hence the move towards the creation of a Towards Supporting People fund. The increase in supported housing provision in recent years has given rise to an effective resource that provides valuable assistance to vulnerable people. Many of the schemes have been provided through funding from my Department in the form of housing association grants. Therefore, I have a vested interest, and I certainly do not want to see a situation develop whereby that investment might be jeopardised in any way through a lack of appropriate revenue funding. More importantly, I do not want to see a reduction in the level of service that is currently provided to the vulnerable and needy in society. For those reasons, I decided that Northern Ireland should establish a Towards Supporting People fund.

The creation of such a fund will provide many advantages. I agree with Ms McWilliams that this should be viewed as an opportunity rather than a threat. It will provide a replacement for the amount of housing benefit that is presently funding housing support services. That amount is now being identified and quantified by the Department as part of the transitional housing benefit process, and will be transferred from the social security budget to the Towards Supporting People fund in April 2003 as part of the Northern Ireland block.

Another advantage of the creation of such a fund is that it will eliminate fragmentation, removing the problems that stem from the current complex funding arrangements by combining all other existing funding streams into a new, single budget to be administered by the Housing Executive.

While changes to the funding arrangements are the main feature of the new proposal, they are by no means the only feature. The new arrangements will allow us to place a greater emphasis on the quality of the service provided. If we place all funding sources into a single budget, we will be able to progress from a situation where the service provided is tailored to meet the requirements of the funding source to one where the needs of the individual are the determining factor.

It will also mean that the Housing Executive can more closely monitor the service provided, and will therefore ensure that vulnerable residents receive the level of service that best meets their needs. In the next

few weeks I propose to issue a consultation document that will set out the details of the proposed arrangements for monitoring.

An interdepartmental working group comprising representatives from the Department for Social Development, the Department of Health, Social Services and Public safety, and health and social services boards, chaired by the Housing Executive, has developed our proposals. They have been endorsed by an external reference group including representatives of the various interested bodies. They have also been subject to wide consultation. While concerns have been raised about details, the broad concept of the proposals has been welcomed.

This motion concerns the implications of introducing a new system for funding housing support costs and the need to secure commitments from the Executive so that financial allocations for the Towards Supporting People fund are guaranteed and will be maintained at levels not lower than those currently provided through housing benefit. The motion emanates from the concerns of Committee members. They have already expressed concerns to me about the move from a demand-led fund to one that will have to be bid for year-on-year.

Concerns about funding were a recurrent theme during the consultation period and in the responses. I acknowledge those concerns. As has been acknowledged by some Members — but not by Mr O'Neill, who suggested that we do something different in Northern Ireland — we have no option in the matter. The decision to remove support costs as an eligible charge for housing benefit was not made by this Department; nor would this Department have made it. The decision has not been made by the Assembly or by any MLA.

The decision has been made as a result of a court challenge, and it applies throughout the United Kingdom. Either we react to that fact and establish a Towards Supporting People fund, or we turn a blind eye to reality and risk jeopardising the viability of many important and worthwhile schemes. I am not prepared to do that. We do not have the luxury of wishing it could be different or of reverting to the previous situation. Things have moved forward, for reasons that I have explained.

The changes to the housing benefit system are being introduced because the courts decided that support costs are not an eligible charge for housing benefit. Whether we like it or not, housing benefit will not pay for housing support services from April 2003.

The housing benefit portion of the new Towards Supporting People fund, which is the amount that will transfer from demand-led to annual bidding, accounts for only half of the funding. The remainder will come from within the housing budget in the form of a special needs management allowance, which my Department pays to housing associations that operate supported housing schemes, and several other smaller funds operated

by the Housing Executive. In terms of the motion as it is worded, there is no difficulty in agreeing that the financial allocations “will be maintained at levels not less than currently provided through housing benefit” because a substantial portion of the money allocated comes above and beyond housing benefit. Housing benefit is only a proportion of it.

I know that there are some concerns about matters of detail, not least about the method for calculating the amount of housing benefit funding that is considered to cover support services and that should, therefore, move from the social security budget to the Towards Supporting People fund. I give a guarantee to Mr Sammy Wilson, who raised the point, that there will be no under-estimation of the amount to be transferred. Mr Billy Hutchinson said that the baseline figure in the first year will be critical. I am determined to ensure that the maximum amount of money is transferred to meet the costs of the Towards Supporting People programme.

Members have also expressed concerns about appropriate funding being made available to enable the Housing Executive to carry out its responsibilities, and that is where the £138 million comes in. Mr Shannon, who unfortunately is not in the Chamber, and other Members, raised that point. That figure is the money given to some 400 local authorities in Great Britain to implement the scheme. Northern Ireland has only one organisation, the Housing Executive, and until now the Housing Executive has managed to meet its responsibility within existing budgets. However, I realise, and I share the concerns of Members, that this is a situation that cannot continue. That is why I have bid, and will continue to bid very strongly, to the Department of Finance and Personnel to secure the necessary funding that the Housing Executive will require to allow it to meet all its additional commitments.

Therefore, I welcome the plea that was issued for all Members to ensure, when it comes to backing up the strong arguments made today on the need to ensure that appropriate funding is put in place, that those arguments are also put to the Department of Finance and Personnel. It is to the credit of the Housing Executive that it has been able to carry out the preparatory work to date within existing resources. Much important work has already been done in calculating the size of the fund and developing an implementation plan that sets out the timetable for tackling issues such as needs and supply mapping.

Funding for the Housing Executive is, of course, not the only issue. Members have raised the issue of the impact that the Towards Supporting People fund will have on the voluntary agencies that provide housing support services. It is important that they receive the necessary assistance to allow them to prepare for the new arrangements. The House will acknowledge the fact that some £120,000 has been provided in that regard, and the money has been used to create three posts specifically

aimed at assisting voluntary organisations to prepare for the new arrangements.

The issue of Sydenham House was raised. The Housing Executive's Towards Supporting People project team has several secondees whose aim is to provide specific aid to small organisations such as that.

6.15 pm

I also accept that communication is important. I assure Members that every effort will be made to keep all interests fully informed of developments.

The introduction of a Towards Supporting People policy and funding framework in Northern Ireland will allow us to place the future of the supported housing sector on a more secure and co-ordinated basis. It will eliminate fragmentation of funding and improve the quality and effectiveness of housing-related services.

The issue of ring-fencing has been mentioned in relation to the situation in the rest of Great Britain, where money has been allocated to local authorities and ring-fenced to ensure that they do not spend it on other requirements. Under the new arrangements the money in the Towards Supporting People fund will be part of the housing budget. The Minister for Social Development will be responsible for it and will be in a position to ensure that that money is not raided to meet other priorities. The Assembly will be in a position — through the votes at Budget stage — to ensure that the necessary resources are available to meet the priority that we have spoken about so strongly today. Let no one be in any doubt as far as that matter is concerned.

I value the debate. It has been an important debate on an important issue. I commend the Committee for Social Development, and I assure the House on behalf of my Department that we are fully committed to the introduction of the Towards Supporting People fund, which will meet the needs of the most vulnerable and needy people in our society.

Ms Gildernew: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I shall make a few additional remarks, given the importance of the debate and the concerns surrounding it.

Several common themes arose from the consultation process and the consultation paper ‘Supporting People: A New Policy and Funding Framework for Support Services’. Several seminars took place about the Towards Supporting People fund. The key message from those seminars was that the housing support element was too low, resulting in an underestimation of the budget.

The budget for the Towards Supporting People fund should be ring-fenced so that it is not diverted to other priorities. That is essential, as funding may be split between the Housing Executive and health trusts. We must ensure that resources can only be used for this specific purpose or we will have difficulties in years to come in providing funding for this essential service.

Providers have difficulty in determining the split between rent — meaning bricks and mortar — and care and support costs. That will no doubt result in the underfunding of certain projects. Small providers and some voluntary groups will need training, support and the necessary resources to implement the scheme. There is a danger that some of the smaller housing providers for the homeless will not be able to survive within the parameters of Towards Supporting People policy, and may have to close. That will inevitably lead to gaps in provision.

The consultation also highlighted the fact that further details were needed in order to evaluate the extent of partnership required, and that links with local strategic partnerships and communities were essential. Consultation with the voluntary and community sector should continue on this issue.

One can tell from comments made in today's debate that there is a great deal of concern about the inadequacy of funding for maintaining existing services and meeting new responsibilities. If finances are to be based on existing levels of support, then an increase in needs may not be met.

Another theme arising from the consultation was that domestic violence should be explicitly included, particularly in matters of confidentiality. The issue of asylum seekers must also be addressed.

People also wonder how the Children (Leaving Care) Bill will fit in with the Towards Supporting People proposal.

Mr O'Neill rightly identified the issues of timescales and the finance needed to deal with the increasing problem of homelessness, particularly for young people leaving care. My party Colleague the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety recently introduced the Children (Leaving Care) Bill, the Second Stage of which was passed today. She understands the needs of young people leaving care and the many and varied challenges that they face. We must play our part in implementing provisions that will make it easier for young people at that difficult time. We must ensure that the provisions in that Bill, when taken alongside the housing support Bill, provide the proper legislative basis to give young people the security and help that they need. Mr O'Neill is right that bids should not have to be made. It is a demand-led service, and the money must be guaranteed.

Dr Birnie and Mr O'Neill promoted an integrated and holistic approach to the issue. They are right that the issue is not the responsibility of the Department for Social Development alone. The Bill includes an educational component, and its connection with health is obvious. Dr Birnie made an interesting association between the needs of the long-term unemployed and their vulnerability to homelessness. I agree that we need preventative strategies, but we need money for support services as well.

I congratulate Mr Shannon on drawing attention to the plight of women. Vulnerable women affected by domestic violence need to know that there are safe places that will meet their needs in times of trauma. Mick Murphy asked whether the Minister has bid for funding to pave the way for the scheme. I am unsure whether the Minister responded properly by stating that the needs were met through the existing Housing Executive resource funding. Perhaps he could give us further detail on that.

Billy Hutchinson made a measured and valuable contribution. We are lagging behind, and we need more integration. He used the special purchase of evacuated dwellings (SPED) scheme as an example of funding difficulties. In addition, he mentioned charging and means testing, which must be taken on board. Mr Hutchinson also said that it is incumbent on all Members to make pleas to the Executive to provide that money. The Minister is the key person in that respect.

Ms McWilliams made the critical point that legislation is all very well, but resources are needed to give effect to it. She drew attention to the difficulty of breaking down the costs. That common theme emerged from the consultation, and all the service providers made a similar point. Resources are needed urgently to help the service providers to deal with the changes. Ms McWilliams said that that was an opportunity to value the voluntary sector providers.

I was glad that the Minister paid tribute to the voluntary and community sectors. Often they are not recognised for their work to meet certain needs in society. I too pay tribute to them, but the greatest tribute that the Assembly could pay would be to ensure that the work of those sectors is funded.

Sammy Wilson outlined the scale of the problem and the variety of reasons for it. He said that we need to get the baselines right, and I agree. It is important to help service providers to get their calculations right so that underfunding does not occur. Mr Wilson also acknowledged the importance of support work, and other Members highlighted the need for prevention. Perhaps more outreach work is needed to ensure that the situation does not become critical. I trust that the Minister will not overlook the need to include that requirement in his calculation of figures based on necessary provision.

Mark Robinson rightly highlighted the need for certainty among providers. There is a great deal of uncertainty and concern among the service providers as to how they will be affected by the Towards Supporting People initiative. In addition, he raised concerns about the Department's budget levels and drew attention to the fact that England, Scotland and Wales have set aside funding for the introduction of the new scheme and are well advanced in their plans for it. Like Ms McWilliams,

Mr Robinson said that legislation on its own is never enough and that funding is critical.

My first observation is that the debate has served at least one purpose. It has drawn attention to the fact that there are important social issues beyond health and education — housing must be third on our list of priorities.

It is unfortunate that more Members were not in the Chamber. However, the Members who attended have made a valuable contribution, and the standard of debate was excellent. I hope that the other Members' absence is not a reflection of how they feel about this issue, because it is something that affects all of us in every constituency in the North. I hope that those absent will read about the proceedings in Hansard. The Members who participated in the debate spoke about people — people who come from different political, social and religious backgrounds. However, as I have said, they come from every constituency. I do not deny that health and education deserve to be at the forefront of the Assembly's policies. However, they must not overshadow all other matters, and they must not be addressed at the expense of the most marginalised in our community.

It is worth noting that when the idea for the Towards Supporting People fund was put out for public consultation, almost all of the 20 or so organisations that responded were either providers of housing support services or agencies from the health sector. In accepting the need for changes to the existing system, many respondents welcomed the principle of a more flexible scheme. However, they registered deep concern about issues such as means-testing, quality improvements and the practicalities of introducing and delivering the new system. We must pay attention to those concerns. Those organisations have vast amounts of experience — they know what they are talking about, and if they are concerned, so should we be. As I have said, tributes have been paid to the work carried out by those agencies, and, although I cannot mention individuals, they have my appreciation and respect for the work that they do.

I hope that the Executive get the message loud and clear. Health and education are important, but so is

housing. We are talking about legislation to provide for the poor, the elderly, those with addictions, those who have had to endure family breakdown or domestic violence, and young people. Some of those young people will be leaving care and will rely on our support as they seek to rejoin and re-establish themselves in our community. We need to support them properly, and we must ensure that adequate funding is available. I hope that this debate is not a one-day wonder, in which we all pledge to work for the marginalised and then retreat from that pledge.

I shall comment on some of the Minister for Social Development's pledges. He talked about how the Towards Supporting People fund will allow us to place the future of the supported housing sector on a more secure and co-ordinated footing. He mentioned eliminating fragmentation of funding, and approving the quality and effectiveness of housing-related support services. It is imperative that we do that, and I hope that he is right. The Minister said that the increase in supported housing provision in recent years has given rise to effective and valuable resources. That is true, and many of the schemes have come from housing association grants. I would like the Minister to keep this issue at the forefront and to ensure that proper resources are put in place. Although he says that money should not be ring-fenced, many Members said that the money should be ring-fenced. It is a worthwhile cause, so we should ensure that the money is available to enable the most vulnerable and marginalised in our society to have a better quality of life. Go raibh míle maith agat.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That this Assembly expresses serious concern about the implications of introducing a new system for funding housing support costs and calls on the Minister for Social Development to secure commitments from the Executive to ensure that financial allocations for the "Towards Supporting People Fund", due to be introduced in April 2003, are guaranteed and will be maintained at levels not less than currently provided through housing benefit.

Adjourned at 6.30 pm.

NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

Thursday 4 April 2002

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

Members observed two minutes' silence.

EXPRESSIONS OF CONDOLENCE ON THE DEATH OF HER MAJESTY QUEEN ELIZABETH THE QUEEN MOTHER

Mr Speaker: It is my solemn and sad duty to advise the House of the passing of Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth The Queen Mother, who died peacefully in her sleep on March 30, 2002 in her one-hundred-and-second year.

Today's sitting has been called for the special, sole and express purpose of giving the Assembly an opportunity to pay its respects to The Queen Mother for her long and extraordinary life of service not only to our country, but to the Commonwealth as a whole and to express condolences to Her Majesty The Queen and all the Royal Family.

I ask you now to stand in your places and pause to reflect for a minute, giving thanks for a life lived well and in the service of others.

Members observed a minute's silence.

The First Minister (Mr Trimble): I would like to say how much I, and I am sure other Members here, appreciate the fact that the Assembly has been recalled on this occasion to enable us to offer our condolences to Her Majesty The Queen and other members of the Royal Family on the death of Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth The Queen Mother. It is entirely appropriate that we have this opportunity to do so.

Members will know that the coffin of Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth The Queen Mother will be moved from the vicinity of Clarence House to the Palace of Westminster tomorrow. It will be accompanied by the lieutenant colonels of the regiments of which she was Hon Colonel, who will act as pall-bearers. However, the bearer party will not be drawn from any of those regiments; it will be drawn from the Irish Guards.

A few moments ago, I discovered that the grandson of Sir John Gorman — whom I am delighted to see with us today — will be among the dozen members of the

bearer party. It marks the very close association between Her Majesty and the Irish Guards — an association that dates back to 1928, when, as Duchess of York, she presented a shamrock to the Irish Guards on St Patrick's Day, something that she has punctiliously done since then.

One of the characteristics of Her Majesty — no doubt shaped by her experiences in both world wars — is the close attention she has paid to servicemen and ex-servicemen, marking their service and the anniversaries associated with them. Part of that association is with the Black Watch, the regiment raised in the part of Scotland where she grew up, and in which her brothers served during the first world war. Indeed, one of her brothers was killed in 1915 at the Battle of Loos.

It was characteristic of The Queen Mother that, when she discovered 60 years later that her brother had been tended by another soldier — a Dublin Fusilier — just before his death, she immediately arranged for that soldier to come from Dublin to Clarence House to meet her. Instances such as that marked her character.

During the past few days many people have paid tribute to her character, the extraordinary grace and lightness of touch with which she discharged her functions as Queen Mother and the way in which she made everybody with whom she came in contact feel an openness and an easiness of approach. She did this without any sacrifice of majesty.

A very strong sense of humour was associated with her, and we have heard many examples of that in the past few days. However, most people when looking back at her long life — nearly 102 years, half of which were spent as Queen Mother — will associate her with carrying out a wide range of official functions and doing so with the lightness and grace already mentioned.

When we reflect on her life as a whole, however, we have to reflect on the 16 years in which she was Queen Consort, and many people remember the special contribution she made during the second world war. In 1939, shortly after the declaration of war, it was suggested that The Queen Consort and the young Princesses should be evacuated to Canada for safety from the threat of air raids. Her response was characteristic:

"The children will not leave without me. I will not leave without The King, and The King will never leave."

I suspect, as many people do, that the decision was made by her rather than The King. However, once the war touched the country during the air raids of 1940-41, and thereafter, she demonstrated her fortitude by not leaving the palace or London; by sharing the same dangers as others, and by visiting bombed areas very soon thereafter.

Those visits were not confined to the East End. She visited other cities, and she was in Belfast in 1942 to see the damage that had been done here. While there is a

focus on the contribution that she made during the wartime years, the contribution in the years immediately preceding that war was, if anything, more significant. We were faced with a remarkable challenge from an unusual blend of nationalism and socialism that had arisen in Germany, and there were elements in society, on the right and the left, who were not clear about their response to that challenge, but that cannot be said of The Queen Mother. Before she became Queen she had dipped into 'Mein Kampf' and had seen through its author, and she advised people accordingly. That steadiness was reflected in the contribution of Her Majesty and King George VI in the years immediately preceding the war and during it.

The same courage was displayed more recently during the visit of Her Majesty to Northern Ireland in 1983. One does not know the full details, but a few days before her visit there was a lapse, and her itinerary was stolen from a car. However, that did not affect her. She behaved in an entirely characteristic way while here and, in order to mingle with the crowd, departed from the route that those charged with her safety wished her to take.

Yesterday, the Prime Minister made an interesting reference to the years that she had had and the experience that she garnered during them. She lived through the time of 20 Prime Ministers and 18 Presidents, and she could reminisce to him not just about Churchill and Attlee, but about Asquith, Lloyd George and Baldwin. There was a great wealth of experience there, which is a characteristic of the monarchy as a whole being a non-political expression of national identity and one of the few unifying institutions throughout the country.

Her passing will be felt with sadness by many people communally across the divide in Northern Ireland. It is quite right and appropriate, therefore, that we have this opportunity to express our condolences. I appreciate, and I am sure that the community as a whole will appreciate, the attendance of so many Members here today to mark that.

The Deputy First Minister (Mr Durkan): I join with other Members today as party leader and Deputy First Minister in formally extending our condolences and offering our sincere sympathies to The Queen and her family at this sad time.

The Queen Mother was a remarkable woman of great character and sense of duty who carried out her role with dedication, commitment and great dignity. The esteem and regard in which The Queen Mother was held has been recognised through the many expressions of condolence and the tributes that have been paid to her by world leaders. The Queen Mother's sense of service, her contribution to public life and the charities that she supported such as MENCAP and the NSPCC were significant. Many of the tributes of recent days recalled the war years when her personal contribution provided a much-needed boost to the people of Britain during those

dark times. One does not need to be British or a royalist to recognise The Queen Mother's position in public life and the esteem and affection in which she was held in her nation and beyond.

I recognise that the British Royal Family has a very special place in the hearts of many people in Northern Ireland, and The Queen Mother's death brings a deep sense of loss to them just as her role was a source of great pride to them. People who do not endorse the concept of royalty can still appreciate the qualities of someone who loved life and demonstrated a clear strength of spirit.

10.45 am

The Queen Mother lived her long life to the full. Those who knew her well will greatly mourn her passing. Many in Ireland shared her love of racing. Several well-known politicians on this side of the water — and on this side of the House — enjoyed success on the back of The Queen Mother's tips, real or surmised. I extend my sympathy to The Queen Mother's family, friends and many admirers.

Rev Dr Ian Paisley: The House is grateful to you, Mr Speaker, for your initiative in calling this meeting. It is most appropriate that the House meet as have done the other representative bodies of the United Kingdom, so that politicians can express their views and pass on their sympathy to Her Majesty The Queen and the Royal House. We welcome that opportunity.

On behalf of the people whom I represent, I resent deeply the slogans that have appeared today on walls in certain areas of Belfast, with the words "Royal Family, where is your granny now?". It is preached to us that parity of esteem exists here, but there is none in such language — it cuts across the idea of parity of esteem. Unionist representatives must say that that activity is deeply resented and does not reflect the attitude of vast numbers of people on both sides of the religious divide. Many Roman Catholics feel, too, the sadness and darkness of this day. As the Deputy First Minister said, some do not accept the system of the monarchy but are prepared to be courteous at such times and admit the contribution of royalty and the monarchs of the United Kingdom, especially The Queen Mother. I regret that the SDLP was not represented in the House of Commons yesterday; however, I am glad that its representatives are here today.

Those who had the privilege of knowing and spending time with The Queen Mother could only say that she was a most remarkable woman. The Queen Mother's greatest characteristic was her tenacious memory. Ballymena had the privilege of receiving a visit from her in the early days, when she and her husband opened the town hall there. I was only a little boy, not even a teenager, at that time.

Yesterday, in the House of Commons, the Father of the House reminded Members of a meeting that 15 MPs

had with The Queen Mother on her ninetieth birthday. My wife and I had a lengthy conversation with her then. She reminded me of her visit to Ballymena and of the town hall that she and her husband opened. She also asked me about various businesses in Ballymena. At the time of her visit, the town had a flourishing linen business. She then asked me whether Ballymena had a tobacco business, and I told her that the town was home to Gallaher Ltd at Lisnafillan. She said that she had had that in her mind when she thought of Ballymena. She had a tenacious memory.

It was recorded in the House of Commons yesterday that The Queen Mother prayed nightly for the people of Northern Ireland. That characterises the type of woman that she was. There are no other real competitors for the title “lady of the century”, because in all aspects, she was the lady of the century. She saw the century in and she saw it out, and her remarkable keenness and zest for duty were staggering.

Once, The Queen Mother attended a meeting at St Patrick’s Barracks in Ballymena. I spoke to the Royal Flight pilot who had flown her there. He said that she did not keep to schedules. He had been informed of the time at which she must leave Ballymena, but when the plane took off, the first thing she said was that she would not keep to the schedule, because she thought that she could spend two more hours in Ballymena, and she intended to do so. The pilot told her that that would be difficult for him, because he had been instructed that they should leave Ballymena at 6.00 pm, but she was instructing him to leave at 8.00 pm. He told her that he would be in trouble. She replied that he could leave the settlement of the dispute to her because she was in charge and she would leave when she wanted to leave. Therefore, on that occasion she lengthened her visit to Ballymena in order to meet many more people whom she would not have met otherwise. Her behaviour in my constituency mirrors that in all the constituencies that she visited, and that was the universal assent of Members from all sides who spoke in the House of Commons yesterday.

What a century she lived in — perhaps the greatest century of the era after Christ. She was a powerful lady who had conquered difficulties and had faced great challenges. She experienced many hard parts of life’s rough road and endured many bitter sorrows. She displayed remarkable heroism during the war years, and she expressed great love and sympathy for those who were in need of it.

The foundation of The Queen Mother’s power was a living faith in Jesus Christ as her Saviour. It was remarked in a BBC programme that for her church confirmation she chose the hymn

“I am not ashamed to own my Lord or to defend His cause, Maintain the honour of His Word and the glory of His cross”.

She had a faith, which she needed in the trials, troubles and tribulations that life held for her.

As we look back on The Queen Mother’s life, as a nation we can thank God for giving us such a gift. It is difficult to think of the kingdom without The Queen Mother. We have been left bereft of someone who acted as a tremendous cement to the society of our nation. She bound all classes and people, who saw in her, and in her dedication to the service of the nation, something that inspired them and was a source of strength.

The testimony of her life is best expressed by an anonymous poem, putting into her mouth these words:

“What does it matter then that I am grey,
That this frail frame has been seized by decay?
Though silver is my hair, sweet flowers of gold are blooming everywhere.
My heart’s not old.”

I do not think her heart was ever old.

“And so this tenement of crumbling clay
Is but a hat I rent for one short day.
Love’s wondrous house in peace waits now for me
With joys that shall increase eternally.”

John Bunyan, author of ‘The Immortal Dream’, said of the pilgrim:

“They laid the pilgrim in a large upper chamber, facing the sun rising. The name of that chamber was peace.”

That sums up well the life, the testimony and the contribution that The Queen Mother made to this nation.

Mr Ford: I wish to associate my Colleagues and myself with the remarks that have been made about The Queen Mother by others who have already spoken. It is at times like this that people frequently trot out the phrase “This is the end of an era”. However, in the case of a life that spanned three centuries and was lived so much in the public gaze, it really can be said that this is the end of an era for the people of this country. The three words that have come to me most often in the millions of words that have been written and spoken over the past few days have been: history, duty and personality. In a life that was in the public gaze for three quarters of a century there was an enormous amount of history.

I have no personal memories of The Queen Mother, but at the weekend I listened as my mother and my aunt described how, as small girls, they cajoled my grandfather into taking them to Newtownstewart railway station to watch the then Duke and Duchess of York arrive on their way to Baronscourt in 1924. The Queen Mother was already something of a media celebrity then, as she had already captured the public attention just a few months after her honeymoon. She remained in the public gaze and public affection all her life. It was not just that she was there —there was her sense of duty, her sense of duty towards the family she had married into, the role that was thrust on her by the abdication crisis and her behaviour, which has been referred to by

the First Minister, during the second world war and the famous anecdote about not running to Canada for safety for herself.

She carried that through into the post-war era when she ceased to be The Queen Consort and became the mother of the sovereign. She did not retreat into privacy but continued with an active public life. It was in that that the warmth of her personality showed through. There have been countless anecdotes in recent days as people have talked about how they met her, the things she said and the legendary jokes about how her staff, who were half her age, could not keep up with her. However, it was when she became so popularly known as The “Queen Mum” that her personality showed through to the post-war generations, to those of us who have no memory of her life during the crises of the earlier part of the century. Her work with charities, and her informal meetings with individuals have all been highlighted.

It is clear that she will be missed by people of all ages in every part of these islands, by those who have happy memories of meetings with her at different stages. We send our sympathy to Her Majesty The Queen and to all the members of the Royal Family at this time.

Mr Boyd: On behalf of the Northern Ireland Unionist Party, I too pay tribute to Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth The Queen Mother. The Queen Mother was a remarkable woman who was respected by millions throughout the world. The people of Northern Ireland will remember her with great fondness and affection for having visited the Province on many occasions.

The Queen Mother had a great loyalty to her country, a tremendous love of her people and a strong devotion to her Christian faith. She was a wonderful, decent person, and our nation is much the poorer for her passing. Our thoughts and prayers at this sad time are with Her Majesty The Queen and all the members of the Royal Family. It is particularly sad for Her Majesty to lose her sister and mother within a few weeks of each other in this her Golden Jubilee year.

11.00 am

Mr Watson: We in the United Unionist Assembly Party also wish to be associated with the tributes being paid in the House to the life and service of Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth The Queen Mother. Unlike others here today, my party Colleagues and I did not have the privilege of meeting such a gracious lady. Having been born just a few months before her late husband’s death, I grew up in the new Elizabethan post-war era and, like many others, always regarded The Queen Mother as the grandmother of our nation.

I am reminded of the words of the late President John F Kennedy when he said

“Ask not what your country can do for you — ask what you can do for your country.”

Those words epitomise the life of our beloved Queen Mother. During that long and inspirational life she was a gracious and kindly Queen, and she has left an indelible mark on our society. Throughout that remarkable lifespan she served her people selflessly and diligently. She was indeed the matriarch of the nation, and through her absolute integrity and warmth of character and personality she was a tremendous inspiration to the British people during the dark days of war and during the brighter days too. Her dedication and duty to her family and country, to the Commonwealth of Nations and to other countries of the world cannot be questioned and will not easily be forgotten.

We extend our deepest sympathy to Her Majesty The Queen and all members of the Royal Family at this difficult time and pray that Almighty God will give them

“beauty for ashes, the oil of joy for mourning and the garment of praise for the spirit of heaviness.”

Mr Ervine: It is impossible not to be touched by the loss of someone so wonderful. In common with Mr Watson I did not know The Queen Mother as Queen. You could argue that I did not know The Queen Mother at all, other than by way of the things I am capable of reading or the stories that appear on television. However, to me there seems to have been a benign power, a strength and a rock solid stability that all of us, in some way, have tapped into as a resource, and none more so than members of the Royal Family who have come through a torrid century with circumstances not always as they wished them to be. Yet there was this tower of strength, this benign, relatively petite woman showing all the fortitude and ability to steer her family in the right direction as best she could.

Of course, that family in many ways epitomises the nation, a nation going through trauma and difficulty, having suffered the awfulness of war, the tragedy of death and grief and those things that we know and expect from the sad and terrible moments in any life — in the life of a person, a family or a nation. The Queen Mother saw all those things, but she also saw good things. She saw changes in society that mean we live longer such as the eradication of smallpox. Absolutely destructive and awful things to humankind also happened in the lifetime of The Queen Mother. She would have seen much political chicanery in our United Kingdom. She would also have seen that political chicanery develop through the process of violence. One eye would have been on one part of the United Kingdom that perhaps suffered from its abnormality more than other areas.

My sense is that through all of that — whether we can celebrate it or commiserate about it — there was a life that did make a difference. We have heard today about duty and the undoubted devoted service that The Queen Mother gave to this society. However, hers is not a life to be commiserated; it is to be celebrated, because it has reflected the life of a nation. That nation loved her

deeply. We will carry on without her. Our nation is not besmirched by her passing; it has been greatly enhanced by her existence.

Ms Morrice: On behalf of the Women's Coalition, I pay tribute to The Queen Mother. It is a sad occasion for many people, especially The Queen who has lost her sister and her mother within such a short period and for the close family circle, the grandchildren and great-grandchildren who will miss The Queen Mother very much. It is a sad occasion for those who knew her well and for the many millions of people whose hearts she touched. Our thoughts are with them at this time, and as we say in Northern Ireland, we are sorry for their trouble.

Like the death of President Kennedy, Princess Grace and Princess Diana, the passing of The Queen Mother will be captured as a moment in time. People will ask each other: "Where were you when you heard?". Many people will remember the mundane things they were doing at the time — washing the car or peeling the potatoes. Suddenly, those things will take on a new significance as the stories are told and retold and history becomes reality.

However, The Queen Mother's death was very different from that of President Kennedy, Princess Grace and Princess Diana. Their deaths were tragic because they were cut down in their prime. The Queen Mother passed away having lived her life to the full: that is how she will be remembered. She was a strong, capable woman who for many people embodied the spirit of royalty. She had grace, glamour and good humour. She had dignity and a remarkable sense of duty. She was without doubt a true woman of substance.

Over the past few days we have heard many stories — and we will hear many more — about her resilience during the war years. We have heard about her support for her husband The King; her work for charities; her love of horses and her dislike of change. However, she saw more change during her lifetime than there has been at any other time in the history of the world. Many examples of that change have been cited, but perhaps the most appropriate for me, as a representative of the Northern Ireland Women's Coalition, to mention is that although she was born into privilege she did not have the right to vote until she was 28 years old — because she was a woman.

It has been said that her death marks the end of an era. The door of twentieth-century Britain has been closed. However, before it did so, The Queen Mother had the chance to glimpse the new millennium with her family at her side. Sadly she had to witness the death of her daughter before she herself passed away. It is right to say that the next few days should be a celebration of her life. She lived to see a hundred and one summers, and she died peacefully in the springtime of her one-hundred-and-second year. What more could a family have asked for.

Mr Speaker: I have made arrangements for a book of condolence to be made available to be signed by Members, staff, members of the press and others working in this Building or on the Stormont estate. I invite Members to join me in signing the book in the Great Hall after the Adjournment.

Adjourned at 11.09 am.

NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

Monday 8 April 2002

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

Members observed two minutes' silence.

ASSEMBLY BUSINESS

Mrs Courtney: On a point of order, Mr Speaker. Is it in order for me to thank Members for their kind wishes and the expressions of goodwill that were extended to me after my recent accident, and also to thank you, Mr Speaker, for your letter? Those good wishes helped me a lot on my way to recovery. I am still recovering but am glad to be back.

Mr Speaker: It is, indeed, in order. On behalf of the whole House, I shall say what a great pleasure it is to see you back in your place, and able to serve the House and your constituents. We were all upset to hear about your accident and are greatly pleased that you are back with us.

Mr O'Neill: On a point of order, Mr Speaker. We are concerned about the welfare of our elected representatives. Will you provide an opportunity for comment to be made on intimidating and horrendous attacks on Members' homes, such as the despicable attack on the home of Mr Eugene McMenamin, a Member for West Tyrone?

Mr Speaker: The Member is aware that I must operate within Standing Orders. There is no Standing Order that permits me to open the matter for debate. Members may wish to use the normal routes, such as questions, motions or other ways to raise the matter.

I have no doubt that the whole House, like me, was extremely upset, concerned and angry to hear about the episode over the weekend. My office is already taking the usual actions, as, unfortunately, that is not the first episode of threatening or intimidation of Members. If there is anything else that the Member, Mr McMenamin or any of his Colleagues feel that my Office or I can do, I trust that they will be in touch with me.

I have no doubt that the House is extremely concerned about the matter. It is an attack on Mr McMenamin and his family, but it is not solely an attack on them — it is an attack on the entire process of representative democracy, because he is one of us as a representative. Undoubtedly, the whole House will share that concern. However, I have no leeway to introduce the matter other

than through the normal process, which the Member may wish to take up.

ROYAL ASSENT

Mr Speaker: I wish to inform the House that the Budget Bill has received Royal Assent. The Budget Act (Northern Ireland) 2002 became law on 20 March 2002. The Local Government (Best Value) Bill and the Personal Social Services (Preserved Rights) Bill have also received Royal Assent. The Local Government (Best Value) Act (Northern Ireland) 2002 and the Personal Social Services (Preserved Rights) Act (Northern Ireland) 2002 became law on 26 March 2002.

PUBLIC PETITION

Badger Baiting

Mr Speaker: Mr Shannon has begged leave to present a public petition in accordance with Standing Order 22.

Mr Shannon: I beg leave to present a petition from residents of Newtownards, the surrounding district and further afield. It carries the signatures of more than 1,000 or 1,100 people who are very concerned about the many incidents of badger baiting that persist. Children from Movilla High School in Newtownards — Stacy Paul, Ryan McCullough and Sarah Hill — were instrumental in collecting the signatures, and they are in the Gallery today. Residents from Newtownards are particularly perturbed that, despite legislation, badgers are still being persecuted, and the law is insufficient to ensure their protection. Given that and the need for better protection under the law, we present the petition to the Assembly for consideration.

Mr Shannon moved forward and laid the petition on the Table.

Mr Speaker: I shall forward the petition to the Minister of the Environment and a copy to the Chairperson of the Committee for the Environment.

ASSEMBLY BUSINESS

Suspension of Standing Orders

Resolved (with cross-community support):

That this Assembly suspends Standing Order 10(2) and Standing Order 10(6) for Monday 8 April 2002. — *[Mr Tierney.]*

BRITISH-IRISH COUNCIL:

Misuse of Drugs

Mr Speaker: I have received notice from the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety that she wishes to make a statement on the British-Irish Council meeting on drugs.

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety (Ms de Brún): Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. Is mian liom tuairisc a chur faoi bhráid an Tionóil ar an chruinniú de Chomhairle na Breataine-na hÉireann a tionóladh i bhformáid earnaíleach i mBaile Átha Cliath Dé hAoine 22 Márta 2002. Ag an chruinniú seo pléadh ceisteanna a bhain le mí-úsáid drugaí agus le comhoibriú san achar seo.

I ndiaidh don Chéad-Aire agus don LeasChéad-Aire muid a ainmniú, d'fhreastail an tAire Comhshaoil, an tUasal Dermot Nesbitt, TTR, agus mé féin ar an chéad chruinniú den ghrúpa earnaíleach um mhí-úsáid drugaí. Ba é an tUasal Eoin Ryan, TD, an tAire Stáit do Fhorbairt Áitiúil, a bhfuil straitéis náisiúnta na hÉireann um dhrugaí mar shainchúram air, a rinne ionadaíocht thar ceann Rialtas na hÉireann agus a bhí mar chathaoirleach ar an chruinniú.

An tUasal Bob Ainsworth, FP, fo-rúnaí parlaiminte ag an Oifig Ghnóthaí Baile a rinne ionadaíocht thar ceann Rialtas na Breataine. Ba é an Dr Richard Simpson, FPA, Leas-Aire Ceartais, a rinne ionadaíocht thar ceann Choiste Feidhmiúcháin na hAlban agus ba í Jane Hutt, Uas, ME, an tAire Sláinte agus Seirbhísí Sóisialta, a rinne ionadaíocht thar ceann Thionól na Breataine Bige.

Ba é an tOnórach Richard Corkill, Príomh-Aire Rialtas Oileán Mhanainn agus cathaoirleach ar Choiste Straitéise Drugaí, a bhí mar ionadaí thar ceann Oileán Mhanainn. Ba é an Teachta Roger Berry OBE, atá mar uachtarán ar an Bhord Riaracháin, Stáit Geansaí, a rinne ionadaíocht thar ceann Geansaí; agus ba é an Teachta Roy le Herisser, atá mar leas-uachtarán an Choiste Sláinte agus Seirbhísí Sóisialta, Stáit Geirsí, a rinne ionadaíocht thar ceann Geirsí.

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

D'fhaomh an tUasal Dermot Nesbitt an ráiteas seo agus tá sé á dhéanamh ar a shon chomh maith.

Ag an chruinniú rinne na hAíre uilig a bhí i láthair cur síos ar na príomhdhúshláin sna straitéisí drugaí acu féin. Ina dhiaidh sin, cuireadh baill an chruinnithe ar an eolas faoin obair atá ar siúl maidir le drugaí. Ar an obair seo tá na fáltais ó mhangaíreachta drugaí a aimsiú, an pobal a dhéanamh páirteach i bhforbairt agus i gcur i bhfeidhm straitéisí drugaí, caitheamh aimsire folláin a chur roimh dhaoine óga atá i gcontúirt drugaí a mhí-úsáid agus oiliúint agus fostaíocht a chur roimh mhí-úsáideoirí drugaí.

Rinne an Teachta Roger Berry OBE, atá mar uachtarán ar an Bhord Riaracháin i nGeansaí, cur síos don chruinniú ar fháltais na trádála drugaí/coigistiú sócmhainní a aimsiú, agus glacadh leis an mholadh go ndéanfaí comhdháil a thionól i nGeansaí ar an 16 agus 17 Bealtaine leis an cheist seo a phlé.

Chuir an tUasal Bob Ainsworth FP, atá mar fho-rúnaí parlaiminte ag an Oifig Ghóthaí Baile a bhfuil drugaí agus coiriúlacht eagraithe mar shainchúram air, chuir sé páipéar faoi bhráid an chruinnithe ar thionscnamh dar teideal todhchaithe dearfacha. Is í aidhm an tionscnaimh seo cláir spóirt a chur ar fáil do dhaoine óga atá i gcontúirt, lena n-áirítear scéimeanna monatóireachta agus cláir oideachasúla. Aontáíodh go dtiocfadh saineolaithe de chuid Chomhairle na Breataine-na hÉireann i gceann a chéile i Londain i Meitheamh lena n-eolas agus a n-oiliúint a roinnt.

Chuir mé féin páipéar i láthair ar a thábhachtaí atá sé an pobal a bheith páirteach i bhforbairt agus i gcur i bhfeidhm straitéisí drugaí. Glacadh le mo mholadh go ndéanfaí comhdháil a reachtáil ar an 6 agus 7 Samhain le deis a thabhairt do bhaill eiseamláirí an dea-chleachtais a fhiosrú maidir le pobail a bheith páirteach i straitéisí áitiúla.

Rinne na baill plé chomh maith ar pháipéar a d'ullmhaigh Rialtas na hÉireann agus Coiste Feidhmiúcháin na hAlban ar dheiseanna oideachasúla, oiliúna agus fostaíochta le haghaidh úsáideoirí drugaí atá ar téarnamh. Ba é an Dr Richard Simpson, FPA, atá mar Leas-Aire Ceartais i gCoiste Feidhmiúcháin na hAlban, a chuir an páipéar i láthair. D'aontaigh na baill go ndéanfaí comhdháil a reachtáil do chleachtóirí níos moille sa bhliain, in Albain nó in Éirinn, le cur leis an mhalartú eolais san achar seo.

Thug an Dr Jane Hutt, ME, Aire Sláinte agus Seirbhísí Sóisialta na Breataine Bige, tuairisc ar chomhdháil ar laghdú ar éileamh a tionóladh sa Bhreatain Bheag ar na mallaibh, agus rinne an tUasal Richard Corkill, Príomh-Aire Oileán Mhanainn, cur síos ar chomhdháil atá beartaithe ar straitéis um dhrugaí agus alcól — dul chun cinn i ngníomhaíocht. Thoiligh baill leis an chomhdháil seo, áta le reachtáil ar an 5 agus 6 Deireadh Fómhair ar Oileán Mhanainn.

D'aontaigh na hAíre go ndéanfaí an chéad chruinniú eile ar dhrugaí san fhoráid earnaíleach a reachtáil i mí Feabhra 2003.

D'aontaigh na hAíre ar théacs an scéala oifigiúil a cuireadh amach i ndiaidh an chruinnithe. Cuireadh cóip den scéala oifigiúil mar aon le liosta iomlán de bhaill na toscaireachta sa Leabharlann.

I wish to report to the Assembly on the meeting of the British-Irish Council that was held in sectoral format in Dublin on Friday 22 March 2002. The meeting con-

sidered matters that relate to drug misuse and to co-operation in that area.

Following nomination by the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister, Mr Dermot Nesbitt, Minister of the Environment, and I attended the first meeting of the misuse of drugs sectoral group. Mr Eoin Ryan TD, Minister of State at the Department of Tourism, Sport and Recreation, with special responsibility for local development, who has responsibility for the Irish national drugs strategy, represented the Irish Government and chaired the meeting. Mr Bob Ainsworth MP, Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State at the Home Office, represented the British Government. Dr Richard Simpson MSP, Deputy Minister for Justice, represented the Scottish Executive. Ms Jane Hutt AM, Minister for Health and Social Services, represented the National Assembly for Wales. The Isle of Man Government were represented by the Chief Minister, the Hon Richard Corkill MHK, who is Chairperson of the Drugs Strategy Committee. The States of Guernsey were represented by Deputy Roger Berry OBE, President of the Board of Administration. The States of Jersey were represented by Deputy Roy George Le Hérissier, Vice-President of the Health and Social Services Committee. This statement has been approved by Mr Dermot Nesbitt and is also made on his behalf.

The meeting received presentations from all Ministers in attendance. Challenges exist in each of their individual drugs strategies. The meeting was informed of several ongoing pieces of work with regard to drugs, including the targeting of the proceeds of drugs trafficking, community involvement in the development and implementation of drugs strategies, the diverting into healthier pursuits of young people who are at risk of drugs misuse, and the reintegration of drugs misusers into training and employment.

12.15 pm

Deputy Roger Berry OBE, President of the Board of Administration of Guernsey, gave a presentation on targeting the proceeds of the drugs trade and asset confiscation. A proposal for a conference on the issue, to be held in Guernsey on 16 and 17 May, was agreed.

Mr Bob Ainsworth MP, Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State at the Home Office with special responsibility for drugs and organised crime, presented a paper to the meeting on the Positive Futures initiative, which aims to provide sporting programmes for young people at risk. The initiative includes mentoring schemes and educational programmes. It was agreed that experts from the British-Irish Council would meet in London in June to share their knowledge and expertise in that area.

I presented a paper on the importance of involving the community in developing and implementing drugs strategies. My proposal to host a conference on 6 and 7 November to give members an opportunity to explore

models of good practice in involving communities in local strategies was agreed.

Members also considered a paper prepared by the Irish Government and the Scottish Executive on education, training and employment opportunities for recovering drug users. Dr Richard Simpson MSP, Deputy Minister for Justice in the Scottish Executive, presented the paper. Members agreed that a conference for practitioners would be held later in the year, either in Scotland or Ireland, to advance the exchange of information in that area.

Ms Jane Hutt AM, Minister for Health and Social Services in Wales, reported on the recent conference on demand reduction held in Wales. Mr Richard Corkill MHK, Chief Minister of the Isle of Man, outlined a proposal for a conference on drug and alcohol strategies' progress in action. Members agreed that the conference would be held on the Isle of Man on 5 and 6 October.

The Ministers agreed that the next meeting on drugs in sectoral format would take place in February 2003. The Ministers agreed the text of a communiqué that was issued after the meeting. A copy of the communiqué and a full list of delegation members have been placed in the Assembly Library.

The Deputy Chairperson of the Committee for Health, Social Services and Public Safety (Mr Gallagher): I welcome Minister de Brún's statement. It is encouraging for us all to see attention being focused on the growing problem of drug abuse across all these islands. It pervades all social strata and is a particular problem in deprived areas.

Drug abuse is a serious problem that transcends political borders. There is ample evidence of that, with drug trafficking spreading across entire continents, wrecking countless lives and, indeed, blighting whole communities. It is vital, therefore, that the various Administrations on these islands continue to co-operate fully on the matter by sharing expertise and practical initiatives that help address the scourge of illicit drugs in modern society.

Madam Deputy Speaker: Order. Will the Member move to his question?

Mr Gallagher: Have any mechanisms been put in place to establish clear baselines to measure the effectiveness of the various initiatives that have been introduced?

Ms de Brún: Measuring the effectiveness of what is being done came up under each of the headings. At each stage, the seminars, meetings and visits that were agreed at the meeting all contain the precise aim of sharing best practice, being able to learn from each other, looking at what works and implementing those aims as best we can.

Mr Hamilton: I welcome the development of the mutual co-operation that is being fostered among the United Kingdom Government, the devolved Administrations of the United Kingdom and the Government of

the Republic of Ireland in our efforts to combat a serious and growing problem that affects both jurisdictions.

In her statement, the Minister referred to mentoring schemes and educational programmes as part of a possible strategy. Will she elaborate on what they may entail, and on what organisations may be involved in mentoring and providing mentors? Do the educational programmes envisaged involve the Department of Education, and will they be brought directly into school classrooms?

Ms de Brún: I thank the Member for his question. The issue arose during the discussion on the Positive Futures initiative, which was launched in England in March 2000. Some 24 projects were set up around the country to provide sporting programmes for youngsters at risk. Their success in reducing criminal activity and in obtaining better attendances at school, healthier lifestyles and increased involvement with sports led to the setting up of a further 33 projects on 1 March 2002.

The projects involve people in the fields of education and sport, and some sporting figures have lent their assistance to the schemes by giving positive alternatives to young people at risk. The projects provide training, mentoring schemes and education programmes around positive attitudes, healthy lifestyles and leadership skills. A joint Positive Futures steering group oversees the initiative's progress.

As a result, Ministers at the British-Irish Council meeting on 22 March 2002 agreed that representatives from each area would visit a Positive Futures scheme at Leyton Orient to learn more about the initiatives. After that visit, I shall be able to bring the Member up to date on further lessons to be learned.

Ms Ramsey: Go raibh maith agat. I too welcome the Minister's statement, and her focus on targeting and tackling drug misuse. My interest is in community involvement in developing and implementing drug strategies. The Minister spoke about drug misuse at a recent conference in my West Belfast constituency, as did Jo Deakin, the new drugs tsar. I would be interested to hear the Minister expand on why she sees the initiative as an important step. The report of that conference deals with community involvement. It is due for publication, and I ask that she examine it closely. There is no need to reinvent the wheel.

Ms de Brún: I thank the Member for her question, and I shall be more than happy to look at the report when it is published. I welcome such initiatives, because it is important that communities are involved. My reply to Mr Gallagher gave some examples of community involvement for youngsters at risk. As a result of the working groups and the new structures set up to combat the misuse of drugs and alcohol, the communities lead a working group on communities. They have not only 22 places in the structure, they also have the lead, and each of the other groups is led by the relevant Department. For

example, the Department of Education leads the education group, and the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety leads the treatment working group. It was felt important that communities themselves should lead the communities working group.

Such aspects will be included in the regional action plan developed by the six working groups. That contains 115 activities that must be undertaken if our strategy's objectives are to be met. Many of the initiatives are community-based, because communities must be involved if we are to tackle the scourge of drug and alcohol misuse, both of which have a considerable negative impact throughout our community.

Mr McCarthy: I welcome the Minister's statement. It is positive to learn of the scope of the topics discussed at the British-Irish Council meeting on the misuse of drugs. The Alliance Party supports the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety's management of the issue. However, there will always be a significant policing element involved in dealing with the issue. Does the Minister endorse the presentation that was made on targeting the proceeds of the drugs trade and asset confiscation? Given that policing is part of all communities, does the Minister agree that co-operation with the police must be included in any drugs strategy? Will the Minister now encourage her supporters to join the new Police Service of Northern Ireland, thus helping sooner rather than later — *[Interruption]*.

Madam Deputy Speaker: Order. The Member has asked his question.

Ms de Brún: One of the most interesting aspects of the British-Irish Council meeting in Dublin was the fact that all the representatives managed to come together from different places to have a really constructive meeting, which focused on tackling the problem of drug misuse. It was not focused on point scoring, on which political parties were present, on trying to bounce people or on trying to play word games. It was a constructive meeting, at which no one felt the need to shout from the sidelines — *[Interruption]*.

Madam Deputy Speaker: Order. The Minister is entitled to be heard.

Ms de Brún: No one felt the need to be childish or petulant, or to shout or detract in any way from the job in hand of tackling drug misuse. We all planned together on the issue.

The Member asked about the proposed Guernsey seminar. All Ministers agreed that Guernsey would host a seminar on 16 and 17 May to discuss targeting the proceeds of the drugs trade and asset confiscation. I consider the Northern Ireland Office (NIO) to be a part of that; in fact, it is entirely within its remit. As the proceeds of the drugs trade and asset confiscation are reserved matters, officials from the NIO and the Depart-

ment of the Director of Public Prosecutions (DPP) will attend the seminar.

Mr B Hutchinson: My question needs to be asked, and I hope that the Minister does not think that I am trying to score political points. The paper that was presented at the meeting highlights the importance of involving the community in the development and implementation of drugs strategies. Unfortunately, in north and west Belfast, two drugs organisations that do good work have been refused funding twice. They are based in the Shankill and Falls areas. Through working with professionals, the organisations provide educational programmes in schools and clubs to show young people the bad effects of drugs. Therefore, I find it ironic that, although we intend to do something about good practice, we cannot even support good practice on our own doorstep in north and west Belfast. Will the Minister confirm how many community organisations have been funded, how much funding they have received, and in which parliamentary constituencies they are located?

Ms de Brún: The Member will know that today's statement is about the meeting of the British-Irish Council in Dublin. Therefore, Members' questions should reflect what was discussed at that meeting. The Member is, of course, entitled to ask a question for written or oral answer requesting the details to which he has referred, and I would welcome that.

My Department is fully aware of the excellent work that both the Forum for Action on Substance Abuse (FASA) and the Falls Community Council do to tackle drug and alcohol misuse. — *[Interruption]*.

I wish that Unionist Members did not feel the need to barrack my every answer. If Members would allow me to hear questions, and other Members to hear my answers, it would be much better for all concerned.

The Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety is fully aware of the excellent work of the Forum for Action on Substance Abuse (FASA) and the Falls Community Council. We are also aware that approximately £25,000 each is insufficient to enable those organisations to continue to provide those valuable services at community level. My Department has awarded £65,000 of non-recurrent funding to each group. It will also work with the North and West Belfast Health and Social Services Trust over the year to try to find a more permanent solution to the insufficient core funding for those, and other, voluntary and community groups.

12.30 pm

The Member who asked the question has spoken to me privately about the matter and already knows that I supported the Executive programme fund bid, which did not attract sufficient weighting to enable it to obtain funding. I also supported good practice elsewhere.

Mrs Courtney: I welcome the Minister's report on the first meeting of the misuse of drugs sectoral group. The meeting was obviously well attended by Ministers from throughout the island. Judging by the report, the drugs problem affects all areas. I welcome the Minister's initiative to involve community consultation at all times. The means of diverting young people who are at risk of drug misuse into healthier pursuits and of reintegrating drug abusers into training and employment must be addressed. Will extra funding be needed for those?

Ms de Brún: Yes, new initiatives will require new funding. Learning from best practice elsewhere allows us to do a certain amount without new funding. We can also put some new projects in place at the expense of current projects. However, 36 projects had been set up, for which funding was provided, and when the funding ran out at the end of March and my Department was unsuccessful in obtaining any further money, I had to find the money to fund the 23 projects that came within my remit. Other projects will be referred to the Department of Employment and Learning, the Department of Education and the Northern Ireland Office to see whether they can continue the funding. The Executive and the Assembly must take on board the fact that money is required to fund projects.

Dr Birnie: I thank the Minister for her statement. Did the meeting consider the important issue of possible heroin substitutes? In Glasgow, methadone has been used in an attempt to wean addicts off heroin, although its effects have caused controversy. It is important that we learn from the experience of the Greater Glasgow and Greater Dublin areas, where there are tragically high death rates from heroin usage.

The Minister referred to drug trafficking. I want to ask particularly about the source of such trafficking. Is she willing to condemn all groups, wherever they are in the world — notably, although not only, those in Latin America, such as the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) — that are involved in the drug production chain at any point, from production to importation into north-west Europe?

Ms de Brún: The possibility of learning from Glasgow and Dublin came up briefly at the meeting and will be continued in future work. I also took the opportunity at the meeting to thank colleagues from Glasgow and Dublin for their valuable work for the drug strategy team, which improves our ability to make progress here.

With regard to his other question, the Member knows that criminal justice issues are not within my remit.

Mr Kennedy: What is your answer?

Ms de Brún: I hope that Mr Kennedy is not going to start his silly barracking again. Given that a Member of his party, Esmond Birnie, asked the question, his party

Colleagues must consider the issue to be important enough to merit an answer.

Mr Kennedy: What is your answer?

Ms Ramsey: Let her answer.

Madam Deputy Speaker: Order.

Ms de Brún: As the Member has no intention of listening to the answer, I will simply say that his party knows that neither I, nor anyone belonging to my party, are involved in any way in drug trafficking, and nor are we associated with organisations that are.

This is an extremely important matter, which I have done much more to tackle than those who spend the entire time barracking, making silly comments and shouting from the sidelines.

Mr J Kelly: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I congratulate the Minister on this positive report. It is unfortunate that some Members, particularly those from the Alliance Party, choose to politicise this serious issue. *[Interruption]*.

Madam Deputy Speaker: Order.

Mr J Kelly: It is a pity that some Members choose to politicise the issue. Given the concerns expressed by Billy Hutchinson and Annie Courtney, will the Irish and British Governments provide the extra money needed to implement this drug and alcohol strategy, obviating the need for this cost to come out of the Minister's departmental budget?

Ms de Brún: From time to time money is made available — £6.23 million was made available to the Executive. This money will be spent on the work to be undertaken by the working groups and will be used to implement the plans I mentioned earlier. However, we must also recognise that part and parcel of this work — whether in my Department, the Department for Employment and Learning, the Department of Education, the Department of the Environment, or the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment, all of which are represented on the ministerial strategic steering group — is the need for all Departments to address this from their budgets. The Executive will have to consider that, and it is not enough to look elsewhere for one-off moneys either. We need to look at this in our budget processing. Again, this matter did not come up at the British-Irish Council meeting on 22 March.

Lord Kilclooney: I have listened intently to the Minister's every word, including those that I did not understand. I commend her statement; drug abuse is a serious matter for all communities in Northern Ireland. Can the Minister assure us that sufficient resources in Northern Ireland are being directed to combat drug abuse, and is she satisfied with the work of the Police Service of Northern Ireland? Is she right in stating that this problem exists mainly in poorer areas? Next door to

my constituency of Strangford is your constituency of North Down, Madam Deputy Speaker. It is one of the more affluent constituencies in Northern Ireland, yet it has a considerable drug problem.

Finally, I am delighted to learn of the conference in the Isle of Man, at which all the Governments and Administrations from these islands will be represented. Experts will be present at this meeting. Of course, the Minister will be in a position to offer considerable expertise — FARC is one of the main producers of drugs.

Ms de Brún: I am delighted to hear that the Member listened to my statement. I could hardly hear myself for most of this session, which demonstrates to me how important the Ulster Unionist Party finds this issue and what its approach to it will be. Drugs cross all boundaries. No community can be complacent, nor can any political party. This is not a matter for political sniping, catcalling or other ways of minimising the important work that went on in Dublin on 22 March, as I am sure the Ulster Unionist Party member, who was there in his capacity as Minister of the Environment, could share with his Colleagues.

We are making considerable resources available. I have considered often how that can be done, as have other Ministers as regards their contribution to the overall alcohol and drugs strategy. We are approximately £4 million short in implementing proposed action plans, and that must be considered. It is one reason why we have talked about — as we have done in most other areas — the difference between our plans and the resources that we can devote to them. The issue will straddle several Departments.

The Member is well aware of my position, and that of my party, on policing. He knows my views on the need for a new beginning to policing and for a police service that is capable of attracting sustained support from the whole community. However, I reiterate that criminal justice issues are not within my remit, though I expect that all agencies with responsibility to address the scourge of drugs will co-operate to eradicate the problem.

Mr McHugh: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I thank the Minister for her statement on this important subject. The Minister referred mainly to alcohol and drugs misuse, and we must do all that we can to resolve that. However, does that exclude discussion about solvent misuse, which is on the increase among young people?

Ms de Brún: I welcome the Member's assertion that the issue is important. It is important to me; however, given the manner of the debate, I do not feel that that it is important to everybody in the House, which is a matter of deep regret.

The specific matter of solvent misuse did not arise at the British-Irish Council meeting on 22 March, but it is dealt with by the working groups here. In fact, some of

the targets in the action plans of the working groups relate to the misuse of prescription drugs.

Mr Kennedy: I am grateful for the opportunity to ask the Minister a question and to respond to her charges that the Ulster Unionist Party is not interested in the drugs question or in some way overlooks its importance. I assure the Minister that that is not the case. It is also the Minister's responsibility to answer questions in the House, however difficult they may be.

Given the acknowledged links between the Minister's political party and drug-trafficking agents in Latin America, does she not feel even a twinge of shame or embarrassment? Given that people who are directly involved in terrorist organisations such as the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) are actively engaged — *[Interruption]*.

Mr J Kelly: On a point of order. Are Mr Kennedy's comments relevant to the subject under debate?

Madam Deputy Speaker: Under Standing Orders, I cannot take a point of order until the end of the debate. I ask the Member to leave his point of order until then.

I ask the Minister to respond, because I assume that the question has been put.

Mr Kennedy: No.

Madam Deputy Speaker: I call on the Member to put his question.

Mr Kennedy: Does the Minister feel any twinge of shame or embarrassment, given the links between her own political party and — *[Interruption]*.

Madam Deputy Speaker: Order. This is a statement on the British-Irish Council and its debate on drugs and drug abuse. The Member is stretching the limit of relevance when he puts this question, and I ask him to finish his question. I assume that the question has been put.

12.45 pm

Mr Kennedy: I posed the question in this manner because of the undoubted link with drug trafficking, which was referred to in the Minister's statement. That was a topic for discussion —

Madam Deputy Speaker: Order. I would like the Minister to respond.

Mr Kennedy: I have not yet reached the end of my question. I would be pleased if I were given the opportunity to put that.

Madam Deputy Speaker: Order. If the Member has a further extension to this question, I ask that he make it relevant to the British-Irish Council statement.

Mr Kennedy: In pursuance of my earlier remarks, does the Minister find her public position on policing inconsistent with the drugs issue? It is clear from her statement that other agencies are working together, in-

cluding police services throughout the United Kingdom and the British Isles. The lack of ministerial support and endorsement for policing arrangements in respect of drugs undermines —

Madam Deputy Speaker: Order. Order.

Mr Kennedy: That undermines her position on this issue.

Madam Deputy Speaker: Minister, you may choose whether to respond.

Ms de Brún: It is a matter of extreme regret that at least half of the UUP Members in the House were laughing while Danny Kennedy was asking his question. This is obviously a game to them. Mr Kennedy did not listen to a single answer prior to that. He heckled throughout and then asked a question that is not even about the meeting — an important meeting where people worked together, without any of this silliness, on the important issue of tackling drugs.

The Member knows well that Sinn Féin is not involved in any way with drug trafficking; nor is it associated with organisations that are. My party's position on drug trafficking and policing is entirely consistent with my efforts, as Minister, to implement the drugs strategy and to combat drug abuse.

We now have new structures. There are six working groups on the joint implementation of drug and alcohol strategies, as agreed and supported by the Executive. Two of the working groups, the social legislation working group and the criminal justice working group, are concerned with legal issues. The PSNI is represented on four of the six working groups and on the drug and alcohol implementation steering group. The Executive and I feel that the structures agreed will best advance the matter.

Madam Deputy Speaker: That concludes the questions to the Minister.

CARERS AND DIRECT PAYMENTS BILL

Final Stage

Resolved:

That the Carers and Direct Payments Bill (NIA 1/01) do now pass. — [*The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety (Ms de Brún).*]

ASSEMBLY:

Committee for the Environment

Resolved:

That Mr William Armstrong replace Mr James Leslie as a member of the Committee for the Environment. — [*Mr Davis.*]

ASSEMBLY STANDING ORDERS

Madam Deputy Speaker: As there are four proposed amendments to Standing Orders relating to the same issue, I propose to conduct only one debate. I shall call the Chairperson of the Committee on Procedures to move the first amendment. Debate will then take place on all four amendments. When all who wish to speak have done so, I shall call the Chairperson to wind up before I put the Question on the first amendment. I shall then ask the Chairperson to move each further amendment in turn, and separately put the Question on each amendment without further debate. I hope that that is clear for all Members, and, if so, I shall proceed.

The Chairperson of the Committee on Procedures (Mr C Murphy): Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle.

I beg to move the following amendment: In Standing Order 52(4)(c) delete all at sub-paragraphs (i) and (ii) and insert

“(i) any Code of Conduct to which the Assembly has agreed; or

(ii) any Guide to the Rules Relating to the Conduct of Members approved by the Assembly.”

The amendments to Standing Orders are primarily technical and were submitted to the Committee on Procedures by the Committee on Standards and Privileges. The amendments have been checked by the Assembly legal adviser and are considered to be legally competent.

The amendments focus on two issues. First, they centre on references in Standing Orders to the Code of Conduct and the ‘Guide to the Rules Relating to the Conduct of Members’, which have both been approved by the Assembly. Secondly, they focus on the power of the Committee on Standards and Privileges to recommend a lesser penalty than that which Standing Orders currently provides for a breach of the Code of Conduct or the ‘Guide to the Rules Relating to the Conduct of Members’.

The first two amendments on the Order Paper are interrelated. They focus on the ‘Guide to the Rules Relating to the Conduct of Members’, which was amended by the Assembly on 15 October 2001. Standing Orders refer to one specific code of conduct and one specific guide. However, the Committee on Standards and Privileges believes that more than one guide may exist; therefore, it felt that specific reference to the current guide was unnecessary. The proposed amendment to Standing Order 52(4)(c) would serve to remove the reference to the specific guide and replace it with reference to “any Guide” or any “Code of Conduct”.

However, on the advice of the Assembly legal adviser it was considered necessary to maintain reference to the current guide in Standing Order 64. That is because paragraph 5 of Standing Order 64 refers to a specific paragraph in the current ‘Guide to the Rules Relating to

the Conduct of Members'. That is why the second amendment proposes to include the last date at which the guide was amended — 15 October 2001. It follows that if the guide is amended again, the Standing Order must be amended accordingly.

The amendment to Standing Order 64(6) makes it clear that the Committee on Standards and Privileges can report to the Assembly when it is of the view that a Member has failed to comply with, or has contravened, a provision of any code of conduct that has been agreed by the Assembly. As with the previous amendments, the key point is the inclusion of the reference to "any Code of Conduct". The current wording of Standing Order 64(6) refers to a contravention of the provisions of that particular Standing Order and, by inference, of the 'Guide to the Rules Relating to the Conduct of Members'. However, the Committee on Standards and Privileges considered it important that Standing Orders should make it clear that it also refers to contravention of any code of conduct which the Assembly has agreed.

The final amendment also pertains to Standing Order 64. It proposes a minor amendment to the recommendations that the Committee on Standards and Privileges can make when it chooses to report a Member to the Assembly. Under the present arrangements the Assembly Ombudsman, on completion of his investigation, will report to the Committee on Standards and Privileges. The Committee may, in turn, choose to make a report to the Assembly. That report can contain a recommendation for exclusion from proceedings for a specified period and withdrawal of rights and privileges as a Member for that period.

However, the current wording of Standing Order 64(7), and in particular the use of the word "contained", gives no scope for the Committee to recommend a lesser penalty — for example, an apology. The Committee considers that it would be more reasonable for it to have such flexibility. As such, the amendment proposes that in Standing Order 64(7) the word "contain" be replaced by "include", and the Committee on Procedures agrees.

Madam Deputy Speaker: There are no indications that Members wish to speak. I remind the House that because the amendments relate to Standing Orders, the votes require cross-community support.

Amendment agreed to (cross-community vote).

Resolved:

In Standing Order 64(5), line 5, delete "14 December 1999" and insert "15 October 2001."

Amendment made (cross-community vote): In Standing Order 64(6), lines 2 and 3, delete

"has failed to comply with, or has contravened any provision of this Order,"

and insert

"has failed to comply with any provision of this Order or any Code of Conduct agreed by the Assembly."- [*The Chairperson of the Committee on Procedures — (Mr C Murphy).*]

Amendment made (cross-community vote): In Standing Order 64(7), line 5, delete "contain" and insert "include". — [*The Chairperson of the Committee on Procedures (Mr C Murphy).*]

REPORT OF THE COMMITTEE OF THE CENTRE:

European Union Issues

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

The Chairperson of the Committee of the Centre (Mr Poots): I beg to move

That this Assembly notes the recommendations outlined in the report of the Committee of the Centre on its Inquiry into the 'Approach of the Northern Ireland Assembly and the Devolved Government on European Union Issues' (02/01/R) and calls on the First Minister and Deputy First Minister to implement the relevant recommendations.

Mr Deputy Speaker: I have received one amendment to the motion, which is published on the Marshalled List of amendments.

Mr Poots: I beg to move the following amendment: In line 1 delete "notes" and insert "accepts".

After consideration at its meeting of 20 March 2002, the Committee of the Centre agreed to an amendment to its original motion to ask the Assembly to accept rather than note its report and recommendations. We believe that the change gives more weight to our recommendations and is a truer reflection of the work and commitment shown by members of the Committee over the past six months. I shall speak on the amendment.

1.00 pm

I shall start by giving some background on how EU issues impact on Northern Ireland and why the Committee of the Centre and I believe that it is an important area worthy of in-depth consideration. European issues are not devolved matters. The European Union is a union of member states, and a council of the relevant Ministers from the member states — the Council of Ministers — and the European Parliament make decisions.

During the Committee's investigations, it came as a surprise to discover that up to 60% of our legislation comes from Europe, and 80% of the policies in our Programme for Government relate to, or originate from, European Union policies. Although the decisions are taken in Brussels, they are implemented in, and impact on, Northern Ireland. That gives the Northern Ireland Assembly and its Administration a clear role to play in EU affairs. The role is recognised and codified in the memorandum of understanding between the United Kingdom Government and the Northern Ireland Executive in the Concordat on Co-ordination of European Union Policy Issues.

United Kingdom Ministers and Departments take policy lines on various issues under discussion in Europe. The relevant Minister subsequently takes that policy line to the Council of Ministers in Europe. It is, therefore, vital that Northern Ireland ensures that its voice is heard in

London before the UK agrees its policy line. That is especially important when the issue under consideration will have a distinct or unique impact on our region.

Post-devolution, the Office of the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister created two new structures to reflect Northern Ireland's changed role in EU affairs — the Office of the Northern Ireland Executive in Brussels and the European Policy Co-ordination Unit in the Office of the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister. The Committee visited the Office of the Northern Ireland Executive in Brussels in January 2002 and used its premises as its headquarters while it carried out business there. The office has the remit of liaising with European Union institutions on issues that affect Northern Ireland. The occasion of the Committee's visit to Brussels afforded Northern Ireland's MEPs their first opportunity to visit the office.

The Scottish Executive and the Welsh Assembly have similar offices. I wish to make it clear that the Committee welcomes the opening of the Brussels office. It is an essential step if Northern Ireland is to create its own voice in Europe and have a say in the UK policy line to Brussels. The offices are well situated and well appointed, and every consideration has been given to security. Given that the staff work under the umbrella of the UK Permanent Representation to Brussels (UKRep), which gives them diplomatic status and access to confidential papers, security considerations are important. However, the Committee has major concerns about the approach that the office adopts. Those concerns centre on the fact that the office was initially set up only for the Executive. That was done despite the expectation of the Northern Ireland Centre in Europe that it would share office space with the Office of the Northern Ireland Executive.

The Committee questions that narrow approach. It also has concerns that so much office space is lying empty. The Northern Ireland people are paying for the office at a premium, and that space could be used to create a sense of an office for Northern Ireland, not simply an office for the Executive. All the evidence that the Committee received indicates that to succeed in the creation of a distinct voice for a region, it is necessary to involve all individuals and organisations that have an interest in Europe. That includes MEPs, the Assembly, local government and other non-governmental partners. The Scottish Executive and the Welsh Assembly have taken a co-operative networking approach, and the Committee believes that that is the best approach for Northern Ireland.

When the Scottish Executive and the Welsh Assembly opened their offices in Brussels, they made a deliberate decision to work co-operatively with the organisations that were already there. The Scottish Executive moved into the same building as Scotland Europa, and the Welsh Assembly shares office space with the Wales European Centre. Scotland and Wales built on the experience of the organisations that were already there, which allowed

them to build on the existing contacts and make use of existing networks.

A platform for all of Scotland and Wales, it also created a sense of a region working together. A complementary system exists between non-Government and Government, which only enhances the profile of the region. As many individuals told us during our visit to Brussels, the European Commission, the European Council of Ministers and the Parliament do not want to hear five or six different voices from one region. Representations are more likely to be effective when all sectors and parties work together.

When the Committee began the inquiry, we were concerned at the lack of such a co-operative partnership-led approach. We welcome indications from the junior Minister and from the First and Deputy First Ministers that that is now being addressed. This change, however welcome, does not address the issue of why the Office of the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister did not initially develop a working relationship with the Northern Ireland Centre in Europe, which had a base in Brussels. It did, and still does, have a wide range of contacts and access to important and influential networks. It has in-depth knowledge and expertise, which can be used for all of Northern Ireland. The Committee understands that OFMDFM has reopened communication with the Northern Ireland Centre. I could be cynical and say that negotiations are only happening because of the inquiry. However, the Committee is more concerned that it is happening, rather than why it did not happen in the first place.

As I have said, our focus was to ensure that the approach being taken was the best for Northern Ireland, and, to that end, we make several recommendations for the Brussels office that will improve the current approach. We welcome the statement by junior Minister Haughey that communication has been reopened with the Northern Ireland Centre in Europe and recommend that the Committee receive regular briefings on the progress of such communication. We also recommend that the Brussels office take a more co-operative and networking approach, that it looks at the Scottish and Welsh models of building on existing expertise and that it provides office space for non-governmental organisations. We would also like to see a change in its name, to reflect the more co-operative approach promised by the junior Minister in his evidence to the Committee, and by the First and Deputy First Ministers in their speeches at the office's opening.

The other new structure put in place by OFMDFM since devolution is the European Policy and Co-ordination Unit, which sits within the Economic Policy Unit of OFMDFM. Its overall task is to provide a policy and co-ordination role for the Departments in developing their relationship with the European Union. The unit has identified six main areas of work, which are listed on page 253 of the report. The Committee focused on the

co-ordination aspect of the unit's work and found it to be disappointing. Of course, some leeway must be allowed, as it is a new unit that is starting from scratch. However, it has been operating for two years, and we expected it to have made more progress than it has done. For example, in the EU strategy, we find that OFMDFM's corporate business plan was to be delivered in July 2001, and we still await it. What we eventually received, at the conclusion of the inquiry, was an intermediate document — the EU draft framework. Junior Minister Haughey indicated in his evidence that he aimed to complete the strategy before the Assembly breaks for the elections in 2003. That is almost two years behind schedule, which is totally unacceptable.

The EU draft framework also makes reference to several other strategies and related documents, such as the strategy for interregional co-operation and a policy on secondments. However, we have no indication of when those documents will be available for our scrutiny. The document is only a framework, but even within a framework we expect to see a certain level of detail on delivery, methodology, resources, expected outcomes, timescales and evaluation. Those are all missing from the document. For example, in the framework paper, aims and objectives, as set out in annex A of the document, objective 1 has four parts to it, but it gives no indication of how those will be achieved, the resources needed, how success or failure will be measured, et cetera. The document, which is contained in a written submission in the report, is called 'A Framework for Developing Northern Ireland's Participation in the European Union', yet, on page 263 of the report, reference is made to a

"co-ordinated strategy for the Northern Ireland Executive."

That is not a strategy for Northern Ireland as the title would suggest. The document is based solely on the needs of the Departments and the Executive.

No recognition is given to the involvement of the Assembly and other key players, and when we passed the framework document to other Assembly Committees, their response showed that they had neither been consulted nor had been able to scrutinise the departmental priorities listed as EU priorities for Northern Ireland. Many of the written submissions received by the Committee noted that they had not even heard of the existence of such a document.

The junior Minister made reference to, and the Committee agrees that there is a need for a regional strategy that takes account of all Northern Ireland's needs and not simply those of Departments. That approach is missing. As with the Brussels office, a narrow approach, based solely on the needs of the Executive, is evident — an approach that the Committee does not believe is best for Northern Ireland.

I mentioned the priorities set out for Northern Ireland in the framework document. They are found in annex B of the framework document and on page 273 of the inquiry report. A list of 100 topics is set out, which, as the framework document says, are

“of immediate interest and will relate directly to the work of the Brussels office.”

The Brussels office is, apparently, to shadow the 58 high priority areas. The Committee does not see how that will be possible with only four staff in the office and given its other work.

Northern Ireland is a small region in Europe with limited resources. We cannot expect to influence or make a difference in every area of EU policy that affects Northern Ireland. Planning and co-ordination are needed if our resources are to be focused on the areas in which we can be sure of getting some return. The Committee does not feel that trying to cover 100 topics will develop the focus needed to ensure successful returns from our limited resources, so we have made several recommendations that deal with the European Policy Co-ordination Unit and EU strategy. The number of topics should be reduced to achieve a more strategic focus that will reflect the distinctiveness of our situation, and that should be done by timely consultation with Assembly Committees and others, such as Members of the European Parliament.

We also recommend that the EU strategy be completed before the Assembly is dissolved for elections, and the need for greater detail on methodology, et cetera, should be addressed immediately. The strategy should be a regional one, not one narrowly focused on the needs of the Executive and Departments, and it should be developed and informed through wide consultation.

Having dealt with OFMDFM's approach, it may be appropriate to consider whether that approach can be successful in influencing policy and decisions that affect Northern Ireland.

As I mentioned earlier, the UK is the member state that makes the decisions that affect Northern Ireland. If we wish to influence policy, we must first do that by influencing the UK policy line. Generally, the UK takes its policy line to the Council of Ministers' meetings in Europe where the final EU policy decisions are taken, sometimes in conjunction with the European Parliament. UK Ministers are supported by the UK Permanent Representation with its staff of 140. Northern Ireland Departments must, therefore, liaise with their UK counterparts and ensure that our concerns are taken into account when the UK policy line is being determined. That is important when the policy is going to have a specific impact on us. The Committee was concerned to note that many of the Departments do not have the appropriate contacts in place.

The concordats that I mentioned make provision for Northern Ireland Ministers to attend the relevant Council

of Ministers' meetings in Brussels, and Ministers from the other devolved regions use that privilege extensively. On occasion, the Scottish Ministers have even led the UK delegation. The Committee was concerned, therefore, to find that the only Northern Ireland Minister to attend a Council of Ministers' meeting has been Brid Rodgers and recommends that every effort be made to ensure the attendance of our Ministers at relevant Council meetings, especially when policy or legislation is being discussed that will affect Northern Ireland.

On the subject of influencing EU policy, the Committee noted the evidence that suggests that there are ways to influence EU policy, other than by the formal London route. Informal networking, especially with other regions or consortia with similar concerns, can prove very effective, if they do not contradict or go against the UK policy line.

There are several points of entry, but such informal networks require long-term commitment, collective effort, co-ordination and a willingness to actively engage with non-Government partners. It would appear from the evidence received by the Committee of the Centre that such informal networks and methods of influencing are being ignored at the expense of the formal, structured Government channels.

1.15 pm

The Committee makes several recommendations to deal with the issue of networking. First, it looked at the individuals and organisations with a formal role to play. That includes the MEPs, the Assembly and the Northern Ireland representatives on the Committee of the Regions and the European Economic and Social Committee.

The Committee recommends that formal structures be put in place to ensure regular communication and networking. The MEPs, the Committee of the Regions and the Economic and Social Committee members all have an important role to play in Europe, detailed knowledge of what is happening and, most importantly, strategically important contacts. For example, our three MEPs can, and have, come together, despite their diverging political backgrounds, to work to achieve the best for Northern Ireland, and they have had considerable success.

The Committee acknowledges that the Office of the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister has made some attempts to bring all the major players together, but those attempts do not appear to have been successful. The Committee would refer OFMDFM to the work of the Scottish Executive in creating the European Elected Members Information Liaison and Exchange (EMILE). That is a structure set up by the Scottish Executive, which regularly brings together all relevant parties and individuals who have a formal role to discuss European issues and share information. It involves the Scottish Executive, the Scottish Parliament, MEPs and Scotland's representatives on the Committee of the Regions and the

European Economic and Social Committee. The Committee would like a similar group to be established in Northern Ireland.

The Committee would also like structures to be put in place to ensure that networking occurs among informal players such as local government, the social partners and organisations such as the Northern Ireland Centre in Europe. The Committee notes that the Programme for Government 2001-02 made reference to a forum for Europe. That has been omitted from the latest Programme for Government. Although the Committee does not see the need for an elaborate structure, such as that of the Civic Forum, it recommends that some form of improving communication and networking with the informal parties be put in place.

The recommendations that deal with networking are especially important, given that the evidence gathered during the Committee's inquiry showed that many of the non-Government bodies and local government representatives expressed concerns that relations within the European Union were conducted on an unco-ordinated and ad hoc basis, with little or no communication on what was happening.

The Committee considered ways to address what it thought of as the shortcomings of OFMDFM. In summary, the areas that the Committee was most concerned about include: the lack of awareness by non-Government bodies on the approach; the lack of communications and consultation by OFMDFM; the narrow focus of the European Policy and Co-ordination Unit on the needs of the Executive, rather than on the region of Northern Ireland; the need for greater clarity in those important areas; and the delay in developing the EU strategy.

The Committee's report makes several recommendations to deal with shortcomings, which I have mentioned. However, it makes two further recommendations of a structural nature, which it believes will improve the situation.

First, the European Policy and Co-ordination Unit should be a free-standing unit within OFMDFM, not a part of the Economic Policy Unit. European affairs are sufficiently important to justify a free-standing unit. It should also be properly resourced to enable it to carry out its wide-ranging and varied responsibilities. A budget of £163,000 and four staff working under a director who has other responsibilities is insufficient to enable the unit to carry out its duties. The Committee suspects that that under-resourcing leads to missed deadlines, lack of consultation and a focus on the official channels of communication.

The second major change that the Committee recommends on the structure of OFMDFM concerns the remit of the junior Ministers. Several witnesses suggested that Northern Ireland should have a Minister, or junior Minister, for Europe. The Committee considers that there

is some merit in that. Although there is nothing in the Northern Ireland Act 1998 to prevent the nomination of one of the junior Ministers to take a lead role in one policy area, the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister have taken the position that the junior Ministers must act jointly. The Committee, however, recommends that one junior Minister should take a lead role for European affairs.

That would be pivotal if the Office of the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister were to address issues such as the widespread perception of an unco-ordinated and ad hoc approach.

Post-devolution, Northern Ireland has the ability to develop its own strategies and policies, which differs from the pre-devolution period when policy was established in London. The direct engagement of officials with Europe — with the exception of the Department of Finance and Personnel on funding and the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development — was limited. The Committee thinks that a more proactive approach should now be taken to build capacity in Departments and in the Assembly in order to become engaged in European issues. When junior Minister Denis Haughey gave evidence to the Committee, he agreed with that point. He said that

"It takes considerable time to build capacity in that machine [the Civil Service] and to reorient it so that it begins to think in ways which have not been natural for about a quarter of a century."

The evidence received by the Committee points to secondments as being one of the most effective ways to build capacity. The Committee was, therefore, alarmed at some of the information available on secondment. Despite its importance, very few people are currently on secondment. More importantly, it appears that, on return from secondment, little use is made of newly acquired skills. During its inquiry, the Committee examined the secondment policies of the Scottish Executive and the Welsh Assembly. The Scottish Executive have put aside a substantial budget in order to allow up to 12 secondments each year. The Welsh Assembly has gone a step further by ensuring that secondments can be made from the non-Government sector. That is another example of partnership and a co-operative approach that seems to be missing from the Northern Ireland approach.

However, the Committee notes that a secondment policy is being developed, and it looks forward to receiving it. The Committee expects that the recommendations on secondments in its report will be taken on board. The recommendations include: long-term secondments of two to three years, and short-term secondments; full use being made of the experience and skills gained on return; enhanced promotional opportunities for long-term secondees in order to attract high-quality candidates, and to provide a reward for the disruption to the secondee and to his or her family; central funding to be put in place to cover departmental costs, because

Departments must pick up the secondment costs at present, which is not encouraging and is often seen as a disincentive to allowing staff to go on EU secondments; and funding for non-Government secondments.

Northern Ireland has several outstanding EU Directives that have not been transposed, and we could soon face fines for non-compliance. Recently, Italy had fines of up to £50,000 each day for non-compliance. Any such fines will be taken out of the Northern Ireland Budget. The Committee for the Environment specifically highlighted that issue. Northern Ireland seems to experience most problems with environmental EU Directives. However, Mr Haughey indicated to the Committee that many problems had arisen during direct rule.

The Office of the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister has a core responsibility to ensure that Departments implement EU Directives, and it has created a database in order to keep track of that implementation. The Committee recommends that the database be brought up to date and be shared with the Assembly and the relevant Committees. The Committee welcomes a recent meeting between the Committee for the Environment and the Minister of the Environment, which brought that Committee up to speed on the current status of EU Directives. Furthermore, the Office of the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister should be working upstream and should be aware of EU Directives as they are being developed. It should be able to provide the Assembly with a 12-to-18-month forward programme of any EU legislation that it is expected to implement. Each Department should brief its Committee fully on current and future EU Directives, develop an implementation timetable and provide information on any likely infraction procedures.

The Committee considered its own role, as well as asking for the opinions of the Statutory Committees. The main issue that was highlighted by Committees was lack of information and communication from the relevant Departments on EU issues, particularly on Directives. It is important to provide high-quality, relevant and timely information. When making decisions on EU issues or attempting to influence a particular point, it is essential that the correct information be available. Given that matters are moving so fast in Europe, it is important to ensure that information is up to date.

Despite matters moving so fast in Europe, it can take two to three years for a policy or law to move from the discussion stage in the European Commission to a decision that either the Council of Ministers or the European Parliament, or both, are ready to endorse and agree. Therefore, it is important to work upstream and to be prepared for new issues that may not come into effect for another two or three years.

Despite having a co-ordination role in a cross-departmental area, the Office of the First Minister and

the Deputy First Minister has made it clear that it is not its role to ensure that Departments provide timely, clear and accurate information to Committees. Although it is not the role of the Committee of the Centre to say how other Departments should operate, the Committee nevertheless urges those Departments to put in place structures to ensure that Committees are kept informed both on current developments and on issues that may be two to three years upstream. The Committee also urges Statutory Committees to ensure that such structures are put in place.

The Committee recommends that, in its co-ordinating role, the Office of the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister establishes a central resource that brings together all relevant information on EU issues and explains their context and implications. Indeed, many of the non-governmental organisations also asked for such a resource to be made available to them. As the Federation of Small Businesses said:

“However late in the day policies come to the political table, they are coming to the business table even later.”

The Committee also recommends that the Assembly take a more proactive role and that the Assembly Commission consider the costs and the benefits of staffing an Assembly information desk in Brussels, which several Statutory Committees suggested. There may be merit in exploring whether a joint office could be set up with Scotland, which is also considering a similar project.

Alternatively, such an office could be based in the Office of the Northern Ireland Executive in Brussels. It is unlikely that the Brussels office could provide the necessary level of service to the Assembly and its Committees. By that I mean information to aid them in the scrutiny of the work of the Executive and Departments in European affairs. It is, after all, an office for the Executive, not the Assembly.

The Committee also recommends that the Assembly’s research and library service develops its specialist service to assist the Committees in taking a more proactive role in dealing with EU legislation and policy. Another proactive measure, again suggested by the Statutory Committees, is that Members should receive EU familiarisation training specifically based around their Statutory Committee responsibilities.

The final recommendation dealing with the Assembly concerns the role of the Committee of the Centre. The Committee considered in detail and spent considerable time debating its own structures and role. The Committee has a wide remit, and the area of EU affairs is only one item within that. The Committee has found it impossible to devote sufficient time to EU affairs.

In addition, the evidence from many diverse organisations, ranging from the academic sector to the business sector, suggests that the lack of a dedicated European affairs committee within the Assembly is seen as a

weakness in allowing full scrutiny of cross-cutting EU policies and legislation. For example, the Committee has not had time to devote to the ongoing Future of Europe debate — a debate that may change the role of regional authorities in Europe. Furthermore, much of the evidence suggests that an EU affairs committee could provide the focal point for the concerns of local groups and organisations involved in Europe. It could provide an important two-way link between the MEPs, as representatives of the European Parliament, and Members of the Assembly.

After much consideration and some frank discussions, the Committee agreed that there should be a dedicated Standing Committee on EU affairs. However, the Committee recognises that the practicalities of establishing such a committee means that it is unlikely to occur within the lifetime of this Assembly. In the interim, the Committee will establish a subcommittee to consider in detail the remit, workload and membership of such a Committee.

I conclude — Members will be glad to hear — by making a final reference to what the Committee hopes will be achieved if the recommendations in this report are implemented by all concerned, and not only by the Office of the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister.

Throughout the inquiry, the Committee focused on the approach being taken and debated whether that approach was the best for Northern Ireland. As I have already made clear, the Committee is not convinced that it is. At present, the Office of the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister's approach is narrow. It deals with the needs of the Executive and the Departments and is centred on using formal channels at the expense of informal networks.

The Committee believes that its recommendations, if implemented, will result in a professional, effective and co-operative approach to Europe. Such an approach will involve not only the formal players — the Executive, the Assembly and the MEPs — but also local government and non-governmental bodies.

1.30 pm

It will make use of the vast experience of Europe that exists outside Government. It will build institutional capacity and will focus on gaining maximum returns for what is essentially — in an EU context — a small region with limited resources. I therefore recommend the report to the Assembly.

Mr Deputy Speaker: I do not intend to introduce a time limit at this stage, but I would be grateful if Members would limit their speeches to 10 minutes.

Mr K Robinson: I support the report and commend it to the Assembly. Its 43 recommendations and over 300 pages reflect our enthusiasm for the task. I hope that it also reflects the detail of our investigation.

I congratulate the Chairperson on the businesslike manner in which he chaired the meetings, irrespective of which city we found ourselves in. I also express my appreciation to the Principal Clerk, the Committee Clerks and their colleagues for the professional and patient manner in which they approached the task; not forgetting the invaluable advice given by our researcher and our adviser.

This report, if endorsed by the Assembly, will represent a significant step forward by Northern Ireland plc in its relationship with the EU and its institutions. Sometimes, when dealing with Europe, it is possible to feel like the English tourist who arrived in Ballymena, asked the way to Antrim, and was told "If I were you I would not start from here". There may be other reasons for not wanting to go to Antrim, but we will not go into those. I am sure that Antrim is a delightful place, and I am sure that you will speak up for it, Mr Deputy Speaker.

To date, as highlighted in the document, most contacts have centred on the financial largesse of the EU in its funding of agricultural, structural or peace and reconciliation schemes. Until now, Northern Ireland has been a beneficiary of funding that has been, in general, designed to overcome our distinctive, historical and economic problems. Those days will cease in 2006, which will coincide with the enlargement of the community. Those two events should encourage the Assembly and this region to plan ahead in an inclusive and coherent manner. We must learn to become selective if we are to become effective.

The recommendations in the report are a signpost, which, if followed, will enable the whole community to benefit from the opportunities that an enlarged Europe will bring. They will also allow us to deal more effectively with the threats that such a change could bring.

In our approach to this investigation we chose to map out how EU policy might be influenced. To help us to put this vital aspect of the report into context, we visited our sister institutions, which had already evolved their own distinctive approach mechanisms to the EU.

The House of Commons European Scrutiny Committee, the House of Lords European Scrutiny Committee and the Scottish Parliament identified key points and critical stages at which EU policy might be positively influenced. The common factor indicated by all was the primacy of the member state. Therefore, it is vital that, as highlighted in Recommendation 2, linkages between the Whitehall Departments, Northern Ireland Departments and the corresponding Assembly Committees be in place. Dare I suggest that they be in place by September 2002?

Equally important is recommendation 8, which states that

"structures are put in place which ensure that the Departments engage at an early stage with the relevant Assembly Committees in areas where a distinct policy need and position for Northern Ireland is being considered."

The Chairperson drew attention to that vital and fundamental point.

The need is reinforced by recommendation 12, which states that advice and guidance could be provided via a contact point in each Department to its corresponding Assembly Committee and other interested parties.

Recommendation 14 builds upon that more productive approach and suggests that an Assembly information desk be set up in Brussels. Many who submitted evidence favoured the idea, including those from three Committees of the Assembly.

The advent of the devolved institution has presented us with an opportunity — after 30 years of relative inertia — to influence EU policy. Given that 80% of the Programme for Government is affected by EU policy and 60% of Northern Ireland legislation emanates from Brussels, that is vital.

The experiences of the Scottish, Catalanian and Flemish regional representatives point firmly to the necessity of using formal and informal networks in a planned and coherent manner. They also highlighted the need to focus selectively on areas in which results can be obtained — an approach that I have characterised as being “selective to be effective”, which encapsulates the essence of what must be done.

That approach relies on the willingness of the Office of the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister and all other Departments to accept the principle of inclusiveness by incorporating the existing skills and knowledge that non-governmental organisations have developed in European matters. That wealth of experience and reservoir of information must be tapped into. That approach found widespread support from consultees, which the Committee highlights in recommendations 7, 9, 11, 23 and 24.

Recommendation 29 refers to co-ordinated networking and access to the Brussels office by organisations such as the Northern Ireland Centre in Europe (NICE), local government and non-governmental organisations. All our contacts, whether regional observers or not, pointed to the need to involve a range of key players in the task of influencing the EU policy makers as far upstream as possible. Mr Nicholson, in his discussions with the Committee, also pointed out the need to monitor the progress of the policies as they come downstream, as they constantly change due to pressure from other interest groups and lobbyists before emerging as fully-fledged Directives.

The Committee also favoured the involvement of Assembly Members and civil servants in a programme to raise awareness of EU matters. It was encouraged to develop strong policies to organise secondments by those to whom it spoke in Brussels and Edinburgh. Given the backlog that Northern Ireland has inherited, the Committee felt that the fast-tracking of staff for short-term

secondments and careful placement to maximise, on their return to Northern Ireland, the benefits of their experience should be investigated thoroughly in order to make the process as worthwhile as possible, both to the participants and the Administration. Those thoughts are contained in recommendations 37, 38 and 39.

During the Committee’s consultations, concern was expressed that the situation was one of reactive drift, in which responses were tempered to head off infraction proceedings, to dispense EU funding and to introduce the necessary legislation to comply with EU Directives. The Committee is convinced that a proactive framework must be established at all levels. It is no longer a “can do” situation; it is a “must do” scenario in which direction must be given. The Committee’s conclusion, which is shared by many contributors, is that a junior Minister must be given responsibility for EU matters. That vital step must be implemented sooner rather than later. It may be reinforced in the interim by the formation of a subcommittee of the Committee of the Centre to focus on EU issues. My preference is that the opportunity to form a European affairs committee should be a central consideration of any review of current practice in the Administration, and that is envisaged in recommendations 10 and 26.

I welcome the establishment of the European Policy Co-Ordination Unit but agree with recommendation 24 that it must be properly resourced if it is to become effective.

During the Committee’s consultation with other regional representatives, it was apparent that they all compile formal and informal lists of contacts that may be useful to them for selective and continuous lobbying. It is vital that Northern Ireland develop such a comprehensive list of sympathetic and influential movers and shakers. A co-operative and proactive approach, inclusive of governmental contacts, is suggested in recommendations 29 and 31.

The role, influence and expertise of MEPs must also be connected to everything that I have said. I was not convinced that any or all of them were being actively sought out regularly. The impression that I was given was that, in a crisis, MEPs become central figures, but that once the crisis is over they become marginalized and bureaucracy takes over once more. Recommendations 17, 23 and 34 draw attention to that important point. With the enlargement of the EU, this will become a critical consideration. A community of such a size requires less bureaucracy and more democracy if the machine is not to grind to a halt.

The flow of vital information, both upwards and downwards in the system, is crucial to influencing issues at an early stage. Recommendations 41 and 42 refer to explanatory memoranda from the Cabinet Office being shared with the Assembly, its relevant Committees and,

in part, with other non-Government interests. Those memoranda are worthy of scrutiny.

(Mr Speaker in the Chair)

The centralisation of resource capabilities referred to in recommendations 4, 5 and 13 is a useful method of ensuring that existing and expected information and impacts are set in a meaningful context. That will better inform people about the implications, whether they be opportunities or threats.

Throughout the deliberations of the Committee, there was a great deal of cross-party agreement and co-operation. We can all see how fundamental and central this aspect of the life of the Assembly is in dealing with European matters. We cannot afford not to implement the key recommendations in the report, and I appeal to Members to proactively support the drive that the Committee has set before the House — *[Interruption]* — in its report.

Dr McDonnell: I apologise sincerely for that interruption. It was a wake-up call, and I got more than I bargained for.

I support the report and its recommendations. I will start where my Colleague Ken Robinson left off, by reusing the words “fundamental” and “central”. We have all accepted that Europe has had a massive influence on our lives, and everyone would agree that that influence has mostly been for the better. Many people in our community are very grateful to Europe for the support of the peace and reconciliation fund. That is only one example.

At the core of the report — and this is an issue for the Assembly today, tomorrow, next week and next year — is the seriousness with which we want to approach the European Union and with which we want it to take us. How seriously do we want to regard the major influence on our lives that the European Union has become?

Until now, Europe has been seen as a honeypot; a place where funding — sometimes soft funding — could be found. Europe has been a source of cash and, unfortunately, it has been viewed as a bit like Santa Claus at Christmas. Our participation was passive and receptive in many ways as we held out the bowl for the funds, whether regional funding, social development funding or other types. We were very receptive to that bounty. However, that was a short-term approach. It enabled us to get back on our feet after some very difficult years, but we must now move on and develop a more mature relationship with Europe. We must be able to influence the evolution of European Union policies and strategies at a much earlier stage. As some of my Colleagues suggested earlier, we should be influencing policies not only at the early stages, but throughout their evolution and implementation. We must do that in a proactive way, compared to our previous passive approach.

In the European context, some of us have been taught a salutary lesson in how the drift and estrangement of

the population in Southern Ireland created circumstances in which the public felt uninvolved — to the point that they voted against the Nice Treaty, which was unfortunate. We do not want to get to that stage, and I do not think that we will if we take this report, and some of the recommendations emerging from it, with the seriousness that it merits.

1.45 pm

When we discuss Europe, parties could disagree on many points — Ken Robinson touched wisely and informatively on that matter. As the report was evolving, there was broad consensus, and the Committee sought, for the large part, a common ground. Despite Northern Ireland’s limited population of 1·6 million or 1·7 million, there was a realisation that the Assembly could influence Europe and have access to the key players there. That was brought home to the Committee during its visit to Brussels. We realised that we could copy some of the best practice that we saw, and in that context I was particularly impressed with the Scottish system’s organisation and experience. I have no doubt that the Scottish representation dressed up their experiences and did not tell us about all their difficulties, but they produced a positive and efficient image. We will need to influence Europe as enlargement unfolds — if we do not, enlargement will swallow us up. It is one thing to be a region with a population of 1·6 million or 1·7 million in a community of approximately 300 million, but if the community’s population almost doubles, to over 500 million, Northern Ireland will be a very small fish indeed.

The big issue is the need for greater contact with, and engagement in, Europe. We need to get Northern Ireland Ministers to Europe, attending meetings where possible. In that context, the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development had useful contact with Europe during the recent agriculture crises. During the inquiry, the Committee felt that all our Ministers should find ways to attend European Council meetings. We saw the need to connect the Assembly with Europe. We do not wish the report to be the beginning and end of that — we want a regular drip feed to the Assembly from Europe, and from the Assembly, so that it can influence Europe.

Colleagues mentioned the need for a European affairs committee. Although the Committee is aware of some of the difficulties that may be created, and the fact that Members are already stretched in their attempts to cover all the current Committees, members agreed that the vacuum must be filled. We need to take Europe seriously. I will not dwell on that at length, but I have already mentioned the possible designation of a Minister or junior Minister with a European affairs brief. Local government organisations, industry and business must be better connected. Overall, we need to establish a multi-level, multifaceted approach to Europe. Although the Committee welcomed the opening of an office in Brussels, it

saw it as much too narrow, and more bureaucratic than political. We need a wider approach, which is well co-ordinated and involves all our players. The Committee accepts readily that the Executive are the big player and that individual Ministers and Departments follow very closely.

However, we emphasise — and I am perhaps repeating what has been mentioned already — that the Assembly does have a role to play in European affairs and should be involved in the Office of the Northern Ireland Executive in Brussels. We realise that Members of the European Parliament have considerable influence and that there should be some method to facilitate regular contact with them. Members of the Committee of the Regions should be linked into some type of formal or informal network. In addition, we could make contact with the European Economic and Social Committee. There is also, of course, the wider community.

As the Committee carried out its inquiry, it discovered an obvious need to get out of the silos — I am thinking especially about the various Government Departments — and make partnership and co-operation work on European issues, in the interest of our whole community. A comprehensive approach would ensure that we achieve the maximum influence in Europe and receive the maximum benefits from it.

There appeared to be a *laissez-faire* attitude in many Departments and sections of Government. Often, matters were allowed to drift, and because European issues sometimes had to be dealt with by several Departments, the process was like musical chairs — everyone deferred to someone else.

We must move from that passive attitude into a proactive, dare I say, aggressive approach to Europe. We have seen what other nations have done — and we only have to look South of the border to see what the Irish Republic has done as regards its influence in Europe. Equally, the inquiry noticed that some regions had dramatically influenced Europe and had served their own interests extremely well.

As I mentioned earlier, we need a network to gather information that goes beyond the formal arrangements. I was particularly impressed that, even though there are few secondments from Northern Ireland to Europe, several natives who have been placed in Brussels, or who have worked there, have a considerable resource of information and influence. Therefore they must be included in any informal network that we create.

If I could dwell for a moment on the secondment of staff — *[Interruption]*.

Mr Speaker: I must draw to the Member's attention that he has had in excess of 10 minutes.

Dr McDonnell: I am nearly finished. I suggest that we take seriously the opportunity to second staff to Europe. I will leave it at that.

The Committee was concerned about the Northern Ireland Centre in Europe, which has done a wonderful job over the years. However, once again I will not dwell on that.

Overall, the report is an excellent initial work of the Committee, and we will have to revisit this subject from time to time and deal with many of the recommendations in greater detail. We will also have to examine the cost implications of the recommendations. It would be foolish to publish the report today; blandly accept all the recommendations; put a pink ribbon round it, and go away. We must review the issue.

Some Colleagues are concerned that the word “accepts” in the amendment is a bit stronger than the word “notes”, but I would be comfortable with the amendment if it were set in the context of revisiting the subject and examining each recommendation in greater depth.

Mr C Murphy: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I too support the report. I commend the Committee for the work that has been done. I thank the Clerks, the Committee staff and research staff who ably assisted us. It was a very interesting and worthwhile exercise, and the vast scope of the report and the number of recommendations made showed how seriously the Committee took its work and how much interest there was in the subject.

The report, and the evidence contained in it, clearly demonstrate the absence of a coherent strategy in our dealings with Europe. The Office of the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister has yet to put in place a co-ordinated approach to the EU, both within the Assembly's jurisdiction and across the islands, through the all-Ireland implementation bodies and the North/South Ministerial Council. That was probably best displayed by the lack of co-ordination with other stakeholders in going forward with the Office of the Northern Ireland Executive in Brussels. Ken Robinson and Alisdair McDonnell referred to the Committee's broad consensus in agreeing the recommendations and the approach needed by the Assembly to Europe. That is correct. Regardless of whether one is a Euro-sceptic, a Europhile, or shares one of the many opinions between those positions, the majority of our legislation emanates from Europe. That has a massive impact on how we do our business here.

It is clear from the report and our investigation that we need early warning on EU legislative proposals and infraction proceedings that will affect us. We must know which EU Directives we need to act on and their time-tables for implementation. We can see the risk with respect to the environmental Directives, in particular, and the serious potential to impose financial penalties on us.

The Assembly must guard against the risk that its approach to the EU might become merely an adjunct to that of the British Labour Party, which is working its way through Westminster, Scotland and Wales. Regardless of which side of the House they come from, many Members agree that an individual, distinct approach would benefit us.

Another weakness that I identified in the approach from OFMDFM — and it emerges in some of the evidence of the report — is the failure to develop an all-Ireland approach to EU matters. Unlike many member states, we have a unique Executive and institutional link to another member state. Not only should we benefit and learn from the success of the South in its dealings with the European Union, but in our approach to the European Union we should reflect our formal institutional and Executive link to the South. I hope that the idea and development of a common strategy could be advanced at North/South Ministerial Council level.

I support the idea of setting up a Standing Committee on EU affairs. As a result of our inquiry and our examination of how other institutions' EU Committees have operated, there is a strong argument for a Committee with responsibility for both the scrutiny of important legislation and conducting broad inquiries into EU matters and their impact on Northern Ireland affairs. However, given the pressure that there is on the Assembly's Committee system, the membership and attendance of our Committees and the number of Committees and Ad Hoc Committees, we must ensure that we do not increase that stress. We must ensure that we do not create a Committee that cannot function due to the workload of other Committees. It must be an effective Committee; it must be able to deal effectively with, and scrutinise, our relationship with the EU and that between the Executive and the EU.

I regret to say that the lack of strategic planning by OFMDFM appears to have been a feature of its approach. That is reflected in many of the recommendations and in much of the commentary of previous Members who spoke. A lack of communication has been another regrettable feature. Those features must be reversed. I accept the amendment to change the report and its recommendations from being "noted" to being "accepted" by the Executive.

The report must be taken seriously, because reports can be absorbed without an effective adoption of the recommendations therein. The report was a serious attempt to look, comment and reflect on our relationship with the EU. It was an attempt to recommend to the Executive what the Committee feels should be done about that relationship. That must be done if we are to have an effective relationship with the EU that would benefit not only those whom we represent in the North, but everyone on the island, through all-Ireland institutional links. Go raibh maith agat.

Mr Neeson: I welcome the report. I also accept the amendment.

Such a report has been long overdue, and the enlargement of the European Union will be a significant development that will affect our everyday lives.

2.00 pm

When the Committee for Enterprise, Trade and Investment was carrying out its investigation into energy it realised the impact that the EU was having on energy policy throughout Europe, including the regions. The Committee receives all European Directives that affect it.

I was a member of the Committee of the Regions for several years, albeit as an alternate. However, it was a significant role. I congratulate those who have been newly appointed to the Committee from Northern Ireland and wish them well during their period in office.

The Committee of the Centre's recommendations are very welcome. Only two political parties from here are involved in the membership of the Committee of the Regions. Four members, two full members and two alternates, would make it broader. In present Assembly circumstances it would include a Member from the DUP and a Member from Sinn Féin. The Assembly needs to take that on board.

I am a voluntary member of the board of the Northern Ireland Centre in Europe (NICE), and I share the Committee's concerns about the treatment of NICE. When we had an office in Brussels, the cost of running it was about one third of the cost of running the new office, and that needs to be considered. I do not resent the fact that money is being invested in such an important office, but it is essential that its work be monitored closely. The fact that the office costs three times more would be acceptable if there was clear evidence of greater achievements or a higher quality of work, but, going by the report, the Committee did not find such a quantum leap.

The Committee expresses concerns that the experience of NICE has not been used or built on. As a voluntary member of that board I share those concerns, and it is time that they came out into the open, because the board has faced considerable problems recently.

Over the years NICE has built a substantial foundation of contacts, information, skills and knowledge that has been put at the disposal of the public and private sectors in Northern Ireland. The benefits from the organisation continue, yet there has not been a single contact from the head of the Executive's Office in Brussels to discuss that experience or to seek benefit from it, despite the clear assurances given by the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister at the official opening. They stated clearly that the office would work in an open manner, co-operating and communicating with all sectors, and yet for an organisation that was established through a

cross-party initiative, there has been absolute silence. That silence sends a clear and resounding message. How loudly it speaks of the attitude of some in the Civil Service. They have more than tripled the cost to taxpayers and have not even had the common courtesy to contact the organisation that has invested so much time and expertise.

It would be bad enough if it were simply a lack of courtesy. It is worse than that. Not only has the head of the Office of the Northern Ireland Executive in Brussels never contacted the board or the staff of NICE, but there is a clear pattern of behaviour that the Minister should take steps to change substantially. I also note that the Chairperson of the Committee, Mr Poots, recently asked in the House when NICE would begin to be treated in a more honourable way. I echo that question. A considerable amount of successful work was undertaken with genuine, constructive and positive motivation for the benefit of all in Northern Ireland. The attempt that was made to bury that work and cast NICE aside was despicable.

It is time for the officials in that area to cease their petty-minded approach and meet with the staff of NICE, who have acted with integrity and character throughout this shameful period.

There is no doubt that Europe is having a greater impact on our everyday lives. I welcome the fact that Marks and Spencer in Belfast now has a counter that accepts the euro, and several other retail establishments in Northern Ireland are doing the same. The question is not whether the euro will be introduced in the UK but when. I hope that the Assembly can focus on the issues that are at hand concerning the development and enlargement of the European Union.

I would like to thank the Clerk, the Committee and the specialist adviser for the work that they have put into the report, which I consider to be significant. I also want to put on record my thanks and support for the efforts of the junior Minister, Mr Haughey. If the Assembly is to nominate a Minister for Europe, I cannot think of a better person.

Ms Morrice: I shall declare an interest. I am a former head of the European Commission office in Northern Ireland, and I remain actively involved in a variety of bodies concerned with Europe and Northern Ireland.

I welcome the report. It is obvious that a great deal of work has gone into it. It is excellent that the report opens up the European debate, which has, sadly, been in its infancy in Northern Ireland for far too long. It is timely, and its recommendations are very welcome. The Committee's "knuckle-rapping" on the work of the Executive and OFMDFM and its approach to Northern Ireland is valuable, and its recommendations for changing that are very appropriate. *[Interruption]*.

Mr Speaker: Order.

Ms Morrice: I wish to consider the conclusions of the report. Dr McDonnell asked if we were taking the European Union seriously. I go further than that and openly criticise the Executive for not taking the European Union seriously. The report suggests that the Executive should get its European house in order and realise that it is not a chateau for the elite in the Executive and Government Departments.

It should be an open house for all members of the public and the various sectors in Northern Ireland. That has been totally disregarded. There has been a lack of communication and consultation with the experts in that area. The three MEPs are pretty long in the tooth and long in understanding European Union affairs, yet they have not been properly consulted. Members of the Committee of the Regions, members of the Economic and Social Committee, non-governmental organisations, farming unions, trade unions and business sectors are not being properly consulted on what we should be doing on European Union affairs. Why is that being ignored? What sort of attitude is there in Government Departments and in the Executive that those issues are being ignored, and people's expertise is being ignored?

I want to quote some comments, which I found incredible, made by officials from OFMDFM justifying the problems that they have in trying to convince Departments to get involved in European affairs. One of them said that

"A major problem is that many Departments have not yet realised that they need our services, and that they need to get into Europe."

Wait a minute. Think about that. It is said that many Departments have not realised that they need to get into Europe. First, could someone please tell those people that we are in Europe now. Secondly, we have been in Europe since 1973. Where have those civil servants been since 1973 if they did not realise that we were already in Europe?

It is stated that officials noted that resources were needed. That comment relates to the implementation of Directives. As Members know, there has been a backlog of Directives, especially in relation to the environment. As the Chairperson said, it is costing the Italians around £50,000 a day. I would love a response from the Ministers — *[Interruption]*.

A Member: It is costing the Italians 50,000 euros.

Ms Morrice: Excuse me. Thank you. I would love a response from Ministers stating how much the backlog of Directives is costing Northern Ireland. Ministers are looking at monitoring that, but I would like to have a figure to see how much it is costing us because we do not have our house in order on implementing the Directives. The excuse is that

"There are significant issues concerning implementation of our Directives ... we did inherit a major problem there."

I assume that refers to devolution. Another excuse is that

"It is difficult to obtain the necessary resources and legal expertise. We must solve this problem as quickly as possible."

That is very good, but it is 25 years too late. We are talking about the legal expertise and resources necessary to implement Directives into the law of Northern Ireland. We were supposed to have that in place when we joined the European Union, and not so many years later. The excuses are legal expertise and resources, and I suppose that we should appreciate that those aspects are being recognised now. However, we have been in the European Union for a quarter of a century, and some people need to wake up to that fact.

I shall highlight a few valuable recommendations. There is the recommendation that a Standing Committee on European affairs should be established. Members may recall that the Committee that looked into the impact of devolution made that recommendation. But what happened about it? Zilch. When it came to the formation of the Committee of the Centre, it was assumed that we would have a committee on European affairs, a Minister on European affairs, a committee on equality and a Minister on equality. Suddenly the tables were turned, and we found ourselves with a Committee of the Centre and two junior Ministers covering the works. How can we possibly take Europe seriously if it is done in that way? We back the recommendation to have a Standing Committee.

Greater use of expertise is vital. The expertise of all the representatives in the European scene is important, as well as the expertise in non-governmental areas and that of the people who have been working with European peace money, the business sector and the trade unions. It is vital for that expertise to be channelled properly.

Another issue is ministerial attendance. The Committee is disappointed that we are losing out on key opportunities to influence European policy-making. How long have we been doing that? Ministers from Northern Ireland should be at those ministerial meetings.

2.15 pm

I want to add two more recommendations that I did not see in the report, and the Chairperson will hardly be surprised by that. Something has been ignored.

On this occasion it is not the euro, it is young people. Members will appreciate the influence of young people. The Executive have not done enough to get the debate on European awareness into the public domain in order to get the public more actively interested in European affairs — especially young people.

Secondments should not only be for executives or senior officials of the Departments. They should be for non-governmental organisations and they should be for young people. There is in-service training — *stages* — which is a superb course in the European Commission for graduates — that is what started me on the European

road. Why is that sort of thing not being pushed to allow more young people to get involved?

I realise that I am running out of time, but I have much more to say. I want to look at departmental priorities. I was flabbergasted by the section at the end of the report in which Departments were asked to categorise their European Union affairs as high or medium priorities. I want to go through a few of those. The EQUAL programme and lifelong learning are only medium priorities for the Department for Employment and Learning. Access to environmental information is a medium priority for the Department of the Environment. Wait until you hear this — the Department for Social Development rates non-governmental organisations and the voluntary and community sector as medium priorities. Wow.

Economic and monetary union, as well as consumer protection are medium priorities for the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment. Organic farming and food labelling are medium priorities for the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development. Last, but not least, the Department of Education only has two areas of responsibility for European affairs, and both are medium priority. What is going on? Does the Department of Education not realise that we are in Europe to stay? All those Departments should realise that.

I have had my say, although I would have liked longer. We have to start taking Europe seriously. Politics aside, we are in the business of doing what is good for Northern Ireland. Unless the parties in the Executive that are not interested in being a part of Europe are prepared to say that they want us to withdraw from it, they should be working hard to ensure that we reap the benefits and also offer our expertise to others in the European Union.

Mr Paisley Jnr: I welcome the debate, and I want to congratulate the Chairperson and Members of the Committee for producing such an extensive report. It is substantial and impressive. In the detail in which it has examined the topic, it is one of the most far-reaching reports published by the Assembly to date. It serves as an example of how an Assembly Committee — a non-Statutory Committee, by the way — holds the Government to account. More importantly, it finds the Government wanting on the key issues that they ought to have been dealing with in the past three years.

The inquiry caught OFMDFM napping on the serious and important issue of Europe, and the approach of the devolved Government to European issues. In the annex we have the first published paper by OFMDFM on European issues, which shows that the Committee was able to force the Government belatedly to respond to some of the key issues that have been before them for the past three years.

One got the impression from the OFMDFM submission that it was a case of bolting the stable door after

the horse had gone. There seemed to be several issues that it was trying to catch up on or that might have been reported to it — not necessarily by Committees members. It appears that OFMDFM was trying to put a brave face on the situation, and to plug an embarrassing leak.

As Ms Morrice said, it is to be hoped that the report serves as a serious wake-up call to the Government here on how they intend to deal with Europe. If European policy is not scrutinised closely, European Directives will be imposed on Northern Ireland that are contrary to the will of our people. It is important that Northern Ireland has its say on those Directives, that when they are just ideas in the minds of bureaucrats and Eurocrats they are shaped according to our wishes. It is important that we have early warning and early influence in Europe. I agree with the Committee's view that our Government must be proactive on Europe. The scathing criticisms in the report show that the Office of the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister has been at best, reactive and, at worst — which is most of the time — inactive on European issues. A plush office in Brussels must not be the be-all and end-all of Government policy, but I get the impression that that is the role that the Northern Ireland Executive seek for themselves. They have ticked the box, they have an office in Brussels, but the Executive must do considerably more than that. It is to be hoped that they will start to deliver on some of the promises made, as there is very little to show for their work over the past three years.

Criticism of the Executive has been universal. They were not given the most auspicious of starts, given that when the Assembly travelled to Brussels in 1998, some members of Sinn Féin used the opportunity to attack the paymasters and to insult the people of Northern Ireland by their approach. The Executive could nevertheless have built on that low point, but unfortunately they have not done that.

I refer to page 199 of the report and to the written submission of Mr Nigel Smyth, the director of the Confederation of British Industry (CBI) Northern Ireland. He states that

“a number of key issues are of concern to the business community. These include the following: the lack of information on the existing Northern Ireland strategy towards, and activities focused at, the European Union; the apparently ad hoc and unfocused approach to European issues; the difference in governance arrangements between Northern Ireland and the European Union; and the additional issues — just how important is it and how does it impact on Northern Ireland's ability to access EU funds.”

CBI's criticisms are echoed by the Federation of Small Businesses, which also made a written submission. Time forbids listing all its recommendations.

Both Ms Morrice and Mr Neeson noted some criticisms voiced by the Northern Ireland Centre in Europe (NICE). It is important to record the criticisms of Mr John Kennedy,

the chief executive of NICE. His recommendations, on page 244 of the report, stressed that

“Existing approaches, which are based on the immediate administrative agendas of Departments, are not likely to realise the maximum potential. We believe that it is necessary to fundamentally review this approach and to build on the learning available.”

There are major gaps in the Executive's approach to European issues.

The Department of Agriculture and Regional Development must spend 46.7% of its budget according to European Directives and yet, it is clear to me as a member of the Committee for Agriculture and Regional Development, that it is difficult for Committee members to grasp some of the European issues that arise. That is because the Minister does not bring those issues to the Committee; officials relate them in an ad hoc fashion and on many occasions bounce them on the Committee. The Committee is told that if it does not act immediately the money will be lost, so there is no co-ordinated, strategic approach for dealing with money, for which we are accountable as public representatives.

All Committees must have a much more detailed knowledge of European Directives, the way in which they come to us and how the Government influence those Directives at the beginning. The report shows that all the Committees are concerned at the apparent lack of knowledge of the role of the European Union, and its extent, on our affairs. It is a serious criticism of the House and the institutions that have been established that there is no driving force to change that situation.

In his submission the European Commission's representative, Mr Jim Dougal said that he is prepared to arrange training seminars. However, it is not his job to do that — it is the job of the House and the officials here to put in place those recommendations and training mechanisms. We do not want to get our steer totally from the European Commission's representative. Members may not necessarily share his agenda, which accords with that of the Commission, and it is important that we ensure that our approach is in the interests of the people whom we represent, rather than in the interests of the Commission with its own detailed agenda.

There are some other criticisms to which I would like to refer. I note that only one MEP made a written submission to the report, although Jim Nicholson made himself available to the Committee for an extensive verbal briefing. Both MEPs had the same stark criticisms, and the Office of the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister must address those instead of just taking them on the chin, because they are serious. For example, in his submission on page 284 of the report, Dr Paisley said that he would like the Office of the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister

“to identify the various EU policy papers they are currently lobbying the Commission on; and how they are representing the

opinions of the Assembly Committees as they express views on matters and policies that are relevant to EU matters.”

That does not seem to be being done, and it is essential that OFMDFM picks up on that.

The report gives an interesting insight into the role of OFMDFM and its links with MEPs:

Dr Paisley continues:

“Critically your committee inquiry should consider why there is no co-ordination between the Departments and the MEPs. There are no regular briefings and there is no strategic approach in general from the Executive. I continue to make approaches directly and receive the briefing papers that the Scottish, English and Welsh MEPs receive on behalf of the Government Departments there. Quite frankly the Northern Ireland Departments and the Executive are not at the same game. In fact, in my experience it is now more difficult to get information from the Northern Ireland Departments about European matters than at any previous time due to the defensive nature of the ministerial run Departments.”

That is a stark criticism, and, brushing aside its political content, it is a very serious administrative criticism, which the Office of the First and the Deputy First Ministers should address seriously. Ken Robinson, on behalf of the Ulster Unionist Party, also made that point, and I am happy to echo it.

Finally, I wish to draw Members’ attention to the comments of Mr John Simpson, Queen’s University and the Ulster Farmers’ Union, all of which make the same criticisms that there is neither the scrutiny, the strategic vision nor the proper policy approach to Europe that there should be. The Assembly is grateful to the Committee of the Centre for carrying out this brave task and for identifying the issues in the way in which it has.

Mr Speaker: Order. We have now arrived at the moment of interruption.

The debate stood suspended.

2.30 pm

Oral Answers to Questions

ENTERPRISE, TRADE AND INVESTMENT

Mr Speaker: It is time for questions to the Ministers. First, we have questions to the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment, Sir Reg Empey. Question 3, in the name of Mr Eugene McMennamin, has been withdrawn. The House will be aware of why that is the case. Mr McMennamin is not able to be here today because of the appalling attack on his home last night. Our thoughts are with the Member and his family in consequence of that. His question will, of course, receive a written answer.

Tourism Ireland

1. **Mr O'Neill** asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to outline the progress made by Tourism Ireland. (AQO 1066/01)

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment (Sir Reg Empey): Before answering the question, I want to say that I deplore last night’s attack on Mr McMennamin and his family. I am sure, Mr Speaker, that all Members will share your view that it was an outrageous attack. We wish the Member and his family well in coming to terms with it.

Several Members: Hear, hear.

Sir Reg Empey: Tourism Ireland Ltd has achieved its core objectives of being operational in 2002 and of launching and implementing a challenging international marketing campaign. In accordance with the direction of the North/South Ministerial Council, a corporate plan has been developed to guide the company through the period from 2002 to 2004.

Mr O'Neill: Is the Minister confident, given that the body’s full complement of staff is now in post and that it is fully operational, that all the views from all sectors of the tourism industry, North and South, will have adequate representation in Tourism Ireland Ltd?

Sir Reg Empey: There were industrial relations problems concerning staff who were transferring from Bord Fáilte in the Republic. Those problems have been resolved. A full complement of staff is being assembled in the Dublin office. The Coleraine office is in temporary accommodation at present. Five out of the possible 15 or 16 members of staff are in post. The remaining staff will be assembled between now and the autumn. It is hoped that the new Coleraine regional office will be available later this year, when all staff members will be in post. That is the current plan.

I assure the Member that although at the time of appointment to the board there was criticism that not every section of the tourist industry was represented — bearing in mind that we had to have a small operational board with the capability to start off a multimillion pound organisation — the views of all parts of the industry are now being taken on board. That is being done through the creation of groups involving industry representatives and Tourism Ireland Ltd representatives to work out the operational plans. All sections of the industry will be able to convey their views to the heart of the organisation and have those views reflected in future marketing campaigns.

The Member must, however, bear in mind that although there has been criticism in that respect, the significant achievements of creating a new organisation from scratch and starting its first marketing campaign, have taken place against the background of two of the worst events to have affected tourism on these islands in our lifetime — foot-and-mouth disease and the events of 11 September 2001. Tourism Ireland Ltd's response has been positive, and I congratulate it.

E-Government

2. **Dr McDonnell** asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to outline (a) any elements of e-government which have been introduced within his Department in each of the past three years; and (b) any plans for e-government development in the next three years. (AQO 1091/01)

Sir Reg Empey: In the past three years my Department has developed an e-business strategy, including an Internet presence providing information directly to the public. We have also upgraded our IT infrastructure, completed a pilot study on electronic document and records management and developed a project in Companies Registry that has converted paper systems to electronic access. The Department intends to extend that approach to other areas.

Dr McDonnell: I thank the Minister for those details of positive and obvious progress. The corporate strategic framework for electronic delivery of Government services specified that Departments would consult their customers to ensure that needs are addressed. Can the Minister outline any processes that businesses in his Department use to identify customers' electronic services needs?

Sir Reg Empey: There is significant potential in such processes. The first requirement is to understand customer needs, as the Member correctly identified. We must then ensure that both staff and customers understand the approach and are confident with the systems and the proposed changes. Provision of self-service facilities for customers, supported by a contact centre, is one project that we are following up. That should ensure a more joined-up approach, with delivery through various media: Internet, e-mail, fax and perhaps kiosks. It depends on what the service is and where it is required.

An editorial board has been established, with responsibility for providing a customer-focused web presence for the Department. Exploiting knowledge management relies on maximising the corporate memory through good information use and management, of which an electronic record and document management system is an essential component.

I visited Companies Registry a few months ago and saw the records that are held there. Massive circular document holders are dug into the ground, and a huge amount of paper is collected. The office will be altered so that customers will be able to access much of that information electronically. Of course, it will be stored.

We must remember that there are many legalities involved; companies are involved in court actions all the time. Therefore, we are grateful that we are making progress on giving legal effect to electronically generated materials. I am satisfied with the progress that is being made. A target has been set of ensuring that services and advice are offered not only via current methods, but by new methods, by the end of the e-business programme in 2005. By that time, all key services are to be available online. That is quite ambitious.

Mr Neeson: The Committee for Enterprise, Trade and Investment has taken a great interest in the development of e-government. The Minister said that the Department had established targets. What monitoring procedures have been established to ensure that those targets are met?

Sir Reg Empey: A committee in the Department is charged with exactly that. A quarterly report informs me of the progress that has been made across all targets that the Department sets, including the development of e-government. That is entirely consistent with the commitments in the Programme for Government. The target date of 2005 is ambitious, but it will be worth it. The Committee is interested in e-government. Indeed, many services across Government and local government can be provided in that way, such as licence applications and the provision of information, which is where, for instance, kiosks and so on come in. They are very ambitious targets, but I assure the Member that monitoring is conducted on a rolling basis and quarterly reports are sent to me.

Mr K Robinson: Does the Minister agree that the principal pitfall of e-government is the e-mail congestion that it creates? What steps are Departments taking to address the proliferation of an unnecessary duplication of e-mails in the Government machine?

Sir Reg Empey: I am not sure whether it is generational, but the first thing that people seem to do on receiving an e-mail is to copy it in triplicate in hard copy. If I am aware of any particular problem, it is that one. People are still afraid that when material is transmitted electronically, it will run away unless it exists as hard copy. Perhaps I misread the expression on your face, Mr Speaker, but you give me the impression that you

know what I am talking about. There is a substantial proliferation of e-mails — I see it in my office all the time. However, the problem is that in addition to those e-mails, there is also hard copy, or e-mails are automatically printed out as hard copy. One successful company in Northern Ireland makes the point that over one third of all e-mails are not answered, and it has employed people in Belfast and Londonderry to deal with that problem.

I do not have a technical answer to the Member's question, but that will come with experience. When credit cards were first introduced, people were reluctant to use them. However, people are now familiar with credit cards, and some people have taken to them very well. We will all learn how to handle it.

Mr Wells: When does the Minister expect to publish the comparative costs of electronic service delivery versus the cost of the more traditional paper transaction service?

Sir Reg Empey: I have no current plans to publish comparative costs, because those matters are cross-departmental. The motivation for the provision of that type of information is not simply speed of transfer, and if it is managed properly, it has the potential to involve fewer people in the transmission of larger amounts of information. That is the rationale for undertaking it. I will take advice on the Member's question and will write to him if such figures are available in detail in my Department. A central Government unit is charged with the process. Government-wide figures may be available, and I will inform the Member accordingly.

Outward Investment

4. **Mr Poots** asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment how he assists local companies that engage in outward investment. (AQO 1067/01)

Sir Reg Empey: Invest Northern Ireland's mission is to accelerate economic development in Northern Ireland. Financial support will be offered towards investment in Northern Ireland to achieve that goal. Direct assistance is not offered towards companies' investments overseas.

Mr Poots: Do the Minister and his Department recognise that, when businesses express a wish to develop overseas as well as at home, it is an indication of a vibrant economy? Does he recognise that businesses do not necessarily require financial assistance, but back-up assistance to develop international links in order to improve their chances of bringing further investment and profitability to Northern Ireland?

2.45 pm

Sir Reg Empey: I recognise the Member's point. The Department offers assistance in different ways. Invest Northern Ireland has several overseas offices, including one in the Dubai Internet City. Before Christmas, it

opened an incubator centre in Boston, and it is hoped that a follow-up office will open in New York shortly.

Those measures are designed to help companies that are establishing themselves in overseas markets. Primarily, of course, their objective is to sell their products and services in those markets. However, the Member touched on an issue that, as I have said before, Members must come to terms with. A growing number of our companies are acquiring, or entering into arrangements with, overseas companies. They have transferred a significant amount of manufacturing to those overseas locations on the grounds that it enables them to become more competitive and in some cases they send partially finished materials back to Northern Ireland for more added-value work. That is spreading across sector after sector.

To answer the Member's question, the Department does not give money directly to companies to establish overseas offices. However, in helping companies generally, whether financially or through the provision of advice and other services, the establishment of overseas offices is a growing trend. It is an emotive issue. Therefore, as a community, we must make a judgement in the not-too-distant future on how we choose to deal with these matters. People see the establishment of overseas offices as the exporting of jobs; they see it as encouraging companies to move production facilities elsewhere. The Department does all that it can to avoid that, but the Member is correct to say that we must be extremely aware of the issue, and we must provide as much advice and assistance as possible in the manner that I indicated.

Mr Dallat: To what extent has InterTradeIreland been able to assist Northern Ireland companies to develop and expand their business in the Republic of Ireland?

Sir Reg Empey: InterTradeIreland is designed to increase the amount of trade between the Republic and Northern Ireland, which it does in several ways. It also has objectives to improve the competitiveness of, and to measure, that trade. The first thing that the Department discovered is that the measurement of cross-border trade is one of the most difficult tasks, because the figures did not match. Work has been undertaken to set a benchmark to show the position from which we are starting.

Schemes have been introduced whereby graduates from Northern Ireland companies work in companies in the Republic, and vice versa, in order to exchange information. The Department has encouraged graduates to join companies to help them to develop marketing strategies. In particular, that initiative applies to small companies that hitherto have not had the opportunity to develop their own marketing strategies because they have not had the necessary resources. As I mentioned in answer to a previous question, the Department is keen to expand the grossly under-exploited amount of business that is done through public tendering arrangements in which the public sector buy billions of pounds worth of goods and services on both sides of the border.

Therefore InterTradeIreland has a substantial agenda that it is working through well. I presented its corporate plan to the House following the most recent North/South Ministerial Council meeting, and I am sure that the Member has read it assiduously.

Lord Kilclooney: The Minister has answered my concerns that were provoked by the wording of the original question. For the sake of clarification, can he state that it is the case that no assistance is given to firms from Northern Ireland that successfully take over companies from outside the United Kingdom? Does the term “outward investment by Northern Ireland companies” include investment in the Republic of Ireland, in which there is increasing investment due to the weakening of its currency?

Sir Reg Empey: I confirm that the right hon Member’s interpretation of my answer is correct, and the answer to the Member’s second question is “yes”.

Rixell Expansion

5. **Mr McElduff** asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to make a statement on the decision of the Rixell Company to expand its operations to Omagh and thereby create 150 jobs. (AQO 1083/01)

Sir Reg Empey: Rixell Ltd is a new subsidiary of the Ritek Corporation. Locations in America, Europe and Asia were considered for this £27 million investment to service the European market. Omagh succeeded because of the availability of staff, suitable premises, the educational infrastructure, proximity to the market and support from Invest Northern Ireland and Omagh District Council.

Mr McElduff: I warmly welcome and commend the decision of the company to expand its operations to Omagh, thereby creating 150 jobs. As the Minister will be aware, the move is raising morale in the area. The combined efforts are acknowledged. Omagh is the county town of Tyrone and has been identified as a major regional growth centre. The Minister referred to suitable accommodation. Does he wish to comment further on the value and importance of having an advance factory in helping to attract and secure inward investment?

Sir Reg Empey: I was pleased to be present when the announcement of the investment in Omagh was made. I hope that 150, rather than 120, jobs will be created. I know that the announcement was well received in the local community because significant time had passed since such an investment had been announced for the Omagh District Council area. The presence of that facility outside the town was very significant. I visited the facility last year, and I was very impressed by its quality. The fact that it was already there and available to be altered for the needs of this company was one of the critical factors in the decision to locate in Omagh.

A similar situation arose at the end of 2000 in Strabane. An investment was located in Orchard Road

by Fab Plus, which took over an advance factory. On a visit to Omagh shortly afterwards, I promised that we would take immediate action to ensure that further space was made available on an adjacent site in the area. A development brief has been produced, and I hope that a new facility, suitable for multiple occupancy or for an information and communication technology (ICT) company, will be available by this autumn. I am considering the situation in Omagh to establish whether a similar development should be made there. I will contact my colleagues in Invest Northern Ireland to see what response they intend to make.

Mr Hussey: I welcome the announcement of the decision. It was a pleasure to be present when the announcement was made. I also acknowledge the Minister’s reference to a similar project in Strabane. However, the Minister will realise that inward investment is a cross-cutting issue, involving housing, health provision, education and transport infrastructures. Will the Minister give a commitment to continue to liaise with the Ministers responsible for those other areas to ensure that west Tyrone remains an area attractive to inward investment?

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

Sir Reg Empey: The Member’s point about the cross-cutting nature of investment is valid. I agree that investment is not attracted by one factor. The Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment liaises particularly closely with the Department for Employment and Learning. The availability of labour was one of the key considerations in this investment. Equally, matters such as transport are vital. That is a major issue in the Member’s constituency, and with such long distances to be travelled, the lack of transport is seen as a disadvantage.

I have also answered questions from the hon Member and his other colleagues from west Tyrone on the availability of broadband, another piece of infrastructure that is important and goes a long way to counteract peripherality, which is at the root of the Member’s comments.

With regard to liaising with Colleagues, transport strategies and such programmes are relevant. Indeed, if the Programme for Government is to have meaning, we must ensure that such matters are co-ordinated. I accept the Member’s point, but there is cross-cutting, cross-departmental liaison and ongoing work — particularly in areas of targeting social need or those with a history of significant unemployment — to ensure that measures are put in place to give poorer areas a reasonable opportunity to benefit in any economic upturn.

Invest Northern Ireland – Client Executives

6. **Mr Byrne** asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to outline the role and deployment of client executives within the new Invest Northern Ireland organisation; and to make a statement. (AQO 1077/01)

Sir Reg Empey: As Members will be aware, Invest Northern Ireland is consulting publicly on its corporate plan, and the manner in which it will interface with its clients and customers will be an important aspect of this consultation. The draft corporate plan envisages that client executives will work closely with client companies to understand their needs, to act as a single access point and, in many cases, to work as members of cross-functional client teams to co-ordinate the integrated delivery of Invest Northern Ireland services.

Mr Byrne: Does the Minister accept that client executives have an important role to play in the promotion and development of manufacturing enterprises, in particular, across Northern Ireland? Will the Minister give serious consideration to housing client executives in some of the regional offices outside Belfast — for example, in Omagh, where there has been a LEDU western regional office for many years?

Sir Reg Empey: The question of regional offices has been raised on several occasions, and I have expressed a commitment to ensure that Invest Northern Ireland will have a significant regional presence. There are five local offices in Ballymena, Belfast, Londonderry, Omagh, and Newry, which will remain at present. However, there has been much interest and lobbying by many politicians on the matter, and the board of Invest Northern Ireland is examining the location of offices in the regions and their staffing levels as a key priority.

I have already had discussions with Prof Monds, the board's chairman, and Leslie Morrison, the chief executive, and I have no doubt that when the board has considered the next stages I will consult with it. I am conscious of the Member's point. We want to provide a service in the regions that improves the availability of information and access to the services for local people. We want to use those facilities to encourage and support more people to start up businesses and to help those already in business. This issue is high on the board's initial agenda, and I ask the Member to be patient for a little longer, until it has had an opportunity to consider these matters.

Mr Hamilton: Can the Minister confirm that efforts to attract new investment into Northern Ireland will receive even more priority under Invest Northern Ireland than they did with the Industrial Development Board?

Sir Reg Empey: Attracting inward investment remains a priority, and that will continue to be the case. Indeed, Invest Northern Ireland has been structured so that it has a managing director with external trade and investment as his key brief. Of course, the largest single slice of the investment cake comes from indigenous companies, and I do not envisage that that formula will change in the short term, particularly as the pool of mobile investment is considerably limited following 11 September 2001 and the events that flowed from that, which we have not seen the last of yet.

I believe that it will remain a top priority, because it is impossible to have a balanced and progressive economy unless there is a mixture of inward and indigenous investment. I assure the Member that we will not let up in our efforts to achieve both.

3.00 pm

EMPLOYMENT AND LEARNING

Mr Deputy Speaker: I wish to inform Members that question 6, standing in the name of Mr Éamonn O'Neill, has been transferred to the Minister for Social Development and will receive a written answer. Question 14, standing in the name of Mr Eugene McMennamin, has been withdrawn and will also receive a written answer.

Further Education Employability Prospects

1. **Mr Bradley** asked the Minister for Employment and Learning what steps she is taking to raise the employability prospects of those in further education.

(AQO 1089/01)

The Minister for Employment and Learning (Ms Hanna): Supporting the development of the Northern Ireland economy is a key priority for the further education sector. My Department raises employability prospects by encouraging students to pursue courses that have the best current and future employment prospects. We have several policies and initiatives to improve those prospects such as centres of excellence, which recognise high-achieving colleges, and the partnership fund, which encourages colleges to work with businesses and the community among others.

Mr Bradley: I agree with the concept that every young trainee is a type of student, and that those who serve their times in trades that relate to the construction industry, hairdressing, machine operating or farming are entitled to wear the student label. What is the Department doing to ensure increased enrolments at higher levels in areas of skill requirements?

Ms Hanna: I agree that they are all students. In addition to the normal allocation of full-time higher education places in further education colleges, my Department made available a further 600 places during 1999. Those places focus on the six key skills areas identified as being necessary to our economy. We are also piloting foundation degrees in further education colleges in areas related to information technology.

Mr Savage: How does the Minister plan to address the severe shortage of skills in the building and plumbing trades as well as the all-trades association that has a severe problem in obtaining young, highly skilled and motivated people to fill vacancies?

Ms Hanna: One way in which we are addressing that problem is through the foundation degrees. There are a small number of part-time foundation degrees in the construction, hospitality and catering areas. The pilot programmes will be evaluated and, subject to a positive evaluation, foundation degrees in other departments will be introduced.

Disadvantaged Groups

2. **Mr McElduff** asked the Minister for Employment and Learning to detail the steps that she is taking to make higher and further education more accessible to disadvantaged groups. (AQO 1082/01)

Ms Hanna: My Department has a range of policies to make higher and further education more accessible to disadvantaged groups. Those include specific, earmarked funding to assist the further education sector in reaching out to those groups; increased places in higher education; funding premiums for students from disadvantaged backgrounds and students with disabilities, as well as a comprehensive package of student support measures. Of course, we must also constantly consider more innovative ways to engage with disadvantaged groups.

Mr McElduff: I categorise people who live in rural areas as a disadvantaged group in this matter, and I am conscious of plans for a new further education college in Omagh and for the provision of more degree-type courses there. Is the Minister working with the Minister for Regional Development to address issues of poorer rural transportation, especially for disabled people, and people suffering social isolation?

Ms Hanna: We have plans for the college in Omagh, and it is certainly important that we work with the Department for Regional Development. Transport is an issue for all disadvantaged groups, including students.

Dr Birnie: The disabled are one group of disadvantaged people. Will the Minister confirm that the Department of Education had the lead responsibility regarding the introduction of the now-delayed Bill on disability rights in all aspects of education? Will the Minister confirm that that implies that the Department of Education was responsible for the delay?

Ms Hanna: My Department is introducing this legislation jointly with the Department of Education. The issues are complex, and the consultation is detailed. It is regrettable that there has been delay, but in the light of the complexity, the Bill's introduction will inevitably be delayed until the next Assembly session.

Mr Dallat: The Minister will be aware that many people with learning difficulties and disabilities have gone through the education system undetected. Will the Minister assure us that her Department is doing everything possible to widen access to further education for

those people who have been disadvantaged by the education system in the past?

Ms Hanna: My Department has taken significant steps to improve access to further education for students with either learning difficulties or disabilities, or both. All further education colleges currently must publish a disability statement, and they have a statutory duty to have regard to the requirements of persons over the compulsory school age who have learning difficulties.

Financial incentives are provided through the additional support fund, which assists colleges with the costs of technical or carer support for students with learning difficulties or disabilities. Colleges also receive a higher financial weighting in their funding formula for such students. Capital funding is also provided to enable colleges to improve physical access for disabled students through the provision of ramps, car parking, stairlifts, et cetera.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Question 3 stands in the name of Mr Maskey, but he is not in his place.

Third-Level Education at Regional Centres

4. **Mr Gibson** asked the Minister for Employment and Learning what plans she has to ensure third-level education can be accessed through regional centres. (AQO 1068/01)

Ms Hanna: My Department currently funds both Northern Ireland universities to deliver a wide range of higher education courses, including several at outreach centres and further education colleges. However, it is a matter for the higher education institutions, as autonomous bodies, to decide on the location of outreach centres, and on the courses to be delivered at those centres and at further education colleges.

Mr Gibson: Does the Minister consider that there is now a growing demand for third-level qualifications, particularly among those who are participating in work programmes, and that those should be available through local access? What plans does the Minister have to ensure that such third-level qualifications can be accessed at regional level — for example, at the new college in Omagh?

Ms Hanna: I am aware that some of the further education colleges deliver higher education degrees. I am not sure if the Member was asking why Omagh is not delivering full-time higher education at present. We certainly have part-time and evening courses. It is probably always going to be down to resources. There must be a critical mass in any area before we can provide full-time higher education courses. I hope that when Omagh gets its new college, it will have that critical mass.

Mr A Doherty: Will the Minister give examples of courses available, or that might be made available, at regional centres?

Ms Hanna: Queen's University Belfast operates an outreach centre at Armagh that offers several undergraduate degree programmes. The university also runs an outreach programme in Omagh that offers three undergraduate degrees in partnership with Omagh College of Further Education, including one of the new pilot foundation degrees.

Queen's University, based at the Ulster American Folk Park, offers a part-time masters degree in migration studies. Although the University of Ulster has no dedicated outreach centre, it is a multi-campus that facilitates regional delivery. In addition, the university has well-established links with further education colleges throughout Northern Ireland to deliver higher education courses.

Mr Beggs: In developing regional centres for further and higher education throughout Northern Ireland, does the Minister acknowledge the need to address the further education void in East Antrim. There is no permanent further education campus in my constituency. The Minister and her Department could help to develop a new campus in Larne if she advanced funding to the East Antrim institute building, which could be repaid when the old campus land issues are resolved.

Ms Hanna: That matter will arise in a later question, and the Department is addressing it seriously.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Question 5 stands in the name of Mr Fee, but he is not in his place.

Adult Literacy Strategy

7. **Ms Lewsley** asked the Minister for Employment and Learning how the strategy to tackle adult literacy will impact on the fact that the International Adult Literacy Service revealed that 24% of adults have lower levels of literacy. (AQO 1096/01)

Ms Hanna: A framework and consultation paper aimed at improving adult literacy will be published on 17 April 2002. The strategy will recommend establishing regional standards, curriculum and assessment arrangements to engage and support learners, and the provision of professional development and resources for tutors. It will set targets for building capacity across all providers of literacy and numeracy, and for engaging learners through new avenues such as work-based or family learning.

Ms Lewsley: Many Members will welcome that. Will the Minister say what funding is being made available to implement the strategy on adult literacy?

Ms Hanna: The Department secured an additional £1.2 million for two years through Executive programme funds. In addition, approximately £7m is available until 2006-07 from Peace II to expand literacy and numeracy programmes. However, if the approach advocated in the strategy is to be successful, further significant investment will be required, and I shall seek support from the

Executive and the Assembly for future bids from my Department to address that important issue.

Dundonald Adult Education Centre

8. **Mr McCarthy** asked the Minister for Employment and Learning to make a statement on the future of Dundonald Adult Education Centre. (AQO 1078/01)

Ms Hanna: Decisions on the future of Castlereagh College's outreach provision are a matter for the governing body of the college, and it must take operational decisions in the light of its financial responsibilities and the college's financial position.

Mr McCarthy: Does the Minister acknowledge that the majority of the students are over 55 and that the move could have a serious effect on our wish to scrap age discrimination? If that proves to be the case, will the Minister offer any assistance to the people involved?

Ms Hanna: The college has advised me that 80% of the students attending the centre live outside Dundonald. Castlereagh College will still have facilities at Ballybeen and Tullycarnet.

Employment Bill

9. **Mr Armstrong** asked the Minister for Employment and Learning when she intends to introduce the employment Bill. (AQO 1073/01)

Ms Hanna: It is my intention to introduce an employment Bill in May this year. The Bill will cover family-friendly issues, including enhanced maternity leave, paternity pay and leave, adoption pay and flexible working.

Mr Armstrong: Given the recent discussions in Brussels on employment rights for agency workers as temporary workers, will those issues be considered in the employment Bill?

3.15 pm

Ms Hanna: I am not absolutely sure what stage the Department has reached, or whether that matter can be taken into consideration. The Bill is being introduced alongside its counterpart in Great Britain. I shall get back to the Member on that matter. However, I do not believe that we can take it into consideration at present.

Mr O'Neill: Will the Minister expand on the purpose of the employment Bill?

Ms Hanna: The Bill will be designed to address the needs of working parents in a modern economy. It will provide for an increase in paid maternity leave from 18 weeks to 26 weeks. Women will have 26 weeks unpaid leave. The Bill will provide for two weeks paid paternity leave, 26 weeks paid and 26 weeks unpaid adoption leave, and a duty on employers to give serious consideration to applications from parents of young children for flexible working hours.

University of Ulster Applications

10. **Mr Neeson** asked the Minister for Employment and Learning to detail: (a) the number of applications this year for courses in (i) hospitality management, (ii) hotel and tourism, and (iii) consumer studies at the University of Ulster; and (b) how those figures compare with applications for the past three years. (AQO 1079/01)

Ms Hanna: The Universities and Colleges Admissions Service (UCAS) collects information on applications to higher education courses. Unfortunately, they categorise courses into general subject groups, which makes it impossible to identify the number of applications for the courses specified. Information on enrolments is available in the form sought, and I have placed a table outlining that information in the Library.

Mr Neeson: I congratulate the Minister on the way she is rattling through her answers this afternoon. Other Ministers have much to learn. The point of the question, however, is that I have been reliably informed that the numbers of applications have decreased this year, simply because of the uncertainty about whether those courses will be made available at the University of Ulster at Jordanstown in the light of proposals to move them to the facilities in Portrush. Will the Minister take on board the concerns that many people in the area have about the possibility of that move?

Ms Hanna: I thank the Member for his good wishes. I am in the right Department. Perhaps I should slow down, or I shall be finished before 3.30 pm.

As the Member knows, consultation has just concluded on the proposed merger of the Northern Ireland Hotel and Catering College at Portrush with the University of Ulster. All views will be taken into consideration. My decision is only on the merger and not on the location, which is a matter for the college.

Mr Foster: Has the Department completed an economic impact assessment of the proposed merger? If so, what did the assessment show?

Ms Hanna: The Department has carried out an economic impact assessment. I am unable to give the details to the Member today, but I shall provide him with a written answer.

Mr S Wilson: Is the Minister aware of the widespread opposition to the proposed merger from hoteliers, the licensing trade and many of those who require students to obtain qualifications through the existing course at the University of Ulster at Jordanstown? Will the Minister assure us that when she makes a final decision on the merger, the opinions of those who benefit from the courses currently provided at Jordanstown will be taken into consideration, and that the decision will be made on the basis of not what is best for the university, but of what is best for the industry that the university serves?

Ms Hanna: All those issues will have to be taken into account, including what is best for the students. I am aware that there is considerable opposition to the location, rather than to the merger itself. The consultation has just concluded, and all the issues raised will be considered.

Adult Basic Education and Literacy

11. **Dr Birnie** asked the Minister for Employment and Learning when the strategy document on adult basic education and literacy will be published. (AQO 1074/01)

Ms Hanna: The adult literacy strategy document will be published on 17 April, and I look forward to seeing the members of the Committee for Employment and Learning at its launch.

Dr Birnie: I probably speak on behalf of the Committee members when I say that we welcome the fact that the strategy is imminent. In the past, the Committee has been supportive of bids for extra funding in that area. The Minister mentioned that future funding could possibly be based on Peace II moneys. Does she appreciate that that has created a problem for education providers in that field in that they are trying to apply for Peace II funding before the strategy is unveiled? They are working in a vacuum, or at least with some uncertainty.

Ms Hanna: I appreciate that, but that will not be the case for much longer. The Department has secured Peace II funding of approximately £7 million up to 2006-07.

Mr Shannon: Does the Minister accept that there is a deficit in the provision of the grant? She mentioned that £7 million was available through Peace II funding. Is that the total funding allocation? Is the Minister satisfied that that will address adequately all the needs that have been identified?

Ms Hanna: That sum will not address all those needs. It is an important issue, and it will be a cornerstone for my Department. Approximately 250,000 adults in Northern Ireland have, at best, the reading age of an average 11-year-old and, at worse, they cannot read the instructions on medicine bottles, they cannot read bus timetables, and they cannot help their children with their homework. Additional funding is required, and I hope that I shall have the Assembly's support when I approach the Executive for that funding.

Research and Development Funding

12. **Mr Byrne** asked the Minister for Employment and Learning what steps she is taking to increase research and development funding. (AQO 1086/01)

Ms Hanna: I greatly value the contribution of university research to the Northern Ireland economy and to society. I cannot give a commitment to increase overall provision for research and development for 2002-03 because that budget has been agreed already and adopted by the

Assembly. With regard to 2003-04 and beyond, the Department for Employment and Learning will bid for additional resources in that spending review, and university research will be a priority.

Mr Byrne: Does the Minister accept that both universities in Northern Ireland are handicapped in that only half the percentage of money is allocated for public research in Northern Ireland compared with the rest of the United Kingdom? Therefore, will the Minister endeavour to increase the amount of money allocated to the universities for meaningful research in the next few years?

Ms Hanna: I shall endeavour to do that. I cannot give a commitment for this year, but I hope that there will be a successful outcome to my bid in the spending review 2002 for additional funding for research that would enable the Department to reward the universities adequately for their improved performance and to encourage a research focus on the economy.

E-Government

13. **Dr McDonnell** asked the Minister for Employment and Learning to outline: (a) any elements of e-government that have been introduced within her Department in each of the past three years; and (b) any plans for e-government development in the next three years. (AQO 1092/01)

Ms Hanna: In 1999-2000, all the Department's staff were provided with e-mail access. In 2000-01, the Department's employment service launched a vacancy Internet site called JobCentre Online, and it commenced a touch screen kiosk pilot in five job centres. In 2001-02, the Department launched a new corporate Internet site and developed a comprehensive e-business strategy. In the next three years, the Department plans to implement e-government, which includes making JobCentre Online a more interactive site, extending the kiosk pilot across all job centres, and delivering careers information and advice using the Internet.

Dr McDonnell: The corporate strategic framework for the electronic delivery of Government services in Northern Ireland specifies that Departments will consult with their customers to ensure that their needs are addressed. What processes did businesses in the Minister's Department use to identify the needs of customers for electronic services?

Ms Hanna: We consulted widely. Through our job centres, my Department has more dealings with the public than most. Therefore, the consultation has been important to us.

Mr Beggs: I was uncertain whether we would reach this particular question. I compliment the Minister on the businesslike fashion in which she has answered her questions. In the current year —

Mr Deputy Speaker: I did not want you to ask a supplementary question Mr Beggs. Simply state the number of your question.

Capital Work Programme

15. **Mr Beggs** asked the Minister for Employment and Learning whether the planned capital work programme for the further education sector for 2002-03 has been finalised. (AQO 1071/01)

Ms Hanna: The Member is getting a double bite of this particular cherry today, and I think it is his sixth or seventh question since I became a Minister.

The capital work programme for 2002-03 is currently under consideration, and I expect to be in a position to make an announcement shortly. The Member will be pleased to note that Larne will be included in that consideration.

Mr Beggs: I thank the Minister for that news. However, I hope that Larne will not only be included for consideration but finally, and deservedly, be provided with a local campus. It is a disgrace that there is no further education campus in the East Antrim constituency and that, to date, there has been no focal point. Does the Minister agree that locating a new focal point in the centre of town, beside a YMCA building with childcare provision, would create an ideal opportunity for many people to continue their lifelong learning in Larne?

Ms Hanna: My Department has approved an economic appraisal for a new further education facility in Larne. Indeed, that proposal will receive consideration in the 2002-03 funding proposals. However, the Member knows that I cannot give any commitment at this stage.

University Campuses / Religious Breakdown

16. **Mr Poots** asked the Minister for Employment and Learning what is the religious breakdown of students on university campuses. (AQO 1072/01)

Ms Hanna: Religion is recorded only for Northern Ireland-domiciled students at Northern Ireland higher education institutions. A table giving the breakdown of religion by campus has been placed in the Assembly Library. However, the information is incomplete, because the question is not compulsory and, on average, 26% of students have not responded.

Mr Poots: I have not really got an answer. I understand that tables are available, and I have seen a reply from the University of Ulster's Magee campus. The religious breakdown in that university shows that a very small proportion of the students are from the Protestant community. There is a chill factor in universities for Protestant students, and I want to know what the Minister intends to do to encourage more young Protestant students to take up third-level education in Northern Ireland.

Ms Hanna: As I have already said, the accuracy of the tables cannot be guaranteed because it is not a compulsory question. However, I have to say that religion is not a factor in the universities' admissions procedure. Under section 75 of the Northern Ireland Act 1998, universities have a duty to ensure equality of opportunity and a neutral environment.

Lord Kilclooney: Does the Minister agree that the idea of a chill factor for Protestants in Northern Ireland universities is greatly exaggerated, and that there has been a considerable increase in the number of Protestant students from grammar schools throughout Northern Ireland attending Queen's University of Belfast and the University of Ulster?

Ms Hanna: I do not disagree with the Member. Like him, I have to go by the tables, and it is difficult to have accurate information. However, I do not believe that there is a chill factor in Queen's University.

3.30 pm

Larne Further Education Campus

17. **Mr K Robinson** asked the Minister for Employment and Learning to detail the exact nature of the title problems that are delaying the building of a new further education campus in Larne. (AQO 1070/01)

Ms Hanna: The title difficulties at the East Antrim Institute's property at Pound Street in Larne relate to the establishment of the exact terms of the lease.

Mr K Robinson: Will the Minister ensure that the matter will be pursued vigorously to a satisfactory outcome, so that Larne will be no longer seriously disadvantaged in third-level education provision, which is a vital component of the regeneration of the town?

Mr Deputy Speaker: Would the Minister be brief in her reply?

Ms Hanna: The Minister will be very brief. I have already answered the question twice today. The Department will consider the future of the college at Larne.

SOCIAL DEVELOPMENT

Mr Deputy Speaker: Question 3, standing in the name of Ms Patricia Lewsley, has been transferred to the Office of the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister and will receive a written answer.

Housing Executive Greenfield Sites

1. **Mr Beggs** asked the Minister for Social Development to outline the greenfield sites in the Carrickfergus Borough Council area that are already zoned for housing and owned by the NI Housing Executive. (AQO 1076/01)

The Minister for Social Development (Mr Dodds):

The Housing Executive owns greenfield sites at Lower Woodburn, Carrickfergus central and Sunnylands, on which it has tentatively planned to provide 15 units, 12 units and 15 units of housing, respectively. The Housing Executive has already discussed its site selection with the Member and the town regeneration committee.

The Housing Executive is identifying sites in its ownership that would be suitable for development, without giving rise to serious loss of amenities or space. Sites with development potential would be subject to a feasibility study, and, if the recommendation were positive, consultation would follow.

Mr Beggs: Does the Minister recognise that there is a sizeable waiting list for housing for elderly and disabled people in the Carrickfergus area? Public assets would be better used if the relevant sites were released so that funds could be generated to build additional properties for those in need. Will he ensure that the Housing Executive works in partnership with statutory bodies to help to release land being used for antisocial activity?

Mr Dodds: As I said in my original answer, these matters have been discussed with the Member, the Housing Executive and the town regeneration committee, of which he is a member. Mr Beggs asked if it would not be better for the land to be released. That is what the Housing Executive is doing. The Housing Executive owns sites at Lower Woodburn, Carrickfergus central and Sunnylands, where it plans to provide housing.

I repeat that the Housing Executive is identifying sites suitable for further development. The Housing Executive is fully aware of the concerns and will endeavour, through the land in its possession, or other sites identified, to meet housing demand in the Carrickfergus area. As the Member will know, and as the House should know, some estates in Carrickfergus are extremely popular, while others contain large numbers of voids. Those issues have to be, and are being, addressed by the Housing Executive locally, with Department for Social Development approval.

Mr O'Neill: My supplementary question is more general; it relates to zoning.

Mr Deputy Speaker: I must remind the Member that a supplementary question must be related to the question on the Order Paper.

Mr O'Neill: My question relates to the zoning of land for housing.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Does it relate to zoning in Carrickfergus?

Mr O'Neill: Is this part of a continuing policy of the Department to ensure that there are land banks of service sites available for development, not just in Carrickfergus, but throughout the whole of Northern Ireland?

Mr Deputy Speaker: The Minister may use his discretion as to whether he will answer the question.

Mr Dodds: The Member's question does not relate specifically to Carrickfergus, but I will be happy to give the Member a written reply in due course.

E-Government

2. **Dr McDonnell** asked the Minister for Social Development to outline (a) any elements of e-government which have been introduced within his Department in each of the past 3 years; and (b) any plans for e-government development in the next three years.

(AQO 1093/01)

Mr Dodds: My Department is committed to the targets for e-government agreed by the Government in July 2001, and it is already well placed to meet them. We use electronic technologies widely, and we are seeking further ways to modernise services and interfaces with our customers and partners.

Examples of developing work are the extensive use of e-mail for communications in the Department and with other Departments; the provision of advice and information to the public; the modernisation of disability benefits in conjunction with a private-sector partner; a retirement pension-led teleclaims service; and a disability contact centre for claims to disability benefits. My Department is also co-operating fully in efforts being co-ordinated by the Central Information and Technology Unit for Northern Ireland (CITU [NI]) to develop a strategic approach to the delivery of e-government services.

Finally, in relation to social security and child support, the Department for Social Development is moving towards electronic service delivery in conjunction with the Department for Work and Pensions in Great Britain, on which it relies for most of its operational systems.

Dr McDonnell: I thank the Minister for his answer and for the gallant effort that he made to be here today, which we appreciate.

The 'Corporate Strategic Framework for Delivery of Government Service Electronically in Northern Ireland' specifies that Departments will consult with their customers to ensure that their needs are addressed. What processes does his Department use to identify customer needs for electronic services?

Mr Dodds: I thank the Member for his initial comments.

Customer service is a central focus of my Department. The Social Security Agency alone provides a direct service for some 600,000 customers. That agency conducts customer satisfaction surveys, which show a high degree of satisfaction. Our customers tell us that we are meeting their needs to a large extent. I am not complacent, and I understand the motivation behind the Member's question. As I said, my Department is committed to meeting fully

the agreed targets for the electronic delivery of its services, and I am confident that, by constantly developing and improving our technology, we can continue to meet the demands of our customers.

Mr K Robinson: I thank the Minister for his very full reply so far. When does he expect to publish the cost of electronic service delivery and compare it to the current cost of paper transaction for the same services?

Mr Dodds: As the Member will know, the Government have agreed that in Northern Ireland 25% of all key services should be capable of being delivered electronically by the end of 2002, rising to 100% by the end of 2005. An immense amount of work must be done to meet those targets, but I am confident that we will meet them. I will research the comparison that the Member has asked for and give him that information. I will also ensure that a copy of the answer is placed in the Assembly Library.

Housing Executive Waiting Lists

4. **Mr Poots** asked the Minister for Social Development to detail the extent of waiting lists for homes in Lagan Valley by each local Housing Executive area.

(AQO 1075/01)

Mr Dodds: The information requested by the Member is not compiled according to constituency. However, the Housing Executive's Antrim Street district in Lisburn corresponds most closely to the Lagan Valley constituency. At 31 December 2001 1,270 applicants were on the district's waiting list, of whom 610 were categorised as being in housing stress — that is having 30 points or more under the housing selection scheme.

Mr Poots: Does the Minister agree that it is shocking that so many people are waiting for public-sector housing in the Lisburn district? Will he agree to investigate the circumstances in which the Housing Executive is reducing the amount of public housing available in some areas? It is selling land, and there is a limited expansion of the housing base in that district.

Mr Dodds: I do not agree that those figures are particularly shocking, because the current ratio of applicants in housing stress to relets is 1:1.25, which shows that the housing needs of the whole area are largely being met. However, in order to deal with existing and anticipated pressures, housing associations, which provide all-new social housing, have planned a work programme for the next three-year period.

I want to give some details about the Lisburn area. The last phase of 96 new houses in Poleglass and 15 new houses in Lisburn has just been completed. A further nine homes are under construction in Old Warren in Lisburn, and they will be completed in the autumn. In addition, over the next three-year planning cycle, housing associations plan to start building a further 218 new

homes. In 2002-03 they plan to start three schemes of 180 new homes. In 2003-04 they plan to start four schemes of 40 new homes. In 2004-05 they plan to start seven schemes of 98 new homes.

Houses of Multiple Occupation

5. **Mr Maskey** asked the Minister for Social Development what plans he has to introduce legislation to regulate houses of multiple occupation for the benefit of tenants and neighbours of such dwellings.

(AQO 1094/01)

Mr Dodds: The proposed housing Bill contains provisions to allow the Northern Ireland Housing Executive to introduce a mandatory registration scheme for houses of multiple occupation. First, such a scheme will increase the protection given to tenants in such establishments by ensuring that the accommodation provided is safe and of good quality. Secondly, it will include measures to ensure that the owners and operators of houses of multiple occupation conduct themselves in a way that does not interfere with the rights of neighbouring residents to enjoy peaceful occupation of their homes.

Mr Maskey: Can the Minister clarify the nature of the legislation? For example, if someone has a tenancy agreement with the Housing Executive, a neighbour or local resident can approach the Housing Executive with allegations about a breach of that agreement. Does the legislation allow a neighbour of a person living in a house of registered multiple occupation to deal with a complaint in a similar way?

Mr Dodds: The scheme for houses of multiple occupation is designed to regulate those houses for the benefit of tenants and neighbours. If the Housing Executive moves towards a mandatory scheme, it will include measures to ensure that owners and operators of houses of multiple occupation conduct themselves in a way that does not interfere with the rights of neighbouring residents. I am aware of the need to introduce measures that will allow residents and neighbours to deal effectively with antisocial behaviour. The scheme that is being introduced to address antisocial behaviour, which is contained in the legislation, will deal effectively with the problem and is welcomed widely.

There are many defects and problems in the current system. The general body of the legislation will include remedies and measures that currently cannot be used to deal with antisocial behaviour, which is why I am keen to see that legislation on the statute book as soon as possible. The provision of a mandatory licensing scheme will also go some way towards improving the situation for those who live in houses of multiple occupation.

Mr Dallat: The Minister will be aware that, after double glazing was installed, many houses of multiple occupation became fire traps. Indeed, he will be aware

that several people, including students, have lost their lives. Is he satisfied that the legislation is adequate to prevent further tragedies?

Mr Dodds: Currently there is a voluntary licensing scheme, which will allow the Housing Executive to introduce a mandatory scheme.

3.45 pm

It will go a long way to improve the situation that the Member mentioned. Up to 30,000 people live in houses of multiple occupation throughout Northern Ireland. We must accept that that includes both high-quality and very poor, often overcrowded, accommodation.

Student accommodation is not covered by current legislation. It will be covered under the proposed legislation, which will make a big improvement. Many landlords provide acceptable accommodation, but standards fall short in some areas. Once the legislation is through, those standards will be better addressed.

Mr S Wilson: Regarding the Member for West Belfast's supplementary question, will the Minister join me in welcoming the apparent change in stance by IRA/Sinn Féin in dealing with antisocial elements in housing? It seems that they would now prefer to have those matters dealt with through legislation than by thugs wielding baseball bats.

Mr Deputy Speaker: That may be out of order, but I will allow the Minister to use his discretion.

Mr Dodds: Thank you, Mr Deputy Speaker. Any move that encourages those who have been prepared to use methods outside the law to use the law instead is to be welcomed. However, I fear that the transformation does not even near completion, because we hear daily reports of people who have been terrorised, threatened, had limbs broken or been forced out of their homes for antisocial behaviour by the movement of which the Member for West Belfast is part.

Mr Deputy Speaker: There being no further questions to the Minister, we will resume the debate on the Report of the Committee of the Centre.

REPORT OF THE COMMITTEE OF THE CENTRE

European Union Issues

Debate resumed on motion:

That this Assembly notes the recommendations outlined in the report of the Committee of the Centre on its Inquiry into the 'Approach of the Northern Ireland Assembly and the Devolved Government on European Union Issues' (02/01/R) and calls on the First Minister and Deputy First Minister to implement the relevant recommendations. — [*The Chairperson of the Committee of the Centre (Mr Poots).*]

Dr Birnie: I thank those who made this inquiry and the report possible, especially the Committee staff, the witnesses and our special advisers. Speaking in broad support of the report and the motion as amended, I want to highlight some of the recommendations.

Recommendation 3 refers to the attendance of Northern Ireland Executive Ministers at relevant European council meetings. I support that as an attempt to try to get Northern Ireland and our concerns closer to the heart of European decision-making. However, I want to go further than the recommendation as it stands. Indeed, I made this suggestion in the Committee. The regions of some other European Union member states represent their entire country on a rotational basis. Germany is a notable example, with the heads of provincial Governments representing the rest of the Länder. Northern Ireland ministerial representatives could represent the whole of the United Kingdom, and on other occasions, representatives from the Scottish Parliament and the National Assembly for Wales and their Administrations could do likewise.

I support recommendation 4 with respect to the maintenance of an up-to-date database on forthcoming European Directives, and provision of that information with adequate notice to the relevant departmental Committees. I link that to recommendation 6, which refers to the provision of up-to-date reports on the implementation of European Union Directives and, in particular, on so-called infraction proceedings that might arise from the insufficiently speedy implementation of such Directives, which could lead to fines. Many Members mentioned those. Indeed, in that case a stitch in time could indeed, financially speaking, save nine.

I also support recommendation 7. The Executive's framework proposals on the relationship with the European Union contained 100 high- and medium-level priorities. That is simply far too many, because if everything is made a priority, nothing will be a priority, and the list as it stands is unfortunately close to meaningless.

I had more problems with recommendation 10, which proposes the creation of a dedicated committee for European affairs. I understand its logic and, as other

Members have pointed out, several external witnesses said that it was a good idea. However, I want to put it on record that there are practical problems with implementing recommendation 10, and the report notes that.

The first is that, as many of us know, we already face problems in maintaining adequately the existing number of Committees by retaining a quorum.

The second problem is the potential for turf wars between Committees. For example, the Committees for Agriculture and Rural Development and the Environment have a heavy diet of EU-related matters. How would they take to offloading those responsibilities or rights to a dedicated Committee? Perhaps they would be happy, but perhaps they would not be, and that must be considered.

The third problem is the worrying precedent that arose when the Committee of the Centre took evidence. We heard that the Scottish Parliament has created a dedicated European Affairs committee. Similarly, for some years, the House of Commons has had such a Committee. If we create a Committee for Europe we must look very carefully at the relationship — in fact, the co-ordination — between that Committee and its counterpart in the House of Commons. There is evidence from our visits to London and Edinburgh that the relationship between the London-based Committee and that in Edinburgh is severely dysfunctional, in spite of, or perhaps because of, the fact that in both cases the majority of members are from the Labour Party.

I strongly support recommendation 26 that one of the junior Ministers should take a lead on European-related affairs. By implication, that would lead to the other junior Minister leading on matters concerning OFMDFM. That is perhaps a necessary piece of good administrative housekeeping which should have been introduced some time ago.

In closing my remarks, I will make some general comments. We should be optimistic, but realistic, about what we could, and should, aim for the Northern Ireland Administration to achieve in the European Union. As was noted by other Members, we are a small player in that regard. Our region's population is 1.7 million — barely 0.5 per cent of that of the entire European Union. That percentage will obviously go down further if, as I hope, enlargement into the East occurs. In the recent past we may have punched above our weight in the influence stakes for several reasons. One was sympathy for us, given the troubles since 1969. Another seems to be a feeling in the Commission that it contributed powerfully to the so-called peace process after 1995. Neither of those factors is likely to endure, although we should make the most of them while they exist.

During the 1990s the economic transfer from the European Union to Northern Ireland with respect to the common agricultural policy, the likely effects on foreign direct investment, the impact of more free trade and,

very notably, the structural funds, though on the debit side higher food prices paid by consumers, may in total have amounted to 5% net of our regional gross domestic product. That is a significant economic benefit, but it is dwarfed by the net transfer from the United Kingdom Treasury system. Therefore, in that respect, it is important to put EU matters in perspective.

No matter how far upstream we manage to get in the policy-making process in the Commission in Brussels, there are doubts about how much we can change some of the so-called common policies, such as the common agricultural policy and the common fisheries policy, in our favour. In the case of the common agricultural policy, the possibility that, in the coming years, it will gradually collapse under its own contradictions may work in our favour. The agricultural policy may return to being operated, funded and administered at separate national levels. It will be repatriated to the national Governments in the European Union.

If the Executive can get their overall social and economic policy right through measures such as the Programme for Government, to a degree the correct strategy for European matters will be implied. Subject to the implementation of all the qualifying factors, I support the motion as amended.

Ms Lewsley: As the Deputy Chairperson of the Committee for the Environment, I welcome the opportunity to contribute to the debate. The Committee was pleased to note that the draft EU Framework document goes some way to address several of the recommendations made in its response to the Committee of the Centre's European inquiry. For example, the development of appropriate training and secondment opportunities which several Members mentioned, and the commitment to improving essential networking skills should assist Northern Ireland to participate more fully in the early stages of policy formulation and to pursue its own interests in Europe more effectively.

The Committee noted that in addition to the specific environmental policy, four of the seven European policy areas identified in the draft EU Framework document have important environmental content. These included the EU structural funds, agriculture, fisheries and education and training and employment, which came under the heading of education for sustainable development and training and building skills for the green economy.

The Committee is concerned that the environment should not be compartmentalised, rather it should be viewed by the Executive, the Government Departments and the wider community as a core cross-cutting issue. In that light, the Office of the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister may wish to emphasise the opportunity presented by the EU structural funds as an important vehicle to bring Northern Ireland in line with the levels of environmental awareness and good practice in other parts

of the EU by ensuring that the funding programmes are rigorously proofed for their environmental impact.

The introduction to the draft EU Framework document refers to facilitating an improved understanding of the EU among the Northern Ireland Departments and the wider community, and paragraph 4 goes some way to recognise that concern. Many non-governmental organisations (NGOs) that work in Northern Ireland, including the World Wide Fund for Nature, Friends of the Earth and the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds, have considerable understanding of the workings of the EU and are involved in Europe-wide networks that have wide experience of lobbying on environment issues. The Committee agrees with some of the recommendations that the Department may wish to utilise the experience and contacts provided by such organisations in developing strategies to engage with EU institutions.

It is important that the Office of the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister has the necessary co-ordinating role in EU policy. The Committee is concerned that the experience of direct rule may have had a negative impact on the skill levels in Departments, and it believes that all Departments, including the Department of the Environment, must address the growing need for radical change in organisational culture to meet the demands of the devolved Administration.

Therefore the Committee recommends that the Office of the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister adopt a more proactive leadership role to take the necessary steps to facilitate the training and secondment opportunities that have been mentioned, to assist Departments' identification of priorities and to balance the need for policy innovation against the more familiar processes of dealing with the backlog of EU Directives that have not yet been transposed.

4.00 pm

In its response to the Committee of the Centre's European inquiry, the Environment Committee expressed a concern that there is a considerable risk that the Department of the Environment's outlook on the European Union may be dominated for some time to come by the risk of infraction proceedings. The Committee reiterates that the Department of the Environment should not simply view itself as a delivery mechanism for EU decisions and legislation but should develop its understanding of EU institutions and improve communication with EU officials in order to gain a sense of ownership of European environmental policy-making.

Under objective 5 of the draft EU Framework document, the Executive identified several steps to address the need to raise Northern Ireland's positive profile in Europe, including arranging visits to EU member states and institutions by Ministers and other delegations. We have already heard from the Chairperson of the Committee about the number of Ministers who have not yet engaged

in or communicated actively with Europe. That ties in with the Committee's recommendation that the Minister of the Environment should take the lead in developing a positive relationship between the Department and the EU institutions.

I would now like to speak on the matter in more general terms, and as a member of the Committee of the Centre. Communication is vital to promote awareness of, and to encourage debate on, EU issues that directly affect Northern Ireland. The establishment of a web site as a central resource would be valuable, and an excellent way to share information with non-governmental organisations and local government. The inclusion of evidence-gathering and widespread consultation would provide a basis for benchmarking and best practice in relation to the other UK regions. We must also facilitate the development of links with other devolved institutions to promote our involvement at an early stage in matters that affect Northern Ireland.

The exchange of information among the agencies involved in European matters, and the utilisation of expertise in that area, is vital to increase our knowledge of, and familiarity with, EU policies and legislation, as well as their impact on Northern Ireland.

I too express my thanks to the staff involved in producing the report, and I commend the report to the Assembly.

The Deputy Chairperson of the Committee of the Centre (Mr Gibson): I have great pleasure in supporting the recommendation from the Committee Chairperson earlier today. The 43 recommendations are a serious attempt to represent the various interests that take the view that Northern Ireland, as a region, should be well represented in Europe. As several Members have said, those people are fully aware that 80% of the policies that affect us directly in Northern Ireland emanate from Europe. Furthermore, 60% of our legislation is influenced directly by Europe. Therefore, it would be foolish for any Executive or region to ignore a power that has such a great impact on our day-to-day lives.

The distilled wisdom that is to be found in the 43 recommendations was gathered from the sincere presentations that were made to the Committee. The Committee heard from some people who had a great deal of experience in Europe. I am thinking about people such as the UK Permanent Representative to the EU, Sir Nigel Sheinwald, who gave us some very important pointers that are included in the recommendations. The Northern Ireland Centre in Europe has already made a massive contribution. It has 10 years of experience and was able to bring to us a working knowledge of how a region can be effective and efficient. Their contribution helped us to form our opinions. The forthright comments of our three MEPs cannot be ignored either. They are experienced in Europe — they have been effective there

and have helped to deliver a massive amount of money, which has been useful in developing this Province. They have a vision of how the Executive, the Assembly, the non-governmental agencies and Northern Ireland plc can influence policy and decision-making. John Simpson, who has long European experience, also impressed me. He made several helpful concrete suggestions.

This is a positive report. The infant body of the new Executive, which is trying to make its way in Europe, has been given good directions and sensible guidelines by the Committee. This has been developed from the experiences of those who have seen how it works and who have made a judgement on how our region can be effective. Members have already covered several of the recommendations and have made important points. However, it would be wrong for the Executive to ignore this report in its totality. In fact, they cannot ignore it, as the report combines the collected wisdom of those who are working in the best interests of Northern Ireland. I hope that the Assembly accepts and recommends the report. I hope that the Executive and the two junior Ministers will use this as a stairway to the future of Northern Ireland as an effective and efficient region of the European Union. I commend the report.

Mr Beggs: During the Committee's investigation into European issues, it became clear that European engagement from a Northern Ireland perspective was not being comprehensively addressed — far from it. That should not surprise us, because during direct rule Ministers were content to let Westminster Ministers take the lead on European issues, with the largely Great Britain perspective of Labour or Conservative Governments. Our investigations have shown that other devolved regions have recognised the importance of monitoring European affairs, particularly where issues have had a regional effect on them.

(Mr Deputy Speaker [Mr J Wilson] in the Chair)

In the recommendations there are 100 priorities, and that highlights the lack of focus. It also suggests that the unit is under-resourced, and I hope that the junior Minister is pleased that, for once, a cross-party group of Members is calling for additional resources and not criticising top-heavy bureaucracy in a Department. Additional resources are needed.

The example of Scotland Europa compares favourably with the experiences of the office of the Northern Ireland Executive in Brussels. The titles suggest the differences between the approaches of the two devolved regions of Northern Ireland and Scotland. The office of the Northern Ireland Executive in Brussels is just that — an isolated office serving the Northern Ireland Executive. It must be widened to involve the entire European Community.

Scotland Europa and the Scottish EU Office are now housed under the same roof. Scotland Europa encompasses

a wide network of Scottish regional organisations in Europe: the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities; local commerce and industry; universities and the world of academia. It is vital to develop a similar network to monitor issues that are significant to Northern Ireland.

However, I add a note of caution: we will not be able to control what is going on in Europe, therefore people must be realistic about what they expect to come out of this. Northern Ireland is a small cog linked to a bigger cog — the UK's representation in Europe — that contributes to EU policy. However, there will be several issues of particular importance to Northern Ireland that we might be able to lobby effectively with other devolved regions.

In common with other contributors to the debate, I note the similarity of regional interests that affect Northern Ireland, Scotland and, to a certain degree, Wales. These are rurality; the importance of agriculture and, to a degree, the importance of forestry and fishing, and our peripherality in Europe.

Several Members commented on recommendations concerning networking. Clearly, the experience gained in that area to date has not been properly tapped. I fully support recommendations 9, 29, 32 and 33. I also endorse the recommendations referring to the Northern Ireland Centre in Europe highlighted by my East Antrim Colleague Sean Neeson and others.

I recall the helpful, friendly and constructive engagement that the Northern Ireland Centre in Europe had with Members during the first visit to Brussels prior to devolution, and I know that that has continued to a degree. However, financial support is needed so that it can bear the fruit that could develop.

I give my broad support to the thrust of the recommendations, and it is in that spirit that I support the amendment proposed by the Chairperson of the Committee to accept the report. However, I wish to highlight that further work must be done. For example, recommendation 10 proposes the establishment of a Standing Committee on EU affairs and that we must firm up the Committee's workload, its membership and its quorum. I must express reservations — which I did to the Committee of the Centre — about the establishment of yet another Committee.

I serve on several Committees, and I am aware of the difficulties of maintaining a quorum on occasions. Indeed, an examination of the proceedings in the Committee's report shows that there was a poor turnout frequently in what is a 17-member Committee. My concerns about the introduction of yet another Committee must be addressed. Membership and quorums of all Committees might have to be reassessed if Members are unable to attend meetings. Perhaps some Members should also have to answer for the frequency of their non-attendance.

I support the recommendations in the spirit that more work must be done. I particularly look forward to hearing not only the comments from junior Ministers Denis Haughey and James Leslie but also to a detailed response from OFMDFM on how they intend to address each recommendation, or if there are other issues that we are not aware of: we must think about how best to address such issues.

I am content to accept the broad thrust of the report. I acknowledge that it has brought a significant improvement to what has been happening to date. It has brought a new perspective, a new level of scrutiny, and I hope that the net result will be to the betterment of everyone in Northern Ireland.

Mr Shannon: I support the recommendations and wish to make some points. The main problem with the EU is that many of our constituents know that we are a part of Europe and that European legislation affects many parts of our lives. However, they know very little of how, when and where such effect takes place. The public has heard of the EU only through tabloid press stories about straight bananas; one flavour of crisps; an EU law, and, indeed, metrication, which we have all heard about lately.

4.15 pm

This is why the Committee's first recommendation is important. It recommends that the work of the Office of the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister should be open and transparent on European Union matters, including membership of the working group, its aims, agenda and its outcome. As the Ministers in question were voted into their offices somewhat democratically, we should insist that every part of the process of government is democratic and, therefore, open to scrutiny. Not only does the public want to know what is going on in this country and what affects it on a wider European scale; it is entitled to know. After all, any legislation that we in our offices believe is right and good for the country affects the people directly, but it may not be what the people want.

It is recommended that the database of EU Directives be brought up to date, as there is much legislation coming into being every day, some of which can be used to help or to hinder Northern Ireland. The database must be current and readily accessible so that the devolved Assembly can be adequately prepared for the future and the ramifications of any new legislation or Programme for Government order. Further to the updating of the database of EU Directives, a central resource should be established that not only collates all the available European Union information, but also helps explain the context, the implications, the opportunities and the threats.

That is to be concurrent with the establishment of web-based portals and should be investigated as a method of sharing information with the rest of Northern

Ireland. It is only sensible that, as the point of entry for these laws, the Assembly should facilitate the availability of such information to the people of the Province. Those of us who are not fluent in the workings of the law and legal terminology can have specialist advice and translations that make the lengthy and sometimes laborious wording of these Directives less confusing and more user-friendly. It will also be of great benefit to the children of our Province who study politics. They could access this web site and use it to their advantage and to its main purpose. It would be invaluable to the smooth running of the Assembly, not to mention Northern Ireland as a whole.

The main suggestion that I support is that of European Union familiarisation for all Assembly Members, which does not just focus on their Committee responsibilities. We all move around the Assembly and take up new posts. Even today we have seen a change of Committee membership. An overview of the effects of the EU on each part of the Assembly should be available to everyone; in fact, it must be given to every entrant when taking a position in the Assembly.

If this is combined with the recommendation that the Assembly should provide secondments for Assembly staff to EU institutions that will also facilitate a better understanding of the European Union and its policies. The staff who are given the go-ahead for secondments could help in the development of the web site and in the collation of all available information.

We are all agreed that the main problem is that while the European Union's policies impact on 80% of Northern Ireland's policies and 60% of the Programme for Government, our contact for European legislation is Whitehall, and some links have yet to be established between Whitehall and the Assembly. As the Assembly in its present form is new and innovative, we should perhaps exercise more caution. We must ensure that the legislation that is being handed down is not detrimental to the democracy and the policies of the parties involved in Northern Ireland. The safeguard of Whitehall is not fully implemented, and thus we must insist in the strongest terms that the explanatory memorandum from the United Kingdom's Cabinet Office is shared with the Assembly and its Committees.

We may be living on the periphery of Europe, but we must ensure that Europe is central in our thoughts so that we can stop any detrimental legislation forcing restrictions on the people of Northern Ireland. One has only to look at the fiasco in the fishing industry; it has been almost crippled by the restrictions and the quotas placed on it. If we had known as soon as possible what was happening in Europe, we could have done our best to ensure that Northern Ireland's voice was heard and taken account of. Representing the constituency of Strangford, I know, perhaps better than most, how much events in Europe

have impacted on the fishing industry in a village that is almost dependent on fishing for its future.

We must also address the lack of detail in the Framework document on resources and methodology.

It is obvious that the funding for many of our programmes will be stopped in 2006, and we need to know what other options will be made available. With a lack of clarity in the Framework document, the recommendations will be important. We need to know what is stated in the light of legislation, and we need to know immediately that such information is published. Therefore, we need to have people who are in touch with the European Union, and we need to have the policies interpreted and made accessible for all Members of the Assembly. Members also need to be educated in the way the European Union works, so that they can access funding for their respective Committees.

The recommendations of the report must be accepted. They are a very focused way forward and would benefit everyone in Northern Ireland. They would take the unknown element out of the European Union for many people — and also for some politicians. The European Union and Northern Ireland have a great deal of history, but for many that history is shrouded in legal red tape and lengthy technicalities that need explanation. We need to agree to the recommendations so that we can remove the bureaucracy and put Northern Ireland firmly on the map of Europe, and not on the edge, where it seems to be now and has been for many years.

Mr Savage: I commend the Committee of the Centre on its excellent report. Its 40-odd recommendations are all useful and will advance how Northern Ireland interacts with the EU in a more structured, organised and effective way. As a member of the EU Committee of the Regions, I understand fully the critical role that Europe plays in what we do here and how we can achieve our maximum.

Eighty per cent of the Programme for Government is derived directly from EU initiatives, and that shows where the power lies. The whole concept of networking set out in the report is critical to the success of Northern Ireland in Europe. I refer not just to government networks but also non-governmental networks and informal networks. There is a great deal of EU expertise and experience in our community, and we must tap into it, recognise it and use it to our advantage. Networking is the key to success in Europe, and it needs to be focused. We must have a Europe Minister and a European affairs Committee. As a high proportion of our laws are made in Europe and a high proportion of our funding comes via Europe, it merits such treatment.

Let me illustrate this from the Committee for Agriculture and Rural Development's point of view. Each year, Northern Irish farmers are paid about £160 million in subsidies by the European Union, and UK sources pay only £16 million. That is why we need to be more

EU-focused. Europe is increasingly regional. Regional parliaments like ours play a major role in all countries — in federal Germany and what is now a federal France — so we must espouse Europe. It is part of our identity, and we must directly and energetically interface with it.

We must throw off the shackles of direct rule, during which we were at the wrong end of the UK queue with a begging bowl in hand. We must become active and aggressive Europeans. This Assembly has only been in existence for a few years, and we are still in a learning process. However, as time goes on, we will learn and be able to hold our own anywhere in the world.

We have talked about what has happened in different places, and a Colleague referred to subsidies for fish. According to the Commission's latest assessment, national subsidies fell by over 30% between 1997 and 1999. The second scoreboard reveals a steady decline in EU state aid for sectors such as industry, services, agriculture, fisheries and railways. However, the survey still finds significant disparities between member states in the distribution of state subsidies. For instance, state aid to manufacturing and to the coal and service industries, as a percentage of overall aid, ranged from 16% in Luxembourg to 69% in Portugal. Aid to fisheries accounted for only 7% of overall aid in Germany, but was as high as 73% in Finland and some other countries. In the UK, which had the lowest total amount of state aid at less than 0.05% of gross domestic product, most went to manufacturing and the railways.

We need a strong representation in Europe, because that is where the real power base resides. It is of paramount importance that we get the fair share of money to which we are entitled. As time goes on I fear that unless we pay more attention to what goes on in Europe we will be worse off. We need full-time people there. I know that the MEPs spend much of their time in Europe. That is where the power lies, and it is where we must make a big impact.

Some Members spoke earlier about their involvement in the Committee of the Regions. Unless we have people there from Northern Ireland to speak their mind when policies are being made that affect the UK, we will get nothing. I have seen that over the past three weeks. We need representation to fight for our entitlements. I support the proposals and recommendations made by the Committee of the Centre.

The Junior Minister (Office of the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister) (Mr Leslie): I have several observations to make on the report, after which my Colleague Mr Denis Haughey will sum up in detail on behalf of the Executive. I apologise for being late for the restart. I had thought that we would start again at 4.00 pm, and was caught on the hop by the small number of questions to the Minister for Social Development.

I welcome the debate and the report from the Committee. It is important that we reflect on European issues and on the relationship that Northern Ireland should be seeking to build with the EU and its constituent parts. I acknowledge the detailed work that the Committee has done to produce the report, which is full of constructive and thoughtful suggestions.

The Executive are committed to developing an effective EU approach, which is crucial. The remarks that Mr Savage has just made from a regional perspective are exceedingly pertinent. We also need to be aware that timing is very important, as the European Convention is engaging in a wide-ranging debate about the future of the EU and its structures. That work is about to commence, and it is important that Northern Ireland formulates views that will form part of that debate. Northern Ireland, with only 1.7 million people, is a very small part of the EU. We are not going to have much influence on our own, so it is important that we find common cause with other regions.

To get that process started, we intend to host a conference in the summer that will focus on the debate on the future of Europe. That conference will draw together interest groups from across sectors of society, and will provide a natural forum in which to address the major strategic EU policy issues. We envisage that the conference will be, in effect, a first annual forum.

4.30 pm

The Committee specifically mentioned a forum, and I hope that it will react favourably to the proposal by OFMDFM.

The inquiry contains 43 conclusions, and these set a direction for policy. In view of the number of recommendations made and the detail in which the Committee has formulated them, it would be unrealistic for us to respond in detail at such short notice. However, all the matters raised are worthy of detailed consideration, and that is what we will give them. We will respond in detail, item by item, to the Committee as soon as we can. Some of the proposals that the Committee made are already part of our plans, and progress on these will soon be seen. Other proposals are new suggestions to which OFMDFM will have to give careful consideration.

There are also some proposals that cut across the work of more than one Department. Although overarching responsibility lies with OFMDFM, individual Ministers will inevitably have specific views on matters significant to their Departments. In that respect, the proposal for a Committee on EU matters, which is a matter for the Assembly to decide for itself, requires quite a lot of thought. For example, who will take the lead on issues relating to the common agricultural policy? Hitherto, the Committee for Agriculture and Rural Development has done so because it reflects directly on that Department. Is it suggested that the EU Committee should do that?

There are important issues that need to be carefully thought through. Nonetheless, the Committee makes the point that many of these issues are cross-cutting, and that is crucial.

The report makes recommendations on cross-cutting themes and using the range of available expertise and networks including those outside the Government. It urges us to involve, in a more systematic way, key players such as MEPs and representatives on EU institutions. We know that we must consult with these people and bodies. Some work has been done, and more is continuing.

We are also looking with interest at how measure 4.1 of the Peace II programme, which is worth about £6 million up to the end of 2006 and which seeks to promote Northern Ireland and the border counties as an outward and foreign looking region, can best be used. By the end of this month we should have responses to the call for projects, and through these we hope to develop our approach and see how groups can be supported in this work. It is an area on which OFMDFM has more to learn, but we want to get started with some projects and look for further tranches as our experience develops. We are giving thought to ways in which communication with MEPs and the Committee of the Regions can be developed.

We note the Scottish model. That the Committee took a close look at that and at the arrangements in Wales was valuable. However, the Scottish Parliament's European Committee has regular meetings with MEPs and other representatives, and we will be looking carefully at that, but it is a two-way process. If such meetings were to be held in Brussels, all our MEPs would have to be in Brussels. Although Mr Nicholson is exemplary in that regard, the same cannot be said of the others.

The Executive put forward a draft strategic framework to the Committee in February. In that we reflected on the links with UK Government and, as has been highlighted today, while national policy is not devolved, there are elements in it that have a devolved effect. The links with Departments in Whitehall will inevitably be crucial. We have to be realistic about this. The Prime Minister came into office making a great fuss about how he was going to put the United Kingdom at the heart of Europe. It is not particularly noticeable that he has succeeded in that. Therefore, we have to be realistic in our expectations of the position that Northern Ireland might be able to achieve.

The report is sensible in recommending that a small number of strategic priorities should be identified. That relates to my previous point; it is sensible and realistic, as to try to pursue too many at once would inevitably lead to disappointment. The framework strategy identified all the areas of current work. It was not intended to be a list of priorities; it was a list of the work. The Committee is right to say that specific priorities need to be identified,

and we will be working on that and liaising with the Committee.

The report also reflects on how work is organised in the Office of the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister and on the staffing issues. These are being addressed, and we are undertaking a considerable increase in staff numbers. We hope that the European Policy Co-ordination Unit will be doubled in size in two or three months.

We have looked at the methods being used by the Scottish Executive in their Brussels office, and there are useful lessons for us. I hope that Members will be aware that extra space was deliberately taken in our offices in Brussels with a view to expansion being available and to being able to have different entities develop there. My Colleague, Mr Haughey, will say more about that in a few moments.

I welcome the report and the interest of the Committee. We will be taking its recommendations seriously and responding to them in detail. Mr Gibson seemed to think that we were going to ignore the report. I assure him that we will not, although he said that we might not be able to accept it in its totality, and I dare say that that may prove to be the case. However, the Committee will see, in early course, a number of measures coming forward that will closely mirror the suggestions made in its report.

Mr Deputy Speaker: I will call Mr Haughey to make a response. In the earlier contribution there was an element of response as well as a personal contribution, but I was in a tolerant mood.

The Junior Minister (Office of the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister) (Mr Haughey): I wonder why. I greatly appreciate your tolerance, Mr Deputy Speaker.

I thank the members of the Committee of the Centre for their detailed and valuable work in producing the report. I know that the inquiry has been detailed and robust, and I welcome that.

I listened with interest to the remarks about the change in the wording of the motion. We were a wee bit surprised that we were not given some notice of that. However, overall we welcome the report of the Committee, and on first reading I have found, as I think we all have, much in it on which we are likely to agree. It is heartening that on an issue such as this where, in the past, there has been some difference of view and emphasis, we have found so much common ground and agreement across the divide between the parties in the Committee of the Centre, and in the Assembly, on how we should approach being part of the European Union.

A report of this kind, weight and depth will require careful reflection. We will respond in full as an Administration on each of the recommendations as quickly as we can. I cannot say today that we accept the report totally

or that we will implement in detail every one of its recommendations, as there are many matters to be considered. However, we will commit ourselves to carefully considering the report and the recommendations, although we cannot be bound by it in every detail.

Today's debate demonstrates the Assembly's interest in, and concern with, European affairs. We are determined to broaden the debate in the community in the coming months. Our detailed response to the Committee's report will be one input into that debate. The Administration's work in planning, addressing and reviewing our relationships in the European Union is an important element of the Assembly's role.

Before I respond to the details of the Committee's report, I will make a few comments. First, the report is wide-ranging and includes 43 recommendations. Many of those have important implications and must be studied carefully by the Executive. Those recommendations also have implications — not the least of which are the cost implications — for various Departments, not only for the Office of the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister. The Administration would not want to be bound to implement all 43 recommendations — or those that apply to the Administration — and incur the substantial costs involved, only to have those who made the recommendations jump on them for spending all that money. The Executive will look carefully at all the implications of the recommendations.

The Assembly will have to consider the recommendations as they apply to it. Six of them — recommendation 10 and others — have direct implications for the Assembly. Would an Assembly Committee on European affairs lead on the matter of CAP reform, or would the Committee for Agriculture and Regional Development play the lead role? Would the Committee for Enterprise, Trade and Investment lead on competition policy? These important issues need to be thought through carefully, as they would have an impact on the work of the Committees and of the Assembly. Given that we have had a relatively short time to read the report and look at the recommendations, we need to give the matter careful consideration over time, rather than to rush into accepting the recommendations in total today.

It is timely to remember that membership of the European Union has brought Northern Ireland and its citizens a considerable range of benefits and opportunities. I am aware that some Members are not fully persuaded of the value of the European Union. That is their absolute right. For my part, I am convinced that there are many gains for all citizens of the European Union, not least the citizens of Northern Ireland, through the widening and deepening of contacts across the continent. Some commentators seek to obscure those gains and introduce irrelevancies about European superstates, about the loss of identity, and as Mr Shannon pointed out, make ridiculous points about the straightening of bananas and

about the planting and growth of square tomatoes. They also seek either to deceive the public about the implications of European union or to rubbish it by introducing all kinds of nonsense about it.

The increasing co-operation and development across Europe has produced significant and measurable advantages for the citizens of Europe, and it has seen a prolonged period of peace, which is no small or unimportant matter. It has seen the growth of greater economic prosperity and support for those citizens in society most in need. It has also seen a growth in equality Directives and the outlawing of discrimination. Much greater progress has been made in those areas in a European context than was ever made in the national context. These are all positive outcomes of our membership of the European Union. It is my conviction that these outcomes have been achieved through the establishment of an ever-closer union between the people of the member states.

Despite the range of views in the Assembly and in the community about European integration, a positive feature of our approach has been cross-community co-operation on European issues.

4.45 pm

Northern Ireland's three MEPs have established a strong record of collective and constructive work, which has greatly advantaged our community. Since devolution, the Executive have sought to continue a collective and positive approach. I am pleased to report that there are continuing positive outcomes in our relationships with the European institutions.

I acknowledge that some Members have not reached the same conclusions as the Administration on European integration. Therefore it is all the more significant that a Committee that contains a diversity of views on those matters has produced such a helpful and constructive report.

Some quarters have been quick to criticise the work of the devolved institutions. The detailed, constructive, positive approach of the Committee of the Centre and the work that it has produced are a clear illustration of our collective commitment to work on behalf of the electorate.

On behalf of my Colleagues in the Office of the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister, I fully welcome the report and assure the House that the closest possible consideration will be given to the analysis and recommendations in it. The report contains a useful analysis of our situation. It carefully examines the value of our approach, and it makes considered recommendations to protect our interests, to project the distinctive voice of Northern Ireland and to avail of the opportunities that our membership of the European Union gives us.

I have considered the report carefully, and three major themes emerge from it. First, we should develop and implement a collective and workable vision of

Northern Ireland as a region of the European Union. Secondly, we should draw on the learning derived from our work in the European Union, that which we can derive from our colleagues in other parts of the European Union and from our own citizens' work in the European Union. Thirdly, we should establish effective, open and transparent working methods that make the best use of the public resources invested in that area.

I should like to speak about the development and implementation of a collective vision. I note that the Committee reviewed in considerable detail the approaches in other parts of the United Kingdom, in the Republic of Ireland and in regions of other member states. As I read the Committee's evidence, I was struck by how the successful regions in Europe identified clearly the regional role in the European Union of member states. It reflects my experience of working in European matters for over 20 years. Successful regions have considered the reality of the regional role, examined the potential of that role and defined a clear and practical vision that meets the strengths and addresses the weaknesses of their region. The less successful regions have done that less well. The less well they have done it, the less successful they have been.

Northern Ireland has made considerable progress in developing that approach in some areas. Our political representatives in the European Parliament, the Committee of the Regions and in the Economic and Social Committee have a strong track record of working together cohesively, identifying available opportunities and co-operating to secure progress on them. Through that work we have received considerable financial benefit from our colleagues in the other member states through the mainstream structural funds programmes and, significantly, through the special support that has been given to Northern Ireland through the programme for peace and reconciliation, Peace II and the major contributions made by the European Union to the International Fund for Ireland.

All Members have seen the substantial benefits of that support in their constituencies, and they welcome the assistance that has been provided. However, the challenge now is to build on the progress that has been made with the assistance of the European Union. Devolution has brought new and important roles for Ministers, Committees and Members.

In the report, the Committee identifies the necessity to work towards establishing better ways of integrating the work of Ministers, Committees and Members, as well as agencies and bodies outside the Assembly, in a collective regional approach. There is considerable value in such integration. Officials in the Department will undertake further work to address the issues that the report has highlighted and to secure the kind of open working methods that are required. As the report illustrates, it is also essential to ensure that the work of all sectors

has access to the development and implementation of the collective vision that the Assembly hopes to demonstrate.

As I made clear in my evidence to the Committee of the Centre and in discussions with the Chairperson and Deputy Chairperson and members of the Committee, the Office of the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister is strongly committed to a collective approach. Many issues that the Assembly faces in relation to the European Union and European matters highlight clearly the need to work collectively — to establish frameworks and approaches that enable all sectors to share their perspectives in order to reach a better understanding of how issues affect each other. A common misconception is that regional Administrations such as that of Northern Ireland must be organised in Brussels in order to do business in Europe. It is more important to be organised in Northern Ireland in order to develop the capacity here to do business in the European Union.

As the Assembly works together to develop the approaches of the new institutions, the Office of the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister will seek to put in place improved mechanisms for providing better information and enabling other sectors to play their part and to deliver on their responsibilities in this collective work. At the opening of the Office of the Northern Ireland Executive in Brussels, the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister made it clear that the Administration see that office as a resource for all sectors and interests in Northern Ireland. The report notes that the name of the office is perhaps, therefore, somewhat misleading. That point will be considered by the Office of the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister.

When I spoke at the function in Brussels, which was held on the day of the opening of the office, I made it clear that it was simply a building block in the construction of a much bigger edifice — the regional representation in Brussels of all sectors, and providing facilities and opportunities for involvement by a much wider range of regional interests in Northern Ireland. Much reference was made to that in the debate on the Northern Ireland Centre in Europe. That was the initial aim of the centre — hence the name.

The Northern Ireland Centre in Europe is refocusing and renaming its organisation. The Administration are working out a new relationship with the Northern Ireland Centre in Europe. Perhaps the Assembly could address that. The Office of the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister will ensure that the head of the Brussels office will develop the office and its work in building regional representation, not just as an office for the Executive. An office for the Executive is needed. However, Northern Ireland needs much greater regional representation in Brussels.

We will also be examining ways and means by which all the organisations that I mentioned — the social

partners, the various agriculture representative bodies, the further and higher education sector, local government and, indeed, the Northern Ireland Centre in Europe itself — can become involved in building the collective and co-operative approach that was endorsed and recommended by the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister. The report provides further evidence, if further evidence were required, that that is the only sensible approach to those issues.

In the period before devolution, as I told the Committee, officials worked in a difficult environment; policy lines were set in London and, often, there was little clear distinctive development of those lines to take account of our regional interests. However, the establishment of the devolved institutions removes that difficult dimension. As the report illustrates, there is now a clear political will to undertake an open and informed approach to developing a distinctive regional posture for Northern Ireland within the European framework. That will characterise the work of the Office of the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister, and we will ensure that it characterises the approach of the office in Brussels.

That takes me to the second theme, which is drawing on the learning available to us from our experience of the European Union to date and, indeed, the experience of other regions in the European Union. The theme also involves developing and drawing on the learning that different sectors of our society have derived from their work in Europe.

Over a decade ago, an initiative was undertaken to establish a centre where all sectors could consider how to address the issues arising from membership of the European Union. That initiative arose from work done by the main constitutional political parties of that time and led to the establishment of the Northern Ireland Centre in Europe. That organisation established a positive track record working with all parties and all sectors of our society. It greatly assisted and clarified the understanding of the challenges and the opportunities to be addressed. For many years, it was one of the few organisations in this society that had the full involvement and support of all the main constitutional political parties.

It secured support from all councils and from a wide range of interests in the private sector. For a time, the centre also secured the support of central Government. No one regrets more than I do —

Ms Morrice: Will the Minister give way?

Mr Haughey: Is it traditional for a Minister to give way? If so, I have no problem with it.

Mr Deputy Speaker: It is up to the Minister.

Ms Morrice: You may have been about to comment on this, but I just wanted clarification of the grand words about the Northern Ireland Centre in Europe. If the centre

was so valuable and so good, what happened to it? Why is it half of itself?

Mr Haughey: I was just coming to that. No one regrets what happened more than I do. No one worked harder to prevent it from happening than I did.

I could say an awful lot here. I could redd my chest. To do so would give me a great deal of satisfaction, but I do not believe that recrimination, name-calling, finger-pointing and laying blame and accusations will get us anywhere. What happened, happened. I fully agree with those who say that it was tragically unfair, but that does not measure the full importance of it. It was more than tragically unfair — it was a mistake of serious dimensions that has cost us dearly.

We are where we are, and we must build from that position. When I gave evidence to the Committee, I said that, because of the opportunities that now exist, we were currently engaged in rebuilding our relationship as an Administration, and the relationship of central Government here on the regional level, with the Northern Ireland Centre in Europe. That work is nearing completion, and I hope to be able to report fully and positively on the outcome of that to the Assembly in the very near future.

5.00 pm

I acknowledge that many Members of the Assembly feel as strongly as I do about this. Many of them benefited in no small way from the clear, professional, independent analysis provided by the Northern Ireland Centre in Europe. Those who may wish to reflect on the issue should also reflect on the fact that I was among those members of my party who, along with leading members of the Ulster Unionist Party, the DUP, the Alliance Party and others, created that institution. Therefore, I do not want the value that I attach to it to be questioned in any way.

I welcome the Committee's recommendation, which accords completely with the view taken by the First Minister, the Deputy First Minister, Mr Leslie and myself, that we now have the task of building on, and strengthening, the approach pioneered by the Northern Ireland Centre in Europe. I assure the Assembly that my ministerial Colleagues are at one in relation to that. We are putting in place mechanisms that will secure and widen the value of the independent analysis provided by a stronger, refocused and — as I said earlier — perhaps renamed organisation, and we shall ensure that value is applied across a range of issues.

Therefore, in considering the Committee's report, the detail of the written submissions makes it clear that there is a wide level of support in this society for the work of the new democratic institutions established in this House. I welcome the significant degree of support expressed in those submissions, but that lays heavy responsibilities on those of us who are involved and

who were elected to take those responsibilities. Among those responsibilities is one to find ways of drawing on the learning from the different sectors, especially from those who took the time and the trouble to make submissions to the Committee. Those organisations have clearly indicated that they are interested in more than simply lobbying for their own narrow concerns. They are willing participants in the collective work of developing a regional posture and strategy for Northern Ireland.

I also noted the Committee's approach in taking evidence from a range of expert analysts and practitioners from other regions of the European Union. Those inputs have provided valuable insights as to how we can further develop our own approach. I have considered and discussed those submissions with officials, and we are keen that the Committee's approach should be further developed. Measure 4.1 of the Peace II programme, 'The Outward and Forward Looking Region', which is implemented through the Office of the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister, offers us an opportunity to build on that process and to learn from our relationship with other regions of Europe by examining how they have done business. Measure 4.1 has been put in place to support further strategic examinations of how we relate to the European Union and beyond, to reflect on how we undertake our work here, and to seek ways in which we can learn together, thereby establishing better and more effective means of policy development and implementation.

In addition to the work that will be undertaken through that measure, we have asked officials to prepare proposals to build on the available learning. Those proposals will address a wide range of issues identified. For example, the potential benefits of secondment were frequently mentioned during the course of the debate. Other examples range from the question of ongoing research and analysis, more open work practices and better reporting systems to widening opportunities for considered inputs into policy development. Through that collective approach, the Administration will seek to integrate in a practical manner several observations and recommendations made by the Committee in its report.

Any initiatives must, of course, be in the context of effective, open and transparent working methods that make maximum use of the public resources invested. Many challenges and many opportunities arise from EU membership, and we must invest in early-warning systems if those are to be identified at a sufficiently early stage for them to be effective. Several Members made that point.

Where resources are scarce, we must ensure that we get the best return on our investment. The time is now right to examine the value of the approach that has been taken since devolution. That examination will provide evidence that will help us to ensure that we are using the most effective and efficient methods possible, and to

make any necessary adjustments in cases in which we find any shortcomings.

I welcome that the Committee intends to continue to monitor the analysis and recommendations of the report. I shall ensure that the Committee is provided with the full response to that.

The report is a valuable analysis of the current situation. It provides a context in which we can clearly see the progress that has been made and the goals that are still to be attained. I thank the Chairperson of the Committee, Mr Poots, and his Colleagues for their detailed and constructive work. I also thank all who contributed to the report's preparation. I assure the House that the Ministers in the Office of the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister will reflect on its analysis and recommendations, and seek to use them in the same positive and constructive spirit in which they were prepared.

Mr Poots: I thank the Members who participated in the debate for the largely positive and constructive contributions that they made. It is indicative of a growing interest in European Union affairs, and overall there has been a general welcome for the report and its recommendations.

Jane Morrice referred to the need to involve young people. The Committee would also like to see the greater involvement of young people in EU affairs. Indeed, one of the main themes in the report is the need to involve all people, including the young, in European issues. The recommendation that deals with secondment to non-governmental organisations covers the point that she made.

Sean Neeson referred to the Committee of the Regions. The Committee of the Centre addresses that issue in paragraphs 134 and 135 on pages 30 and 31 of the report. It compared the mechanism for nomination used by the Office of the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister in Northern Ireland to that used by the Scottish Executive. In Scotland, provision was made for the involvement of the Scottish Parliament to endorse the Scottish nomination. The Committee understands that no similar provision exists in the relevant Northern Ireland papers. Despite the fact that the appointments were made in November, I only received notice of the appointees to the Committee of the Regions from the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister last week. I leave Members to draw their own conclusions from that.

The fact that no provision was made for it does not mean that there should not have been any consultation with the Assembly. The Committee was eventually informed of the appointments following several requests for that information. Therefore, the Committee recommends that the Office of the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister follows the model used by the Scottish Executive and ensures that, although the Assembly is not involved in endorsing the nominations, it at least receives proper and timely notification of them.

Mr Beggs and Dr Birnie referred to the creation of an EU affairs committee. I assure them that Committee members made that recommendation only after considerable thought, and they know that there will be difficulties, such as those that other Committees have experienced in achieving quorums. The Committee knows that the creation of such a committee must be looked at in the wider context. However, it feels that a marker must be set to show that the Committee thinks that EU affairs are important enough to warrant an independent committee.

Junior Minister Haughey also commented on the potential role of the EU affairs committee. Its role would be similar to those of the committees in the other devolved Administrations that deal with EU affairs. The Committee of the Centre did not envisage that such a committee would take up the remit of current Committees. The Committee of the Centre has had initial discussions about the EU affairs committee, but more work must be done. It is assumed that the committee would be strategic, and focus on cross-cutting issues rather than delve into departmental issues.

I largely welcome the junior Ministers' comments.

Mr Haughey commented on the cost implications of the report. Although some recommendations will cost money, the majority have no or minimal cost implications. However, I must point out the cost of some European Directives. For example, it will cost some £400 million in capital alone to deliver the current waste management strategy that is being advertised heavily on TV. That is not to mention the recurrent year-on-year costs of delivering it. The amount of money that it would cost to implement this report's recommendations in full would be peanuts compared to the cost of implementing some European Directives. In addition, savings could be made if we could, at an early stage, make changes to the small number of issues that affect Northern Ireland.

I regret the comments made by the junior Minister, Mr Leslie, about the activities of the MEPs. It ill behoves a Minister to use his position to attack Members of the European Parliament. Perhaps I can put that down to his inexperience.

Mr Paisley Jnr: I agree that the junior Minister Mr Leslie did not dress himself in any honour by making those comments. I hope that that is not an indication that the junior Ministers are going to continue to burn bridges with the MEPs. They should be building bridges to allow the MEPs' expertise and experience to play a part because that will lead to a better understanding of, and a better commitment to, European affairs. We can all make cheap jibes. If the MEP that he was praising is doing such a wonderful job, why did he not use the professional staff in his Brussels office to make a written submission to the report. However, let us not make such silly points.

Mr Poots: I shall not take that point any further. I do not believe that the junior Minister was speaking on behalf of OFMDFM on that occasion.

I welcome the increase in the capacity of the European Policy Co-ordination Unit. Nevertheless, the Committee recommends that it should remain free-standing, and I know that Ministers will consider that in more detail.

With regard to NICE, I take Mr Haughey's comments at face value and accept what he says. I shall be watching developments on that closely to see what progress can be made.

By and large, I am very encouraged by the response of Members and Ministers. Adopting this report will ensure better days for Northern Ireland in its dealings with European Union affairs and in what it derives from Europe. At some stage, it may be useful to conduct some research into how much it is costing Northern Ireland to implement European Union Directives. We often hear of the benefits of Europe and of how much we are drawing down in structural funds, peace fund money et cetera. However, it would be interesting to do a comparative study to establish how much we are having to spend to adhere to, and implement, European Union Directives.

I thank the Assembly for the time that it gave to this report and I look forward to its being adopted by the Assembly.

Question, That the amendment be made, put and agreed to.

Main Question, as amended, put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That this Assembly accepts the recommendations outlined in the report of the Committee of the Centre on its Inquiry into the 'Approach of the Northern Ireland Assembly and the Devolved Government on European Union Issues' (02/01/R) and calls on the First Minister and Deputy First Minister to implement the relevant recommendations.

Motion made:

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

5.15 pm

DOWNPATRICK MATERNITY HOSPITAL

Mr O'Neill: Initially I tabled this debate for November 2001 when the crisis in maternity services had reached a new peak. There had been, and there still remains, urgent concern about the future of maternity services in Downpatrick and, indeed, the hospital itself. I was anxious that strict new guidelines that barred specific women from giving birth in their local hospital would reduce the rates of delivery in the hospital by between 10% and 20%, thus making the hospital appear less credible. I want to re-emphasise that issue. The Minister subsequently gave a commitment that the full range of services would be available until the outcome of the review was known. While we patiently wait for reviews, and sometimes reviews of reviews, there is a great danger of the existing services becoming even further eroded. If that were to continue, by the time reviews have finally been published, the case for maternity services in particular will have been reduced.

Sceptics might say that that could be seen by some people in the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety as a convenient way to handle the decision without having to take responsibility for that decision. Down Lisburn Trust is running into an underfunding gap, estimated at £9.1 million, but some would say that it may well run to £12 million. That lack of investment in professional services must be responsible for the reduction in the numbers of higher-risk pregnancies being taken into the Downe Hospital. Down District Council is calling for that shortfall to be made up and for the situation to be restored. The local health trust has met the Department's requirements for funding controls, and it has been punished because other health trusts had not met their required levels. Funding has had to be redistributed, and the impact is now being felt.

In November 2001, we were informed that anaesthetists were refusing to provide facilities for mothers who were overweight, who were expecting multiple births, who had previously undergone a Caesarean section, or who were under any threat of early labour. Notably, the decision to adopt new stringent criteria was taken without consultation with the people whom it would affect. The threat to the maternity services in the Downe Hospital is a direct threat to the rights of the community. It is not a little backwater hospital. In 2001, Downpatrick Maternity Hospital was recognised by the Imperial College of Science, Technology and Medicine as the third safest

unit in Northern Ireland. That small rural unit has a history of high standards, good service and continuity of care, which is highly valued by the local community. The professionals on the ground — the obstetricians and midwives — have attacked the criteria as being unduly restrictive, and there are statistics that prove that they effectively screened out 50 mothers-to-be, who were transferred to Belfast hospitals. The numbers being admitted to the hospital are being eroded continually, thus undermining the case that the Minister will have to report on shortly and the recommendations that she will have to make for the continuity of the service.

Some questions spring to my mind. Have those circumstances been properly taken into consideration? What are the consequences for the future of Downpatrick Maternity Hospital? Have all other hospitals in similar situations been subjected to the same criteria? Is the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety satisfied that our anaesthetists' response to the needs of our maternity and other acute services in Downe Hospital has been the proper one?

When I look back over the years during which we have tried to fight for the retention of acute services in Downe Hospital, it occurs to me that we, especially in Down district, have been subjected to a bureaucratic form of snakes and ladders. During the past few years, we have had documents, reports, consultations and strategies commenting on various ways by which services should be offered by Downe Hospital and Downpatrick Maternity Hospital. Each subsequent throw of the dice seems to have further eroded the services and further strengthened centralist thinking.

We reached the top of a ladder in 1994 when Baroness Denton recognised the need for a new Downe Hospital, which would incorporate maternity services. We then hit a snake's head with the changes made by Ministers Worthington and McFall and slid all the way down. Now, as far as maternity services are concerned, it looks as if we have encountered another snake. As a public representative, I am concerned that centralist professionals, few in number, are using their key professional positions to further their centralist political aims. I am concerned that their work may result in a lack of will to keep the maternity services open.

Then, of course, there is the broader issue. Will we always manage our services subject to diktats from royal colleges? Now that we have a devolved Administration, should we not make policy decisions that meet our particular needs? This is the first time that people of our generation have had the opportunity to structure our services to meet our particular needs, and it is our responsibility to ensure that we base such a structure on real, existing and future needs, and not on the need to sacrifice maternity services in order to maintain other services for the area.

By threatening the training accreditation, royal colleges further risked the future of the hospital. Down district has recognised that Downe Hospital and Downpatrick Maternity Hospital must be linked to appropriate Belfast hospitals for third-level care and specialist diagnosis. If activated at this stage, that link would ensure continued accreditation for those working in Downpatrick Maternity Hospital through the rotation of staff. Rotational training between the hospitals will ensure that all our professionals will meet royal colleges criteria and is a way around the difficulty that they identified. It will ensure that essential services are kept open in the district while plans for the new Downe Hospital are implemented. The case for the retention of maternity services remains strong in Down.

There are no immediate plans to upgrade the two main roads between south Down and Belfast that pass through Downpatrick and Ballynahinch. There are demands for bypasses around both towns because they are bottlenecked at significant times during the working day. Housing development has increased heavily in south Down, and the growing population in the area will be most evident in the forthcoming census results. Many people travel to and from Belfast to work, thus congesting the already inadequate road system. It is clear that access to Belfast hospitals, which currently stands at one hour, will not get any easier — in fact, it will get worse.

The joint review team said that there is no doubt that the standard of services in the community would deteriorate if maternity services were removed. In line with their human rights, the women of Down district, an area served by Downpatrick Maternity Hospital, should have the choice of having their babies delivered locally.

It is accepted by the joint review team that many women will have neither the desire nor the means to travel to Belfast to give birth; a rise in home births and related concerns is therefore anticipated. It also estimates that in the past five years, four or five babies in the area would not have survived the journey from their homes to Belfast. To accept the closure of Downpatrick Maternity Hospital, would be to accept that it is all right to see four or five infants die each year. How can we possibly accept that?

In the Down area, it is widely accepted that the maternity hospital provides a necessary service for our local community, and the entire community will suffer as a result of any diminution of that service. I would like to see the threat to its existence totally removed.

Mr Wells: As a somewhat younger Member of the House, when I was elected here in 1982, the first obvious crisis that arose in the constituency of South Down was yet another threat to the future of the Downe Hospital. I remember the then Health and Social Services Committee visiting the hospital. We were informed that the hospital's entire future, including Downpatrick Maternity Hospital, was under imminent threat. Some 20 years later, we are debating exactly the same problem.

What is going on in Downe Hospital reminds me of plates spinning in a circus. No sooner is one plate spinning than another is about to collapse to the floor; no sooner has one important aspect of the Downe Hospital come under threat and been saved as a result of public outcry than one finds another crucial element of the hospital under threat.

If all the newspaper cuttings, reports and documents that were printed on Downe Hospital in the past 25 years were laid out, they would cover many football pitches. It is only as a result of the tenacity of the local council — I pay tribute to Councillor O'Neill and many others for their stance on the issue — and the community that we are even here this evening debating anything concerning Downpatrick Maternity Hospital. If it were not for that tenacity, there would not currently be a hospital to debate.

I have grave doubts about royal college assertions that everything must be bound by numbers. Those numbers take no account whatsoever of an expectant mother who goes into labour on a wet Saturday night in an area such as Killough, Ardglass or Strangford. She is currently faced with a relatively straightforward journey into Downpatrick. Without that maternity unit, she faces the nightmare of travelling into Belfast.

Not all babies will decide to come at convenient times. There will be those who will decide to arrive during the rush hour. Councillor O'Neill and I have both been involved in calls for bypasses for both Downpatrick and Ballynahinch. As Mr O'Neill said, it is difficult enough to get through those towns at the best of occasions. However, the situation in which a lady who is about to give birth is trying to get through those towns in an ambulance is absolutely horrendous.

I simply do not see the issue as a numbers one. We have been set this high threshold target by the royal colleges, and I fully accept that Downpatrick Maternity Hospital does not meet the target. There are less than 500 births there a year. However, one must look at some of the reasons behind that. So much doubt has been cast over the future of the maternity unit in Downpatrick that many women have decided to go elsewhere to have their babies. A guarantee of the future security of Downpatrick Maternity Hospital would increase confidence, and more people would choose to have their deliveries in Downpatrick Maternity Hospital.

5.30 pm

There is no doubt that the maternity unit will die the death of a thousand cuts. At times, I do not know where to turn. We thought that the problem had been solved, but then a great difficulty arose with the cover for anaesthetists. At one stage, there was a real threat that the unit would close due to the lack of anaesthetic cover. Then, as the result of a huge outcry, we managed — mostly due to the Down community health committee — to obtain

adequate anaesthetic cover. No sooner had that been solved than we found that the future of the maternity unit was again in doubt. That ignores the fact that in the Ards and Down area plan 7,000 new homes are allocated in the area covered by the maternity unit. Most will be starter homes for young couples. There could be a significant increase in the number of births in Downpatrick. However, we could reach a ridiculous situation in which the maternity unit is closed but where a large increase in births means that a unit is needed on our doorstep.

I do not understand the mentality that suggests that all services must be centralised. I can understand to some extent the logic of the royal colleges' assertion that consultants must attend at numerous births if they are to develop the full range of specialities and have experience of complex births. Why can those specialities not be concentrated in Downpatrick? Why must they be concentrated in Greater Belfast? The consultants' tail may be wagging the Department's dog. Perhaps consultants enjoy living in the leafy suburbs of south Belfast or on the gold coast of north Down and think that Downpatrick is on the edge of the universe. The Government in Northern Ireland — even post-devolution — believe that the world ends at Glengormley, and the really adventurous believe that the world ends at Carryduff. There is life beyond Carryduff. Many live fulfilled and happy lives in south Down. They do not believe that the concentration of services should be entirely in Belfast.

Possibly the only point that Mr O'Neill did not raise was that the maternity unit offers employment opportunities to people in south Down. So great is the lack of industrial investment in south Down that the two major employers in Downpatrick are the district council and the hospital. They are essential employers. I got an e-mail this morning from Sir Reg Empey's office saying that he was visiting Downpatrick. I immediately rushed to find out which factories he was visiting. As it turned out, he was going to a function to celebrate the work of Mr McGrady — a very good cause, I must say; I do not condemn him at all. It shows, however, how little industrial investment there is in Downpatrick. It would not take very long to visit all its factories.

The maternity unit is a vital employer in the town, and it would be appalling to lose it. The campaign will go on, and I am convinced that the community will rally round to hammer home the point that Downpatrick is not prepared to be a second-class citizen to Greater Belfast. We must retain the unit. As Mr O'Neill said, if the unit closes and a mother dies tragically in labour or a newborn child dies in an ambulance that is caught in a traffic jam on the way to Belfast, people will then realise what a dreadful mistake it would be to have closed this unit.

Mr M Murphy: I thank Éamonn O'Neill for bringing this serious problem before the Assembly. I am very disappointed that only two members of the Committee for

Health, Social Services and Public Safety are present. That shows how seriously they take the Downe Hospital.

To maintain the safety of the facilities, and the good health of mothers and babies in South Down, we need a fully staffed and equipped maternity service. There has always been a high standard of quality and safety in Downpatrick Maternity Hospital, where arrangements for mothers and babies have worked very well. I wish to see those standards maintained, and I take this opportunity to pay tribute to the staff, who have maintained those standards under extreme difficulties over this period of uncertainty.

Under the Hayes Report, those standards are being undermined. I want the same quality of service for the people of east Down as is enjoyed by those in Newry and Mourne and south Armagh. The people of Kilcoo, Leitrim, Legananny, Castlewellan, Newcastle, Ballynahinch, Dromore and Drummaroad need a proper service and a proper roads infrastructure for easy access. Those considerations have not been properly addressed in the Hayes Report.

I shall now address the most important issues relating to the provision of a proper maternity service for a new hospital in Downpatrick. It is the right of every woman to have the required expertise available and to have the birth experience that she wants. Pregnancy and giving birth have become medicalised. We have some of the highest rates of hospital births in Europe and high rates of medical intervention in labour — Caesarean sections and other surgical interventions. Our intervention rates are far higher than they need to be. The majority of births are normal and require no specialist or medical intervention.

I am convinced by many of the arguments put forward by the Royal College of Midwives in favour of midwife-led maternity teams. Indeed, the early evidence suggests that women making use of the midwife-led maternity teams in Craigavon are very happy. This also means that we need to re-evaluate the role and status of the midwife, with the creation of the consultant grade midwife becoming standard.

However, in the small minority of cases that do require medical intervention, it is important that the highest levels of professional care and facilities are available. Sinn Féin in south Down rejected the proposal for a £15 million cottage hospital because it would not have retained acute or maternity services in Down. We have consistently argued that a new hospital in Downpatrick needs both. Sinn Féin in south Down will not settle for far less than is needed for the local population, or less than they deserve. That is why we argued against a smaller hospital with less capacity and fewer services. The SDLP appears to be prepared to accept less than people deserve. That is not surprising, given that it has happily settled for less than people need or deserve on policing. The people of County Down must not be short-changed.

The future of maternity services is tied to the review of acute hospitals and the Hayes Report. I look forward to having the opportunity to examine the proposals put forward by the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety, Bairbre de Brún, when they have been approved by the Executive. The Hayes Report acknowledges that radical changes in the organisation of our acute hospitals, and a dramatic increase in resources, are required.

The Hayes Report has broken with convention, and it offers proposals that will create significant change in how services are delivered. It highlights the key role of patients and service users in making decisions. The proposals will be judged on their ability to deliver equality of access to services. The Minister, Bairbre de Brún, has begun to win the argument with the Executive for increased resources to put right the struggling scheme that she inherited. Everyone will welcome the SDLP's commitment to lobby their Finance Minister to support Ms de Brún.

One of the key issues that has affected the delivery of maternity services in the Six Counties is the power of the royal colleges to set quotas for the number of births that must take place on a site in order for consultants and junior doctors to be given accreditation. The removal of maternity services from Tyrone clearly demonstrates that the operation of quotas is detrimental to the accessible delivery of a quality service. The requirements of the medical service for groups of doctors to work together stems from the fact that doctors are no longer covering the full range of a speciality but, rather, are increasingly developing their expertise in more focused areas of work. Larger teams have to be assembled to support this approach, and that is leading to the concentration of caseloads on fewer sites.

As part of maintaining official recognition, doctors and nurses need to see a certain number of patients with a specific condition in order to maintain their expertise. The royal colleges have said that training recognition may be withdrawn from a hospital if there is an insufficient number of patients to enable trainees to get the right experience, or if there is insufficient supervision for trainees. It is quite clear from this approach that the maintenance of medical status is being prioritised above the requirements of creating a high-quality service that is accessible to the people of Down.

It is clear that meeting targets is more important than the treatment of patients. Guidelines and standards have been set in relation to minimum patient numbers that must be achieved to maintain services. Some 1,500 to 2,000 deliveries are required to sustain a maternity service. In this case, sustaining the service means that the royal colleges have decided to set quotas that need to be achieved in order for an acceptable quality of service to be developed.

Women might have to travel greater distances, perhaps without the benefit of personal transport. It has been

said that it takes an hour to travel from Down to one of the hospitals in Belfast, but there is no way that it would take an hour or less to travel from Newcastle at the height of the tourist season. That does not appear to be a concern for the royal colleges.

The monetary considerations, the status of the medical profession and the setting of targets all call into question the goal of achieving a balance between high quality and access to the service, with the latter failing to be taken into proper account. These decisions highlight the power of vested interests — the very interests that have medicalised the natural process of pregnancy and giving birth.

I call on the Executive to give priority to making the resources available for this new hospital in Down. The people of east Down require acute and maternity services, not a cottage hospital.

5.45 pm

Mr McGrady: I welcome the opportunity to participate in this important debate and to endorse what my party Colleague from south Down, Mr O'Neill, said when he opened the Adjournment debate.

As has already been said, Downpatrick Maternity Hospital has been under threat for 20 years — even before the original hospital was built — given a constant barrage of undermining activity by the Department. There is no question about the quality of care in Downpatrick Maternity Hospital. Antenatal care, delivery care and postnatal care are excellent, and that has been acknowledged by professionals. The surroundings of the hospital for the mothers and the babies are also excellent, and if only we could get mothers from any part of Northern Ireland through the door, they would be registering in the Downpatrick Maternity Hospital for their deliveries.

There are, however, a number of impediments to that. It is not of the Minister's doing, but of her predecessor's. It may not even be of her predecessor's doing, but of the Department's doing, and that is the policy of centralising maternity services. Unless the Minister and the Executive can redirect departmental policy, centralisation will continue to be the policy and the drive behind the closure of hospitals such as the Downpatrick Maternity Hospital. That is why it is so important that we target the source of problem — the policy decision to centralise.

Many Members have correctly quoted — and it has been quoted often — the Royal College of Obstetricians and Gynaecologists which has made certain insinuations regarding throughput. I want to place on record a reply to a letter that I sent it. The Royal College of Obstetricians and Gynaecologists replied on 26 June 1998, and I quote directly from it:

"I should explain that the college has not issued any guidelines relating to the minimum number of deliveries which a consultant in a maternity unit should have per year."

It has not issued any guidelines, yet this is what has been said time and again as part of departmental PR spin of the centralists. The Minister and the Department must tackle this. That came out officially in the Baird Report some 20 years ago, and that is where the figure of 2,000 came from.

A few years ago the Eastern Health and Social Services Board dealt with the points made by Members about geographical isolation and the needs of the communities of Down and Mourne. I quote from its strategy document:

“In recognition of the relative geographical isolation of the area served by the Downpatrick Maternity Hospital, the board is prepared to continue to purchase consultant-led obstetric services in Downpatrick even though the number of births are not expected to reach DHHS guideline numbers. That is current board policy.”

Again I direct the debate to where the problem lies: the centralisation policy in the Department must be changed immediately. For instance, when Maurice Hayes was asked to carry out a review of acute services, his terms of remit specifically excluded maternity services because they were already under the diktat of the policy decision of the Department. This was before the Minister's time, so she is not responsible for that. However, that is where it still is, so the Minister is responsible for continuing that policy if that is what we get in the post-Hayes era.

The constant undermining of the Downpatrick Maternity Hospital has sadly led to the anticipation that only 54% of all births in County Down will take place at that hospital. Why is that? As I have said, the care and the surroundings are excellent, and my Colleagues have spoken about that. There is the constant black propaganda of the Department, which is undermining the confidence of young mothers-to-be or not so young mothers-to-be that the service will be available by the time their deliveries take place, so they do not register in that wonderful setting. We only have to look back to the events of 18 March, when the anaesthetists from the hospital took unilateral action that almost led to its immediate closure. That was not a decision of the board, the trust or the Department — the Department did not know what was happening.

Much has been said about the difficulty of travelling from the catchment area of the Downpatrick Maternity Hospital to Belfast. Equally important, modern medicine tells us that a substantial part of the recovery programme for patients is family support. Families can easily and frequently visit a hospital like Downpatrick to give support to mothers-to-be or the mothers and their babies. That accelerates their sense of well-being and they get well quickly.

However, there is a problem with service delivery in the Downpatrick. For example, the paediatric consultant does not have full facilities, and there is no epidural procedure available because of the infrequent attendance of

anaesthetists. These are money-led restrictions, and there is no reason, with an equality agenda, for those facilities' not being made available on a partnership basis with the Royal Maternity Hospital or the Lagan Valley Hospital to mothers-to-be who want them. That would give additional facility and confidence.

If the policy of centralisation, which is another word for closure, continues, what is to happen to the expanded population in these areas? The area served by Downpatrick Maternity Hospital is one of the few areas outside Belfast which is expanding rapidly — it is the most rapidly expanding area in Northern Ireland, according to the last census. For those reasons, this matter must be addressed once and for all. The remit of the Hayes Report did not include maternity services — I am subject to correction on this — but it said that maternity services would be centralised in Belfast. However, the Hayes Report was dealing with acute services in general medicine and surgery, not with maternity services, which was a stand-aside subject at that time. In another context the Hayes Report suggested partnership as a way forward.

It is with regret that I note that Mr Mick Murphy, the Sinn Féin Member for South Down, introduced party politics to an apolitical subject. Sinn Féin did the same locally to great detriment, and now it is doing the same in this debate.

Mr Wells: Does the hon Member also agree that it does enormous damage to the united community front in the Down area, where the entire community is united on preserving the hospital, when one element uses the issue as a party political football to undermine the campaign to return acute and maternity services to Downpatrick?

Mr McGrady: I can only concur with the hon Member's remarks.

The facts were also grossly wrong; therefore the record must be put straight. First, as stated, the new hospital for Downpatrick was accepted and supported as the way forward by me, the SDLP and the entire cross-party membership of Down District Council, with the proviso that it must include proper acute services. The support was for the building, rather than for the services that were suggested for it.

Secondly, that building — that new start — would have been under construction as we speak. I am confident that in that building we could have had enhanced facilities for acute medical and surgical services and for the maternity hospital. We would have had one campus for the consultants and their various disciplines, whereas we currently have two campuses. However, the money that was set aside for that building has gone and must be found again. The procurement of the highest technology, which was in train, was cancelled and must be started again.

I will take no sermons from Sinn Féin in that respect. I regret very much that party politics has crept into the debate

again. That party even opposed the planning permission for a hospital, never mind the detail of the plan itself. In that context, it ill behoves the Sinn Féin Member to try to divide the community again, when it is totally unanimous in its support for the Downpatrick Maternity and Downe hospitals. We know, as local residents and as patients, that we are getting a first-class service from consultants, doctors, nurses and staff at every level. Their humanity and their expertise in their respective disciplines have helped them to achieve a record that is the envy of any part of Northern Ireland. The cost-effectiveness and the medical effectiveness of both hospitals have been commented upon time and again.

The essential decision about maternity, as distinct from acute, services is that the policy of centralisation, which has been prescribed and promoted by the Department, should be changed. Unless it is changed, the natural and inevitable consequence of centralisation will be the closure of rural hospitals in favour of central ones. That would sound the death knell of flexibility. As has been proven time and again by reports, without access to the Downpatrick Maternity Hospital 24 hours a day, mothers and their unborn babies will be put in danger.

In spite of all the requirements of the consultant-led diktats, the safety and performance records of the Downpatrick Maternity Hospital at the last audit were the best in Northern Ireland. Are we going to throw away the best?

Mr Deputy Speaker: I am aware of the time limit that was set for this debate by the Business Committee. With that in mind, I call Mr Tom Hamilton to make a brief contribution.

Mr Hamilton: I will make my speech brief, Mr Deputy Speaker; I will not even attempt to go over all the facts and figures, which Mr O'Neill, Mr Wells and Mr McGrady so ably contributed. However, Mr Wells touched upon one aspect, which concerns my constituents in Strangford. A proportion of constituents in Strangford do not look to the likes of the Ulster Hospital — much less to Belfast — for services, including maternity provision.

6.00 pm

That group of people seek to receive their services from the Downe Hospital. However, due to uncertainty about the future of general services at the hospital, those people no longer look towards Downpatrick for their services, despite it being their first preference when given the choice.

Mr Wells mentioned that babies do not choose the most convenient time to be born. Ambulances may have to travel from the southern part of my constituency via Comber to the Ulster Hospital in Dundonald. I do not know if the Minister has ever visited Comber, or if she is aware that at the best of times it is a difficult town through which to drive. Rush hour is an absolute

nightmare. A bypass is in the pipeline, and that has been welcomed. However, it will be several years before it is completed.

It is no exaggeration to say that, in an emergency, an ambulance trying to get through Comber during rush hour may not be able to reach the Ulster Hospital. Recently, the local press highlighted a case in which a fire engine that was trying to get from one side of Comber to the other during rush hour was unable to do so. A tender had to be dispatched from a fire station in Carryduff. An emergency vehicle was caught up in Comber traffic and was prevented from reaching its destination because it could not get through to the other side of the town. If that can happen once, it can happen twice. It could happen when an ambulance is trying to rush an expectant mother through Comber to the Ulster Hospital.

I am indebted to the Deputy Speaker for allowing me to contribute to the debate at such short notice. The people who live in the part of Strangford that I represent, who look to the Downe Hospital for maternity care, have a right to receive it there and to be given access to the highest level of care, delivered in the quickest possible time. That can be found at Downpatrick Maternity Hospital. I congratulate Mr O'Neill for tabling the Adjournment debate.

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety (Ms de Brún): Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Gabhaim mo bhuíochas leis an Uasal O'Neill as an díospóireacht seo a tharraingt anuas inniu.

Dála gach seirbhís ospidéil, caithfidh seirbhísí máithreachais caighdeáin nua-aimseartha agus an cleachtas is fearr a léiriú. Éilíonn an dea-chleachtas nár chóir leanbh a shaolú más dóiche go mbeidh seirbhísí de dhíth ar an bhean nó ar an leanbh nuabheirthe nach bhfuil teacht orthu ar an láthair. Rangaítear an tseirbhís mháithreachais i nDún Pádraig mar aonad riosca isil atá faoi cheannaireacht comhairleach, agus le roinnt blianta anuas féadtar mná torracha a aistriú má mheasann cliniceoirí san ospidéal iad a bheith ar riosca ard.

Ar ndóigh, is tábhachtach go ndéantar athbhreithniú leanúnach ar na critéir riosca le teacht ar mheá chothrom idir riosca agus rochtain. Deirtear liom go ndearnadh iniúchadh ar scagthástáil atreoruithe ag Ospidéal Máithreachais Dhún Pádraig mar chuid den athbhreithniú sin. Tá obair den chineál chéanna á déanamh in ospidéil eile. Mar shampla, tá critéir aistrithe ann cheana féin in Ospidéal Ghleann an Lagáin agus in Ospidéal Mater Infirorum.

I thank Mr O'Neill for tabling the debate. As with all hospital services, maternity provision must reflect modern standards and best practice. Current good practice requires that deliveries should not take place when there is a significant likelihood that the mother or the newborn baby will require services that are not available on site.

The maternity service at Downpatrick is classified as a low-risk, consultant-led unit.

Arrangements have been in place for several years for the transfer of pregnancies judged as high risk by clinicians at the hospital. In his opening address, Éamonn O'Neill asked about those risk criteria. It is important that risk criteria be kept under review to achieve the right balance between risk and accessibility. I am advised that the screening of referrals at the Downpatrick Maternity Hospital was examined as part of that review process.

Similar work is also being undertaken in other hospitals. For example, transfer criteria are already in place at Lagan Valley Hospital and the Mater Infirmorum Hospital Health and Social Services Trust. I am also advised that many variables must be considered as part of the risk assessment process and that those may lead to the development of different criteria for different units.

I am further advised that Down Lisburn Trust's recent audit of the new criteria confirmed that less than one transfer per week has taken place as a consequence of the revisions to the risk management criteria. The Eastern Health and Social Services Board considers that that small increase in transfers should not cause significant difficulties for other units that have been experiencing declines in the number of overall births in recent years.

The number of babies born at the Downpatrick Maternity Hospital remains the lowest of any of maternity units here. By way of comparison, between 1 April 2001 and 31 March 2002, Lagan Valley Hospital had 1,086 births and Downpatrick Maternity Hospital had 462. During that period, the Royal Jubilee Maternity Service delivered 4,708 babies and the Mater delivered 1,058. Mick Murphy and Eddie McGrady both referred to royal college guidelines regarding the number of births. I do not accept that 1,500 to 2,000 deliveries are necessary to sustain a consultant-led maternity service. That would not take account of the needs of people here.

Although deliveries at Downpatrick are fewer than those at other maternity units, I fully appreciate the high regard in which that unit is held, and the skill and expertise of all staff at the hospital. Indeed, I recently met a delegation of midwives from the hospital to discuss developments there, and I was extremely impressed by the excellent work that they have undertaken to enhance and develop their skills for the good of all those who use the service.

Jim Wells talked about the growing population in the Down area. However, in the past 10 years, births fell by 20% in the Eastern Board area as a whole, in the Down area by 14% and in the Downpatrick Maternity Hospital by 30%.

In his opening comments, Éamonn O'Neill asked about consultation and choice. I am advised that the Eastern Health and Social Services Board extended the

criteria in consultation with medical and midwifery staff at the unit earlier this year, and that some of those staff are members of the Royal College of Midwives and the Royal College of Obstetricians and Gynaecologists.

With regard to consultation with other units, I am advised that the trust considered that the one additional transfer a week could not cause difficulties. As I said, the trust's recent audit of those criteria has shown that to be the correct number. I am further advised that the decision to extend the criteria was based on clinical judgement and that such decisions are considered necessary for ensuring the safety and well-being of service users.

On the question of underfunding of the Down Lisburn Trust and whether that has undermined the maternity service, the trust's most recent annual general meeting confirmed that the maternity service at the Downpatrick Maternity Hospital is receiving £500,000 more in funding than it did three years ago.

Mick Murphy asked about support for midwife-led units. I fully support, and will actively promote, the careful development of midwife-led maternity units that are within, or adjacent to, a consultant-led maternity unit. I am also aware of pilot stand-alone midwife-led units being established in England, Wales and the South of Ireland. I am keen to explore the opportunities for such developments here.

Members raised concerns about the future of the service, with particular reference being made to the report of the acute hospitals review group. That group was not constrained in any way from looking at maternity services, and it has made recommendations on them. The report addressed maternity services in Downpatrick and noted the difficulties in sustaining an inpatient maternity unit with 24-hour anaesthetic and paediatric cover. The review group recommended the phasing out of inpatient maternity services in Downpatrick, but considered that it should be possible to provide the whole spectrum of maternity services, with the exception of inpatient care, at the time of birth.

I have on several occasions in the Assembly made it clear that no decisions have yet been taken on the future of acute hospitals here. Proposals for the future of maternity services in Downpatrick will form part of a package of proposals that will be published for consultation after discussion by the Executive. A draft memorandum has been forwarded to the First Minister, the Deputy First Minister and the Minister of Finance and Personnel for clearance before consideration by the Executive. When proposals are put out to consultation they will provide communities and their representatives with an opportunity to comment on and contribute to the development of acute services here. In the meantime, I expect the Eastern Health and Social Services Board and the Down Lisburn Trust to do everything possible to maintain services at

Downpatrick, pending strategic decisions on future arrangements for hospital services.

Several significant steps have already been taken to sustain the Downpatrick Maternity Hospital, and mention was made of some of those in the debate. I pay tribute to all involved at every level in the service who have worked together to make many of those steps possible. For example, the arrangements involving Belfast anaesthetists have been introduced to maintain a robust anaesthetic service at Downpatrick Maternity Hospital, and I understand that those are working well. Five extra theatre nurses have been appointed to assist with the 24-hour anaesthetic rota. Moreover, the training programme for midwives has been reviewed, and all midwives are now offered the opportunity for advanced life-support training. Those measures demonstrate a clear commitment to sustaining high-quality maternity services at the Down-

patrick Maternity Hospital, pending the outcome of the acute hospitals review.

I recognise that there are problems in sustaining our smaller hospitals, and I am aware of the discussion generated by the acute hospitals review. I appreciate that all the staff at the Downe Hospital and the Downpatrick Maternity Hospital have worked tirelessly to maintain safe and effective services, and to provide the highest standard of care to the local community. I recently visited the hospital and had the opportunity to meet staff and patients. I saw at first hand the high regard in which the hospital and staff are held. My aim is to ensure that the skills and expertise of all the staff at Downpatrick continue to be used in providing effective, high-quality maternity services in which the community — and women, in particular — can be confident.

Adjourned at 6.13 pm.

NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

Monday 15 April 2002

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

Members observed two minutes' silence.

PUBLIC PETITION

Telecommunications Mast at Ballymena Bowling Club

Mr Speaker: Mr Ian Paisley Jnr has begged leave to present a public petition in accordance with Standing Order 22.

Mr Paisley Jnr: I beg leave to present a petition signed by over 500 residents of Ballymena opposing the erection of a telecommunications apparatus in the grounds of Ballymena Bowling Club, adjacent to the People's Park. The petition cites the controversial scientific evidence regarding health risks, the unsightly blot on the leisure landscape and the distress caused to local residents as good reasons for opposition to the mast. I present the petition to show my concern and to give my support to the residents' campaign to oppose the telecommunications mast.

Mr Paisley Jnr moved forward and laid the petition on the Table.

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

ASSEMBLY:

Committee for Employment and Learning

Resolved:

That Dr Ian Adamson replace Mr Roy Beggs as a member of the Committee for Employment and Learning. — *[Mr Davis.]*

REPORT OF THE COMMITTEE FOR THE ENVIRONMENT

Inquiry into Transport used for Children Travelling to and from School

The Chairperson of the Committee for the Environment (Rev Dr William McCrea): I beg to move

That this Assembly approves the Report of the Committee for the Environment on its Inquiry into Transport used for children travelling to and from school (1/01R) and calls on the Minister of the Environment to ensure urgent evaluation and to take full account of the recommendations.

Some might think that it has taken a long time, or too long, for the motion to come before the House, given that the Committee's report was published in September 2001. I will deal with the reasons for the delay later.

I acknowledge that a motion on school buses was debated and agreed on 19 February 2002. Although I found parts of that debate interesting — especially the then Minister's contribution, to which I will refer later — I considered it to be only a preliminary to today's proceedings. I say that without disrespect to any Member. That debate was important, but my Committee's recommendations take it a step further.

I will provide a background to the inquiry and an overview of the recommendations, and I will then deal with what has happened, or rather, what has not happened, since. I intend to give an honest, concise and open account so that no one will doubt the integrity and sincerity with which the Committee dealt with the serious issue of safety on school buses.

The matter was first raised with officials from the Department of the Environment in January 2000. In the light of the information that the Committee received about the dangers of overloading school buses, it decided on 8 June 2000 to make that the subject of its first public inquiry.

Following the public announcement of the inquiry, the Committee received 57 written representations. Those were from not only Government Departments and associated bodies, but from parents, a significant number of school principals, and even a school bus driver who had been transferred after questioning the practices of an education and library board.

For the benefit of any Member who questions the seriousness of the situation and the need to take immediate action, I will quote from just two submissions to the Committee, all of which are documented in the report. The first is from the mother of a child who travels from Saintfield to Belfast every day:

"I do find it difficult to believe that my daughter has no rights to travel safely to and from school ... she usually does not complain. However, today, when she arrived home bruised, grazed and so sore from being flung against the seat when the bus braked severely ... she did tell me. Only three weeks into the term she already dreads the ordeal of the bus."

The second submission is by the principals of two schools in Limavady, which states that some buses are overcrowded:

“Some buses in our area are allocated up to 90 pupils.”

In addition, it reports that children have to stand on a crowded bus for journeys of up to 18 miles. The submission also refers to the intimidation of some drivers:

“The task of a school bus driver becomes impossible with 80+ pupils in a 54 seater bus, trying to drive along the Limavady/Derry road at rush hour!”

When the report was published, some accused the Committee of being overemotional about the value of a child's life. I challenge them to respond to the mother of the schoolchild who came home battered and bruised, or to those principals who have to teach children who have had to stand for long periods on crowded buses before they even get to school.

Some people went as far as to criticise the Committee for using the phrase “a disaster waiting to happen”. However, I remind the House that that phrase did not originate with any member of the Committee; it came from evidence presented to the Committee by Ch Insp Hiller of the then RUC traffic branch. I will quote from what he said:

“It would only take one bus jam-packed with about a hundred children colliding with a heavy goods vehicle to make this a major issue. We now see it as a major issue and we hope that the Committee and the Assembly will give us legislation that is workable and enforceable.”

The inquiry took some time, but the Committee wanted to give everyone an opportunity to put their point of view. Consequently, in addition to the 57 written submissions that the Committee received, it took oral evidence from 13 different sources, some of whom had to be brought back to give further evidence. When all the evidence was gathered, Committee members sat down with a team of experienced public sector transport specialist consultants, who address similar safety issues day in, day out, and we arrived at our recommendations. The report was published in September 2001 and therefore has already been with the Department of the Environment for nearly seven months.

The Committee made 28 recommendations, many of which Members will note are not only detailed, innovative and challenging but go much further than the limited scope of the so-called school buses debate, which took place on 19 February. I will not go over all the recommendations, but they are grouped under headings such as: the “3 for 2” seating provision; schoolchildren standing on buses; seat belts; arrangements for getting on and off buses; signage; flashing lights; legislation governing the use of minibuses and coaches on organised trips; behaviour and vandalism issues; storage of equipment and baggage; and, not least, road safety education. Almost every aspect of travel to and from school was investigated and reported

on in some detail. Unfortunately, time does not afford me the luxury of detailing every recommendation, but I will say that there is not one single recommendation that will not bring about the improved safety of our children travelling to and from school.

Some recommendations, such as abolishing the “3 for 2” concession, standing on school buses and seat belt provision, have far-reaching implications, including significant resource implications, and the Committee acknowledges that. The Committee makes no apology for this, and if Members read the report carefully, they will see that the Committee accepts fully that all recommendations cannot be implemented overnight. However, that does not mean that they should not be evaluated properly and implemented. I do not accept that nothing can be done unless everything is lumped together.

I now turn my attention to the Department of the Environment's initial response to the Committee on the key recommendations. Suffice it to say that the recommendations will not be evaluated until much later this year at the earliest, and even that is dependent on resources being secured in a monitoring round bid. By contrast, some other Departments that are involved directly in the report, such as the Department for Regional Development and the Department of Education, have acknowledged readily some time ago that some recommendations can be introduced at a relatively low cost and relatively quickly.

What was the Committee's approach in making the recommendations? Through extensive research, the Committee has faced up to the real problems with due consideration and pragmatism. For example, when it examined the serious problem of traffic overtaking buses while children are boarding and alighting, it recognised that there could not be a simple approach or solution for every road in Northern Ireland.

That is why the Committee decided that the banning of overtaking may be practical and necessary in some locations and was certainly worthy of further investigation. In tandem with that recommendation, the Committee also recommended that the Department of the Environment and the Department of Education should develop and publish a good practice guide in respect of risk surrounding boarding and alighting at, or adjacent to, school premises, to cover issues such as supervision, local traffic-calming measures, hazard signals and school bus signage in general. Are those measures so difficult to implement? Are they so expensive? How long do we have to wait before there is action on the recommendations? I mean action and not a vague commitment to review, with no specific timetable or output.

12.15 pm

During the debate on 19 February 2002 some Members expressed disappointment, some of it verging on criticism, that my Committee had not brought the report to the

House earlier. Looking back now, I regret to say that my Committee's trust in the Department of the Environment, with its lead responsibility — I repeat, its lead responsibility — for road safety, and in this case the safety of children on school buses, has proved to be misplaced.

Last September the Committee took a deliberate decision to defer bringing forward the report, so that when it was debated, it would be in an atmosphere of moving forward with the recommendations, together with the Department of the Environment and other Departments, in the most positive and constructive way possible. The price we have paid for our decision is delay and prevarication by the Department of the Environment. It took precisely five months to get an initial response of any substance from the Department of the Environment. The words "initial response" were used by the then Minister of the Environment, and, curiously, that response arrived on 18 February 2002 — the day before the debate on the motion I have already mentioned.

At last week's Committee meeting, one Committee member wondered whether he was paranoid or whether it was just coincidence that every time the Committee was about to act on something, the Department seemed to be able to produce long-awaited replies at the last minute.

However, I must inform the House that by early December 2001 my Committee had received extensive initial responses from the Department of Education, the Department for Regional Development, the Department for Employment and Learning and even from Translink. It took until late in February 2002 for the Department of the Environment to respond. When that was questioned, the then Minister took umbrage and wondered whether his Department's efforts had been misplaced. Those efforts primarily included taking more than two months to collate information that the Committee had already received from the three other Departments. I would add that, for the benefit of Members, my Committee has lodged copies of the relevant correspondence with the Assembly Library, so that everyone can see and understand the Committee's frustration since the report was published last September.

The criticism that my Committee has received from the former Minister of the Environment, and, most recently, from the current Minister, must be addressed. That criticism is centred on two supposed questions in a letter that the then Minister sent to the Committee in December 2001. On two occasions my Committee was specifically accused in the House of failing to give answers. My Committee totally rejects this attempt to divert the focus of attention away from the real issue of school transport.

The two alleged questions were suddenly referred to by the Minister of the Environment on 4 March 2002 during Question Time. One relates to the evidence obtained by the Committee to justify the cost benefits of implementing the recommendations, and the other refers to

where the money is to come from. I must say to the Minister that instead of relying on his officials, it would be a great step forward if he were to read the complete report for himself and not just the recommendations. He would then see all the justification he needs.

I will say something about implementation cost projections in a moment. For example, on page 155 in volume 2 of the report there are statistics that have been provided by the police in relation to children who were injured or killed travelling to and from school between 1995 and 1999. During that period, 413 children were injured while travelling on buses, compared with 488 injured while travelling in cars. I will say no more on that subject.

The second supposed question was about where the money was to come from. The former Minister accused me, and consequently my Committee, of resorting to emotive slogans. However, in his December letter, it is he who wrote about making difficult choices between the needs of hospital patients, the elderly, the disabled, the homeless, the unemployed and educational under-achievers. In what is clearly a rhetorical question, he asks if the money would be better spent on the Health Service than on implementation of the Committee's recommendations. What about emotive language?

The Committee's terms of reference focused the report on school bus safety. The Committee was not in the business of prioritising the Department's budget, nor any other Department's budget, to deal with the costs of implementing the report's recommendations.

Mr McCartney: Is it not correct that the 400-odd children who are injured will take up valuable time, surgical and nursing care, and beds in hospitals, if this is allowed to continue?

Rev Dr William McCrea: I accept the position outlined by the hon Member, but my Committee's responsibility was to investigate the safety of our children travelling to and from school, not to allocate the Budget; that is the responsibility of the Executive and the Departments. We were simply and directly dealing with a specific issue in our investigation. In brief, our concern in this report was to bring out the evidence that was given to us and to develop recommendations to improve the safety of our children. Is that not a laudable position for any Committee to hold? Hard decisions must be made, but at least let us make those decisions based on the facts. The investigation was all about facts such as those documented in the Committee's report — not side issues. We did not make the evidence; we simply took the evidence.

Road safety, and therefore the safety of our children travelling to and from school in buses, is the Minister of the Environment's responsibility. Therefore, the Department of the Environment is responsible for ensuring full evaluation of all of the recommendations within this

report and the co-ordination, monitoring and reporting of subsequent follow-up implementations, as appropriate.

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

The Department of the Environment's response in February promised regulatory impact assessment; reviews; research; and further research — without any reporting timescales. There has been no sign of action. As things stand, the regulatory impact assessment on the Committee's key recommendations will not be completed by the end of this year. That is why the motion not only seeks the Assembly's approval of the report, but calls specifically on the Minister of the Environment to ensure proper evaluation and to take full account of its recommendations.

I thank all of those who contributed to the report. I particularly acknowledge the perseverance and tolerance of my fellow Committee members, including those members who have moved on this since the report was completed. I also pay tribute to the Committee's secretariat for its industry and attention to detail in the report's preparation and delivery. I have great pleasure in commending the report to the House today. Rarely will we have a more serious issue before us than this one, and I ask the Members of the House to give their wholehearted support to the motion.

The Chairperson of the Committee for Education (Mr Kennedy): I am grateful for the opportunity to speak on this important matter. I hope that the personal safety of all children while travelling on school buses, particularly when getting on and alighting from them, is a matter of concern to every Member of the House and to members of the Committee for Education.

The issue has been raised at several meetings of the Committee for Education, and I am pleased that both the Minister of the Environment and the Minister of Education are here today.

The Education Committee welcomed the publication of the report on 13 September 2001 and acknowledges the Committee for the Environment's detailed consideration of the matter. This debate is long overdue.

One of the most dangerous parts of the journey to school is when pupils board or alight from buses. On 19 February the Assembly endorsed my motion noting the number of children who have been killed while getting on and alighting from school buses by motorists and called on the Executive to conduct an urgent investigation of measures to protect the welfare of children when using school buses, taking account of the relevant laws introduced in the United States of America.

In recognition of that, I urged the Executive to put in place pilot schemes in rural and urban areas of Northern Ireland to assess the impact of preventing motorists from overtaking school buses when children are getting on or alighting, and to see whether regulation through

legislation, as applied in the United States of America, could be implemented here.

My motion recognised that school transport is a cross-cutting issue and is not the sole responsibility of any one Minister. Therefore, I am using this opportunity to urge the Executive to take a co-ordinated and cohesive approach involving the Minister of the Environment, the Minister of Education and the Minister for Regional Development to ensure that progress is made.

The importance of pupil safety cannot be over-emphasised, and full consideration must be given to measures aimed at enhancing the care and protection of children being transported to and from school. While the Department of the Environment provides advice on the safety of pupils travelling on school buses, the Department of Education is responsible for policy on home-to-school transport, and services are arranged by the education and library boards.

Many of the recommendations in the Committee for the Environment's report will, if implemented, have a major impact on the education and library boards, and the Committee for Education has sought their views and those of the Department of Education.

Some of the recommendations could improve safety while not requiring major expenditure. Those include involving a means of communication for bus drivers and taxi drivers. The report also recommends the development of a code of conduct for everyone involved in home-to-school transport and the publication of a good practice guide on arrangements for getting on and off buses. The Committee for Education has been informed that the Department of Education and the education and library boards are taking appropriate action on those issues, and we look forward to progress on the matter.

It is also clear that some of the key recommendations, if implemented, will involve significant costs. Those include the abolition of the "3 for 2" seating arrangements, the provision of new seat belts and the prohibition of standing on school buses.

12.30 pm

Examples of the estimated costs include an additional capital amount of approximately £41 million and an extra £22.5 million a year for additional running costs if the recommendations to abolish the "3 for 2" seating arrangement and standing on buses are implemented. Although that is largely a matter for Translink, the additional cost would undoubtedly be passed on to the education and library boards. Provision of new seat belts would require a large capital investment by the education and library boards of approximately £15 million, and ensuring that pupils complied with the legislation and wore the seat belts would present a practical problem.

Implementation of the recommendations would have an important impact on the already critical financial situation

in education. The Committee for Education does not wish to see funds taken from the classroom, as schools already exist on limited resources. Every Member is aware of the poor standard of accommodation in the schools estate. Therefore, the Executive would have to provide extra funding. I seek assurances from the Chairperson of the Committee for the Environment and the Minister that any financial bid made by the Department of Education or the Committee for Education will receive the full backing of the Committee for the Environment.

Given the heavy cost of implementing several of the Committee for the Environment's recommendations, it is important that a cost-benefit analysis be carried out as quickly as possible. The next step, therefore, must be a clear evaluation of the recommendations so that long-term decisions can be properly made.

I endorse the motion in general and welcome this important debate. I look forward to hearing the contributions of Members including those who are members of the Committee for Education. I especially look forward to contributions from the Minister of the Environment and other relevant Ministers.

Mr Gallagher: I welcome the motion and commend the Chairperson of the Committee for the Environment for moving it. The Committee has looked at all the key school transport issues. I agree with the Committee Chairperson: although this is a complicated issue, and progress is not a simple matter, that should not be a reason to delay the implementation of simple measures, some of which have been mentioned, to make boarding and alighting from school buses safer. I remind Members that the facts show that most fatal accidents happen when children are boarding or alighting from school transport.

The Chairperson of the Committee for the Environment referred to the Department for Regional Development. However, the matter poses challenges for several Departments, including the Department of Education. It is important that the Committee's report signals the need for those Departments to co-operate in the development of a strategy to tackle the issues that have been identified. An end to overcrowding on school buses would be most welcome.

We need to keep in mind the safety of all schoolchildren. While the priority is school transport, some children travel to school on foot or on bicycles, and there are dangers for them. In that regard, I want to talk about ending the "3 for 2" seating arrangement rule. While it appears to be a measure that can be implemented and, at face value, it appears to be fairly straightforward, the impact in rural areas must be carefully assessed, as there are cost implications. The Chairperson of the Committee for Education covered that ground, and he clarified the main points to everyone.

However, there are entitlements to school transport, and there is a qualifying distance. As Members know from

their constituents, the practicalities are that, where possible, education boards allow children who live within walking distance of their schools to travel on the school bus if it can take them. If a family has two children, and one child is at secondary school and the other child is at primary school, the secondary school child may qualify for school transport because he has to travel a greater distance. The parents may send the younger child to school with the older child, and it is difficult for the education board to instruct the school driver to pick up the older member of the family and not to take on board the younger member, who may be a four- or six-year-old.

If we end the "3 for 2" arrangements, the qualifying limit will be applied very strictly. That will mean that more children will walk to school. As Members who represent rural constituencies know, that is a problem. It is also a problem in urban areas, and it will cause a great deal of worry for parents. Children who walk to school have to negotiate road junctions and cross busy roads — even in rural areas — and that throws up dangers. While the ending of the "3 for 2" rule will help to alleviate the pressure on the school transport system and reduce overcrowding, more children will walk to school, because many families do not have access to school transport, and they cannot take their children to school. We have to keep the safety of all children in mind.

With regard to the Department for Regional Development, I emphasise the recommendation in the report about the need to bring all school bus routes into the winter gritting system. People who live in rural areas, quite rightly, claim that there are inconsistencies and inequalities in the system. It is difficult to disagree with those concerns, and improvements should be phased in before next winter. That would be consistent with what the Chairperson said about the key Departments moving now to advance the strategy and improve safety. As I said in a previous debate, the Department of Education should recommend that particular attention be paid in schools to the personal safety of all children who rely on school transport and use it daily.

Mr M Murphy: As a member of the Committee for the Environment, I support the motion. Given that the Minister has not implemented the 'Report on the Inquiry into Transport used for Children Travelling to and from School', which involved months of hard work, his commitment to the road safety of schoolchildren leaves a good deal to be desired. I take on board the fact that the Minister is new to the post; however, his Department shows a lack of interest in implementing the Committee's recommendation that legislation be introduced to set minimum safety standards for vehicles that transport schoolchildren. I appeal to all the Departments involved to play a constructive role in implementing the report.

I recognise the significant cost involved in implementing the Committee's recommendation; however, what price can we put on a child's life? That strong principle emerged

from the evidence that the Committee received. No cost can justify the death or serious injury of any child travelling to or from school. Every Member has a copy of the report, which details fully the Committee's recommendations, and I appeal to everyone to approve it. It is time to evaluate the 57 written representations to the Committee from service providers and other witnesses. In addition, I call on the Minister of the Environment to put into action the Committee's recommendations.

Mr McCarthy: I support the motion, and I record the Alliance Party's thanks for the Committee's hard work on this serious subject. I welcome the report. However, it was produced in September, and I am disappointed that it has taken seven months for it to reach the Floor. How long will it take to implement the important recommendations, or is it a question of how many more schoolchildren will be killed before action is taken?

The Chairperson of the Committee for the Environment has already covered every aspect of this important subject, but I will mention a few of the main concerns and recommendations. Standing on school buses should be a thing of the past. On the Ards Peninsula, in my constituency of Strangford, particularly in September, it is almost a matter of how many youngsters can be squeezed onto a bus, and I am sure that that unacceptable practice is replicated throughout Northern Ireland.

I have seen schoolchildren standing against the door at the front of a bus. I pay tribute to bus drivers for keeping their buses on the roads in such circumstances. The A20 from Portaferry to Newtownards, for example, is a winding road that runs adjacent to Strangford Lough. If a school bus were to collide or swerve anywhere on that road — and coastal erosion can happen in that area — the bus would topple into the lough, resulting in many young casualties. That could occur in many places in Northern Ireland, so standing on school buses must be done away with as soon as possible.

12.45 pm

I agree that the "3 for 2" seating policy for children should be a thing of the past. Every pupil should be entitled to a seat, and a seat belt should be available. I understand that seat belts are already compulsory on many buses and coaches — private operators have accepted that policy. They must feel aggrieved that the public operators can get away without that safety provision. What is good for the private operator must be good for the public one.

Front and rear signage on school buses must be of paramount importance. Members of the Portaferry Women's Institute suggested to the Environment Committee the possibility of enacting legislation to have traffic stop to the front and rear of school buses when children are alighting. The Chairperson of the Environment Committee and the Chairperson of the Education Committee also mentioned that. That idea was prompted by the unfort-

unate death of a pupil who had alighted from his school bus and crossed the busy road between Kircubbin and Portaferry. There are other sad instances. If young lives are to be saved, all proposals must be investigated as quickly as possible.

There are many recommendations in the report, such as codes of conduct for all concerned; good practice guides for getting on and off school buses; and a reduction in vandalism, bullying, and so on. It is imperative for all the proper authorities to come together to grasp the nettle and put into practice actions that will mean that schoolchildren can travel to school in safety, even if those actions are implemented over a number of years. Costs will play a large part in the implementation of the Committee's many recommendations. The question is: what price a child's life?

Ms Morrice: I join the other Members who welcomed the report. It was enlightening to hear how the inquiry was conducted and to be aware of the delays, and I too must express my disappointment about that. It is not before time that the report has come out.

Many of the 28 recommendations on child safety are extremely important, and the Women's Coalition supports the motion's call to deal with them as a matter of urgency.

I will deal with some of the recommendations, but in reverse order. There are some valuable points in the report that have not been touched upon. First, I welcome recommendations 16 and 20 that propose a strategy to deal with bullying, vandalism and bad behaviour. I assume that that would also include intimidation. The Committee's recommendation that an action plan be drawn up to deal with these problems is a valuable one, as is the idea of setting up a telephone hotline to deal with incidents on school transport.

The report mentions the amount of baggage that children must carry to school, and, as a mother, I am very aware of that. It is a difficult problem to deal with. Perhaps the Minister of Education could take on board the need to provide facilities in schools for storing books and equipment so that children would have less baggage to carry. In that context, space to store pupils' bags should also be provided on school buses.

I also welcome the idea of using yellow buses. There was an opportunity to examine how that system was introduced into the USA. According to recommendation 12, research into the yellow school bus system will be valuable with a view to possibly adopting it in Northern Ireland. The system seems to work well in many American states. Other recommendations with regard to the use of flashing lights, signage and road safety education are important.

As is my wont, I started with the soft issues, and I will move on to the difficult issues. The Committee's proposals for dealing with standing on buses and seat

belts are too lenient. It is inappropriate that timescales have been set for the introduction of seat belts, for example, over the short, medium and long terms. Seat belts for school buses should have been introduced yesterday. They should not be phased in.

Members understand the Department's concerns and its need to prioritise. There is a question about whether money should be given to the Health Service or to education. I was impressed by Mr McCartney's point that a reduction in the number of accidents involving school buses would reduce pressure on the Health Service. The argument about where money should go does not stand up in that case.

Standing on buses should also have been dealt with yesterday. Parent-teacher associations have addressed the need for safety on school buses. Serious pressure should be applied to speed up the implementation of the report's recommendations, if not yesterday, at least tomorrow.

The Committee's remit concerned the specific issue of safety on buses. However, the debate must be broadened to include safer routes to school, whether children travel on foot, by bicycle or by bus. For example, approximately 2% of children in the UK cycle to school, compared with 60% in Denmark. That is understandable, because a cyclist is 12 times more likely to be injured or killed in Northern Ireland than in Denmark.

We could also discuss children walking to school to avoid rush-hour traffic. However, that may be outside the remit of the debate. Perhaps the best example of a school bus is the "walking" bus, which is a pilot system that is being operated in north Down. There is no need for seat belts, because all the children walk to school. However, only children who live in close proximity to the schools can do that.

Rev Dr Ian Paisley: This is an important debate. We must help two sections of the community to the best of our ability — the aged and the young. The motion deals with the children of Northern Ireland.

As I understand it, at present a 53-seater bus can carry 101 children. That will not make them safe — just think of 101 children crammed into a 53-seater bus.

Something must be done as soon as possible. Otherwise, we are waiting for a calamity to happen. If a calamity happens, every voice will be raised. Every voice and every hand will be raised in horror that the Assembly tolerated such a system. The finances of the situation, as the Chairperson said, are not the responsibility of the Committee for the Environment. That matter will arise when the Budget is being distributed and when cries are being made for certain amounts of money to be put to certain good causes.

I trust that the Minister will not try to defend a 53-seater bus carrying 101 children, that he will admit that that cannot be tolerated and that he is prepared to do

his best to remedy the situation. Some of the recommendations would take little or no money to put into operation. Why can the Minister not say, as an act of good faith, that he is going to seek the immediate implementation of that which does not put strain on his present budget? That would be an assurance to children, and to their parents, that a start was being made.

Seat belts are important. It is preached every night on television that not wearing a seat belt endangers not only oneself but others as well. However, the Assembly is prepared to tolerate a situation with school buses which completely ignores the facts that are being presented. The Minister can take a positive step forward by telling the House that, although finance is an issue, there are recommendations that do not demand large amounts of money — and perhaps some that do not require any — and that he is prepared to take steps to implement those immediately and progress to those others that are important. However, the Assembly must face up to the glaring fact that money will have to be spent on the problem. That cannot be avoided.

My Friend, the Chairman of the Committee for the Environment, who presented the report, and the other Committee members must be congratulated on it. They have faced up to the situation. The hon Member for North Down, Ms Morrice, is not happy about parts of the report. She thinks that parts of it should have been implemented yesterday. I agree with that. The Assembly should never have let the situation get so far. However, we must face the facts.

I have told the Minister that he can start his tenure well by assuring parents and children that he will do all that he can in the circumstances. There must be movement on this, and that movement must then be carried to a successful conclusion. The Minister will receive the plaudits of the people if he pursues that path. However, telling the Assembly that that is not possible because of finance and other things that need to be done is simply putting it off. I hope that the Minister will not put it off, but will announce that this is the day when action will be taken to address this serious problem.

Mr K Robinson: The fundamental point of principle in the debate is that nothing exceeds the value of human life. Indeed, the existence of the Assembly is based on the sanctity of human life after a 30-year war that saw the loss of so many innocent lives.

For that reason alone, we should place the protection of lives, especially young lives, at the top of our agenda.

1.00 pm

In December 2001, two children were knocked down while alighting from school buses; both were young teenagers. Many lives have been blighted as a result of such accidents. Indeed, over many years, a series of such awful incidents have resulted in the loss of young lives.

The tragedy is that they are all avoidable. The creation and enforcement of a simple set of traffic rules would considerably reduce the risk of such incidents recurring.

I recently visited the United States, where I went to a school to observe how the authorities deal with what is a universal problem. In many states, school buses are painted yellow and are easily visible. They are fitted with bright flashing lights that operate when the vehicle is stationary. When those lights are flashing, no traffic is allowed to overtake the bus. That dramatically reduces the risk of child being hit by a car when alighting. Such lights are easily fitted and are already present on many vehicles. Furthermore, the expense is not extraordinary.

An extendable arm is another device used in the United States that significantly reduces the risk to children alighting from school buses. Normally forming part of the front bumper, the arm extends outwards, parallel to the footpath or roadside. It causes children to walk a considerable distance from the bus and reduces the opportunity for them to dash or walk out unwarily on to the road. Again, that measure is simple and easily fitted. Importantly, it could save lives.

I do not accept that the risk of greater traffic congestion as a result of these measures is an acceptable reason for doing nothing. Frankly, that argument belongs to the Stone Age. On balance, to save one human life is worth whatever minor traffic delay is caused. One would have to be a cynical, uncaring person to recommend inaction, simply because the measures might delay traffic somewhat.

In continental cities, vehicles automatically stop to allow a person to alight from, or board, a tram. Why could traffic here not automatically stop to allow children to enter or exit a school bus?

In America, mirrors on school buses that allow drivers to see children who are close to either the front or rear wheels are fitted extensively. That again reduces the risk at the point where children have lost their lives in the past.

The case appears clear-cut and simple. As an Assembly, we have reaffirmed the protection and preservation of human life as a paramount consideration. Therefore, we should recommend the adoption of the measures that I have outlined: brightly painted buses; buses with flashing lights that operate automatically when stopped; a ban on cars passing stationary buses when those lights are flashing; and an extendable arm fitted to bus bumpers to prevent children crossing close to the vehicle. That is a raft of simple measures, but they would go a long way to reducing what is currently an unacceptable risk.

Recommendations 9, 12, 13 and 14 of the report go some way to highlighting the facts that I have mentioned. Recommendation 14 deals with the supervision, scheduling, queuing and signing systems, design of drop-off and pickup points, and local traffic calming. All those aspects

are vital to create a mindset that this is a central issue that must be addressed by everyone: schools; transport companies; parents; and drivers of all other road vehicles. I am sorry to say that we are currently very glib in our approach to road safety. Recommendation 14 focuses the attention of all who have a part to play in reducing what is a serious problem.

I wish to draw attention to recommendation 19 in the Committee's report, which returns us to the core of the matter. Many incidents and accidents go unreported. The Committee's recommendation that there should be a formal system of reporting such incidents and accidents is positive. That can better inform our way of addressing them within the schools, when parents come to collect their children, when children are about to cross the road and when other vehicles come upon a school bus.

I commend the report, and I congratulate the Committee and the Chairperson on their detailed and necessary work. We now rely upon the Minister and his officials to take the recommendations forward and build them into legislation.

I remind Members that a former Government Minister in this Building dared to be different in the past. He introduced the R-plate system specifically to address the problems that Northern Ireland's newly qualified drivers were causing. I hope that the Minister today will follow that lead.

Mr A Doherty: With his fixed, nice-guy smile and his anxious eyes, Tony Blair said "education, education, education". I was quite impressed, even though it was election time, when dramatic slogans are highly valued and sometimes quite effective. Then I began to wonder — why education times three? Why not just education? Education is education. That is it. Then I wondered a bit more. Perhaps the champion of new Labour meant that there are three educations — education for the privileged, education for the ordinary and education for the underprivileged. If that was what he meant, he would be very much in tune with some people in this enlightened little place. However, I am sure that he did not mean that. I hope he did not mean that, although much of what he has done about education since he uttered that rousing call has been alarming.

You might ask what that has to do with the motion. It is simple. Like every other aspect of education, this is an issue of equality and human rights. All children have the right to an appropriate education, and I do not mean that it should be appropriate to their parents' bank balances or their social standing. It follows that people who have a duty to provide education have a duty to ensure that children arrive safely, and in reasonable comfort, at their places of education — hence the great effort put into this inquiry by the Committee for the Environment. All the report's recommendations are reasonable and achievable. There are cost implications, and we appreciate that there

is competition with other areas of great need. However, a start must be made immediately, and much can be done at no great cost if the will is there.

I must emphasise that the inquiry deals with proposals to change transport arrangements that serve an education system which itself is in need of reform — a system which is in many ways an affront to equality and children's rights. There are proposals to improve the system. Whatever comes from those proposals, the results must be far-reaching and right. If we mess it up — and I fear that we will — I will be long gone before there is another chance. Members might say that that will be no great loss. However, they and their children will also be gone.

I do not stray from the motion, for if we get the system right there will be bonuses with regard to school transport. For example, it is daft for hordes of children to travel 10 to 20 miles to school in one direction, meeting hordes of other children travelling in the opposite direction. Before anyone sneers about "postcode schooling", I know that if neighbourhood schools are to be the norm, those schools must all be excellent, and every neighbourhood must be made tolerable. That is not the case at the moment, and that must be put right.

"The rich man in his castle;
the poor man at his gate
God made them, high and lowly;
and ordered their estate."

Sadly, that mentality still haunts us. It must be changed, and we must change it.

The principals of Limavady High School and St Mary's provided the Committee with oral evidence. I know both gentlemen and their schools well. At paragraphs 551 and 554, Vol 2, Appendix 4 of the report, Mr Bradley told the Committee that

"In Limavady, we have pupils from a largely rural community travelling anything up to 18 miles - the distance from Strathfoyle to Limavady. It can be a long and arduous journey, taking 35 to 40 minutes, during the morning rush hour and, again, between 3.30 pm and 4.00 pm. Having 22 or 23 young people standing for that time will lead to problems. In my paper, I mentioned misbehaviour, bullying, vandalism, and sectarian taunts and fights. In that respect, Limavady is no different from any other area. I stress that 95% or more of the pupils travelling on those buses are well behaved, but a small minority takes up an inordinate amount of our time and that of Translink."

"The first housing estate in Ballykelly is King's Lane. The distance has been measured by Translink and the estate was found to be within the three-mile limit for Limavady High School and St Mary's. The children do not get a free pass, and their parents must pay. Fortunately for those who attend Limavady Grammar School, which is slightly further up the road from us, the distance from King's Lane to school exceeds the three-mile limit and children get a free pass."

Those are just two examples of situations that are strangers to the concepts of equality and children's rights and are far removed from the acceptable standards of safe and comfortable travel. The report is full of such examples. I recommend that it be carefully studied. I support the motion.

Mr McHugh: I welcome the opportunity to speak about the report, and I commend the work that has brought it to completion. I also support the comments of the other Members who spoke about the delay of seven months during which nothing has happened. These recommendations that are not too costly should have been implemented, and all Members would like to see the full implementation of all the recommendations.

The issues and the terms of reference that the Committee considered are accurate, and all Members agree with them. The groups that considered the key issues are listed in the report. The fact that so many people contributed to the report must not be ignored. We must not ignore the safety of children travelling to and from school; it is the most important element of the debate.

I notice that my Colleague from the Committee for Education cannot resist the opportunity to mention the last 30 years. However, I can mention the last 70 years of underfunding and discrimination in the part of Ireland that I come from, west of the Bann. No one has a monopoly on that. Whether children cycle to school or travel by bus or on foot, their safety is of paramount importance to all of us.

I agree with the recommendations, but I wish to highlight recommendation 1, which refers to the "3 for 2" rule, and recommendations 2, 3 and 4, which refer to schoolchildren standing on buses. To allow buses with seating for 53 children to carry up to 100 children is a serious issue that must be addressed. That difficult situation should not be allowed to continue.

Overcrowding causes stressful situations and creates risks. For example, overloaded buses must be unstable, especially on bendy, rural roads and in hilly areas of cities. That increases the risk to children getting on and off buses. Children rush to get on to buses so that they will not have to stand or sit on the edge of a seat. They also have to carry very heavy school bags, which slow them as they cross roads. Must children carry so many books? Could that problem be alleviated? Crowded buses also lend themselves to bullying and additional problems that would not occur in a managed situation.

1.15 pm

Those problems could be addressed without massive cost. It would be costly to allow only one child per seat, and the provision of seat belts would be even more costly. The cost of providing seat belts would be £41 million initially, and £22 million a year in running costs. It may also be difficult to make children use seat belts. From my experience with my own children, I imagine that the seat belts might never be used.

As the Chairperson of the Committee for Education said, we must consider whether that money might be better spent in the classroom. Members of the Committee for Education can immediately see the benefits of spending

money in the classroom, rather than on seat belts, especially given that most fatal accidents happen outside, rather than on, school buses. We should place more emphasis on stopping those accidents. That is a lesson for parents, children and bus drivers, whom I must commend for their tremendous work — they have a tough job. They are all involved in this situation, and they must be involved in the implementation of measures to improve the safety of buses.

The yellow bus system can be commended for many reasons. In particular, it slows traffic. There is an argument that, because of congestion, it would be impossible to completely stop traffic. Nevertheless, there is merit in examining that system and in studying the research on the subject, particularly in America, where the car is king.

In most areas, young people are unable to cycle to school. There are cycle lanes in some towns, and there is a move towards providing more. However, until full provision is made to enable children to walk or cycle to school, such use of the roads will involve a great risk. On most roads, there is just one lane, which gives priority to cars only, without room for anyone else. Until that is changed, the number of people cycling or walking to school will not increase, despite the health benefits of such activity.

One of the benefits of the yellow bus system is that it slows down traffic. I am not sure whether we should stop traffic completely; however, flashing lights and signs could be fixed to the buses that we have already. That would make other road users more aware of school buses. As car use is so prominent here, I am not sure that people actually have the same awareness of, or consideration for, children going to school as they have for everyone else using the road, particularly during rush hour. That is a problem, and we need to make people aware of it.

At this point I appeal to all road users to be more aware of children and school buses, because most of the fatal accidents I know of — certainly the ones in Fermanagh — have been in instances where it is quite difficult for people to distinguish a school bus from other buses. Something that would bring that difference into focus, whether it be flashing lights or something else, would probably save lives, especially in rural areas.

During the rush hour there is speed, intolerance, and lack of consideration on the part of many road users. American research has shown that a considerable number of people — 1.1 million in Georgia — broke the rules and passed school buses regardless of the laws. I feel that it is necessary for us to try and implement that legislation, but I am not sure if it would be entirely correct for us. However, it is certainly a possibility that we should be considering — slowing down traffic and making the situation much safer for young people.

The school crossing code educates young people on the speed of traffic, but you cannot expect young children to know what speed traffic is doing, because they are not

drivers. Each morning we can see the rush that occurs. At the time when children are going to school, everyone else is rushing to work. It is a hostile environment for children trying to get to school, whether boarding or alighting from buses.

It has been proved that the key stages for fatal or other injuries are when boarding and alighting. Several issues arise at these points, and there are several things that the Department for Regional Development, which is outside the education budget, could do. Signage could help people focus on the dangers of getting off a bus. It could stop children from single-mindedly heading for the other side of the road, where they happen to live or where there are cars to pick them up.

Much of this subject has actually been covered, but we need to further consider the yellow bus system. We need to see other research from Europe, where more children cycle to school, because it may have much to offer us. Has the research mentioned in some of the recommendations been carried out, and if not, why not? It looks as if some research has not yet been acted on. That is not particularly costly, but it needs to be done. We need to know exactly what the recommendations are going to cost. The costs are considerable, and are, therefore, part of the debate.

Given our present budgets, it does not seem likely that we will be able to implement all of this strategy. We are talking about massive funding. Will money come from the Department of Education's budget or that of the Department for Regional Development? If we implement this, what will the savings be for health? This is the sort of work I want to see done immediately.

Mr Poots: It does not seem that long ago, but it is quite some time since I was getting school buses. I clearly remember standing on the steps of a bus, or leaning against the front window of a bus, as it travelled down a rural road at up to 60 mph. Time has moved on. I now leave my son to the bus, and by the time it gets to school it is overloaded with children. The bus has children standing in it and children sitting "3 for 2", and one wonders what has happened in the intervening period. Why have we not addressed this issue, and why have we not dealt with it?

In Northern Ireland we are fairly stingy when it comes to taking our children to and from school. We spend £381 per child on school transport. Scotland spends £515 and England £542 — £721 in London. We are taking our children to school on the cheap. We must look at that seriously.

Through the Department for Regional Development, Translink bid for £50 million for additional buses over a three-year period; £25 million for the first year and £25 million for the other two years. The bid was rejected by the Executive. Therefore, when one hears the discussions about encouraging people to use public transport or safer

transport, while a bid such as that has been totally rejected, one wonders where the Executive are coming from.

I want to deal with several issues in the report, and I want to put some things on the record. First, the Department of the Environment informed the Committee that, in an inspection of 178 buses run by education and library boards in February 2000, 37 were found to be in breach of the law and nine were prohibited from further use. For the record, 18 vehicles had no road service licence, six had no public service vehicle (PSV) test certificate, six were without a PSV driving licence, two were without excise duty, and there were four other offences, including failure to display school signs. That is not acceptable or satisfactory. We simply cannot afford to have vehicles on our roads that are not meeting the standard.

I have heard people pooh-pooh the report, saying that it is unrealistic and that the finances involved do not stand up. People can reject the Committee's views; they can say that we are just busybody politicians, but perhaps they will pay attention to RUC traffic branch, because it had a major role in ensuring the safe passage of people on our roads. Ch Insp Hiller told the Committee without ambiguity that

"we must get the buses right and put seat belts in place. We must put large amber lights on buses to make them clearly visible; hazard warning lights are inadequate because they are 18 inches from the ground and quite small ... the American system is very clear. The concept is excellent. Americans seem to take these matters much more seriously than we have in the past."

That makes things very clear. There is nothing that allows any room for manoeuvre. It must be done. Seat belts must be fitted on our buses.

Private coach operators who want to transport children must fit seat belts. The children on all those large coaches are all seated and wearing seat belts — or at least they all have the opportunity to wear them, if the law is properly enforced. Translink pointed out what it seemed to think was the major difference between its buses and coaches — Translink buses are restricted to 58 mph, while coaches are restricted to 62 mph. That makes the difference between Translink not having to put seat belts in its buses and private coach operators having to put them in. Frankly, the argument does not stand up.

Ch Insp Hiller went on to say in terms of accidents and the potential risk:

"the seat backs and so forth are non-absorbent, so they do not absorb the impact. Anyone standing will automatically become a projectile, particularly in a frontal impact. There will obviously be a pile-up towards the front of the bus."

I have watched the advertisement on television that Minister Nesbitt's Department funds. You see the young man in the back of the car with no seat belt on. You can see his head crashing into the face of the young woman. It is very vivid and realistic. However, here we have the

same Department ignoring the situation in relation to young people on buses.

1.30 pm

It is saying that young men and women in the back of cars must wear a seat belt but that young children travelling to school in a bus can stand or be seated without wearing one. I will quote a final comment from Ch Insp Hiller:

"In our view it is simply not right, it is not safe. Without commenting on Translink, common sense would tell you that unless you take steps to restrict the potential for a serious accident, it is only a matter of time until it happens."

Last December, a young man alighted from a school bus. He walked round to the back of the bus, and there was no traffic coming up behind it. He walked to the middle of the road and found that some traffic was coming the other way. He stood waiting for that to clear. In the interim period, several other vehicles came up the side of the road that was originally clear, one of which was a van. Its wing mirror caught the young chap on the side of his head. His mother came and found him lying on the road. There were no broken bones; apparently, he had no serious injuries. However, whatever part of the vehicle hit that young lad on the side of the head, it killed him.

If buses that were leaving children off had signage and a system that ensured that vehicles were not allowed to pass on either side until the bus moved off, that young man would be alive. That is the simple fact of the matter, and if that had held up the cars for around 30 seconds or one minute, so be it. What was the cost to that life? For that we are not looking for millions of pounds to be spent; we are looking for simple legislation to be passed. It would perhaps slow down traffic for a brief period, but young people are being killed getting on and off buses.

If the Minister believes that he cannot afford to put "3 for 2" seating in or make school buses non-standing, surely we can afford to get proper signage and lighting on buses. Surely we can address seriously children's safe passage when they are boarding and alighting from buses. If we cannot and will not do that, we are ignoring the needs of our community and the needs of the children in it. I appeal to the Minister to implement this report. I want him to implement it in full, but he should certainly begin with the recommendations that are easiest to implement. He must start taking the issue seriously.

Mr Foster: I welcome the report before the Assembly today. Road safety is vital. It was vital when I was Minister in the Department. This is undoubtedly a serious issue. I refute the accusations thrust towards the Department that when I was Minister, we did not take any action. I can assure Members that we care deeply about road safety. I feel duty bound to speak on this motion — not necessarily to support every one of the many recommendations, but to caution that perhaps not enough thought has been put into whether some of them are realistic. Let us proceed with caution.

I can but assume that we all support the depth of feeling and care put into the report. None of us here would ever want to hear that a child, somebody's loved one, had been killed or severely injured in an accident going to or coming from school. One death is one death far too many. Sadly, there was a death in my home county of Fermanagh towards the end of last year.

I speak as a parent and a grandparent. I am aware of the fears of many people in these days of heavy traffic and collisions, which result in many fatalities and cause so much heartbreak and heartache to families and friends. However, let me make it abundantly clear that no matter what is said by people here today — and I have no doubt that they are sincere, — nobody has a monopoly on the care or provision necessary to protect an innocent child from collisions. Such remarks are not made to try to challenge or to doubt the sincerity of those who support the report in full. I commend the Committee for its deliberations.

The Committee has made 28 recommendations that translate into some 40 actions that cross-cut several Departments. The four key recommendations are: abolishing the “3 for 2” provision for public service vehicles; no standing on publicly and privately operated road passenger vehicles; the need to have seat belts on those vehicles; and proposals for new signage and lighting requirements for school buses. Those recommendations will require a comprehensive impact assessment, which will include an analysis of the cost of implementing the changes and the potential road safety benefits that would accrue.

The Department — and I am not speaking on its behalf today — must secure expert advice to assess the detailed implementation of the Committee's recommendations. The Chairperson of the Committee, Dr McCrea, must recall the points that I made in my letter to him of 12 December 2001 when I was Minister of the Environment.

The Department of the Environment, the Department of Education, the Department for Regional Development and Translink are all involved in making provision to try, at the very least, to save a child from injury or death. They will assume most of the responsibility for trying to effect such action as would help to prevent collisions. However, there are some minor, but nevertheless important, actions that stem from the Committee's report that could be introduced to improve safety and which would not require major expenditure — and several Members have already referred to expenditure. Urgent re-evaluation is required. That will not be easy because children can be taken to school in a family car, in a relative's or friend's vehicle, by Ulsterbus, by school bus or by rail to the nearest station. The different conveyances used make it more difficult to co-ordinate action to ensure safety.

The education and library boards have the power to ensure that their vehicles do what is expected within the law. A suggestion has been made that all vehicles must

stop when children are alighting from a bus. However, there is great danger in that. If all traffic has to stop when children alight from a school bus and are about to cross the road, children could be under the false premise that traffic stops every time people alight from a bus, and there could be horrible consequences. There is a danger that children would be given a false sense of security when alighting from an ordinary service bus. That is a vital point.

Parents or guardians should have a duty to ensure that their children get to school safely. Entitlement to school transport is conditional on primary schoolchildren living more than two miles from school or public transport. Secondary schoolchildren are entitled to school transport if they live at least three miles from school or public transport. Many children travel on school buses as a concession. Not all schoolchildren can obtain transport to school, so many are in an “at risk” situation. However, life is not without risks. Any collision by a school bus with children on board would be a tragedy. There are always risks in life, and families should take greater responsibility to ensure that their offspring are protected against injury or death.

I commend the report and its good intent, but I think that it should have acknowledged the reality of the situation and not have built up expectations.

The education and library boards could improve the situation if a personal supervisor were to assist on the buses and keep a watching brief on pupils who do not always act their age. The bus drivers have enough to do without also having to conduct and control pupils. It is the drivers' responsibility to concentrate on the road, and nothing should distract them from that. Overcrowding and standing are not acceptable, and the roadworthiness of buses is also important.

It is easier to be an advocate than the person who takes necessary action. I refute the accusations that have been thrust at my former Department and myself. Dr McCrea does not have a monopoly on care and compassion — we all care.

I acknowledge the report. However, I cannot accept it hook, line and sinker, because it encourages aspirations that are unlikely to be easily fulfilled. It is somewhat dishonest to raise such expectations.

When we consider the large number of deaths on the roads these days, there is a thought for all of us:

“But O for the touch of a vanished hand,
And the sound of a voice that is still!”

Mr Savage: Like many Members who have spoken today, I serve on the boards of governors of several schools. It is impressed upon school governors that they have a duty of care towards the children in the schools. The Assembly has a duty of care towards all the children of Northern Ireland. With that in mind, I wish to see the

introduction of measures that will improve the safety of children alighting from school buses, particularly in country areas.

Traffic on country roads, especially where there are no speed limits, can be fast. That is not good for children alighting from school buses. A simple measure that could greatly enhance children's safety is the clear marking of school buses. That was mentioned earlier in the debate. We are all aware, from American films on television, of the purpose-built yellow school buses in the United States. It may seem to be a small thing, but brightly coloured school buses could make an important contribution to saving lives, particularly when the buses have to travel in country areas in the early morning or late in the evening when visibility is reduced.

We should always be aware that children might be on a road. Whenever one sees a bus, one can be sure that someone is going to get on or off it. I congratulate the Committee for the Environment on bringing forward its proposals today. However, we must ensure that drivers are made to exercise greater care — especially on small country roads, where people may not be as careful as the rest of us. There will always be someone who will flout the law. As time goes on, more and more children will use school transport. We can go a long way today towards solving the problems that the report highlights.

A clear message that has come out of the debate today is that cost is a major factor. However, what cost do you put on the life of a young child? Regardless of family, colour or religion, a child's life cannot be replaced. I am glad that the Minister of Education and the Minister of the Environment are both present today. I say to them that we frequently hear about discrimination, but in my constituency there are many places where groups of children get on and off school buses. It is wrong that some have to pay while others do not. All children should have free transport to school. That would save time when boarding or alighting from the buses, and it would save the energy of the bus drivers. I hope that I live to see the day when all children will have free transport. I support the motion.

1.45 pm

The Minister of the Environment (Mr Nesbitt): I have listened with great interest — and I say that in all sincerity — to the debate. I support wholeheartedly the sentiments that Members have expressed in word and spirit. Road safety is a top priority for the Department of the Environment. Quite often, road deaths and injuries are avoidable and, as often as not, they are the result of human error such as carelessness, inattention, excessive speed, alcohol consumption or failure to wear seat belts.

The death or injury of a child is especially tragic. Parents and grandparents know that a child represents a bundle of opportunity. Therefore, the Department of the Environment has an onerous responsibility to ensure that it does

everything possible to promote road safety. I speak for all Ministers, especially those who are directly responsible for road safety — Mr McGuinness and Peter Robinson and I — when I say that we will continue to do all that we can to improve this aspect of road safety.

I will make some general comments on the Committee for the Environment's report. I listened carefully to Dr McCrea's comments. He said that he gave an honest, open account of the situation. I share many of the sentiments expressed in his report. He concluded by saying that

“we will seldom ever have a more serious issue before us”.

I concur with that. There is seldom a more serious issue than that of the life of a child, the future of Northern Ireland, so I thank the Chairperson and the Committee for their extensive work. I assure the Assembly that my ministerial Colleagues and I are considering seriously the Committee report, as did my predecessor, Mr Foster. I also support what he said.

A comprehensive evaluation is needed and will be carried out on the key recommendations. I emphasise the words “comprehensive evaluation” and “key recommendations” because the evaluation will be complex and lengthy. Some 28 recommendations and 44 actions were proposed. They fall within the competence of the Department of the Environment, the Department of Education and the Department for Regional Development. Each of those Departments will develop the specific recommendations for which they are responsible.

The length of time that the Department of the Environment took to respond was commented upon. The Department of Education and the Department for Regional Development each made an initial response in November. The Department of the Environment, as the overall umbrella Department, produced — and it took until February — a comprehensive response compiling the three Departments' recommendations and detailing how each is to be progressed. Therefore, the wait from November to February was justified.

We have discussed key recommendations and what needs to be done. One aspect that filtered through the debate was the financial implication. That is relevant. Nothing crystallises the mind more than having to live within one's budget. That applies also to school safety provision.

I shall look at the main recommendations briefly. I said that there were four key recommendations. The words of the report are:

“on the clear need to increase safety and quality standards of the transport used for home to school transport.”

The four recommendations were simple to state: the abolition of the “3 for 2” provision; the phased introduction of no standing for schoolchildren on buses; the phased introduction of lap and diagonal seat belts for all schoolchildren; and improved signage and flashing lights.

Dr McCrea rightly said that those recommendations have far-reaching implications, and I accept that. He also made a point about the financial implications. A third point that he made was that, although the recommendations are far-reaching, that does not mean that nothing can be done in the interim. Something is being done.

The financial implications are important. I was struck by Mr Kennedy's comment that, whenever action is decided, funds should not be taken from the classroom. We are mindful that he is asking that the Committee for the Environment and I support the Minister of Education if or when he bids for funds. I note that in passing.

I shall touch on the aspect of expenditure and give an indication of the cost to implement the four recommendations. The abolition of the "3 for 2" seating provision will have an estimated capital cost of £3 million and an annual running cost of £2 million. The abolition of standing on school buses will incur a capital cost of £38 million and annual running costs of £21 million. Seat belts will have a capital cost of £140 million and an estimated annual running cost of £40 million. The cost of new hazard lights is currently not known in detail. However, the costs will amount to £181 million for capital expenditure and £63 million for the annual running costs for the simple implementation of the four key principles, which is not inconsequential.

I have looked generally at the detailed recommendations and at the costs involved. I said earlier that a comprehensive impact assessment and a cost-benefit analysis of the more detailed recommendations is required. That analysis will include a more accurate estimate of the cost of implementing the changes. In looking at the costs, we must also assess the benefits — namely the potential road safety benefits of putting that multi-million spend into place. That will require appropriate, expert and professional advice. A new post has already been created in the Department to undertake that work and to be responsible for co-ordinating external advice.

To implement the four main recommendations will require a robust case to be made to the Executive. Significant resources are required for their implementation. Rapid decisions on the four main recommendations will not happen; we must undertake the assessment. As I have said, the analysis will be complex and comprehensive. I wish to make it clear that I empathise with what the Committee says about what needs to be done. However, the report did not offer the *prima facie* case, that road safety benefits were likely to be commensurate with full implementation. Figures were mentioned, which I shall come to, but the *prima facie* case was not there. Perhaps a *prima facie* case could not be offered, given what the Committee was doing — and I do not say that as a criticism of the Committee. Therefore, the Executive's approach to the analysis of these four key elements must be detailed, sensible and pragmatic.

The child road casualties are the important element. It has been shown that children are significantly more at risk as pedestrians or as car passengers than they are as bus passengers. In the last four years 131 children were killed or seriously injured while travelling to or from school, but none of those killed and only six of those injured were occupants of buses, coaches or minibuses. That is a small proportion. Mr Gallagher said that most fatal accidents occur when alighting from or boarding buses, and Mr McHugh perceived the problem as being outside school buses, not actually on the buses. The statistics indicate that the problem arises in the vicinity of buses, but I do not want to reduce a sensitive issue to mere statistics.

The Committee's report on page 1, under the heading "Collision Statistics 1995-1999: Children Under 16 Years Travelling To and From School" shows that the statistics do not distinguish between slight and serious injuries and that children travelling to and from school are grouped under different modes of transport — bus and car/van. Those statistics do not, however, disaggregate. When the figures are disaggregated it is found that travel on buses is safer than it is in a car or as a pedestrian.

Therefore, children's behaviour coming from or going to school, in and around school bus stops and alighting from or boarding a bus is widely accepted as requiring attention. Road safety education is a key area. As Mr McCrea said, the fact that the issues are complex does not mean that nothing can be done. The Department of the Environment has taken that aspect seriously. Under Mr Foster's guidance, the number of road safety officers was increased from 11 to 21 — in other words, it almost doubled. That enables us to intensify those officers' work in schools and to allow the introduction of new education initiatives. For example, we will ensure that every school is visited at least twice a year, amounting to 4,000 visits by departmental education officers to schools. That is a significant contribution to education and road safety. We are mindful that the danger lies in alighting from and boarding buses. Through the remit of the education officers, the Department of the Environment also gives valuable support by providing teaching material worth £650,000 on road safety in schools.

2.00 pm

Those are among the Department's attempts to educate young people about road safety. However, there will be other initiatives. Mr Gallagher said that schools should be made particularly aware of safety. My Colleague, Ken Robinson, said that people were often glib about road safety. We must ensure that people are conscious of road safety. My Department will introduce practical child pedestrian training in October 2002, in support of classroom training. Later this year we will introduce a new initiative called the "children's traffic club", as part of which the parents of every three-year-old will receive six free books on road safety at three-monthly intervals.

The thrust towards education is part of the Department's structured approach to encourage parents to teach pre-schoolchildren about road safety.

The Department will be examining other initiatives on education and publicity. I am conscious of the problems, and I intend to ensure that children and other vulnerable road users become more alert to the dangers of the roads — that permeates everything that must be done. It applies not only to children but to drivers and motorcyclists. People must recognise buses as critical danger zones for children.

Ken Robinson, Mr Kennedy and Ms Morrice referred to the school bus system in the United States. Although the Executive have overall responsibility for the matter, recommendations relating to the American model are matters for the Department of Education and the Department for Regional Development. My Department's responsibility is limited to ensuring that any vehicles used as part of pilot or permanent schemes meet the relevant technical standards.

The two principal features of the American system are purpose-built buses — we have seen them in the movies or during visits to America — and road traffic rules that require motorists travelling in each direction to stop when the buses are stationary. Both were mentioned today. The matter requires careful examination, as I will demonstrate. Such road traffic rules would be the responsibility of the Department for Regional Development, and if it wished to introduce such rules, my Department would be fully behind it in assisting with the provision of any necessary public information. My Department has spent much time and effort on road safety education.

It might be beneficial to prohibit the overtaking of buses that have stopped to allow children to alight. However, we do not have dedicated school buses, such as those in America. If we adopted such a system, children might presume that it is safe to cross the road when any bus stops and that traffic will have stopped. They might develop the habit of running across the road, without worrying about traffic, after alighting from a bus. That is a serious point. I am not saying that the recommendation is wrong; but something of that nature requires serious consideration before it is introduced.

A pilot scheme is currently underway in Calderdale, Yorkshire, managed by the Department for Transport, Local Government and the Regions. It began in February 2002 using adapted American buses. It does not include traffic control measures for such things as overtaking, or speed restrictions. However, the Department of the Environment is mindful of what is happening there and will monitor the scheme closely.

Dr Paisley raised the issue that 101 children being crammed on board a 53-seater bus was a calamity waiting to happen. I agree that that is indefensible. However, the Assembly must ensure that when statistics are used, they are not misleading. The figure of 101 is simply calculated

from the theoretical "3 for 2" maximum number on a bus, allowing for standing passengers. However, the figure of 101 does not operate in practice. The Committee for the Environment reported that Translink carries a maximum of 75 passengers on each bus and makes limited use of the "3 for 2" provision.

The report also stated that the education and library boards have an operating maximum of 79 passengers per bus, and they do not permit standing. Translink and the education and library boards are at liberty to reduce standing and the "3 for 2" provision. That does not require legal change. However, it would have significant financial implications. I empathise with Dr Paisley's sentiments about cramming on school buses. The Assembly must, however, be mindful of the statistics.

Mr B Hutchinson: The Department of the Environment has released a hard-hitting advert about the dangers of not wearing a seat belt. The emphasis is put on a young lad who does not strap himself in and causes his girlfriend permanent brain damage. Considering what Dr Paisley and his Colleagues have said, I assumed that the issue being discussed is that when people are standing on buses they become potential projectiles.

Mr Nesbitt: I do not deny that people standing on buses can become projectiles. The House does not want to reduce such a sensitive issue to statistics. However, in that context, there are more road killings and injuries involving cars than involving buses or pedestrians. That advertisement is directed particularly at people who do not wear seat belts in the back seats. At speed, the back seat passenger can project forward. I accept the Member's point. However, I must also put it into context.

Ms Morrice suggested the "walking bus". She praised its introduction. I thank her for reminding me about it. A walking bus pilot scheme has taken place at Moneyreagh Primary School. For people who are not fully conversant with the idea, a walking bus is not a vehicle, but an organised party of children walking to and from school under parental supervision. Those taking part are appropriately dressed in fluorescent or reflective garments. The Department is assisting two schools in Limavady and Ballymoney to organise similar walking buses in September 2002, and aims to further promote the practice in Northern Ireland. I thank Ms Morrice for raising the issue and enabling me to draw it to the Assembly's attention.

I assure the Assembly that we are, have been, and will continue giving the Committee's report serious consideration. I say that not on behalf of my Department but as a representative of the Executive. It is for other Ministers to bring forward their own thoughts on the report, but the Executive are seriously considering it.

Detailed evaluations of the key recommendations will be conducted as quickly and as practically as possible. A new official is in post to conduct the research and analysis. We are not standing still. To paraphrase Mr McCrea's initial

comments, the fact that some of the big things cannot be done does not mean that nothing can be done. I have mentioned areas where we have been doing things and will continue to do things.

I repeat the commitment that I made at the outset: none of us wants to see any road deaths. Most of them are avoidable, but the road death or injury of a child is particularly sensitive. Therefore, I have no doubt that all Members who took part in the debate are not, and should not be, trying to score political points. Rather, we should try to do what is right for the future of Northern Ireland, because the future lies with the children.

Rev Dr William McCrea: I thank the Members who participated in the debate for their largely positive and constructive contributions. The seriousness of the issue is clear to everyone in the Chamber. For a long time, safety on school buses has been a major concern to parents and school principals, which is why the Committee sought to address the matter in greater detail. Immediate action is required on the detailed recommendations brought forward by the Committee.

I want to deal with some of the contributions, but, because I have been allotted only 10 minutes, I cannot reply to many comments. Mr Nesbitt said that we should not seek to score political points. I do not know where the Minister got that from or why he felt it relevant. Let me make it abundantly clear that it was the unanimous opinion of the entire Committee.

I was saddened that the former Minister of the Environment, Mr Foster, chose to attack me personally by saying that I do not have a monopoly on compassion or caring. I have never sought to bring forward my personal opinion in Committee, although I fully endorse and wholeheartedly agree with the report. I have sought to represent honestly and fairly the unanimous opinion of the Committee. The Committee members who spoke today made it abundantly clear that the report represents the unanimous opinion of the Committee.

I do not know why there was a personal attack or why seeking to score political points was mentioned. This issue has nothing to do with scoring political points. We are talking about one of the most serious matters affecting the lives of families and communities — the lives and safety of our children.

2.15 pm

Irrespective of the school he or she is going to or coming from, every child is of equal importance, and we value the lives of all our children. I trust that that has nothing to do with scoring political points, but that it has everything to do with the safety of our children's transport. For that I will never apologise. It constitutes the main thrust of the report, and I stand wholeheartedly by that.

The report does not state that we have a monopoly on care or that we should beat our chests and say that we

have a monopoly on wisdom. No one has a monopoly on wisdom or anything else. Let us be honest; surely we all learn something through the Assembly, and surely this debate has made us all think carefully. The contribution of the Member for East Antrim, Mr Ken Robinson, was a thoughtful and helpful contribution. He put his finger on many points that concerned Committee members and which should concern the Assembly. He referred to fundamental principles and impressed the importance of several recommendations on the Assembly. We should recognise those points and act on them.

Let me therefore repeat: any notion that this matter concerns party political issues must be completely removed. It is a political issue, and this is a political forum. It affects all our children, irrespective of the party people support, and I will defend the right of every parent to demand that the Chamber represent their will and their wish for their children to travel to school in safety. That is the burden and the emphasis of the report.

I take seriously the comments of the Chairperson of the Committee for Education, and I support Mr Kennedy's call for the education and library boards to progress pilot schemes to improve safety in boarding and alighting from school buses. Mr Kennedy also mentioned action being taken by education and library boards, but unfortunately my Committee has no information on that matter. That highlights the need for co-ordinated action by officials from the Departments involved, with the Department of the Environment taking the lead.

The Member for North Down, Jane Morrice, mentioned that the Committee was too lenient about phased proposals to prevent standing on buses and to provide seat belts. I understand her point, but it contradicts the opinion of some people who thought that the Committee was pie in the sky and unrealistic. The Committee was criticised for being too soft. It shows, however, that the Committee was careful to frame its recommendations in order to ensure implementation and to address priorities. It endeavoured to do that with consideration, not thoughtlessly or recklessly. I know that many people would have liked matters to be rushed ahead.

I take seriously the point made by my hon Friend Dr Paisley in respect of 101 children in a 53-seater bus. In their evidence to the Committee the police said that it is legal to carry 101 children or less in such a bus. In 2002 it should not be acceptable that such a situation is considered legal. The Minister said that that does not happen, and he pointed out that the report stated that the number of children on a Translink bus was 75, and the number on an Ulsterbus was 79. The Minister should know that that is the evidence that was given to the Committee; it is not an assumption that the Committee made.

However, the Member for East Londonderry, Mr A Doherty, reminded the Assembly that two principals told the Committee in oral evidence that up to 90 children

per bus were travelling to their schools. Where did the figures of 75 and 79 go to? The Committee dealt with the hard evidence that it was given. Those principals were seriously concerned. What message is the Minister giving? Ninety children are being crammed into one bus, and yet we put advertisements on television that lecture the importance of having seat belts in the back of cars.

The figures mentioned are 75, 79 and 90 — up to 101. The Assembly is giving those young people a dual message; it would be fair of them to assume that it is not really serious. The Police Service provided the Committee with the following statement about the wearing of seat belts:

“Our paramount priority is road safety, although we understand that there are other issues such as the environment and congestion. We want to see children on school buses afforded the same opportunity for protection as afforded to those travelling in cars”.

Therefore, the Committee could not close its mind to that issue. It is a calamity waiting to happen.

The Member for Upper Bann, Mr Savage, asked what cost could be put on a life. That is strange because, when the Committee asked that question, his Colleague condemned it as being emotive. Those are double standards. The Committee is genuinely concerned by the value that is put on the lives of our children and by their safety when they travel to school. The report goes to ensure that they travel in safety. Therefore, it is with confidence and conviction that I commend it to the Assembly.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That this Assembly approves the Report of the Committee for the Environment on its Inquiry into Transport used for children travelling to and from school (1/01R) and calls on the Minister of the Environment to ensure urgent evaluation and to take full account of the recommendations.

The sitting was suspended at 2.23 pm

On resuming (Mr Speaker in the Chair) —

2.30 pm

Oral Answers to Questions

FIRST MINISTER AND DEPUTY FIRST MINISTER

Mr Speaker: I wish to inform the House that question 3, in the name of Mr McGrady, has been withdrawn and will receive a written answer.

City Status (Newry)

1. **Mr Kennedy** asked the Office of the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister to make a statement on the granting of city status to Newry. (AQO 1138/01)

The First Minister (Mr Trimble): We were pleased to note the granting of city status to Newry and Lisburn this month to mark Her Majesty's Golden Jubilee. People of both these new cities have every right to be proud of their new status and to be congratulated on their success, which was achieved against significant competition from towns across the United Kingdom, including others in Northern Ireland.

Mr Kennedy: I welcome the First Minister's message of congratulations to the people of Newry on achieving their new status, graciously conferred by Her Majesty The Queen as part of her Golden Jubilee celebrations. Does the First Minister agree with me that it is incumbent on the chairman of Newry and Mourne District Council to invite Her Majesty The Queen to Newry to present the letters patent in person, and, in recognition of his position as chairman, to receive Her Majesty in a proper manner, thereby representing the wishes of all local people from all local traditions?

The First Minister: I am sure most people, if not everybody, in Newry would welcome the prospect of Her Majesty's visiting the new city and presenting the letters patent in person. Regarding the position of the first citizen of the new city, I am sure he will be prepared to take a leaf out of the book of the DUP. I noticed that on Friday of last week the DUP mayor of Derry City Council was there to welcome the President of Ireland on the occasion of her visit there. I am quite sure that Sinn Féin will be only too happy to follow the DUP's example on this matter.

Mr Bradley: Does the First Minister recognise the immense communal effort made by the people of Newry to achieve city status, and does he agree with me that Newry City, situated almost equidistant from Dublin and Belfast, now represents a key location for investment?

The First Minister: I am happy to recognise the communal effort referred to by the Member. With regard to the question of location for investment, the Member will recall that we decided to locate the headquarters of Inter-TradeIreland in Newry precisely for the reasons he gives.

Mr Close: As one of the proud citizens of that other great city, Lisburn, I ask the Office of the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister to ensure that there are no impediments, either bureaucratic or legal, in the full implementation of city status to both Lisburn and Newry. We want to ensure that the necessary and appropriate signage and advertising is done without delay.

The First Minister: I am sure that is a desire shared by the entire Administration. I am not aware that there are any impediments, legal or otherwise, but if there are, I am sure we will look at them sympathetically.

Confidence and Reconciliation

2. **Mr McElduff** asked the Office of the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister what steps it is taking to instil confidence and assist reconciliation on a North/South basis throughout Ireland. (AQO 1139/01)

The Deputy First Minister (Mr Durkan): We refer the Member to the Declaration of Support contained in the Good Friday Agreement:

“We are committed to partnership, equality and mutual respect as the basis of relationships within Northern Ireland, between North and South, and between these islands. We reaffirm our total and absolute commitment to exclusively democratic and peaceful means of resolving differences on political issues, and our opposition to any use or threat of force by others for any political purpose, whether in regard to this agreement or otherwise.”

We wholeheartedly reaffirm the letter and spirit of that declaration.

We recognise the work being done within the Executive and by other organisations to foster and promote reconciliation, not just within our community but also more widely between North and South. We are totally committed to implementing all of the elements of the agreement and to promoting a culture of tolerance at every level of society.

Mr McElduff: Has the Office of the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister reflected on the offensive and damaging remarks of the First Minister with regard to society in the rest of Ireland when he claimed that it is sectarian, mono-cultural, mono-ethnic and pathetic? I did anticipate perhaps that the First Minister would address question 2. Nonetheless, that was avoided. However, would the Deputy First Minister care to comment on the damage —

Mr Speaker: Order. The Member must be a little cautious about some of the accusations he makes in that regard. I think that it is the case that the First Minister and

the Deputy First Minister have always followed things through in a fairly orderly fashion, in fairness to them.

Mr McElduff: Will the Deputy First Minister comment on the damage caused by those remarks to confidence and reconciliation on the island of Ireland?

The Deputy First Minister: I have said before that the remarks that the Member is referring to were made by the leader of the Ulster Unionist Party at a meeting of the Ulster Unionist Council. I, in my capacity as leader of the SDLP, rightly registered my profound disagreement with them. On other occasions, I have also registered my concern about how others would interpret them and the impact that they might have on people's attitudes to the agreement. That has been done through all the relevant channels, and Question Time is not a particularly appropriate channel for dealing with issues that arise outside the Office of the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister.

Rev Dr Ian Paisley: Does the Deputy First Minister not agree with me that the action at the weekend of IRA/Sinn Féin in saluting the Provo volunteers in the line of duty and talking about their noble cause, which drove many to their graves and made widows and orphans throughout the Province, and which the party opposite and the spokesman who is questioning today engaged in, would lessen any chance of getting reconciliation between people of different views in this country?

Mr Speaker: Order. I must remind the Member and the House that Ministers should be asked questions about matters that are within their areas of ministerial responsibility. The Ministers should, therefore, respond to questions within those areas of their ministerial responsibility.

The Deputy First Minister: The real relevance of the Member's question might be in the context of the victims strategy that was launched last week. We all need to do more and work harder. It is not just the devolved Departments whose locus is being looked at in the victims strategy. We all need to do more to show the fullest possible sensitivity to all the victims who were created by the violence that we had in the last generation.

It was a party political event at the weekend, which seems to demonstrate a linkage and an association by one party with a particular armed movement — something which, on other occasions, that party is at pains to deny. Nevertheless, it was a party political event. My views as the leader of the SDLP and the SDLP's views have been registered elsewhere on that. As with the earlier question, I do not believe that Question Time for the Office of the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister is a suitable channel for dealing with those views.

Mr Gallagher: Does the Minister recognise the full potential that exists under the Good Friday Agreement for assisting North/South reconciliation? That potential exists especially in the independent consultative body

and the North/South parliamentary body. Can the Minister tell us what progress has been made towards setting up those institutions?

The Deputy First Minister: I agree that the agreement has the potential to assist North/South reconciliation. The issue of the North/South consultative forum is being taken forward by a joint working group under the auspices of the North/South Ministerial Council, with the final report expected at the next plenary meeting.

We recognise the advantages that would accrue in establishing such a structure. It would allow interests North and South to come together to share experiences and address issues of importance and relevance to both for mutual benefit. This has been covered in the report that the First Minister and I tabled on the meeting in institutional format.

In making that report, we also tabled the annual report of the North/South Ministerial Council, which detailed the work of the Council, the various implementation bodies and Tourism Ireland Ltd — all paying testimony to the benefits of North/South co-operation. Under the agreement, the parliamentary forum is a matter for the Assembly and the Oireachtas to consider. I would like to see that consideration being activated sooner rather than later.

Prime Minister — Meetings

4. **Mr Armstrong** asked the Office of the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister to detail any recent meetings with the Prime Minister. (AQO 1113/01)

11. **Mr McMenamin** asked the Office of the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister what plans it has to meet the Prime Minister. (AQO 1132/01)

The Deputy First Minister: With permission, Mr Speaker, we wish to group questions 4 and 11 together. We last officially met with the Prime Minister on 7 March. We plan to have regular meetings with the Prime Minister, but further dates for those meetings have not yet been set.

Mr Armstrong: When the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister next meet the Prime Minister, will they convey to the Prime Minister the view that while any act of decommissioning is welcome, confidence in the Good Friday Agreement would be greatly enhanced by a more open and transparent process of arms destruction? That would also give Members of the House some place to hang their hats on the subject of decommissioning.

The Deputy First Minister: This is another question that perhaps takes the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister slightly beyond, or more than slightly beyond, the terms of our departmental portfolio. When meeting jointly with the Prime Minister, the First Minister and I will want to reflect positively on all the constructive developments in the implementation of the

agreement. That includes the further positive move by the IRA on decommissioning. The future form and presentation of decommissioning and the implementation of the scheme is a matter for Gen de Chastelain, and I happily leave that to him.

Mr McMenamin: Representing West Tyrone and living in the border town of Strabane, I ask the Minister to convey to the Prime Minister the fact that virtually all my constituency is now a dual currency zone. Will he urge the Prime Minister to accelerate entry to the euro?

The Deputy First Minister: First, I want to take this opportunity to express the solidarity felt across the Assembly with the Member when he suffered a menacing attack on his property recently.

Several Members: Hear, hear.

The Deputy First Minister: I take the Member's question in the terms in which it has been asked. It is true that the influence of the euro and the inroads made in its circulation are significant, particularly in border areas such as that represented by the Member. Many businesses operate a dual currency system. However, that is not a matter of Executive policy. This question is not alone in taking us slightly beyond the brief of the Office of the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister when representing Assembly views.

However, the Minister for Europe, Mr Hain, was here recently; the Minister of Finance and Personnel, Dr Farren, and I had separate meetings with him. He made a point of going to Newry to experience the impact of the euro in a border area. Undoubtedly, he came away with a better idea of its actual impact in areas of the North than he would have had if he had not so visited.

Mr Paisley Jnr: With regard to the amnesty for terrorists on the run, can the Deputy First Minister inform the House if the First Minister has taken a different view in these meetings with the Prime Minister to that which he argued during the Weston Park discussions? Can he tell us what that view is? In the Deputy First Minister's view, will there be an extension to the Weston Park proposal for an amnesty for gunmen?

2.45 pm

The Deputy First Minister: The matter that the Member refers to has not been the subject of any of the joint meetings of the First and Deputy First Ministers, nor should it be. While the First Minister is the leader of the Ulster Unionist Party and I am the leader of the SDLP, when we are doing business as the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister we make a careful distinction between those roles. It is not always easy to be as careful as we should be. Sometimes other parties are very quick to alert us to the difference between the two roles, and at other times they seem to be very slow to see the distinction.

It is a matter of record that what emerged as a proposal from the Governments as a result of the Weston Park

discussions was not something that all the other parties at Weston Park were party to or had agreed. That was why the Governments produced the package and only one party was identified with it. The Office of the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister is not so identified.

Mr Speaker: This is an opportunity for Ministers to be held accountable for the things that they are responsible for as Ministers. If Members ask questions that are outwith that — even if they are permitted to go ahead — it merely uses up the time in which Ministers may be properly held to account. Ministers can only give Members nugatory answers making it clear that the matter is not part of their responsibilities as Ministers. That wastes the time for holding Ministers to account for the things for which they are responsible.

Resident Groups

5. **Ms Armitage** asked the Office of the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister if it has any plans to meet resident groups and encourage both communities to show respect for each other's culture in the coming months.

(AQO 1098/01)

The First Minister: We recognise and pay tribute to the valuable work carried out by certain community groups in resolving local issues. The Deputy First Minister and I have jointly met several groups from north Belfast and are engaged in a continuing process of dialogue with them about their circumstances. We do not have any immediate plans to meet residents or other groups in other places. However, we encourage everyone in Northern Ireland to respect each other's culture.

Ms Armitage: Does the Minister agree that community relations are much worse than they were four or five years ago and that we are spending £800,000 to £900,000 to build more peace walls? As we are approaching the season when, traditionally, my — and, I assume, the First Minister's — culture is celebrated, will he and the Deputy First Minister encourage people to respect our identity and, in particular, the Deputy First Minister to show respect for what I assume is the culture of the First Minister's tradition? I also think, perhaps in particular, of the Minister of Agriculture. It is important. We have a basic human right and we have a culture. Will the two Ministers give me an assurance that they will do everything possible to ensure that that culture is recognised and its celebration allowed this year? *[Interruption]*. Sorry?

Mr Speaker: Order.

The First Minister: As I said, we —

Ms Armitage: I do not think that it is particularly funny.

Mr Speaker: Order.

The First Minister: We encourage everyone in Northern Ireland to respect each other's culture. I do not agree

with the Member's comment that community relations have got worse. In some interface areas in north Belfast there is an apparent deterioration in the situation, but I am not sure whether that is a new factor or whether it is the tensions that have always existed coming more clearly into focus now that there is no longer a terrorist campaign. The terrorist campaign had the effect of suppressing or preventing clashes that might otherwise have occurred.

There are many places in Northern Ireland where community relations have improved since the agreement. However, the continuing problems in interface areas are a clear message to everyone that if we wish to encourage and improve community relations, we have to address the problems in interface areas. If we wish to improve community relations, we all have a responsibility to defuse tensions over traditional parades.

Mr Watson: Will the Office of the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister give serious consideration to establishing a task force, similar to that in north Belfast, to investigate the intercommunity tensions that have arisen in Portadown, where the threat of violence ensures that diversities are not celebrated in peace, harmony and understanding of each other?

The First Minister: I am deeply conscious, as the Member can no doubt imagine, of both the similarities and the dissimilarities between north Belfast and the situation in Portadown, particularly with regard to Drumcree. If we are successful in defusing the problems in north Belfast, we will have to look seriously at what lessons may be learned from the action we are taking there, and to what extent those lessons may be applicable elsewhere. As I said a moment ago, if we are looking at how to improve community relations, we must focus on areas like north Belfast. We have to consider carefully whether there is something we can do and, if so, how to do it. Nothing would give me or, I am sure, the Deputy First Minister more pleasure than to be able to defuse the interface problems that we have in both of the areas that have been mentioned.

Mr Shannon: What plans, if any, does the Office of the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister have to meet those involved in the Orange Institution to ensure that the culture that I, and others on this side of the Chamber adhere to, is maintained and enhanced? Many people believe that that culture has second-class status. What steps are being taken to address that?

The First Minister: I do not accept the point that the culture that the Member refers to is second-class. We are all aware of the problems that exist, but those relate essentially to parading. The Member will know that a review of the Parades Commission is under way. He will have the opportunity therefore to make his views felt and to make submissions to the person carrying out the review. It is a reserved matter and not one in which

we as First Minister and Deputy First Minister can, in that capacity, engage.

Lesbian and Bisexual Women

6. **Mrs E Bell** asked the Office of the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister if it will implement the recommendations of 'A Mighty Silence — A Report on the Needs of Lesbian and Bisexual Women in Northern Ireland'. (AQO 1116/01)

The Deputy First Minister: We welcome the report as a useful outline of the needs and services available in that community. Our officials are giving the document careful consideration. The report's recommendations relate to the establishment of a new advocacy organisation to represent lesbian and bisexual women and the change in the role of the lesbian advocacy services initiative, which commissioned the report. It is therefore for it to consider implementing the recommendations.

Mrs E Bell: I thank the Deputy First Minister for that heartening reply. I take on board the considerations that have been raised, but within those, can some work be done to ensure that the myths and misinformation surrounding the lesbian and bisexual population are eliminated, that their rights are upheld and that they are given the same priority as others in society?

The Deputy First Minister: Under section 75 of the Northern Ireland Act 1998, all public authorities have a statutory duty to have due regard to the need to promote equality of opportunity between social categories, including sexual orientation. Raising awareness in the positive way that the Member has referred to is part of promoting equality of opportunity. The inclusion of sexual orientation in the statutory duty at section 75 is itself an important milestone in promoting equality of opportunity. However, as the Member's question and the report suggest, there are many problems and misconceptions and many forms of discrimination that we still have to work through and against.

Ms McWilliams: The Deputy First Minister will agree with me that we always want Northern Ireland to avoid any accusation that it is a narrow-minded, pathetic little country. He will have been concerned to read in the report that 20% of those interviewed had been subject to some kind of violent assault. The report reflected on stories of vilification, abuse and isolation. In the light of that, if that is still the case in 2002, will the Office of the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister, with its remit to pursue equality, give some attention to a programme that would help avoid the bullying and harassment of young people in particular, among whom terms of sexual orientation are still used as a form of abuse?

The Deputy First Minister: The NIO has agreed with the Executive to co-ordinate a strategy to tackle violence against women in Northern Ireland. The Member's question

raises the point about whether the strategy can do more to identify some of the issues facing lesbian and bisexual women. We are more than happy to ensure that that is addressed. The Member also raises wider points that affect some people, and we recognise that young people, in particular, are vulnerable to precisely that sort of bullying and the pressures that such bullying can bring. That is apparent in other statistics. The Office of the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister will consider the report, and it will consider how to work through its responsibilities, under section 75 of the Northern Ireland Act 1998, in the Departments involved with the different groups, be they people who suffer because of their sexual orientation or the most vulnerable age groups.

Juvenile Justice

7. **Mr A Maginness** asked the Office of the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister to make a statement on the Northern Ireland Human Rights Commission's report on juvenile justice and, in particular, on what representation has been made to include juvenile justice in the remit of the children's commissioner.

(AQO 1134/01)

The First Minister: The Northern Ireland Human Rights Commission published a highly critical report on the rights of children in custody. The bulk of the report is aimed at the NIO, which has reserved responsibility for criminal justice matters. The Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety and the Department of Education will consider the recommendations that are appropriate to them. The Office of the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister considers it important for the children's commissioner to have a broad remit and for juvenile justice to be included in that. We are working closely with the NIO to that end.

Mr A Maginness: I thank the First Minister for his reply and for his reassurance that juvenile justice will be part of the remit of the children's commissioner. Will he reassure the House that the children's commissioner will have extensive authority and powers on children's matters?

The First Minister: The Office of the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister intends to have an effective children's commissioner, and that requires a range of powers to be given to the commissioner. We were also concerned about ensuring that the grounds on which the powers are exercisable are clearly stated. Juvenile justice is a reserved matter, and we can give the commissioner authoritative power to deal with that area only with the approval of the Secretary of State. His approval is required for those provisions to enable us to legislate in the reserved field. If the Secretary of State withholds his approval, we cannot legislate in that area. We are working with the NIO in that respect. We hope to conclude that work quickly because we are aware of the timetable and of the need to introduce the legislation soon.

E-Government

8. **Dr McDonnell** asked the Office of the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister what progress has been made on the introduction of e-government in OFMDFM, as a Department; the Executive and Government overall; and to make a statement on what plans there are for further developments over the next three years.

(AQO 1126/01)

The Deputy First Minister: Last summer, the Executive endorsed targets for the electronic delivery of 25% of key Government services by 2002, with a target of 100% by 2005. That demonstrates the importance that the Executive attach to e-government as part of the commitment made to modernise Government in the Programme for Government. The Office of the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister has the lead role in developing e-government. In November 2001, we published a corporate strategic framework that set out how Departments should develop their e-government plans. In line with that framework, all Departments, including OFMDFM, have produced an e-business strategy that sets out how we shall achieve the targets for electronic service delivery. The central IT unit in OFMDFM will commission an overarching e-business strategy that will draw together the common threads in the departmental strategies. It will set out the Executive's priorities in electronic service delivery and the potential for joined-up service delivery.

Dr McDonnell: The corporate strategic framework for the delivery of Government services specifies that Departments will consult with their customers to ensure that their needs are addressed. Will the Minister outline any processes that OFMDFM or the subsidiary bodies in the Department may have used to identify the needs of customers down the line? I am worried that, although we have the strategy — and I have no doubt that those who are at the head of political matters are doing the right thing — there is resistance down the line to adopt e-government practice through the ranks of the Civil Service.

The Deputy First Minister: As to the impressions of resistance that the Member has, the First Minister and I are happy to have any such evidence pointed out to us. An interdepartmental e-government board has been established, chaired by a senior official in our Department. The board is tasked with the delivery of the Executive's vision of a modern and efficient public service alive to the latest developments in e-business and meeting the needs of businesses and citizens in Northern Ireland as all Departments go about the business of government in the modern context.

The Chairperson of the Committee of the Centre (Mr Poots): How many services does the Department provide, and how many are regarded as being key services? When does it expect to publish the comparative

costs of electronic service delivery and the current paper transaction for the same service?

Mr Speaker: I have to ask the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister to reply in writing, as we have now come to the end of questions to them.

3.00 pm

REGIONAL DEVELOPMENT

Mr Speaker: Question 3, in the name of Mr Campbell, question 16, in the name of Ms Lewsley, and question 17, in the name of Mr McGrady, have been withdrawn and will receive written answers.

Traffic

1. **Mr Armstrong** asked the Minister for Regional Development what steps he is taking to address the problem of tailbacks of traffic through provincial towns.

(AQO 1127/01)

The Minister for Regional Development (Mr P Robinson): The proposed regional transportation strategy, which is out for public consultation, envisages the construction of a number of town and village bypasses in the next 10 years. The strategy has to be considered later this year and the additional funding has to be secured, but if this type of programme can be realised it will make a significant contribution to enhancing the environment by reducing congestion.

Meanwhile, the Roads Service has already commenced work on the Limavady, Strabane and Newtownstewart bypasses, while the proposed bypasses of Comber and Toomebridge are due to start later this year. The Omagh throughpass is currently being processed through the statutory procedures. All these schemes will directly assist in addressing the problem of tailbacks in those areas.

Furthermore, the Roads Service will continue to invest in traffic management measures to improve the efficiency and safety of existing road space in towns and villages. However, we all have to acknowledge that building and improving roads is not the complete answer to traffic congestion. We have to address the spiralling demand to provide for the private car. In this context, the aim of the regional transportation strategy is to enable a move away from a transport system dominated by car use to a more balanced and integrated system in which walking, cycling and public transport will be attractive options on many trips. The focus will be on moving people and goods rather than moving vehicles; it will be on making people more aware of the full cost and impact of their transport choices and on reducing the need to travel.

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

Mr Armstrong: I could not agree more. However, I am sure the Minister is aware that a blueprint has been

prepared outlining how a bypass can be constructed at Magherafelt by use of public-private partnership. Can the Minister inform the House of the progress of this venture, and will he consider a similar scheme for Cookstown? Does he realise that up to £10 million may be lost annually to business in my constituency, Mid Ulster, due to traffic hold-ups, not to mention business being subdued due to inadequate transport infrastructure?

Mr P Robinson: I am somewhat surprised to hear this question from the Member. The Roads Service wrote to all Assembly Members indicating that it was preparing its 10-year forward planning schedule and asked Members to bring to its attention any applications that they felt were of significance and importance in their constituency. One would have expected that, due to the great importance that we are now told that this particular scheme has, the Member would have written to inform the Roads Service of this issue. He did not. However, my Department is aware of the various road proposals in that area, all of which are being assessed in line with the 10-year programme, about which I hope to make an announcement later in the year.

Mrs Courtney: As the Minister is aware, I come from the second city. Although it is not a provincial city, it still has severe traffic congestion. One solution to the problem was to be the establishment of the Glengallagh Road on the Skeoge lands. Lord Dubs gave an assurance some time ago that the money was in the pipeline. The Department for Regional Development gave an understanding in its recent response that, if money was used to strengthen the Foyle Bridge, the funding might not be there for the road. Will the Minister give an assurance that that road will still be provided?

Mr P Robinson: I shall not enter into any discussions on the rivalry between our various cities. I shall simply congratulate them all. Londonderry's importance is recognised in the regional development strategy and will be recognised in the outworking of the regional transportation strategy.

The Member will be aware that there has been a problem with the tenders submitted to strengthen the Foyle Bridge. To say that they were significantly over our estimates would be to understate our surprise when we opened those tenders. Rather than impact on schemes such as Skeoge, we have concluded that we would put off strengthening the Foyle Bridge. Users of the bridge will be content to know that no immediate difficulties will be encountered by the delay in implementing that scheme. The Department will assess the situation in light of present proposals. We hope to proceed with the schemes outlined for that area. We must go through the statutory processes, which do delay those schemes, but the Department is as keen as Members will be to see schemes outlined for their areas move ahead.

Mr S Wilson: When considering the tailbacks in provincial towns, will the Minister also consider the

possible use of bus lanes in some of the larger provincial towns? The Minister encourages people to use environmentally friendly means of transport. Therefore, will he consider the use of bus lanes by motorcyclists, who take up less room on the roads and who use less fuel when they travel throughout the Province?

Mr P Robinson: Madam Deputy Speaker, my Friend will be aware that some rural areas are looking for buses, never mind bus lanes. The use of bus lanes will be considered in some of the larger provincial towns. I congratulate the Member on his ingenuity in getting question 13 brought forward to be taken with question 1. The issue of bus lanes is an important matter and we have already agreed that public hire taxis should use the bus lanes. The plans to allow motorcycles to use bus lanes are being progressed and we are considering the use of those lanes by private hire taxis as well as buses.

Listooder Road, Saintfield

2. **Mrs I Robinson** asked the Minister for Regional Development what assessment he can make of the proposed development at Listooder Road, Saintfield, in relation to traffic congestion, inconvenience to local residents and the safety of pupils attending the Academy Primary School; and to make a statement.

(AQO 1104/01)

Mr P Robinson: I am aware of the recently submitted outline planning application for a proposed housing development of 52 houses, accessing from the Listooder Road, Saintfield, which is near to the Academy Primary School. That application also includes a proposal for another smaller development of 17 houses to be accessed from The Grange, off the Ballynahinch Road. As a statutory consultee in the planning process, my Department's Roads Service has been consulted by the Department of the Environment's Planning Service regarding that application. Roads Service's consideration of any application focuses on the potential impact that a development may have on the efficiency of the public road network and, of course, on road safety. Therefore, I assure the Member that when that application was assessed, due account was taken of all the relevant traffic and pedestrian issues, especially peak-time congestion outside Academy Primary School when parents are leaving their children to school or collecting them. Although discussions with the Planning Service about various aspects of the application are ongoing, the Roads Service has concerns about the sight lines and proposed arrangements for access to The Grange. I understand that, although there is no objection in principle to the proposed access to Listooder Road, the Roads Service would like access to be moved further away from the school entrance.

Mrs I Robinson: Although the question involves two separate issues, the concerns arise from a single planning application. What is the Roads Service's attitude to the whole planning application?

Mr P Robinson: Although many different plans may propose different entrances that will give rise to different road issues, they form part of one outline planning application. Therefore, it does not meet the Roads Service's requirements. That view will be made known to the Planning Service. However, it is a matter for the Department of the Environment's Planning Service to decide what action to take. Not only are there road issues but there are other planning issues that must be taken into account.

Lord Kilclooney: Is the Minister aware that many residents in Saintfield are concerned about that planning application? Many of them have written to me. A favourable answer was received from the Minister of the Environment that each complaint will be considered. Can the Minister confirm that his Department will not approve the application unless there is adequate provision for good road systems in the area? Will he confirm that the South Eastern Education and Library Board, acting on behalf of the school, has already opposed the proposed applications?

Mr P Robinson: My Department will not support any planning application unless it is satisfied that it will not affect violently the road network in the area and that road safety matters are satisfactory. I am aware of public concern about the application. Roads issues are involved, and the Roads Service is not satisfied with the proposals in their totality. However, I warn Members that it is an outline application. Therefore, the applicant can take account of areas where there are road problems and could resubmit a proposal that takes them into account.

E-Government

4. **Dr McDonnell** asked the Minister for Regional Development to outline any progress which has been made on introducing e-government methods and programmes in his Department and any plans in place for further development in the next three years.

(AQO 1130/01)

Mr P Robinson: My Department's e-business strategy details the actions that it intends to take to enable 100% of those key services that can be delivered electronically to be delivered by 2005. The strategy sets out the means by which the target will be met and includes, for example, the possibility of the introduction of contact centre arrangements that would allow the public to deal directly with the Department for Regional Development by telephone, e-mail and the Internet. That will provide a significant opportunity for improved customer service.

Dr McDonnell: The 'Corporate Strategic Framework for Delivery of Government Service Electronically in Northern Ireland' specifies that Departments will consult with their customers to ensure that their needs are addressed. What processes did the Department for Regional Development

and its subsidiary agencies use to identify their customers' needs for electronic services?

Mr P Robinson: I welcome the opportunity to answer questions on a new area of activity for the Department for Regional Development. It is good to see that some people are interested in matters other than the old faithful issues of roads, water, ports and so forth. As someone with considerable interest in computer matters — in some circles I might be considered to be something of an anorak — I can see immense possibilities for e-government.

Apart from the study carried out by PricewaterhouseCoopers, which had a wide range of consultation, the Department for Regional Development has a full e-consultation process on its web site. The Department can be considered to be enabled 100% in that area. The only problem is that many of my Department's functions are not suitable for electronic delivery. However, there is clearly e-information and e-consultation. In those areas in which transactions can take place, they can be done in a wider sphere.

3.15 pm

The important issue for the Department for Regional Development is in relation to the qualitative response that it gives to the strategy. It would be easy for the Department to have 100% of its services that are capable of electronic delivery to be so available by 2005. I can argue that 90% of those services are electronically delivered at present, which goes beyond the 25% to be delivered by the end of the year. However, those services can be delivered in several different ways. According to the strategy it would be sufficient for them to be delivered by telephone. In my view, unless the response is via telephone, e-mail and the Internet, it is not a proper response. I want to see quality in the way that the Department delivers on the requirements and targets that have been set, not simply the meeting of targets.

Mr McCarthy: When does the Minister expect to publish the comparative costs of electronic service delivery versus the costs of the current paper transaction for the same service?

Mr P Robinson: I have no plans to do so at present. I am satisfied that there are no secrets. I believe in open Government. There is a document that I will make available in the Library if Members have not already seen it. They can see either the executive summary or the larger version if they wish. In fact, if they go to the Department for Regional Development's web site they will probably be able to download the document. I will examine the specific issue of comparative costs. However, the Department is not offering an "instead of" option. It is putting forward an additional option. If the Member is seeking figures in relation to what that additional mechanism is costing, I can tell him that in 1999-2000 the capital costs were £3.2 million, but the departmental running costs were around £4.3 million. In 2000-01 the

capital costs were £3.1 million, and the departmental running costs were £4.6 million. In 2001-02 the capital costs were £3.8 million, and the departmental running costs were £5 million.

I point out, however, that those are costs by which the Department is gaining the advantage of being able to function at a higher level. Therefore, the advantage is not simply to the consumer but also to the Department.

Consultation Documents

5. **Mr Close** asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail the cost of producing documents for consultation over the last three years, including preparation, printing, distribution and all ancillary costs.

(AQO 1118/01)

Mr P Robinson: In 1999-2000 the cost was £9,210. In 2000-01 the cost was £35,047. The latest figure that the Department has for the cost in 2001-02 is £42,580.

Mr Close: Although the figures may be small in financial terms, does the Minister not agree that we are rapidly running the risk of consulting ourselves to death in a sea of paperwork? Can he explain to the House the benefits, economic and otherwise, of sending that glossy brochure on the proposed discontinuance of service on the Antrim to Knockmore railway line to around 500 individuals and groups? When one looks at the types of groups that the brochures have been sent to, one wonders what value could be achieved from the exercise. I will name a few of them — Earthwatch, the International Tree Foundation, the Northern Ireland Birdwatchers' Association, the Rainbow Project and Queer Space. The list also includes numerous women's groups, some of which share the same postal address, as well as the Family Planning Association and Foyle Friend. Some of those organisations do not give a toss about the Antrim to Knockmore railway line. They are probably not aware of where it is.

Madam Deputy Speaker: Order. Will the Member ask his question?

Mr Close: Does the Minister agree that to send the brochure out to such organisations and individuals could be construed as a waste of taxpayers' money?

Mr P Robinson: I certainly agree with that, but I was not among those who supported the Belfast Agreement and the equality agenda contained within it. *[Interruption]*.

Madam Deputy Speaker: Order. The Minister must have the opportunity to be heard.

Mr P Robinson: Mr Close mentioned several groups. I can go further — the Belfast Butterfly Centre and the Bahais have, I am sure, a special interest in the Antrim to Knockmore railway line. I do not gain anything from hearing the views of lesbians in Lenadoon about the Antrim to Knockmore line. I honestly do not believe

that that is sensible, but it is the law that the Member asked for when he signed up to the Belfast Agreement. *[Interruption]*.

Madam Deputy Speaker: Order.

Mr P Robinson: The rest of us are left to consider the waste of money that results from it. I shall give the Member an example. He specifically mentioned the Antrim to Knockmore line. The figure that I gave him earlier represents the costs for the mere publication of the documentation. For the Antrim to Knockmore line, the figure contained within the numbers that I provided earlier is £3,600. However, the real cost, when all the other paraphernalia, including labour costs, are added in is £50,000. If that figure is multiplied for the regional transportation strategy, the regional development strategy et cetera, the immense cost can be seen. I would far rather that the money be spent on hip replacements or more books in schools — *[Interruption]*.

Madam Deputy Speaker: Order.

Mr Paisley Jnr: The Minister has gone some way to anticipating and answering my question. Are the staff costs, as well as the printing costs, included in that figure? What is the true and total cost of such a consultation in the three years that he mentioned?

Mr P Robinson: I could not give an accurate and true cost if all the labour costs were taken into account. If they were, I have no doubt that it would amount to hundreds of thousands of pounds being spent every year on that type of consultation. I wish to make it clear that consultation plays an important role. However, a distinction must be made between consultations that, as with the regional development strategy and the regional transportation strategy, are of great assistance, where people who had an interest in those subjects gave their views on those matters, and those consultations that are, in my view, carried out wholly for political purposes and are a waste of time and money.

Mr Paisley Jnr: They are also a waste of paper.

Mr P Robinson: That is correct.

Mr K Robinson: Does the Minister agree that the problem with consultation documents is that, rather like a bus, having waited for ages for one to come along, we now find that they have all arrived at once? Our community has waited for consultation documents during 30 years of direct rule. How will the Minister ensure that the public and Members of the Assembly are not inundated by a sea of consultation documents emerging simultaneously, and thus diminishing the quality and quantity of responses that are sought?

Mr P Robinson: Some consultations are required by statute and some are carried out because they are the best way to inform people of the subject matter. A schedule of consultation cannot be worked out. As soon as a new issue is addressed, it goes out for consultation. As I have

said, consultation has an important role to play. I value my consultation with the Committee for Regional Development. I value consultations on specific schemes, where we ask for and receive views from the public. I am concerned about having to consult people who I know are not remotely interested in the subject matter. However, the equality impact assessment requirements under section 75 of the Northern Ireland Act 1998 require me to waste time and money in so doing, and that slows down the process.

Harland & Wolff

6. **Mr M Robinson** asked the Minister for Regional Development to outline the implications for land at the Belfast harbour estate as a result of the proposed changes at Harland & Wolff. (AQO 1105/01)

8. **Mr Hilditch** asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail the conditions he will impose on any re-registration of the Harland & Wolff lease and the steps he will take to ensure that expediency does not undermine the economic potential of the harbour site.

(AQO 1110/01)

Mr P Robinson: Madam Deputy Speaker, with your permission I should like to take questions 6 and 8 together as both relate to Harland & Wolff's lease of lands in the harbour estate.

I was first notified of the company's desire to secure the removal of the restricted user clause from its lease of some of the lands it currently occupies in the harbour estate when Sir David Fell, chairman of Harland & Wolff Group, met Sir Reg Empey and myself on 18 February 2002 to brief us on the company's new business plan. The company has identified an area of some 80 acres as being no longer required for its shipbuilding activities. Its new business plan envisages a more compact yard and diversification of engineering activity, as well as the regeneration of those lands no longer required for shipbuilding. Consequently, the proposal has major implications for the company's future and for land use generally in the harbour estate.

Sir Reg Empey's interest mainly centres on the feasibility of the company's new business plan. It was recognised at the outset that a view on the business plan would inform our decision-making process on the land. While our respective Departments have been working within the very tight timescale notified by the company, the seriousness of the company's situation and the complexities of the issues demanded that the matter be given careful consideration. That, inevitably, has taken time.

I am sympathetic to the plight of Harland & Wolff Heavy Industries Ltd, and I am willing to facilitate the company in its efforts to secure a future for shipbuilding and ship repair in Belfast. However, I approach the matter strategically, mindful of the considerable economic

development and the potential for job creation of the land in the harbour estate which Harland & Wolff has indicated is surplus to its shipbuilding requirements.

In addressing the issue of the land I have made it clear that any arrangement reached between the Belfast Harbour Commissioners, as landlord, and Harland & Wolff, as tenant, must be justifiable and acceptable in its own right, regardless of what the future holds for Harland & Wolff Heavy Industries Ltd.

I am also concerned to ensure that the public interest in the lands is fully safeguarded and that they are used and developed in the best interests of the people of Northern Ireland. The conditions attached to any agreement between Belfast Harbour Commissioners and Titanic Properties Ltd will be construed so as to meet those primary objectives and will be a matter for negotiation.

Mr M Robinson: Can the Minister clarify who will take the final decision in relation to the change of leases affecting the land in question?

Mr P Robinson: In examining the steps to be taken I suppose that the final decision will be taken by Belfast Harbour Commissioners, who by law have responsibility for the harbour. That decision will, however, arise from negotiations with Harland & Wolff and the Fred Olsen companies, and will be taken in the context of a memorandum of understanding, signed by the Belfast Harbour Commissioners and by the Department for Regional Development.

I must indicate to the House that in every respect the Belfast Harbour Commissioners have been true to their word regarding the memorandum of understanding, and our arrangement with them has been open and transparent. The Northern Ireland Executive have indicated that approval of the memorandum of understanding requires their support. There may be no legal obligation for that, just as there is no legal obligation for me to take on board the views of the Committee for Regional Development on the matter. However, it is vital, considering the potential of the land, that the political community is satisfied that what we do is in the best interests of Northern Ireland plc. Therefore, irrespective of what the legal niceties might be on the subject, we want maximum political support, with people knowing that the right decision has been taken for the right reasons.

3.30 pm

Mr Hilditch: When does the Minister think that the matter is likely to be resolved?

Mr P Robinson: Perhaps I can indicate some of the steps that have yet to be taken, and I will leave it for Members to work out a time frame for them. Some final fine-tuning must still be done in the negotiations, and legal clearances are required. The Department has asked the Valuation and Lands Agency (VLA) to review independently the four evaluations that have been

carried out and to satisfy itself with the valuation of the land involved. The state aid issue must be resolved. In addition, I am interested in the comments and analysis of the Committee for Regional Development, which has considered the issue and gathered evidence relating to it. I also want to hear the views of other political Colleagues and those of the House. The final decision rests with Fred. Olsen Energy ASA and the Belfast Harbour Commissioners.

THE ENVIRONMENT

Madam Deputy Speaker: Question 5, standing in the name of Mr Eddie McGrady, has been withdrawn and will receive a written answer. Question 6, in the name of Mr Ian Paisley Jnr, and question 8, in the name of Mr George Savage, have been transferred to the Minister for Regional Development and the Minister of Finance and Personnel respectively. Both will receive written answers.

E-Government

1. **Dr McDonnell** asked the Minister of the Environment to outline any progress which has been made on introducing e-government to his Department over the past three years and any plans in place for the further implementation of e-government methods over the next three years. (AQO 1129/01)

The Minister of the Environment (Mr Nesbitt): Several key services, such as the telephone renewal of vehicle licensing, are provided in electronic form. Through their web sites, the Department's agencies also provide the public with information in several electronically available forms. During 2001, consultants were retained to assist the Department to produce an e-government strategy, which pulls together the individual strategies of its four agencies. The agencies have a high level of contact with members of the public, and each is examining ways to deliver its key services electronically. For example, the Driver and Vehicle Testing Agency (DVTA) plans to introduce a telephone booking service for its customers from August 2002. Payment will be made with either a debit or a credit card, thus increasing customer choice. It is planned to facilitate booking via the Internet by mid-2004.

The current PFI project to re-equip our test centres will integrate with the booking project, and both vehicle and driver test results will be sent directly to Driver and Vehicle Licensing Northern Ireland (DVLNI). Together with plans for expanded links with the insurance industry, that will enable telephone re-licensing of vehicles to be made available to customers by mid-2002.

The Planning Service is also preparing for planning applications to be made and paid for online and for online access to information about planning applications, including information on their progress.

Advances in technology open up some exciting new opportunities, but they also require significant resources such as finance, time and staffing.

Dr McDonnell: I thank the Minister for his extensive answer. It was the least that I expected from him, because I know that he had in interest in, and an awareness of, e-government during his time as a junior Minister. The corporate strategic framework for the electronic delivery of services specifies that Departments will consult with their customers to ensure that their needs are addressed. What processes has the Department of the Environment, or its agencies, used to identify the specific needs of customers for electronic services?

Mr Nesbitt: There are key services that we need to identify for e-government. Twenty-five per cent of those key services must be in place by 2002. However, the guidance states that the key services should be introduced: where there are many transactions, such as the renewal of road fund licences; where the transactions are highly valued by citizens, such as bookings for an MOT; and where citizens are obliged to transact with the public sector, such as the notification of a change of address. Each Department must identify key services and determine how e-government will be implemented. In identifying the key elements, I have tried to clarify where they apply to the Department of the Environment.

Mr McCarthy: What targets has the Department of the Environment set for the take-up of electronic services? What steps are being taken to monitor progress? When does the Minister expect to publish the costs of electronic services compared with the costs of paper transactions?

Mr Nesbitt: Twenty-five per cent of key services, as determined by the Departments, must be in place by 2002, and 100% by 2005. The Executive intend to meet those targets. The cost of developing those services is extensive. I do not have the figures that the Member requested, but I will ensure that, where appropriate, Mr McCarthy receives them.

Landscaping and Planning Approval Stipulations

2. **Ms Armitage** asked the Minister of the Environment what steps he has taken to ensure that landscaping and planning approval stipulations are adhered to.

(AQO 1100/01)

Mr Nesbitt: Under article 27 of the Planning (Northern Ireland) Order 1991, the Department has the power to attach conditions, including landscaping conditions, to planning permission. Those conditions are imposed when they are considered necessary, relevant, precise, enforceable and reasonable. In the past year, the Department approved 20,092 planning applications, all of which contained relevant planning conditions. Given the volume of applic-

ations, it is impractical to monitor all planning approval conditions comprehensively to ensure their compliance.

However, planning policy statement 9, 'The Enforcement of Planning Control', sets out the Department's general policy approach to its discretionary enforcement powers. If the Department considers it expedient to take enforcement action, that action will be commensurate with the breach of planning control to which it relates. When members of the public notify the Department of an unauthorised development, it will be investigated. In the first instance, the Department will seek to achieve a satisfactory resolution through negotiation. If that is not possible, the Department has the statutory power to institute formal enforcement action to resolve the situation.

I propose to bring before the Assembly soon a Bill that will considerably strengthen the Department's enforcement powers. The Department is also recruiting additional staff to bolster the Planning Service's development control and enforcement functions.

Ms Armitage: I thank the Minister for his comprehensive answer. However, the system seems to be a long-drawn-out and expensive way of ensuring that stipulations are adhered to. Will the Minister consider the idea that, when planning approval that includes landscaping is granted, the developer should have to lodge a sum of money to cover the cost of that landscaping? I do not wish to be personal, but in Portstewart, where I live, umpteen developments have been approved with landscaping. Last week I checked about 10 of those developments, and not even a blade of grass had been planted. I am sure that the Minister agrees that insufficient staff are available to check that stipulations are adhered to. Will he consider introducing the advance lodgement of money by developers to cover landscaping costs?

Mr Nesbitt: Enforcement is a fundamental function of the Department, on which I place a great deal of importance. Its aim is to bring unauthorised activity under the Department's control, to remedy the undesirable effects that Ms Armitage mentioned and to take legal action. However, as the Member rightly said, we do not have sufficient resources. The Department has addressed the backlog in planning applications, and when it recruits additional staff it will ensure that enforcement takes place, where appropriate.

By and large, the Department trusts the integrity of planning applicants, and often, when it alerts someone that he is in breach of a condition, the matter is rectified. However, I remind Members that the Department can, and will, take legal action if that does not happen. The Department must always be careful that legal action is timely; it is costly, so it must be effective.

I shall take note of Ms Armitage's interesting suggestion that money be lodged in advance to ensure that conditions are adhered to, and I shall see what happens.

Mr Shannon: The enforcement of planning approval stipulations is crucial to ensure that there is transparency in the Department. In the past few years there have been insufficient enforcement officers, which has led to problems. My Colleague from East Antrim Roger Hutchinson gave the example of travelling people who built walls or erected gates but moved on before the Planning Service could enforce the planning regulations, with the result that nothing could be done. On other occasions, enforcement officers were unable to take action against illegal applicants because of manpower shortages. What does the Department intend to do to address those two issues?

Mr Nesbitt: I do not wish to refer to Members' specific points; however, I referred to the general principles in my previous answers.

Mrs Nelis: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Has the Planning Service, or the Department, plans to deal with land left by developers after development? Such land, which is referred to euphemistically as "open space", is often left without maintenance or landscaping for many years. It is dangerous and has an adverse effect on communities. People pay a great deal of money to buy houses, and the developer profits. I refer specifically to land at Chippendale Park in Foyle Springs, in the Foyle constituency, which has been derelict for 20 years. It is dirty, unsightly, affects property value and is dangerous to the community.

Mr Nesbitt: I cannot deal specifically with Chippendale Park. I agree that open space contributes to the ambiance of the environment, whether in an industrial or residential area. It is part of a wholesome approach to the environment.

Castlebawn Development

3. **Mrs I Robinson** asked the Minister of the Environment to outline discussions he has had with the developer and his agents of the Castlebawn development in Newtownards. (AQO 1124/01)

Mr Nesbitt: I have had no discussions with the developer or his agents about that development. The proposals, which were submitted on the basis of two outline planning applications, include a food superstore, retail warehousing, business parks and a new link road between the Comber Road and the Portaferry Road. However, since receipt of the planning applications, officials from my Department have been in regular contact with the developer and his agents about the various elements relating to them. That included discussions about retail impact, traffic implications and the protection of the historic landscape of the area, including scheduled monuments. The Department has also been involved in detailed discussions with the developer and with the Department for Regional Development's Roads Service with regard to necessary road improvements to deal with traffic generated by the development. Ards Borough Council supported the proposals, indicating that they would be of

benefit to Newtownards. The Member is aware that on 15 March 2002 I announced a notice of opinion to grant planning permission for the proposed development.

3.45 pm

Mrs I Robinson: This question was tabled before the Minister had announced publicly his decision on Castlebawn. I welcome the decision and thank the Minister for Regional Development for his efforts to secure a successful outcome to the project. I hope that the development will halt the haemorrhaging of shoppers who are going elsewhere. Will the Minister take cognisance of the fact that some traders in Newtownards are understandably concerned that the new in-town shopping development at Castlebawn should in no way take away from the existing town shopping area but should complement and enrich the whole town? Will the Minister give assurances that he will do his utmost to ensure that this happens?

Mr Nesbitt: I spoke to the planning officials before I signed off and sought clear assurances from them with regard to the development and transport. I am mindful of where the objectors came from. There is also the issue of the pathway to link the traditional town with the new development. I have been cognisant of the issues concerning Newtownards when discharging my duty.

Mr Hamilton: I am certain that the Minister will join me in welcoming the development, which will be of great benefit to the people of Newtownards and Strangford in general. Ards Borough Council also welcomes the development. Does the Minister agree that the design of this much-needed development, including the provision of walkways to link it with the town centre, will help to relieve traffic congestion and contribute to the economic prosperity of the town as a whole?

Mr Nesbitt: The development will improve the vitality, viability and vibrancy of Newtownards. With regard to traffic movement, when I met the planning officials, I sought a clear assurance that they would not allow a sod to be cut for the development until it was clear where the linkage road between Portaferry and Comber would be located. I also sought an assurance that they would not allow any part of the development until it was clear where the section of the road round the Blair Mayne monument would be located. I have tried to ensure that traffic movement is taken into consideration.

Nitrate Vulnerable Zones

4. **Mr Armstrong** asked the Minister of the Environment what plans are in place for landowners who have land designated as nitrate vulnerable zones.

(AQO 1146/01)

Mr Nesbitt: Arrangements for dealing with nitrate pollution are based on the requirements of EC Directive 91/676/EEC, which aims to reduce nitrate levels in areas where the water is polluted and to prevent new pollution.

The Directive was transposed into Northern Ireland legislation by Regulations made in 1996 and 1999.

In 1999, three ground waters were identified where nitrate levels exceeded the maximum permitted level under the Directive. These three areas were identified and designated as nitrate vulnerable zones (NVZs) in March 1999. One is at Cloughmills, County Antrim; the other two are near Comber, County Down. There are approximately 100 farms within the three zones.

Action programmes were established in June 1999, setting out measures which must be taken by people farming in these zones. Those measures include closed periods for the use of nitrogen fertiliser and organic manures and permitted application rates for nitrogen based on crop requirements. There are also controls on spreading fertiliser and manure, taking account of ground conditions and proximity to waterways. Requirements are also in place for the provision of slurry storage and the keeping of farm records, covering cropping, livestock numbers and the use of nitrogen fertilisers and organic manures. These measures are applied in ways appropriate to the particular agricultural activities carried out on each of the relevant farms.

The European Commission has recently indicated that the Directive applies to surface waters that are eutrophic, or likely to become eutrophic, through nutrient enrichment. The European Commission is currently taking infraction proceedings against France for failure to implement the Directive on those grounds. Accordingly, the Environment and Heritage Service of my Department is reviewing its water quality monitoring data. If, following this review, any other areas are identified as candidate NVZs, my officials will consult farmers and other interested parties before proposing any further designations.

Mr Armstrong: Will the Minister outline the measures that his Department is proposing to take to assist farmers in their efforts to reduce the amount of nitrates and pollutions entering the soil?

Mr Nesbitt: As I mentioned in my answer, the farms in nitrate vulnerable zones are subject to a range of measures, depending on the particular circumstances of individual farms. While I am aware of farmers' concerns about these implications, I want to make it clear that I have met representatives of the farming industry. I have asked my officials to clarify the scientific explanation and measurement for both unions in the farming industry. If we are all aware of the problems, that will help us all to address the solutions. Direct assistance in the form of grants which might comply with the controls, for example, falls to the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development.

Mr McHugh: The Minister partly answered my question in his last answer, and I thank him for that. Water quality is a particularly important issue. I wonder about the relevance of the measures that have been

drawn from Europe. They are generally suitable there. However, measures relating to nitrates in particular are not appropriate for this part of Europe where farmers can put slurry on their land. I hope that the Minister will get as much information on those points as possible, especially from the farming organisations.

Mr Nesbitt: We will secure as much information as we can. Slurry and artificial fertiliser are the most significant sources of excess nutrients. I accept that that is relevant to the farming industry. In the same breath, I must say that treated sewage effluents, storm sewage discharges, septic tanks and surface drains in urban areas are also major sources of nutrients. This problem has developed hand in hand with the developing economy.

Waste Framework Directive

7. **Mr M Murphy** asked the Minister of the Environment if he has any plans to implement the Waste Framework Directive (75/442/EEC), which relates to packaging waste. (AQO 1103/01)

Mr Nesbitt: The Waste Framework Directive establishes a framework for the safe management of waste. In Northern Ireland the primary legislation necessary to transpose the requirements of the Directive is contained in the Waste and Contaminated Land (Northern Ireland) Order 1997. However, full compliance will also require a phased programme of subordinate legislation.

The first stage in the implementation of that programme was the introduction of the Controlled Waste (Registration of Carriers and Seizure of Vehicles) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 1999. They require persons or companies carrying or transferring controlled waste to register with the Department.

The second stage will be the implementation of a duty of care on any person who imports, produces, carries, keeps, treats or disposes of controlled waste. A consultation paper on the duty of care was issued on 14 November 2001, and it is hoped that the legislation will be operational in May or June this year.

The third stage in the programme will be the introduction of a new waste management licensing system. Under that system, my Department will issue licences authorising the treatment, keeping or disposal of controlled waste. Those licences will replace the waste disposal licences currently issued by district councils under the Pollution Control and Local Government (Northern Ireland) Order 1978. Consultation on the licensing proposals is scheduled to take place in the next few months, with a view to the system's being operational by the end of 2003.

Mr M Murphy: What does the Minister propose to do about plastic bags from retail grocery outlets? Each week, thousands of plastic bags end up in landfills. Will the Minister introduce the regulations that apply on the rest of the island, where there is a charge for plastic bags

to encourage their reuse and reduce the amount going into landfills? Go raibh maith agat.

Mr Nesbitt: Litter poses a major environmental problem, and plastic bags are a significant part of that problem. I am watching with interest what happens in the South, where Minister Dempsey introduced legislation to deal with plastic bags. His levy will raise funds to help tackle litter.

However, more important than where the funds go is the public's attitude to waste generally, whether that is litter, plastic bags or major forms of litter. Unfortunately, taxes are a UK-wide matter. Northern Ireland is part of the United Kingdom, and it has no powers to adopt a similar levy independently. Therefore, there are no plans at present to deal with plastic bags. However, I will be monitoring the situation in the South, and if we think that it would be helpful, it could be raised at a United Kingdom level.

Drinking Water Directive

9. **Mr J Wilson** asked the Minister of the Environment, in the light of the European Commission's decision to take legal action against the UK due to the absence of legislation transposing the new Drinking Water Directive into legislation in Northern Ireland, what co-operation has taken or will take place between the Department of the Environment and the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development to ensure that the new Drinking Water Directive is transposed as quickly as possible. (AQO 1109/01)

Mr Nesbitt: My Department has worked closely with the Water Service on the quality of drinking water within the current statutory and administrative arrangements for ensuring drinking water compliance. That relates particularly to health requirements and the ongoing monitoring of the quality of water supplies. Because of the under-resourcing of my Department's environmental policy division under direct rule and the first year of devolution, it was not possible to achieve the required date for transposition of the December 2000 Directive. However, my Department issued a consultation document on 29 March 2002 on the proposed water supply and water quality Regulations that will transpose the requirements of the new Directive.

4.00 pm

The Regulations will apply to all public water supplies intended for drinking, domestic purposes and use in food preparation. I have indicated to the European Commission that I expect to have the Regulations in operation by the summer. The new Regulations will give statutory force to the drinking water standards required by the Directive. Those standards will begin to apply progressively from December 2003, and my Department

will be assessing compliance of public drinking water supplies with the standards.

My Department's Drinking Water Inspectorate will continue to liaise closely with the Department for Regional Development's Water Service on the achievement of the standards by the required date. However, responsibility for the infrastructural and operational improvements necessary to ensure effective compliance lies with the Water Service in the first instance.

Mr J Wilson: Will the Minister advise the House as to the legal position wherein infraction proceedings are being taken against the UK Government by the European Union? Will he also confirm that where Northern Ireland is the only constituent part of the UK that is in breach of European Directives, such fines as may be imposed should fall solely on the Northern Ireland Executive?

Does the Minister agree that the existence of a long-running and widespread terror campaign contributed massively to the situation in which environmental issues did not and could not receive the priority treatment that they do now?

Madam Deputy Speaker: I ask the Minister to make his response a brief one.

Mr Nesbitt: Legal infraction proceedings are going ahead because we have been unable to comply with European requirements. That leads to the second point, because, under direct rule, the focus was not there. In the first year of devolved Government in Northern Ireland we had to readjust. That focus now exists, and we have more resources.

As regards the Member's point about the terror campaign, it is true that people have been focused on other political matters. It is to be hoped that we are now moving towards a stable environment in which we can address the issues of infractions and EU Directives.

(Mr Deputy Speaker [Mr J Wilson] in the Chair)

Motion made:

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

MOSSIDE PRIMARY SCHOOL, BALLYMONEY

Mr Kane: We are now supposed to have joined-up government. On the one hand, we have a Department pushing like mad for rural development, and on the other, an education and library board that is responsible to another Department, which is determined to close a rural village school. I ask the Minister of Education and his Department — is that not a contradiction of policy? On what grounds can the education and library board justify closure?

We talk about social and economic deprivation. What greater social need can there be than the need for education for the growing and close-knit community of Mosside? All 108 MLAs should be fighting tooth and nail to keep all schools in rural communities open in order to preserve them for future generations. The North Eastern Education and Library Board (NEELB) is taking away the very fabric of society that exists in a rural community and does not exist elsewhere.

The NEELB appears to have had a complete disregard for the facts in reaching its decision to close Mosside Primary School. The extensive new build programme in the village and the creation of new commercial ventures in the Mosside area are significant reasons to keep Mosside Primary School open. Those factors have been overlooked in the decision-making process. Has the NEELB taken those factors into consideration, or is it too short-sighted?

I accept that a reduction in the number of children of primary school age can lead to falling class sizes, which in turn leads to inefficiency in the provision of primary school education. Bearing in mind the pointers that suggest that the trend is for more youngsters in the village, I am perplexed by the proposed closure of Mosside Primary School. The potential is there in Mosside. Support for rural sustainability means having local primary education. The population and potential for an increase in numbers of children of primary school age is there. The decision to close the village primary school is therefore premature and poorly thought through.

Some parents in the village take their children to other schools, thus not supporting the outstanding teaching qualities available at Mosside Primary School. However, I congratulate the principal and her staff on those outstanding qualities. The NEELB should put the

recommended closure of the school on hold and begin a public relations exercise in the community to encourage parents and children to return to Mosside Primary School. That would be a great asset to the community and a positive step forward.

Teaching staff, the board of governors and parents inform me that the performance rate of children at Mosside Primary School far outstrips the performance rate of children at larger schools. That is a great achievement, and it is a major challenge for the board to have the school kept open. It constitutes a significant factor in the decision that, ultimately, should be to keep Mosside Primary School open for business.

I have been strongly petitioned by parents and members of local churches to resist the closure of the school as it is a focal point for young and old. The parents, children and the entire community are very much aware of the value of the school. There seems to be a disregard in the proposed decision to close the school as it provides convenience for working parents living in the village and surrounding area, and continuity in first-class primary school education for children.

Schools that have closed in the area in recent years include Cloghcorr, Cloghanmurry, Tullybane, Drumtullagh, Giant's Causeway, Croaghbeg, Kirkhills, Ballintoy and Moyarget. Although the circumstances of the declining attendances were compelling at the time, the detachment of children and young people from their community is evident. I must caution Members that this has not been an encouraging development in many cases. We must provide our children and young people with a sense of belonging and a sense of identity for them to prosper and become contributors to their society. We can do this in Mosside, and we must not ignore the opportunity. The future of Mosside Primary School depends on the support of the House to prevent the closure. Neither I nor other Assembly Members can begin to quantify the social damage that primary school closures inflict on rural communities.

Mr Paisley Jnr: I congratulate my Colleague on securing the debate today. It is an important debate because it goes to the heart of Government policy; it also goes to the heart of what we want for our community and for this society. Schools are a cornerstone of society, and in rural areas where there is remoteness and lack of choice, it is essential that the heart is not ripped out of the local community. That issue must not be lost in the House.

Many people will argue that this is about resources, but the reality is that the school has been well resourced. In fact, one could argue that it is one of the best equipped schools in the area. Therefore it would be a double scandal to remove the teachers and the resources and equipment from the school. Today I saw a report listing the equipment in the school. For such a small school it is not short of modern technology. There are six personal

computers, two laptops, two televisions, two videos, five printers, three data projectors and a hi-fi system. The Internet is available to every classroom as well as the assembly hall. The classes are obviously small due to the dwindling number of pupils who have enrolled. However, that means that there is more time allocated to each pupil and that there is a better teacher/pupil ratio than in many other schools. Therefore it can be argued — and shown — that the children are well catered for in this area.

The fabric of the building is also very good. The recent installation of double-glazed windows and a new central heating system; the construction of a principal's office and the replacement of sanitary ware have left the school in tip-top condition. There have been improvements and special conditions put in place for children with special needs. There is now a special needs classroom that has been completely refurbished with a new roof, carpeting, curtains and a heating system. In relation to the entire fabric, therefore, the school is probably one of the best catered for and maintained primary schools in the vicinity. It would be a double scandal to rip up that good work by no longer using a well catered for school and by asking the children to go elsewhere.

As I said at the beginning, this is not just a question of resources; it is a question of Government policy. It is essential that Government policy allows for choice in rural areas. People in areas that could be left remote or without choice should be given the choice to attend a local primary school. We have seen that choice given to other schools, such as Irish-medium schools. Government policy for Irish-medium schools shows that where a school has 12 pupils or more, it can be considered for funding. This school is not an Irish-medium school, but surely it is entitled to the same rights. If Irish-medium schools with 12 pupils are entitled to funding, then Mosside, which has seen a dwindling in its numbers, should also be entitled to proper funding.

I want to identify some of the reasons for the dwindling numbers in the area. In 1988 there were 72 enrolments, and last year there were 13. The tapering downwards of the number of enrolments seemed to start between 1996 and 1998. It fell from 34 to 22 in the year beginning 1999. I suggest that the reason for that is the uncertainty placed at the heart of the future of the school. That uncertainty started with a rumour that the school would not last due to dwindling numbers. As a result, parents have panicked and decided to register their children for pre-school education in other local schools, so that they can get the next best school. That rumour has damaged the availability of pupils to enrol in the area.

The one thing that the Department could do is give certainty back to the school and say that it will stay open. We would then see enrolment increasing because parents would be confident that their children would be at the school for several years to get their education before going on to secondary level education. The rumours

should be quashed, and the Assembly and Department can help to do that by saying that they will give certainty back to the school. It is not an unprecedented request; the Minister of Education, who is here for the debate, made such announcements before. He has done it for two other schools. He indicated that Toberlane and Churchtown Primary Schools would stay open even though they do not reach the same criterion. Most Members will know that the criterion is that if a school does not have 25 pupils for enrolment, it can be earmarked for closure. Those schools had 25 and 24 pupils respectively, yet they were not earmarked for closure. In his public statement of 6 December 2000, the Minister recognised that to close them would be unfair and would disadvantage people in a rural community.

4.15 pm

If the argument stands for areas such as Cookstown, it stands for areas in north Antrim. The same criteria used for that decision should be applied in this case. To close Mosside Primary School because it has not reached the enrolment criteria last year and this year is not good enough. The school needs to be given a chance.

My Colleague Mr Kane talked about local development, and there are major planning developments in the locality that will see a development of the village and an increase in people who will want to live in areas that have been depleted because of changes in farming and in the locality. Those people will want a local school for their children. If there is no local school, they will not want to live there and will go elsewhere. They will want to live in a town or village that does have a local school. We need to encourage people to stay in the area.

Another Government agency, namely the Planning Service, has taken decisions to allow building in the village to keep the village whole, instead of seeing a dwindling population. People will then go to that village and see the cornerstones of the local village, such as the local church, the local school and the local shops. I hope that the principles that were applied to Toberlane and Churchtown Primary Schools will also apply to Mosside Primary School.

There are peaks and troughs in enrolment, and there is a trough at the moment because of the birth rates in the area. There will be peaks in the future, and it is essential that we cater for them and be ready, instead of ensuring that they can never be catered for by closing the local rural school. It is essential that parents have choice. To close a rural school and reduce parents' choice is not a good policy or principle upon which to devise education provision.

The issue has not only been raised at local community level, at the local council, and in the form of a petition which I presented to the House, but also by many people who have indicated their strong desire not to see another rural community decimated by a decision that will damage

the fabric of that rural society. It is important that the plea go up from the House to maintain that school and to apply the same principles in operation elsewhere to allow the school to continue, and also to make sure that discrimination does not creep in. It could be argued that discrimination has been allowed to creep in through other policies. The Department of Education has the responsibility to demonstrate to this rural community in a part of Protestant Ulster that they deserve their rights and are entitled to the same rights as others in that locality.

Rev Dr Ian Paisley: All public representatives have seen rural schools closed before. All sorts of arguments were put forward. First, we were told that the buildings were not manageable; that they had been built years ago and had deteriorated and that a new school would be required. I am glad to report that Mosside has a good building. The issue does not relate to the building — an excuse which has been made on many occasions by those who were intent on ruthlessly carrying out a policy of closing down rural schools. Small rural communities are vital contributors to life both locally and Province-wide.

I was amazed by the figures produced by a recent inquiry into relative deprivation by the centre for urban policy studies at Manchester University. That inquiry reported the shocking statistic that 76% of residents in Mosside over the age of 16 have no formal educational qualifications. If they are to gain formal educational qualifications, they must have a good primary education.

First, Mosside Primary School has a good building, so the Department would not have to spend a vast sum on a new building or renovations. Secondly, it is a good school. All the parents and community members wish me, as an MLA and MP for the area, to express thanks to the teachers and the principal of the school. They have done, and continue to do, a good job.

The issue is represented across the board. An Ulster Unionist councillor, Helen Harding, who is a former pupil of the school, has pledged to fully support the campaign to keep it open. An SDLP councillor, Madeline Black, said that it is vital that such communities have a primary school, which is necessary for children's stability. Therefore, it is not just one section of the community that is crying loudly for the maintenance of the school; every section with pupils at the school is represented. The community has a united voice.

Schools and churches cement a community together. If the cement is taken away, the community will disintegrate. Communities in Ulster are in danger of disintegrating. Schools have been removed from other rural districts that used to have real communities, to which people were pleased to belong, and that enjoyed a neighbourliness that was begotten of people's sense of community. Those communities have completely disintegrated because the cement has been taken away. Children who are brought up and educated together share

a closer bond than those who are educated separately. Therefore, there is a danger of destroying a community that is vital to the betterment of that area of north Antrim.

I do not understand why we plan to build so many new houses in the area and then tell people that there will be no school. Anyone with experience of such schools knows that enrolment statistics vary. The unfavourable statistics of some schools have been reversed because of an increase in the intake of pupils. That must be considered when deciding whether to close a school. New houses are being built, and people are moving to the area, including some who were forced to leave before because of housing difficulties. They wish to live in the area in which they were brought up.

People who speak for rural districts understand that well. I do not know why some statistics should be played to the full, when other statistics point to a rise in the number of children. At first there was panic when it was whispered that this school would close. Then parents worried about where their children were going to go. They naturally wanted to get their children into the nearest school and into the school that they calculated to be the best.

Once there is a rumour in an area that a school is going to close, there is panic among parents. They have been telling me that they are worried that all the children will have to be bused away. I do not think that any mother or father is keen to see children leave home earlier in the morning than they should have to do because of the distance that they must travel to the new school. One mother told me that it will be a long and tiring day for her youngest child, who will have to catch a bus at around 8.30 in the morning and will not return home till long after 3.00 pm. That is not right.

The Assembly must remember that those children are growing up and should not have to depend on such a busing system to get a primary education. That could be avoided if the school were maintained. If it is announced tomorrow that the school is to stay open many parents who have already made alternative arrangements will go back on them to keep their children at the local school.

The Assembly must address those difficulties. The best thing to do is to give the school a chance to continue to do its work. Members are pleading for that chance because the results of closing it will be dire. It will tear the heart out of the community and lead in some measure to its disintegration. All those matters and the points that my Colleagues put before the House mount up to a strong plea to give Mosside Primary School the chance to survive — indeed, the chance not only to survive, but also to succeed.

The Minister of Education (Mr M McGuinness): A LeasCheann Comhairle. Members will be aware that the North Eastern Education and Library Board published a development proposal on 31 January to close Mosside Controlled Primary School with effect from August 2002.

Under the legislative provisions there is a two-month period following this publication during which objections can be sent to the Department of Education before a decision is taken on the proposal. As that period has now expired, I will be examining the details of the case soon, with a view to taking a decision quickly. That is necessary to remove any uncertainty on the part of the school, parents and pupils regarding educational plans that will have to be finalised soon for the next school year.

While I have not yet determined the outcome of that matter, it may be helpful if I outline to Members the various factors that I will consider as part of my examination of the closure proposal. They include the pattern of enrolments at Mosside Primary. I understand that there are presently 13 pupils in attendance.

We must also consider educational factors, such as the balance and delivery of the curriculum and the proximity of neighbouring schools. There are four other controlled schools within a five-mile radius of Mosside Primary School. We must also look at surplus places in other schools and the social, economic and community issues, which several Members raised.

4.30 pm

I am on record as emphasising the importance of a strong network of rural schools as part of the infrastructure to reinforce rural communities. However, although it is important to retain relationships between schools and their communities, there are circumstances in which the burden on teachers to deliver the curriculum in very small schools across a whole range of age groups and abilities is excessive. Ian Paisley Jnr mentioned the situation at Churchtown and Toberlane controlled schools. In those cases, I made it clear then that there are circumstances when change is needed when the burden on teachers to deliver the curriculum is such circumstances is excessive.

We must also look at the condition of school premises. Objections to and representations on the proposal are other factors that we must consider. There were three objections to the proposed closure of Mosside, two of which came from the school's board of governors and Moyle District Council. Furthermore, Ian Paisley Jnr laid a petition in the Assembly during the two-month objection period. That petition has been treated as a formal objection. Members can see that I must carefully examine a range of issues before I can make an informed judgment on the matter.

Ian Paisley Jnr also mentioned the funding criteria for Irish-medium schools. That also affects integrated schools. The reference to the figures acknowledges the lowering of the viability criteria, a decision that I took last year to make it easier for integrated and Irish-medium schools to become established. Support is given to those schools only when my Department and I are convinced that the proposals are robust and that the schools will go from strength to

strength. In almost 100% of cases, those schools have gone from strength to strength. They have not failed. Indeed, enrolment numbers have increased rather than decreased.

It was interesting that Ian Paisley Jnr used the argument about Protestant Ulster. I do not think that Ulster is Protestant. Ulster is full of Catholics, Protestants and Dissenters, and we are all the better for it. We should not attempt to sectarianise the argument. Any decisions that are taken on schools, especially small rural schools, must be based on what is best for the education of pupils in those areas.

All aspects of the arguments for and against the proposed closure of the school will be considered. The overriding objective is to determine a way forward that is in the best educational interests of all the pupils. I am on record as saying that I value highly the contribution that small rural schools make to society, especially as much of our geographic area is rural.

The arguments against closure are not lost on me — I sympathise considerably with all the points that have been made by the three Members who spoke. However, we must also recognise that all cases must be judged on their merits. There are 13 pupils at Mosside Primary School. In all likelihood, there may be only 10 pupils next year. The numbers are declining. People can say that there is a historical explanation for that. Before this institution was established, there were rumours in Mosside that the school was in difficulty and numbers were dwindling. Those circumstances were well beyond my control. If there was any validity in those rumours, we were effectively left with that legacy.

A decision will be taken shortly, and I shall consider carefully the points that have been made before I make an announcement.

Adjourned at 4.35 pm.

NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

Monday 22 April 2002

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

Members observed two minutes' silence.

SPEAKER'S BUSINESS

Mr Speaker: I wish to advise the House that I will not be present during the Assembly's sittings next week as I will be undertaking a number of long-standing private speaking engagements in the United States of America.

PUBLIC PETITION

Out-of-Hours GP Services in the Ards Peninsula

Mr Speaker: Mr McCarthy has begged leave to present a public petition in accordance with Standing Order 22.

Mr McCarthy: I beg leave to present a petition on behalf of 959 residents of the Ards Peninsula in the Strangford constituency. It calls for the introduction by the Health Service of measures to enhance the out-of-hours GP services in all parts of the peninsula. The area has several competent and efficient general practitioners, but the out-of-hours on-call service is administered from Bangor, about 25 miles from the Portaferry end of the peninsula. Residents would like a doctor from the area to be available rather than one some distance away in Bangor, particularly in cases of emergency.

The residents ask the Assembly to expedite an improvement to the out-of-hours service.

Mr McCarthy moved forward and laid the petition on the Table.

Mr Speaker: I shall forward the petition to the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety and a copy to the Chairperson of the Committee for Health, Social Services and Public Safety.

SUSPENSION OF STANDING ORDERS

Resolved (with cross-community support):

That this Assembly suspends Standing Order 10(2) and Standing Order 10(6) for Monday 22 April 2002. — [Mr B Hutchinson.]

NORTH/SOUTH MINISTERIAL COUNCIL

Agriculture

Mr Speaker: I have received notice from the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development that she wishes to make a statement on the North/South Ministerial Council sectoral meeting that took place on 15 April 2002 in Dublin.

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development (Ms Rodgers): The sixth meeting of the North/South Ministerial Council in its agriculture sectoral format was held at Agriculture House in Dublin on 15 April 2002. The meeting was hosted by the Government of the Republic of Ireland and was chaired by Mr Joe Walsh TD, Minister of Agriculture, Food and Rural Development. Mr James Leslie, junior Minister in the Office of the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister, accompanied me to the meeting. Mr Leslie has agreed the content of my statement.

The Council considered and endorsed a report from the steering group on animal health on co-operation on animal health issues between the Administrations. The report told of the progress that has been made in developing closer co-operation and joint strategies for the improvement of animal health on both sides of the border, notably with regard to internal animal movement controls, portal controls and bio-security measures on farms and agriculture-related premises.

The Council noted that the Administrations have a shared commitment to a common approach to internal movement controls for animals and that substantial progress is being made in aligning the controls that are applied to the import of animals and animal products by each Administration at all points of entry to the island.

The Council also noted the joint initiatives aimed at raising the level of scrapie awareness among flock-owners, promoting common codes of good practice for those involved in agriculture and related industries and developing co-operation in other specific areas, including the eradication of tuberculosis, brucellosis and transmissible spongiform encephalopathies (TSE).

The Council endorsed the progress so far recorded and agreed that the foundations have been laid for an all-island animal health strategy. The Council agreed that a co-ordinated and complementary approach to portal controls should be further developed and maintained. It requested the working groups continue their assignments to develop closer co-operation and/or joint strategies for improving animal health on both sides of the border by 31 December 2002.

The Council considered a progress report on the work of the steering committee on cross-border rural development since the last North/South Ministerial Council agriculture sectoral meeting. The consultant's reports on

co-operation between cross-border rural communities and cross-border rural development education, training and research have been completed.

The study of the co-operation between cross-border rural communities recommends an area-based model for enhancing cross-border co-operation that would operate under the umbrella of the local partnership groups, augmented as appropriate by other representatives, in Northern Ireland and the county development boards in the South of Ireland. It is intended that funding for the area-based model would come from the INTERREG III programme's rural initiative.

The study on cross-border rural development education, training and research identified a need for greater co-ordination of, and access to, practical information on current education, training and research provision. The Council noted that the steering committee is examining both reports and that it will advise Ministers in due course on how best to implement their recommendations.

The Council also noted developments in the World Trade Organisation, EU enlargement and common agricultural policy reform and agreed that Northern and Southern officials should explore matters of concern with a view to further focused discussions at ministerial level.

The Council considered a paper on plant health research and development and noted the progress made by both Administrations. Four areas were identified for ongoing co-operation on the regulation of plant protection products. Those were: pesticide usage surveys; the exchange of information on registered plant protection products and their uses; distributor and operator training and certification, equipment registration and calibration; and further co-operation between the Administrations on the regulation of plant protection products, which includes policy issues and the problem of illegal cross-border trade.

The Council considered a progress report on a study of the pig industry. The report's main recommendations include the rationalisation of existing slaughter capacity and the scaling up of plant size in line with international best practices. The development of supply chain agreements between producers and primary processors, based on quality customer-oriented specifications, was also identified as essential to the industry.

The Council noted progress in reviewing the report's main findings, and agreed that officials should continue the process of engaging with the pig industry and development agencies to promote the joint study's recommendations, with a view to improving the competitive position of the pig sector on the whole island. The Council also noted updates from both Ministers on the 'Agrifood 2010 Plan of Action' and the vision group report plans.

The Council approved a paper on behalf of the Special EU Programmes Body that identified the terms of reference for the common chapter joint steering group. It also approved papers on staffing and remuneration for Foras

na Gaeilge, one of the North/South language bodies, and the appointment of a new board member.

The next meeting in this sectoral format will take place in Northern Ireland in October 2002. The text of a communiqué to be issued after the meeting was agreed, and a copy has been placed in the Assembly Library.

The Chairperson of the Committee for Agriculture and Rural Development (Rev Dr Ian Paisley): The Minister will receive communication from the Committee on a parallel inquiry into tuberculosis (TB), brucellosis and botulism. The Committee would like to follow up on the meeting that the Minister reported on today.

Has the working group set up under the North/South Ministerial Council to co-ordinate responses on brucellosis made any conclusions or recommendations?

Ms Rodgers: Working groups have been established and are co-ordinating, collating and exchanging information on the way in which we are tackling TB and brucellosis on both sides of the border. At present, I do not have details of specific proposals. However, I hope, as a result of those groups' work, to have such details by October.

Mr McGrady: My question follows on from the previous one, and the Minister has partially answered it. Last November, the Minister met me along with a delegation from some of the TB hot spots in south Down. We drew her attention to experimental research that was being done in the Republic of Ireland on the control of TB and the methods used to do that. In that context, will the Minister assure the House that all-Ireland inoculation will be considered as a general approach to eradicating TB? Will she comment on the review of the way in which TB may be carried by badgers, and on both the proliferation and protection of badgers, especially in Northern Ireland?

Ms Rodgers: I recall the meeting with the Member. As a result of that meeting, I asked my officials, during their policy evaluation, to take account of the possible role of badgers in carrying TB. I also recall that Mr McGrady referred to the experiment that was being carried out in the South. The Department of Agriculture and Rural Development's policy evaluation is nearing completion. I await the report with interest, but I am confident that it will make specific proposals on badgers.

The Member will appreciate that I am unable to give details of those proposals until I have seen the report, which I anticipate will be presented before the summer. As part of the ongoing work of the working groups, North and South, we will also be discussing the implications of that report and the result of our policy evaluation.

12.15 pm

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

Mr McHugh: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I welcome this comprehensive and wide-ranging

statement from the Minister, particularly the reference to animal disease. Is there an agreed strategy, on an all-Ireland basis, that will work, North and South? Will it have targets — for example, to work towards the removal of animals from diseased herds within agreed timescales? Will there be an agreed scale, especially in border areas such as south Armagh, and will the targets be reached? Will those matters be discussed at the next meeting of the North/South Ministerial Council?

Ms Rodgers: At the North/South agriculture sectoral meeting, we set a firm basis for the production of joint strategies by the end of this year, and I am confident that we will have those in place by then, including a strategy to deal with the eradication of TB, brucellosis and scrapie on the island of Ireland.

Mr Ford: The Minister referred to rural development in a number of areas. Can she indicate whether she managed to learn anything from Minister Walsh about the issue of rural proofing, given that she seems to be having a certain amount of difficulty with her Executive Colleagues in dealing with the matter?

With regard to the references the Minister made to animal movement controls, can she say what additional resources are being provided for the control of animal movement in the island as a whole in the light of the current upsurge in TB and brucellosis? Also, how is testing being co-ordinated between North and South to ensure there is no further cross-border infection?

Ms Rodgers: Rural proofing was not discussed as it was not on the agenda, but I can assure the Member that we do not have problems with rural proofing. In fact, a cross-departmental steering group on rural proofing has been set up and will meet tomorrow under my chairmanship.

With regard to animal movement controls, we are continuing to deal with brucellosis through the biennial blood-testing programme. However, in areas with increased incidence, such as Armagh, Newry, and Enniskillen, we have increased the frequency of testing from biennial to annual. Where infection has been found, we have intensified the testing regime around the infected premises on herds contiguous to the infected herd — that is, the inner ring herds being restricted. We immediately test herds in the outer ring contiguous to the inner ring, and subsequently at four-monthly intervals. We have increased our testing in the areas that are being hardest hit, and this policy has been agreed with the Republic.

Mr Kane: Have the Minister and her Department any plans to trap badgers for TB testing in black spots of bovine TB infection? Will she concede that this would either establish or disprove the link between the badger population and the incidence of bovine tuberculosis infection? Furthermore, since the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development's Veterinary Service can test badgers found by farmers, have figures been made available on the number of badgers found to have TB?

Ms Rodgers: As I said in response to Mr McGrady, a policy evaluation is being carried out, and I will make my decision when the results are available. I am not in a position to make any decision at this point.

Mr Bradley: I note the comments about the joint initiatives aimed at raising the level of awareness among flock-owners concerning scrapie. In reply to Mr McHugh, the Minister referred briefly to the inclusion of scrapie in the joint health programme. What progress has been made on the establishment of an all-Ireland scrapie eradication plan?

Ms Rodgers: Minister Walsh and I share a commitment to eradicating scrapie from the island of Ireland. The nature of the disease and of the sheep population of this island mean that it makes sense to have a joint approach. We agree that greater flock-owner awareness, enhanced testing, depopulation and the continued assessment of genotyping can contribute significantly to eradicating the disease. Although the approach in each jurisdiction may differ in some detail, they each involve the four elements that I mentioned. The Departments, North and South, will share and evaluate practical experience and findings. Where appropriate, they will also undertake shared initiatives in the context of jointly advancing the achievement of common goals.

The first joint initiative is already under way. It aims to raise the level of awareness of scrapie among flock-owners throughout the island of Ireland and involves the preparation and issue of a common advice leaflet on scrapie for farmers. As far as we are aware, there is a low incidence of scrapie in Ireland — an average of three cases a year in the North and seven in the South. Nevertheless, we wish to ensure that farmers are totally aware of it, and we wish to establish the exact levels of incidence. That approach will ensure that scrapie is ultimately eradicated from the island, and, in the meantime, normal trade may continue in accordance with EU rules.

Mr Hussey: I note from the Minister's statement that the North/South Ministerial Council considered a progress report and study on the pig industry, and that the main recommendations of the report include the rationalisation of existing slaughter capacity. Will the Minister assure the House that such rationalisation would not disadvantage slaughter capacity in Northern Ireland? Is the Minister aware that Northern Ireland pig farmers feel disadvantaged because the controls on the export of pigs from Northern Ireland to the Republic are much more stringent than those for the reciprocal import of pigs from the Republic to Northern Ireland? Will that issue be addressed?

Ms Rodgers: The study on the pig industry was initiated in December 1999 because of the grim situation in that industry, which the Member is well aware of. There were several recommendations. One was for the rationalisation of existing slaughtering capacity and the scaling up of

plant size. That was to ensure that the industry survived and went forward. The industry is now taking up those issues.

Other recommendations involved the supply chain, the need for secondary processors and the need to improve production efficiency, particularly in Northern Ireland. These matters were discussed at a recent seminar at Loughry College. Slaughter capacity is a commercial matter and is not my responsibility. The research and the report pointed to what needed to be done to ensure the survival and viability of the industry. The industry has examined that and is taking it seriously.

Intracommunity regulations and laws apply to the movement of pigs between the North and the South in the same way as movement between any two member states. We do not have any control over that: we must apply the intracommunity regulations and rules.

Mr Gibson: Will the Minister be specific as to what measures she has introduced to deal with the backlog of animals with tuberculosis? What measures has she introduced, since the current regulations on cross-border importation of animals, to protect the health of animal stocks in Northern Ireland?

Ms Rodgers: I have asked my Chief Veterinary Officer to treat the eradication of brucellosis as a priority, and much work has gone into that. Recruitment is under way for veterinary and ancillary staff, in addition to the recent appointments of new valuation officers to speed up the removal of reactors. Additional staff have been moved into the three high-incidence areas of Armagh, Newry and Enniskillen.

The Department is reorganising staff at markets and abattoirs to provide extra resources for brucellosis duties. The bulk milk-sampling programme in dairy herds has allowed additional staff to be allocated to the high-incidence areas. There is annual instead of biennial testing in those areas, and I have outlined what has been done about infected premises and the surrounding areas. Several initiatives have been undertaken to eradicate the problem.

We have caught up with the backlog on the movement of animals, and currently there is no backlog. Additional assessors were put in place to deal with that, and there is also additional capacity for getting rid of the animals.

The rules for the importation of animals still apply and have already been outlined.

Mr Dallat: I am sure the Minister has no plans to issue passports for the movement of sheep across the border. However, is the sheep identification system compatible with that in the Republic of Ireland?

Ms Rodgers: Our system for the identification of sheep delivers the same objective, which is the control and traceability of sheep movements. The existing system delivers registration of flocks, unique identification and online ordering of ear tags by manufacturers. The system

is also accessible to approved manufacturers, including those in the Republic of Ireland, by means of an assigned password.

Mr Paisley Jnr: Will the Minister give a breakdown of the figures in Northern Ireland and in the Republic of Ireland for scrapie, TB and brucellosis? How many successful prosecutions has her Department taken against people allegedly involved in the illegal spreading of TB and brucellosis in this jurisdiction?

12.30 pm

Can she inform the House of the cost to her Department of pursuing that case?

The Minister told us that the January sectoral meeting cost approximately £4,000. Are we right to assume that the most recent meeting also cost £4,000 and that a meeting planned for October will cost taxpayers yet another £4,000? If that is so, does the Minister agree that this is not value for money — much of the business could be done by telephone, and there is little need for the whole apparatus of Government to move into Council format for information to be relayed between the two Departments?

Ms Rodgers: I do not have the figures that the Member has requested. However, I will provide them for him as soon as possible. I do not know the cost of the last meeting of the Council, but I am surprised that he seems to think it a waste of time and money to develop a common strategy on animal health on the island of Ireland. The Member may not be aware that this is a complex matter that cannot be dealt with through a few telephone calls. Several working parties are engaged in the strategy.

An all-island animal health strategy has been called for most vehemently by the Ulster Farmers' Union, the Northern Ireland Agricultural Producers Association (NIAPA) and, indeed, the whole industry. I take this very seriously. We saw what happened last year with foot-and-mouth disease, and if it had not been for the co-operation between the Minister in the Republic and myself, the meetings that we and officials had at that time and our telephone conversations, we would have been in a much sorrier state than we were by the end of last year.

Mr McMenamin: I welcome the Minister's statement. What is the Northern line on common agricultural policy (CAP) reform, and what progress has the North/South Ministerial Council made in developing a common approach?

Ms Rodgers: We accept that change is coming and that there will be implications from enlargement, the World Trade Organisation (WTO) and the review of Agenda 2000. The Commission has said that there will be changes in subsidies and that there will be a move from the first pillar of the common agricultural policy (CAP) to the second pillar, which is rural development. Nevertheless, we have to be concerned about the nature,

the pace and the scale of that reform. It must not put unacceptable pressure on farmers and their families or put at risk the viability of the rural economy. There are social and economic issues, and we must avoid creating further marginalisation of rural communities.

On the common approach of the North/South Ministerial Council, I discussed and agreed a set of common concerns and priorities about the future of the CAP at a previous meeting with Joe Walsh, the Republic's Minister of Agriculture, Food and Rural Development. I identified the common concerns when responding to the Northern Ireland priorities. We have agreed to continue to review developments on those matters, especially in the run-up to the mid-term review. When we get the outcome of that in June 2002, we will be able to take further note and decide our priorities. I will also be in discussion with the UK Ministers and Mrs Beckett, the Secretary of State for the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, on this.

NORTH/SOUTH MINISTERIAL COUNCIL

Foyle, Carlingford and Irish Lights Commission

Mr Deputy Speaker: I have received notice from the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development that she wishes to make a statement on the North/South Ministerial Council meeting on the Foyle, Carlingford and Irish Lights Commission held on 15 April 2002 in Dublin.

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development (Ms Rodgers): The eighth meeting of the North/South Ministerial Council for the Foyle, Carlingford and Irish Lights Commission took place on 15 April 2002 in Dublin. Following nomination by the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister, James Leslie and I represented Northern Ireland.

Mr Frank Fahey, the Minister for the Marine and Natural Resources, represented the Irish Government. The papers for the meeting were issued to Executive Committee members during the week commencing 8 April.

The meeting opened with reports from the chairperson of the commission's board, Mr Peter Savage, and the chief executive of the Loughs Agency, Mr Derek Anderson. The chief executive advised that the outstanding accounts for 1997, 1998 and 1999 have now been completed, and those for the years ended 2000 and 2001 are being audited. Outstanding annual reports will be finalised and published soon.

Mr Anderson also said that 11 tenders to carry out an audit of recreational and tourism fisheries in the Foyle and Carlingford areas have been received, and five applicants have been invited to make presentations to the commission's board later this month to facilitate a final selection and the commencement of the work in August. He added that work on the stakeholder survey of the shellfisheries of the loughs is progressing well. It is expected that all interviews will be completed by the end of this month, and a report will be available by May.

Ministers were also updated on shellfish production in the 2001 season, and the mussel and oyster fisheries are performing well. Mr Anderson then advised that there continues to be a significant reduction in illegal fishing activity, and that that is attributable to the successful introduction of the salmon carcass tagging scheme. Combined with that, the agency continues to prosecute when it detects illegal activity, and it directs effort towards the detection and prevention of pollution incidents.

Ministers then noted the resignation of a board member of the Foyle, Carlingford and Irish Lights Commission, Sheila Tyrell, and thanked her for her service. There are no plans to replace her at present.

In addition, Ministers noted the Loughs Agency's proposals for an Atlantic salmon and seal interactive workshop, which is planned for May 2002. Representatives of the recreational and commercial salmon fisheries, agencies, Departments and other bodies with responsibilities for fisheries and environment matters throughout the island of Ireland will meet at that workshop to discuss past and current research on the interaction of seals and salmon, the abundance of seals in Ireland, the UK and the Atlantic seaboard of Europe and Canada. They will recommend further research and data collection to evaluate the impact of seals on salmon stocks.

Ministers then noted the progress in the agency's review of its staffing and structure, with the imminent submission of a report to the two sponsoring Departments and the two finance Departments. That was followed by a discussion on the continuing problems associated with the aquaculture site in Carlingford Lough that was licensed by the Department of the Marine and Natural Resources, whose boundaries have caused problems for Northern fishermen in accessing the public mussel fishery. I impressed upon Minister Fahey the continued need for a speedy resolution to those difficulties. He agreed that the Department of the Marine and Natural Resources and the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development should meet with a view to resolving those issues as soon as possible.

Ministers were then updated on the agency's plans to equip and open the interpretive centre at its headquarters at Prehen. The centre will provide an excellent educational resource for schoolchildren, the many users of the fisheries resources and the public in the Foyle and Carlingford areas. Plans, and work to implement those plans, are well advanced, and the centre remains on target to open in September 2002.

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

I am making the statement on behalf of Mr Leslie and myself.

The Chairperson of the Committee for Agriculture and Rural Development (Rev Dr Ian Paisley): Will the Minister give an up-to-date report on the problems of Northern Ireland fishermen in accessing the public mussel fishery because of the site that has been licensed by the Department of the Marine and Natural Resources in Carlingford Lough? She stated that the matter would be dealt with "as soon as possible". That expression can sometimes mean a very long time.

I am sure that she has been well briefed by her representatives about the problem, and I trust that there will be a speedy resolution.

Ms Rodgers: I am aware of the problem, and the problems it is causing fishermen on this side of the lough. However, as the Department of the Marine and Natural Resources licensed the site, it is for that Department to progress an amicable solution, and I understand that it has sought legal advice on the matter. The Department of Agriculture and Rural Development's aim is to resolve the issue as quickly as possible and ensure that Northern Ireland fishermen have fair access to the public mussel fishery. To that end, it was agreed at the North/South Ministerial Council meeting that my Department should meet with Department of the Marine and Natural Resources officials to make further progress towards a solution. I emphasised at that meeting the need to make progress on the issue as soon as possible.

Mr J Wilson: Having raised with the Minister in the Chamber the issue of outstanding accounts over five years, I am happy to note that there has been progress. However, as regards outstanding annual reports I seek the Minister's assurance that where the report says that they will be published in the near future she means "the near future". Does that mean weeks or months?

As regards the proposed Atlantic salmon and seal interactive workshop, I seek the Minister's assurance that Members will be invited to the workshop — particularly Committee members, who have responsibility for these matters.

Ms Rodgers: The agency's accounts are being finalised. I thank the Member for his remarks; I know there was much concern about the delay, which I explained at fair length in my last report. Annual reports for 2000-01 will be published following completion of the audit of the accounts. It is intended that that will take place in May — in this case, "as soon as possible" means May.

There are conflicting views and interests concerning Atlantic salmon. It is important that everyone with an interest in the matter is consulted. I would be surprised if Members did not have the opportunity to take part in the consultation. Stakeholders, and anyone with an interest — which I assume would include the Assembly — will be part of the consultation and will be able to comment.

Mr McGrady: I thank the Minister for another comprehensive report on the meeting of the North/South Ministerial Council. In view of the need to address the economic and social disadvantages caused by partition of the island of Ireland and the need to encourage trade, investment and tourism, what is the North/South Ministerial Council doing to promote the Narrow Water bridge project, which will connect the Cooley peninsula in County Louth with South Down? Will she explain the logistics of how schoolchildren and the fishery interests in the Carlingford area could benefit from the interpretive centre at Prehen?

Ms Rodgers: I am aware of the proposed Narrow Water bridge project referred to by Mr McGrady. However, as

the project does not lie within the Foyle, Carlingford and Irish Lights Commission's responsibility, it has had no involvement. I understand the issue being raised by Mr McGrady, and I suggest that it is a matter for the transport sector of the North/South Ministerial Council. The sector met recently and will be making a report.

The Foyle, Carlingford and Irish Lights Commission is not involved, although it will be interested to hear what, if anything, is being proposed.

12.45 pm

The logistics and organisation of school trips to various parts of Northern Ireland and particularly to the interpretive centre at Prehen are not in my remit. The Prehen centre is an exciting project and would be worth an organised school visit. If the Foyle, Carlingford and Irish Lights Commission had endless resources, it would have such a centre in every corner of Northern Ireland. However, the agency has no plans to open a separate interpretive centre in the Carlingford area. It is to be hoped that schools throughout Northern Ireland will find the resources in their budget to arrange a visit to the Maiden City and Prehen interpretive centre.

Mr McHugh: Go raibh maith agat. I welcome the Minister's statement and replies.

What impact have pollution incidents and illegal fishing of salmon had on sport angling in relation to cross-border tourism?

Ms Rodgers: I presume that the Member is referring to the effect of pollution on fish stocks in the Foyle and Carlingford areas. As regards pollution incidents from agricultural or other sources, the agency operates a programme of proactive farm visits that it believes has contributed significantly to a reduction in the number and severity of agricultural pollution incidents. The agency collects information on the productivity of the rivers and streams in the Foyle and Carlingford areas. That information provides indications of previously undetected pollution, thus allowing the agency to focus its proactive anti-pollution work. The agency also endeavours to cover the cost of re-stocking after water pollution incidents, and it believes that that acts as a deterrent to potential polluters. The agency expects to strengthen the legislation in order to require polluters to re-stock and to reinstate.

Mr Morrow: In her statement, the Minister refers to the "significant reduction in illegal fishing activity".

Will the Minister define as a percentage what she means by "significant"? Her statement also notes that

"the agency continues to prosecute when it detects illegal activity".

How many successful prosecutions have been brought to date? How many are pending — whether for pollution-related activities or illegal fishing?

Ms Rodgers: The Loughs Agency's predecessor, the Foyle Fisheries Commission, had an effective track record in dealing with poaching in the Foyle area. The Loughs Agency is committed to tackling all illegal fishing activity in its areas of responsibility. Last season, despite the curtailment of the agency's enforcement activities due to the outbreak of foot-and-mouth disease, it seized over 241 illegal nets, 22 boats, and 279 salmon. The introduction of a carcass-tagging scheme in the Foyle and Carlingford areas has also had a positive impact in reducing the levels of poaching. The agency is engaged in 31 prosecutions relating to illegal fishing that took place in 2001.

Mr Hamilton: The Minister mentioned the aquaculture site that was licensed by the Department of the Marine and Natural Resources, the boundaries of which have caused problems for Northern Ireland's fishermen in accessing the public mussel fisheries. What steps is she taking to protect the fishermen's rights of access to the public fishery in Carlingford Lough? Have the Irish Government assured her that they will ensure that the rights of our fishermen will be upheld and protected? Has she considered seeking assistance from the Foreign and Commonwealth Office at Westminster to resolve the matter?

Ms Rodgers: I answered that question when I stated that I had raised the issue at the North/South Ministerial Council. I have raised the matter twice, and I am pressing Minister Fahey to deal with the matter urgently. As Dr Paisley said, it is an urgent matter for the fishermen in the area. I understand their grievance, and I want to deal with the matter as soon as possible.

The Department of the Marine and Natural Resources in the South licensed the site, so it must deal with the problem. I am pressing hard for a solution, and the Foreign and Commonwealth Office is aware of the issue.

Mr McMenamin: How does the agency plan to ensure the development of a sustainable aquaculture industry in Lough Foyle?

Ms Rodgers: Although powers to license and develop the aquaculture industry in Lough Foyle have not yet been transferred to the Foyle and Carlingford Irish Lights Commission, the Loughs Agency is carrying out extensive consultation to obtain the views of those who work on the lough. When that has been completed, the agency proposes to draw up an implementation plan for introducing an aquaculture regulatory system for Lough Foyle. The agency also plans to provide grant aid to assist the development of the aquaculture sector in the Foyle and Carlingford areas when the necessary legislation has been enacted. The agency has also put in place several monitoring programmes in Lough Foyle and Carlingford Lough, including the installation of automatic temperature loggers in both loughs, and bi-monthly sampling to monitor salinity, conductivity, PH and oxygen levels.

The agency recently included the collection of nutrient samples in the programme, which will provide information that will be fundamental to the development and management of the shellfish industry.

Mr Paisley Jnr: After the last sectoral meeting, the Minister said that she had established an advisory forum and focus groups. Did the groups report at the latest meeting or are they expected to report at the next meeting in October? In a letter to me on 29 March, the Minister stated that the establishment of the focus groups had cost £22,000 to date. Is it not about time that a progress report on the lavish expenditure on focus groups was published?

Ms Rodgers: The advisory forum has been established, and it will provide a formal mechanism for interested parties in both areas to express their views on the work of the agency. The membership of the forum includes representatives from a wide range of interests such as shellfishermen, commercial salmon netmen and anglers. The agency also intends to establish several focus groups to represent specific interests when it meets again in May.

I have not received a report from the agency yet. However, the process is ongoing. The agency is consulting stakeholders, and I look forward to its report. It is important that the advisory forum has been set up and that the stakeholders — and there are many around both loughs — can give their views and be part of the process in which the Foyle, Carlingford and Irish Lights Commission improves aquaculture. I am pleased that the forum has been set up and is in operation. However, it must continue with the consultative process.

Mr Hussey: Will the Minister note my concern about the restrictive remit in the audit of recreational and tourism facilities in the Foyle and Carlingford areas? Will she explain why the wider issue of water-based recreation and tourism activities is not being addressed in the audit; even if it is only about how such activities impact positively or negatively on fisheries?

Ms Rodgers: The issues raised by Mr Hussey are not within the remit of the Foyle, Carlingford and Irish Lights Commission.

Mr Bradley: The Minister said that the interpretive centre would be open to the wider public in the Foyle and Carlingford areas. I agree with the comments of my Colleague, Mr McGrady, about the distance of the Foyle from Warrenpoint and Carlingford. However, there is potential for an exciting and long day out for the children of the area. Does the Minister intend the centre to be open to all members of the public?

Ms Rodgers: Yes. From the point of view of education, the centre will be of particular benefit to schoolchildren; however, it will also benefit the wider public — helping them to understand the nature of the water base, and the industry, ecology, and the environmental aspects of the area.

Mr Gibson: The Minister mentioned the significant reduction in illegal fishing. Foot-and-mouth disease prevented possible public prosecutions. Have fish counts on the machines at Sion Mills and Newtownstewart shown a significant increase in the various types of fish making their way into the Mourne, the Strule, and the Foyle? Locally, the perception is that illegal fishing is still rampant and that the number of fish making their way to the headwaters of the Foyle has significantly decreased in the past two years.

Ms Rodgers: I am unable to provide the Member with figures today. However, I will provide him with a written answer about the number of fish going through counters at Sion Mills.

NORTH/SOUTH MINISTERIAL COUNCIL

Education

Mr Deputy 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, which was held on 11 April 2002 in Armagh.

The Minister of Education (Mr M McGuinness): With permission, a LeasCheann Comhairle, I wish to make a statement on the fourth sectoral meeting on education of the North/South Ministerial Council, held in the Armagh City Hotel, Armagh on 11 April 2002. Following nomination by the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister, the Minister of the Environment, Mr Dermot Nesbitt, and I, attended the sectoral meeting of the North/South Ministerial Council. Dr Michael Woods TD, Minister for Education and Science, represented the Irish Government. Mr Nesbitt has approved the statement, and it is also made on his behalf.

1.00 pm

The objectives of the meeting were to review the progress of the joint working groups on educational underachievement, special education needs and teacher qualifications that were established at the first sectoral meeting on 3 February 2000, to consider several progress reports from the working groups, to agree issues where further work was required, to endorse proposed future actions and to take decisions on several specific actions, on which I shall elaborate.

First, the Council considered a report from the teachers' superannuation working group. The working group's purpose was 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. The working group has identified, and is now considering, several possible options. It is a complex issue, and cognisance must be taken of existing arrangements in other public-sector schemes. However, we remain confident of the potential for agreement on this after further necessary work is carried out by the working group.

In the wider context of the report by the Centre for Cross Border Studies entitled 'Study of Obstacles to Mobility of Persons between the two parts of the island of Ireland', which was considered at the plenary North/South Ministerial Council meeting last November, we agreed that the centre should be notified of the working group's work.

The Council also considered a report from the teacher qualifications working group, whose role is to examine teacher mobility on the island. At its previous meeting, the Council agreed that the working group should look

at the need for prospective teachers in the South to take an examination in the history and structure of the Irish education system. The working group is still working on that and on the arrangements for the mutual recognition of teachers' qualifications.

There have been significant changes to the requirements for Irish-language proficiency for teachers in the South. They now relate only to teachers in primary schools or secondary schools in the Gaeltacht, or where teaching is in Irish. Additionally, teachers can now take up to five years to achieve the necessary proficiency. The Department of Education and Science has made special arrangements for language training courses, and the pay differential that existed between teachers who had the language proficiency and those who did not has been removed. Further work remains to be done, and I look forward to receiving the next report from that working group.

The Council considered a report from the literacy and numeracy working group. The House will agree that good literacy and numeracy skills are key to all other parts of the curriculum. That is true here and in the South, and the Council regards that area of work as extremely important. We have agreed that there should be an exchange of materials and good practice among teaching professionals and that the attendance of practitioners at seminars and conferences in both jurisdictions is also important, as is sharing teaching resources and training approaches.

After the previous Council meeting, I reported that we shared with colleagues in the South our experiences of the Reading Recovery programme and new materials that we have produced to help children improve their mathematical skills. The working group has also considered an evaluation of the Reading Recovery programme published by the University of Strathclyde. Proposals have been made by the two universities in the North for a dedicated centre for reading recovery training. However, that is on hold until the working group has had time to look at the idea further and evaluate the potential for such a centre to serve the island of Ireland.

I am pleased that the Department of Education and Science is considering how it might encourage the participation of more schools in the South in the Pushkin Prizes programme, with the aim of bringing participation up to a level equivalent to that of schools here. We are also pleased that a research report carried out by Children's Books Ireland on behalf of the two Departments on the reading habits of children throughout the island is to be published shortly. It is the first large-scale survey on the leisure-time reading of young people and will provide valuable information for teachers, librarians and others interested in what children like to read.

On numeracy, materials and guidance developed in the North are to be disseminated to teachers and schools

in the South. The Council also endorsed the working group's proposals to examine the joint development of materials and good practice guidance in numeracy, as well as the joint development and evaluation of innovative projects to improve numeracy standards.

We are also keen to tackle in a collaborative manner the issue of how young people and children can be encouraged to attend school and achieve their potential. I reported to the Council that my Department is making arrangements with two education and library boards for four pilot programmes. Those are to be modelled on the South's home/school/community projects and are aimed at improving the involvement of parents in their children's education. The pilot programmes with a small number of schools here draw on the considerable experience of those in operation in the South, such as in north Dublin and Dundalk.

Work is also under way on the development of an information pack for schools to promote a positive attitude to school attendance. It is hoped that the initial phase will be completed early in the new academic year.

I am pleased to note that the Department of Education and Science has established a national educational welfare board, and it was agreed that there was ample scope for co-operation with the education welfare service here on a range of issues, such as professional staff development and, perhaps, jointly-developed educational welfare qualifications. The national board is a new body and, therefore, such developments will take a little time to organise.

I have said before that children have a fundamental right to be safe and protected while in school and in other situations, and to be free from the risks of child abuse while in the care of teachers, youth leaders and others. The North/South child-protection working group has examined the complex issues in that area, and I am delighted that the Department of Education and Science is preparing a discussion paper on proposals for a register of unfit people in the South. The consultation process with education partners and others is expected to run until the end of the summer, and I look forward to hearing the outcome at the next meeting of the North/South Ministerial Council.

The Council is convinced that we must co-operate to address the issue of child protection throughout these islands, and the greatest possible level of consistency of approach will be essential. In the North, we are liaising closely with the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety on the provisions to be contained in a proposed protection of children and vulnerable adults Bill, which will come before the Assembly in due course. Such legislation would provide vitally important controls in that area, but we must await the decision of the House.

The development of confidential mechanisms, both North and South, for the registration of teachers and other workers in education who are regarded as unsuitable to

work with children and young people must be a high-priority objective. However, the issue is complex, and separate, yet complementary, legislation will be necessary in the North and the South.

In my statement after the previous North/South Ministerial Council meeting, I noted that the Centre for Cross Border Studies in Armagh had, as commissioned by the Council, produced a scoping study on the extent and effectiveness of existing school, youth and teacher exchange programmes. A key recommendation of the study was the need for suitable processes and structures to improve the management and facilitation of school, youth and teacher exchanges, and to improve the quality of such exchanges for participants.

Since the previous Council meeting, officials from both Departments have engaged with a consortium comprising the Youth Council for Northern Ireland, Léargas, and the Belfast office of the education and training group of the British Council. The consortium indicated an interest in developing the necessary structural and procedural approaches suggested in the study, and, at the North/South Ministerial Council's request, introduced proposals as to how that might be achieved. Although some refinement of the proposals is needed, the Council endorsed the proposed structure, which comprises a programme management committee, a standing advisory committee and a joint-delivery agency. The Council agreed that officials from both Departments should continue discussions with the consortium, with a view to presenting a further report to the Council when it next meets in early autumn. The outworking of those proposals should result in a more robust and cohesive approach to school, youth and teacher exchanges, improved quality of experience for all those concerned and better value for money.

In the field of special education, the Council's initial focus has been on autism and dyslexia. The Council noted the latest progress report from the joint working group, and was particularly pleased that action is well under way on the development and production of videos for the parents of children with autism or dyslexia and CD-ROMs for their teachers. If all goes to plan, these resources, which will provide advice and guidance, will be available towards the end of the year.

The Council also noted that plans are under way at the Centre for Cross Border Studies to engage a special education teacher on secondment to organise and facilitate a jointly funded programme designed to promote dialogue and co-operation among professionals in the field of special education and to develop co-operation at a strategic level throughout the island. The programme will include exchange visits for teachers, principals, educational psychologists, inspectors and other relevant staff, with a focus on the border counties. The teacher will be in place at the start of the next academic year, and it is intended that the programmes will commence early in 2003.

The Council welcomed the publication of four comprehensive reports from the task groups on autism and dyslexia that were set up separately by the two Departments, North and South, in the autumn of 2000. The task group reports are the result of extensive research and discussions among groups of experts and practitioners in those fields. The reports produced in the South have been published, and the reports from the task groups in the North are with the printers. I intend to launch them formally early next month.

It is remarkable, though not surprising, that the reports produced by the task groups in the North and in the South identify and share many common themes. For example, the four reports highlight needs in the following areas: training for classroom teachers to identify children who may have autistic spectrum disorders (ASD) or dyslexia, to address those children's difficulties and to determine how best to meet their needs; the need for the earliest possible diagnosis and intervention; the involvement of parents in the assessment of their children's difficulties, and training for parents in suitable approaches to meeting their children's needs so that continuity of care and learning approaches can be provided during the child's day; multi-agency and multidisciplinary assessment and educational/therapy provision; and consistency in assessment criteria and levels of provision among agencies. Importantly, all four reports note a significant underidentification of children with these difficulties.

There are wide-ranging implications in these reports for service providers at all levels in the North, including in schools, at education and library board and health board level and in further and higher education. Indeed, as both autism and dyslexia are lifelong conditions, they have implications for society as a whole. I intend to convene a conference in the autumn term of this year at which service providers, policy-makers and practitioners can come together to discuss the reports and their responses to the vital, yet pragmatic, issues raised in them.

Michael Woods and I were delighted to announce a major, exciting development that will see the first centre of excellence on the island for work in the field of autistic spectrum disorders. The interim reports from the task groups showed that such a facility is badly needed.

As a result of discussions undertaken jointly by officials from the two Departments, North and South, agreement was reached in recent weeks for the acquisition of the former St Joseph's adolescent training centre in Middletown in order to establish a centre of excellence for autistic spectrum disorders. The facilities are in excellent condition, as proven by formal surveys undertaken on behalf of the two Departments, and we hope that the legal formalities can be completed in the near future.

The Departments will jointly fund the purchase of St Joseph's, and we expect that its doors will open in autumn 2003. The centre will be run by a board of management

and trustees to be established on a joint basis. However, many details — such as referral and admissions arrangements, budgetary arrangements, management, staffing and teaching resources and servicing — are yet to be finalised. Those details are under examination.

Autism is a growing concern throughout the island of Ireland. The development of the centre represents a great opportunity to develop guidance on best practice. Autism is a very particular type of disorder. It causes a range of difficulties that require specialist skill and diagnosis, assessment and provision. Professionals who work routinely with autistic children are still developing their knowledge of the disorder.

The centre will allow all the professionals from the health and education sectors to develop expertise that can be shared more widely. I am particularly excited that this will include expertise in working with families with children who have autistic spectrum disorders. The work in the centre will focus in particular on research, the training of teachers and other professionals, and the development of guidance and advice on good practice in diagnosis, assessment and approaches to working with children with autistic spectrum disorders.

1.15 pm

(Mr Speaker in the Chair)

The Council was pleased to note that, under measure 5.5 of the EU Peace II programme, the two Departments had received some 33 bids for funding between the launch of the measure on 16 January and the closing date for applications on 15 March. The funds available for the promotion of school and youth co-operation amount to approximately 5.3 million euros. The total value of the bids received is 9.9 million euros, which is almost double the available funding.

Officials in both Departments have been working together closely for many months to set up the necessary administrative procedures to handle bids. I hope that the selection panel will be able to complete the selection process by early May, with notification to successful and unsuccessful bidders being made as soon as possible thereafter. I am unable to give the House any details of the bids, but there is an excellent range of types of project proposals, covering a wide variety of issues and approaches.

The Council agreed the text of a communiqué that was issued following the meeting, and a copy has been placed in the Assembly Library. A date has not been set for the next meeting, but the Council hopes to meet again in September or October.

The Deputy Chairperson of the Committee for Education (Mr S Wilson): I notice that a jointly funded centre to study autism will be based on the border. There will be a delay in the establishment of the reading recovery training centre, which was to have been based at the universities in Northern Ireland, to allow time to examine

the possibility of an all-Ireland centre. There will be a jointly developed educational welfare qualification, and there is a proposal to develop jointly the evaluation of projects to improve numeracy standards.

The DUP maintains that cross-border bodies were designed to take Northern Ireland out of the United Kingdom. The report seems to confirm that the Minister is determined, by stealth and bit by bit, to marry the two Education Departments on this island. Can the Minister confirm that the Ulster Unionist Minister who accompanied him on the trip agreed to this process, or was that Minister asleep while the proposals were being put in place?

Mr M McGuinness: I do not really know what to say about that — it is all so predictable. As Minister of Education, I am charged with the responsibility of ensuring the best possible education for all our children. I have no doubt that the work that has been accomplished in the education sectoral format is for the benefit of all the children of this state and, in my view, of this island. People throughout the island of Ireland who are interested in education are keen to see co-operation between education-ists and the Education Ministers.

When I hear the type of comments that I have just heard, I wonder how the parents of an autistic child or the parents of a child who has problems with dyslexia feel when they hear this rubbish. This has been the most exciting announcement made thus far on education. I wonder how parents all over this island feel when they see the result of the work done on the establishment of an all-island centre of excellence for the treatment of autism. I think that those parents are elated. *[Interruption]*.

Mr Speaker: Order.

Mr M McGuinness: I think that they are more than pleased that, at long last, the Departments of Education on this island are prepared to pool their resources in order to put in place centres of excellence that will be of huge benefit to all of the children of this island.

It is also important to point out that this centre of excellence has not been set up for the Nationalist or Republican children of this island. It has been set up for all the children, including Unionist and Loyalist children, who suffer great disadvantage in their lives as a result of these syndromes. Let us therefore get rid of the nonsense, and let us recognise that there is no threat to anyone in moving forward to bring about a greatly enhanced education system. People should see the developments for what they are — interesting, exciting and innovative developments, which are solely about ensuring that we have the best possible standard of education for our children on this island.

Mr Hamilton: I refer to the point about teacher qualifications raised by the Minister in his statement. I note that at a previous meeting the Council agreed that the working group should look at the requirement for

prospective teachers in the South to take an examination on the history and structure of the Irish education system — a requirement, as the Minister will agree, which is a significant bar for teachers from Northern Ireland who may wish to apply for positions in the Republic. While I note that the Minister says that the working group is continuing to look at the matter, it is a statement that is distinctly lacking in detail. Can the Minister tell the House exactly what progress has been made on the removal of this particular barrier?

In addition, I note that although the requirement for the Irish language now exists only in secondary schools in the Gaeltacht, or where teaching is through the medium of the Irish language, it is still a requirement in all primary schools. Again, that is a significant barrier to a substantial number of teachers in primary schools in Northern Ireland who may wish to apply for positions in the Republic. I wonder whether the Minister can tell us what precise —

Mr Speaker: Order. I ask the Member to come to his question. This is an opportunity to ask a question of the Minister.

Mr Hamilton: What precise progress has been made in removing this barrier as well?

Mr M McGuinness: First, as the Member correctly said, the Irish-language proficiency requirement is now limited to teachers in the primary schools, second-level teachers in Gaeltacht schools and teachers required to teach through the medium of Irish. In addition, individuals are now afforded a five-year period in which to satisfy the proficiency levels of the Irish language requirement, and the differential rates of pay pending the acquisition of the certificate have been abolished. Obviously, great progress has been made, and there is no doubt whatsoever that this will be of considerable relief to many teachers who have expressed an interest in having greater mobility on the island of Ireland. On the whole issue of primary schools, we have to recognise that, thus far, the Department of Education and Science in Dublin has shown considerable flexibility and a willingness to explore all of these issues. I have no doubt that we will return to this matter again.

Pending the establishment of the general teaching council, the working group will be giving further consideration to the requirement for an examination on the history and structure of the Irish education system and to the present arrangements for the recognition of qualifications. All this work is fledgling, and we are exploring the willingness on all sides to recognise the huge benefits of making life easier for teachers. Huge benefits can be accrued by the education systems, North and South, and that is what this is designed to do.

Ms Lewsley: I welcome, and am looking forward to, the launch of the task group's report early next month. The Minister has mentioned some of the matters that the report will deal with, but will it make any recommendations?

If so, will there be a timetable for implementing them? Can the Minister assure the House that there will be adequate funding for full implementation? How will this report fit in with the special education needs and disability Bill? Will it in turn be put on the back burner as, unfortunately, has happened with the Bill? The Department has not seen fit to present it during the lifetime of this Assembly. Where will the report fit in the bigger picture?

Mr M McGuinness: Everyone interested in special education will be keenly interested in the publication of these vital reports on autism and dyslexia. These reports will clearly show all involved in education how to deal with these problems. There is not much point in bringing out reports on important issues if we are not prepared to make proposals. It is vital that we do that.

I have seen some of the work that has been done in the reports that have been published by the Department of Education and Science in Dublin. As I said in my statement, the similarities between our systems of education, considering the work that we have done through our working groups on autism and dyslexia, are startling. Clearly, there is much to be gained, and we intend to make progress here. I will be holding conferences in the autumn to discuss the response of the education sector to the autism and dyslexia reports, and we obviously want to hear people's views on them. They will make powerful contributions to the debates on these subjects. Special education has been a top priority since I became Minister of Education. I understand and recognise the great difficulties that many parents, children and educationalists have with this.

Ms Lewsley also mentioned the special education needs and disability Bill. The difficulty with that was that, at the beginning, the Bill was being taken forward by two Departments — the Department for Employment and Learning and the Department of Education. It has now been decided that the Department of Education will take it forward. It is a complex Bill with many issues connected to it. Just look at the reaction to the attempt to put such legislation in place in Dublin. There was huge controversy recently with people alleging that it did not adequately meet the needs of those who were affected. We do not want to make the same mistake, so we are being careful to ensure that our approach is comprehensive.

Mr C Murphy: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. I also welcome the Minister's statement, but not for any party political reason. Much in it and many recent announcements, particularly about special education, are welcome. I have a particular interest in autism, and many parents have contacted me recently who are hopeful and excited about the prospect of a centre of excellence in Middletown.

It has given them renewed hope. Many parents get frustrated when dealing with the issue of autism with educationalists and boards. The centre is good news for

Middletown and for the parents of children with autism throughout the island of Ireland.

1.30 pm

The statement rightly says that the reports from the task groups will have wide-ranging implications for service providers at all levels in education. In the experience of those of us who have attempted to deal with boards and educationalists on the problems of autism, that is much needed. Can the Minister tell us when the centre will be up and running, and whether he expects it to play a central role in the outworking of the implications of the reports from the task groups?

Mr M McGuinness: The centre will be up and running in the autumn of next year. We, and the Department of Education and Science, will be under great pressure to achieve that, but we are determined that the centre of excellence will open next autumn. The centre will provide a huge relief for parents all over the island of Ireland who, for far too long, have been struggling with that condition. I am very much looking forward to the establishment of the centre of excellence. The results of the working parties and groups will be factored into the work to be done at this important research and assessment centre.

Mrs E Bell: I thank the Minister for his comprehensive statement covering a wide range of issues. It is obvious that the work being done on the different educational issues will help all the children of the island, including the children of Northern Ireland.

I will confine my questions to several specific issues. Will the evaluation of the recovery programme from the University of Strathclyde, dealing with literacy and numeracy, be passed to the Education Committee so that it can have a look at the findings? Is there any indication of a timetable for the complementary legislation on child protection? Ms Lewsley has already referred to the delays.

Finally, although I warmly welcome the establishment of the centre, and the work that will be done with autism and dyslexia, will the necessary funds for the work be made available without being taken from the capital or general education budget? The Minister knows that special education is a pet project of mine and that I believe that it should be considered specifically and differently.

Mr M McGuinness: The Strathclyde report will be made available to the Education Committee. 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. We have already been out to consultation on those. The consultation period ended on 31 December 2001. The comprehensive proposals are intended to cover all those working with children, including teachers and other education sector employees, and the main proposal is to establish a statutory list of persons who are unsuitable to work with children.

It will not dispense with the need to carry out a criminal records check on educational sector employees. As stated in the consultation paper, the Bill would create a broad equivalent to the Protection of Children Act 1999 and Part VII of the Care Standards Act 2000 in England and Wales.

Through the Bill, and by mirroring the approach adopted in the Protection of Children Act 1999, the Department of Education proposes to make an amendment to the regulatory powers contained in the Department's primary legislation to allow the Department to draw up Regulations to strengthen, where appropriate, the safeguards in the education sector. Drawing up any such Regulations would involve separate consultation in due course.

The last matter is where the money will come from. I am very conscious of the points that have been made by the Member in the past about the need to ring-fence special education resources. We believe that we have adequately proven in recent times that funding must be in addition to the special educational needs budget. For example, the funding for Middletown will be in addition to the special needs budget. We have already had £1.7 million from the Executive programme children's fund.

Mr Gibson: Three years ago I asked the Minister to investigate the possibility that those who had earned their livelihood in the South of Ireland teaching and lecturing could have their superannuation made available if they came to reside in Northern Ireland. Can the Minister assure us today that that anomaly has been eradicated and that those who worked and earned their superannuation in the South of Ireland could enjoy the less inflationary situation in the North and receive their salary here?

Mr M McGuinness: At the moment, as everyone knows, teachers who move to take up a job either in the North or the South cannot add their previous service to their new employment for the purposes of calculating pension benefits. That is an obstacle to mobility, and its removal would benefit all teachers, North and South.

This is a complex area, and several technical issues must be thoroughly investigated and resolved before firm proposals can be brought before the Council. The working group will notify the Centre for Cross Border Studies of the work carried out to date. Careful consideration needs to be given to the implications for other public sector schemes, particularly those with a high degree of cross-border movement of members. Even though the discussions have some way to go, I am pleased that the working group has shown that there is potential for agreement between the jurisdictions in relation to the establishment of a transfer system for teachers' pensions. The Member can be assured that all issues, including those that he has raised, will be considered.

Mr Dallat: I also welcome the increasing co-operation, which is so necessary and so much overdue. This is all

about children. In an effort to rebuild the natural infrastructures that were destroyed by partition, are there any plans to formalise arrangements so that pupils that live along the border can attend the school nearest their home, when that school is on the other side of the border, be it North to South or South to North?

Mr M McGuinness: That is a difficult issue, and one that has been raised in several ways recently, particularly in relation to school transport along the border. I have previously signalled my willingness to explore, with the Department of Education and Science, how we can deal with that matter under the education sectoral format, and I hope to do that in the future.

Mr McHugh: I thank the Minister for his comprehensive and detailed statement on the North/South Ministerial Council education sectoral meeting. Several points have been covered that are of interest to the Committee for Education, including child protection, special education and exchange of pupils and teachers. What structure is proposed for the development and delivery of that exchange programme, which would be of particular benefit to schoolchildren on both sides of the border?

Mr M McGuinness: The proposed structure has three elements: a programme management committee, which will be responsible for the development of policy and strategy; a standing advisory committee, which will involve a range of stakeholders and which will contribute to policy development and advise on priorities; and a joint development agency, which will promote the programme, target schools and youth groups, assist partner finding, develop new initiatives and put in place monitoring and evaluation procedures.

Mr Paisley Jnr: I welcome the very significant change in Sinn Féin policy on literacy and numeracy. People associated with the distribution of the Pushkin Prize will no longer be subjected to Sinn Féin attacks, and that is to be welcomed. I hope that the Minister will now give a categorical assurance to the House that neither he nor his Colleagues, nor his party operating in Ulster or in the Republic of Ireland, will engage in such attacks or threats of attacks on schools associated with the distribution of the Pushkin Prize programme.

The Minister mentioned child protection in his statement. Will the people who are registered as unfit, North and South, include those with a criminal record? Will it include people who have been involved in punishment beatings? Will it include people who have confessed to being commanders in terrorist organisations? If those people are registered as unfit to have any involvement with children, will that also apply to departmental staff?

Mr M McGuinness: I have attended events sponsored by the Pushkin Prize in the company of the Duchess of Abercorn. She is doing a magnificent job showing children all over the island of Ireland their real potential for poetry,

story telling and story writing. The Duchess of Abercorn and the Pushkin Prizes make a tremendous contribution to the education of our children. I have no difficulty whatsoever in associating myself with a very progressive area of work.

The second part of the question is more political than educational, but it is in all of our interests — and I am very keen to see this happen — that no one who is unfit will work with children.

PNEUMOCONIOSIS, ETC (WORKERS' COMPENSATION) (PAYMENT OF CLAIMS) (AMENDMENT) REGULATIONS (NORTHERN IRELAND) 2002

The Minister for Employment and Learning (Ms Hanna): I beg to move

That the Pneumoconiosis, etc (Workers' Compensation) (Payment of Claims) (Amendment) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2002 (SR 133/2002) be approved.

The Regulations were laid before the Assembly on 12 April 2002, and they will not come into operation until the day after they are approved by resolution, which is tomorrow. The Department for Employment and Learning operates the pneumoconiosis scheme under the Pneumoconiosis etc (Workers' Compensation) (Northern Ireland) Order 1979. The scheme acts as a safety net for employees who have contracted one of the lung diseases covered by the Order, but who are unable to take court action to recover damages from the liable employer or employers. That is generally because the employer has ceased trading.

The scheme offers a one-off lump sum payment as compensation to eligible individuals or their dependants. The Regulations will increase the amount of compensation payable under the Order by 3·8%, which is in line with the retail price index. Such regular increases ensure that the compensation payments made to sufferers of these terrible diseases keep pace with inflation. I commend the Regulations to the Assembly.

The Chairperson of the Committee for Employment and Learning (Dr Birnie): I support the motion to affirm Statutory Rule 133/2002, albeit subject to a qualification to which I will come.

As the Minister says, the Statutory Rule relates to sufferers or their dependants, where the employer no longer carries on business. The Committee considered the policy behind the Statutory Rule on 29 November 2001, when it agreed to seek clarification from the Department. The Committee subsequently received details of the financial consequences of this legislation. The Department's response was placed before the Committee on 24 January 2002, and at that stage, the Committee agreed to support the policy.

1.45 pm

The Committee considered the Statutory Rule at its meeting on 18 April. However, due to the late laying of the Statutory Rule there was little time for the Committee and the Examiner of Statutory Rules to consider the detail. The timing was tardy. However, it was more worrying that the Statutory Rule contained a technical drafting error. This was set out in the Examiner of Statutory Rules draft report of 18 April — the same day

as the Committee meeting. Due to the serious nature of the Statutory Rule for those it affects, to which the Minister has rightly drawn attention, the Committee does not wish to delay compensation. Thus, we have agreed to affirm the motion now, but on the condition that a further Statutory Rule subject to negative resolution is laid in the near future. The Committee seeks that assurance from the Minister.

I would like the Minister to reassure the Assembly that the issue of the treatment of associates of those affected, who also develop the disease as a result of contamination from the primary source through contact with clothing, for example, will be addressed. However, I accept that that the issue has wider implications than this Statutory Rule, since this rule is about supporting ex-employees of businesses that have gone bankrupt. The Committee for Employment and Learning supports the motion.

Dr Adamson: Dr Birnie has already asked my question.

Mr Speaker: That rarely stops other Members from asking the same question again. The Member is to be commended for his consideration.

Ms Hanna: These Regulations provide much needed support to sufferers of industrial lung diseases who are unable to claim damages from the owners of the businesses responsible for their condition. It is important that compensation levels are not allowed to erode through inflation. For this reason the rates of payment should be increased in line with the retail price index.

First, I apologise to the Committee for the short time it had to consider the Statutory Rule. Secondly, in answer to the Chairperson's question, the issue of associates can be looked at. Thirdly, in his scrutiny, the Examiner of Statutory Rules identified an ambiguity in regulation 2(1). The Department will make an amendment removing the ambiguity through negative resolution as soon as possible.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That the Pneumoconiosis, etc (Workers' Compensation) (Payment of Claims) (Amendment) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2002 (SR 133/2002) be approved.

MATERNITY AND PARENTAL LEAVE ETC (AMENDMENT NO. 2) REGULATIONS (NORTHERN IRELAND) 2002

The Minister for Employment and Learning (Ms Hanna): I beg to move

That the Maternity and Parental Leave etc (Amendment No.2) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2002 (SR 135/2002) be approved.

These Regulations were laid before the Assembly on 5 April 2002 and came into operation on 21 April 2002. They are subject to confirmation by the Assembly within six months of that date. They amend the Maternity and Paternal Leave etc Regulations (Northern Ireland) 1999, which I shall refer to as the principal Regulations. The principal Regulations implemented in Northern Ireland the European Framework Agreement on Parental Leave. They introduced a new right for employees who had a baby or adopted a child on or after 15 December 1999, and who had completed one year's qualifying service with their employer, to take 13 weeks' unpaid parental leave within five years of their child's birth or adoption.

The amended Regulations extend the right to unpaid parental leave to the parents of children who were born or adopted in the five years before that date. They increase from 13 weeks to 18 weeks the amount of leave that is available to the parents of disabled children. In addition, they allow more parents to balance more effectively their work and home lives, and they give the parents of disabled children much-needed flexibility. Those arrangements will benefit not only employees, but also employers and society in general.

Mr Speaker: I confirm that, although a paternal leave Regulation may be very desirable, these are maternity and parental leave Regulations, which are slightly different.

The Chairperson of the Committee for Employment and Learning (Dr Birnie): That is an important point, Mr Speaker. Thank you for your clarification.

The Committee supports the motion to confirm Statutory Rule 135/2002. The original pre-draft Statutory Rule was placed before the Committee at its meeting on 24 January 2002. The Committee sought clarification as to whether the Statutory Rule was intended to create parity between Northern Ireland and Great Britain. That information was presented to the Committee on 21 February 2002. At that stage the Committee agreed to support the broad policy aspects of the Statutory Rule, which the Minister outlined. At its most recent meeting on Thursday, 18 April 2002, the Committee agreed to support the Statutory Rule.

Ms Hanna: I extend my apologies for reading the title as it was spelt on my paper. I should have known better.

The Statutory Rule helps working parents to balance their professional and family lives. In so doing, it encourages skilled employees who might otherwise have difficulties in striking a work/life balance to remain in the workforce. In addition, it is fundamentally good for parents and children to spend more time together.

Public consultation carried out by my Department identified widespread support for the right to parental leave. Now that businesses have become familiar with their responsibilities under the 1999 Regulations, they will have no difficulty in adjusting to the increased amount of leave that will be available to the parents of disabled children, and the extension of parental leave to all parents with children under five, when the amended Regulations come into operation.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That the Maternity and Parental Leave etc (Amendment No.2) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2002 (SR 135/2002) be approved.

MOBILE PHONES

Mr Shannon: I beg to move

That this Assembly calls upon the Minister of the Environment and the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to ensure the complete implementation of the recommendations made by the independent expert group on mobile phones, as laid out in the Stewart Report, and further, to implement a change in legislation to ensure that no telecommunications masts are constructed within 300 yards of any dwelling without full public consultation.

The motion arises from the concerns and representations that have been made to me and to other Members. Mobile phones are a dangerous necessity in our daily lives, and our work is almost impossible without them. Talking on a mobile phone has become as natural as eating or sleeping. They are used universally, and, were it not for our mobile phones, Members and other politicians would be excluded from the cut and thrust of political life. However, danger arises from the masts that are placed around the country to pick up signals and ensure that our conversations proceed uninterrupted no matter where we are.

The problem is that telecommunications masts are increasingly being placed in urban areas or in proximity to housing and schools. Last week, a plan was passed to allow the erection of a mast in one of the main shopping streets in Newtownards. The mast is so centrally located that children going to school and adults going to work will pass it every day. Some people will work in the buildings adjacent to it, and that might make many businesses consider their future and relocate elsewhere. Businesses that were thinking of opening in Newtownards might think again if they face the prospect of having a telecommunications mast outside their front door.

Masts are creeping across the countryside. I do not wish to see any more of them in towns or near people's homes. Telecommunications masts have the potential to dent seriously the productivity of a town and its ability to attract new investors. They will be as devastating to many towns as the repercussions of the disaster of September 11, which are still being visited on many towns in the Province.

Telecommunications masts have caused controversy across the Province among all political parties and individuals on many grounds, including visual obstruction, neighbour notification, the proximity of houses, and strongly and sincerely held health concerns.

We have been told that telecommunications companies will face tighter restrictions on planning and masts. However, that does not account for the number of masts that were erected with prior approval in areas where there was opposition from 99% of the local residents. One of the largest petitions voicing opposition to the erection of a mast occurred in my constituency, where more than 1,200 people wrote in opposition to one such application.

Masts are regularly erected with no regard for the people who live next to them. They are everywhere, and they are often conspicuously placed without any scrutiny of the architectural style of the town or the area. Usually those monstrosities are hoisted up with no consideration of the area's character.

We need only look at the countryside to see how much of the landscape has changed for the worse. Masts have marred areas of incredible beauty along the County Down coast, and that is a problem. The masts detract from the natural beauty of Northern Ireland, where the potential for tourism has only recently been revealed after 30 years of terrorism, which, if recent news reports are to be believed, may not be over yet.

To place masts in rural locations may lead some to believe that there is less of a problem. However, I am convinced — as are many elected representatives — that there is more than one problem with placing masts in the countryside. What is the effect of siting a mast in the middle of a field of staple foods, such as wheat, potatoes or barley? What effect will that have on our health and the health of our children? People ask those questions every day. Sir William Stewart's report stated that people's susceptibility to environmental hazards can vary. However, the Assembly works for all people in Northern Ireland, whether or not they are susceptible to such hazards. We have a duty to protect everyone.

2.00 pm

Sir William Stewart's report is lengthy. However, it contains much good information of which Members should take note. It is not fully known whether masts built in arable fields can leak emissions into the food chain, as mobile phones are a burgeoning technology and not enough research has been completed to be sure of the answer to such queries. People have health concerns, and they are worried. The Assembly must, therefore, respond to those concerns.

The Government would have us believe that there is minimal risk. However, they told us that it was safe to eat beef and that CJD would never enter the food chain. Sadly, Northern Ireland suffered the latest death from that disease only last week. It left a young woman without her husband and partner in life, two young children without a father, and, indeed, Newtownabbey Borough Council without a rising talent.

The Government also told us that overhead power lines were as safe as houses. However, power lines have been shown to contribute to the development of cancers. Four thousand people are killed each year in their homes, and three million turn up at accident and emergency wards with serious injuries that were sustained at home. That demonstrates the sort of rot that the Government sometimes tell us to keep us quiet.

Such new technologies need to be thoroughly investigated before they are made available or intrude into the everyday lives of the people of Northern Ireland. The problem with mobile phone masts, and the phones themselves, is that they were let loose on people without such investigations being made, and they have now become far too integral to modern life to be removed. However, we can limit the possible damage by being prudent with laws and regulations and by investing in research.

The first area that should be stringently regulated is the planning minefield. I am glad that the Minister is present for the debate, because I spoke to him about the issue in Newtownards two weeks ago. Planning has let many people down. It seems that if and when a telecommunications company wishes to install a mast it can do so without a licence if the area is not one of special control.

In Ganaway in my constituency, an application was made for a 15-foot mast in February 2001. Planning permission was deferred because the mast would have been too close to a planned caravan park and dwelling. A second planning application was made, putting the mast even closer to the caravan park. The objectors to the first application were notified. Notification also went to the press on 9 August 2001. Objectors submitted a petition on 15 August 2001. Five days later the planners notified the objectors that, after due consideration, permission had been granted for the erection of the mast.

As it would have taken at least one day for the letters to arrive at the addresses, it means that the planners, with their busy schedules and numerous other pending plans, took only three days to consider the petitions and plans for the mast. It took them three days to decide that a mast on which a decision had previously been deferred because of visual intrusion was no longer so when it was moved closer to the caravan park.

Sir William Stewart noted such problems in his report. He recommended that a robust template be set in place within 12 months of the publication of his report, which was published at the end of April 2001. It takes longer for the Assembly to debate the implementation of a report than it does for the planning applications and the Department to replace those masts. At the speed at which the Ganaway mast was installed, around 122 masts could have been decided on by the time the Assembly got around to debating the issue.

Some of those masts, including the one built in Ganaway, are within 10 metres of dwellings. I agree that there should be exclusion zones set up across Northern Ireland. They should be seen as physical barriers and should be part of the template of planning protocol. However, we should go further. Northern Ireland should not only have no-go areas for humans where the recommended exposure guidelines have been surpassed; it should have no-go areas for telecommunications masts. Those should include populated areas, or should at least put exclusion barriers

around housing and shops, extending for a minimum of 300 yds from any dwelling. I use that figure because those who have concerns about telecommunications masts suggested that 300 metres was a comparatively safe distance from dwellings.

Sir William Stewart's recommendation of an independent ombudsman to provide a focus for decisions on the siting of base stations — *[Interruption]*.

Mr Speaker: I cannot comment on the safety of mobile phone masts, but I can say that it is out of order for mobile phones to ring in the Chamber. All Members should attend to that.

Mr Shannon: Sir William Stewart's recommendation that an independent ombudsman should be appointed to provide a focus for decisions on the siting of base stations when agreement cannot be reached locally is the only way forward.

The Minister of the Environment (Mr Nesbitt): On a point of information, Mr Speaker.

Mr Speaker: I can take a point of order, but the Member will need permission for a point of information.

Mr Nesbitt: On a point of order, Mr Speaker. Does the House know if the mobile phone that was ringing belongs to a Member? If so, do we know which Member?

Mr Speaker: There is not perfect stereophonic hearing in this part of the Chamber, but I got the impression that it may have been the speaker's — not this Speaker's, but that speaker's.

Mr Nesbitt: Is the Member happy to confirm that?

Mr Speaker: The Member may certainly be able to confirm it.

Mr Shannon: As I said earlier, we all have mobile phones, myself included.

Mr Nesbitt: Further to that point of order, Mr Speaker. Has the Member confirmed that it was his mobile phone?

Mr Speaker: It sounded very much like a confirmation to me.

Mr Shannon: It was a confirmation that I have a mobile phone.

Mr Nesbitt: Thank you for that confirmation, Mr Speaker.

Mr Shannon: I suspect that everyone in the Chamber has a mobile phone. They are a part of life, but we are trying to address the issue of telecommunications masts.

Sir William Stewart's recommendation that an independent ombudsman be appointed to provide a focus for decisions on siting base stations when agreement cannot be reached locally is the only way forward. Certainly, we all want mobile phones. After all, we have come to depend on them. Members use them to contact con-

stituents, the Business Office and researchers, to touch base with party advice centres, and sometimes to tell our wives that we will not be home that night, or perhaps the next night, because we have constituents to see.

However, we are unsure of the exact consequences of habitually using mobile phones, or of what they do to our bodies. People do not know whether they are predisposed to developing cancer or whether they have accelerated the disease because they use mobile phones or are forced to live near a mast because mobile phone companies have had carte blanche to site masts as close as 10 metres to homes across Northern Ireland.

If an ombudsman were employed to investigate planning issues solely concerned with telecommunications masts and base stations, those who worked for him could access specialist information — and not just information from telecommunications companies that are working for their own benefit. The ombudsman should be informed of all the latest research and should listen to the thousands of people who feel that their health has been affected by telecommunications masts that have left them with memory loss, headaches, skin problems, ear problems, leukaemia, childhood cancers, sleep problems, mental and heart conditions, blood problems, calcium interference and difficulty concentrating. Can we ignore those? I think not.

I call for an independent ombudsman because of controversy over whether researchers in the industry are truly independent. 'The Observer' reported that a doctor who acts as a consultant for Microwave Consultants Ltd, which researched links between microwave radiation, health worries and tissue conductivity in particular, also just happens to be a senior consultant for Orange plc. It is also true that people researching links between microwaves and the ill health of those living or working with radios, mobile phones, et cetera, get half their money from companies that make mobile phones and erect masts across the country. That practice cannot be allowed to continue unchecked — after all, it is only good business sense to pay for the results that one wants.

In addition to the independent ombudsman, Departments must be involved in mobile phone research. The Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety should be involved in funding research into health problems that sufferers blame on mobile phones and the proximity of their houses to telecommunications masts and base stations. There is no smoke without fire. Research into that might, in the long term, cut down on the number of people who are being diagnosed with incurable cancers, because the information gleaned would enable some to remove themselves from situations or places that encouraged the onset of such diseases.

If the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety were to spend some money on researching the issue, other Departments could contribute and take up some

of the research provision. For example, the Department of the Environment could research exactly what masts and stations do to the environment. Does the environment pass on its exposure to microwaves to humans through the food chain? The Department of the Environment could answer that question.

In the Stewart Report, Sir William stated that, in the matter of mobile phones and telecommunications masts, areas to be investigated were the effects on brain function, the consequences of exposure to pulse signals and the possible impact on health of subcellular and cellular changes induced by radiation.

Our investigations must be further-reaching. The lives of everyone in this country depend on that. It has been said that one in three of us will develop cancer. How many cancers could be prevented by a thorough investigation into the effect of radio waves? It is for us, as elected representatives, to ensure that everyone is safeguarded and fully informed of the possible dangers.

The most dangerous thing about this is the amount of hearsay and misinformation gleaned by people from newspapers and television documentaries. We have all seen the scaremongering. Not only does that hamper the truth and the real results of investigations into the effects of mobile phones and telecommunications masts, it makes it harder to find out the truth because the companies are defensive, and their researchers are the only ones with sufficient expertise and specialist information to research the full extent of long-term exposure to those emissions.

Sir William Stewart also recommended that the masts and their base stations should not be placed in any schools without the consent of the school and the pupils' parents. There have been two such examples in the past few months: one in Killinchy and the other in Comber. The mast at Comber Primary School was moved, and I understand that the board of governors has asked the South Eastern Education and Library Board to remove the mast at Killinchy Primary School. To my knowledge, that recommendation has largely been ignored. Everyone —

Mr Speaker: Order. The Member has now been on his feet for nearly 17 minutes in a two-hour time-limited debate. I appreciate that the term "It's good to talk" in the context of phones is a popular one, but many Members wish to talk in this debate, and very few will get a chance unless the proposer brings his introductory speech to an end, knowing that he will be winding up as well.

Mr Shannon: Thank you, Mr Speaker. I was unsure how much time I had.

I want to address two more issues: mast-sharing and roaming. I suggest that telecommunications firms should consider sharing masts. Until now they have appeared to be reluctant to do so. I do not know whether the Minister of the Environment or the Minister of Enterprise, Trade

and Investment would be responsible for it, but the viability of such a suggestion should be investigated.

The other issue relates to emissions from mobile phones and masts. It is recommended that the widespread use of mobile phones by children for non-essential calls should be discouraged. That also forms part of the report. The Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety could support that recommendation by ensuring that information on the health risks from the use of mobile phones is available to everyone, and especially to children and their parents.

I urge Members to support the proposal.

Mr Speaker: I must urge Members to restrain themselves to about five minutes each, and even with that all Members who wish to speak may not be able to.

Mr O'Neill: Does that include phone calls? I welcome the opportunity to speak on the topic, as it has directly affected my constituency for years, particularly in the past 12 months. We should take the opportunity to ensure that the impending legislation is appropriate. We already know that the Department is allowing for public consultation. That is not enough. The amount of mobile phones and masts has increased dramatically in recent years, and their safety has always been in question. It is not appropriate that this should be solely a planning matter.

2.15 pm

Planning leaves no room to discuss health issues. The arguments about mobile phones and their masts usually boil down to the sufficient evidence debate. Mobile phone companies defend themselves with the argument that radio frequencies have not been adequately proven to cause health defects. However, the World Health Organisation (WHO) confirms that current studies to ascertain the real effects of radio frequencies are inadequate, and it proposes that more testing be carried out to establish the lasting effects. WHO states that

"there are gaps in knowledge that have been identified for further research to better assess health risks."

WHO estimates that it will take up to four years for all required research to be completed and evaluated. I am not happy to continue as we are for a further four years, especially as we do not have access to available evidence, such as the studies carried out by Dr Neil Cherry and Dr Gerard J Hyland, to link telecommunications masts to disturbed sleep patterns, brain activity and various cancers.

WHO refers to a 1997 study that identified the increase of lymphoma in genetically engineered mice that were exposed to radio frequency fields. The independent expert group on mobile phones (IEGMP), which produced the Stewart Report, concurs with WHO by saying that the present evidence for the safety of phones and their mast units is insufficient. The group says:

"We conclude therefore that it is not possible at present to say that exposure to RF radiation, even at levels below national guidelines, is

totally without potential adverse health effects, and that the gaps in knowledge are sufficient to justify a precautionary approach.”

In the light of that expert advice, I urge the Assembly to be especially stringent when dealing with mobile phone coverage. A spate of applications in my area has held no truck with local people. One company had the audacity to propose a site in the middle of my home town of Castlewellan. Not only would it have been sited in the middle of shops, businesses and local crèches, and en route to the schools in the town, but it would have been in a conservation area. That proposal was incredible.

Another attempt to erect a mast in Newcastle was carried out in the middle of the night, as the company knew only too well that the local people were against it. The company did that after promising residents on the Castlewellan Road in Newcastle, after much intervention, that it would withdraw the application. The base of the mast is still sited on the road; it is possible that BT Cellnet is waiting for the opposition to abate. I assure it that it will have a long wait. However, in the meantime, the base remains an invitation to any child who wants to use it as a leg-up on to the high wall against which it is built. If a child were injured, I wonder who would pay the compensation.

Telecommunications companies can freely erect masts under prior approval notice without getting full planning permission. The spate of applications is the result of mobile phone companies trying their best to erect masts before new legislation is introduced. According to the Minister of the Environment, the aim of the legislation is to strengthen public opinion in the decision-making process. However, will the forthcoming legislation only give the public more of an opportunity to object? Is the Department putting the onus on the public to object and to take responsibility? That will mean that it is up to local groups to oppose such masts. Therefore, what happens in smaller villages that have fewer people to organise a successful opposition campaign?

Mr Speaker: Order. The Member's time is up.

Mr Kennedy: I am grateful for the opportunity to contribute to such an important debate. I welcome the motion. All Members receive regular representations about masts being located in inappropriate places.

In their capacities either as MLAs or as members of local authorities, Members are receiving strong representations from concerned constituents. I welcome the Minister of the Environment's earlier indication that planning procedures will be regulated and shaped into a proper and satisfactory form.

Many of those who have made representations to me are especially concerned about health issues. It is a matter of regret that the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety is not present. Her attendance would have been appropriate, given her and her Department's responsibility to ensure that the public have confidence in the Ex-

ecutive, and that constituents feel that their concerns are being adequately dealt with. I invite the Minister of Health to make an early statement on the issue. She could undertake a major new survey to establish once and for all the health risks that are of great concern to people throughout my constituency of Newry and Armagh, and throughout Northern Ireland in general.

I welcome the presence of the Minister of the Environment. I pay tribute to his commitment to reaching a fair and equitable settlement on the issue. Is he considering, or will he consider, my concern that the masts are being provided for commercial reasons by commercial companies? In the cases of all the applications of which I am aware, it is clear that the masts are required to provide not only coverage for mobile phone users, but coverage that many of the leading telecommunications companies will sell as a commercial interest. That leads to a concentration in certain areas of not only applications, but sites and equipment, and that is a matter for concern.

It is one matter for the Government, as part of their overall policy, to wish to extend national coverage for mobile phones, but it is another matter when such action has a negative effect on the health of people who live in the affected areas.

I am grateful to the Minister of the Environment for listening to ongoing representations on the masts on a couple of sites outside Newry. I hope that he and the Department of the Environment can make progress on the matter of moving the Jerrettspass mast to an appropriate location. Moreover, I hope that the Department will take on board the concerns that many people in the Newry area have about the concentration of masts there.

We must consider the practical outworking of the motion. It concerns sentiments with which we all sympathise. I shall be interested to hear the Minister of the Environment's reply. However, I shall be especially interested to hear the response of the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety, whose duty it was to be in the House to respond to the health concerns that Members are expressing on behalf of their constituents.

Mr Speaker: I wish to draw a matter to the Member's attention. He must not be familiar with our procedure. It is not possible for two Ministers to make winding-up speeches in a debate. It is possible for two Ministers to speak, but one of them would simply be speaking as another Member and would not have the opportunity to make a winding-up speech on behalf of the Executive. The reason for that ruling is that it is important for the House to receive the considered response of the Executive. Without the ruling, two Ministers could potentially give different responses, which is not helpful to the House.

Although more than one Minister may be present, it is appropriate for only one Minister to respond. On this occasion I understand that the Minister of the Environment will be making the response. I say that for the clarity of

the House. In order that Members are clear: even if the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety were here, she would not be able to respond as a Minister, and she would not be able to give a winding-up speech in the debate, save if the Minister of the Environment were not participating. I am just making that point for the record.

Mr Kennedy: On a point of order, Mr Speaker, I am aware of the procedure of the House in this respect. The point that I was trying to make is that it would be helpful for the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to be in a position to listen to the representations, particularly on the health concerns that Members will undoubtedly raise as part of this important debate.

Mr Speaker: I understand that, but I was listening quite carefully to the Member and I think he said: "to reply to the concerns" — hence my intervention.

Mr Kennedy: I am grateful to you for listening carefully, Mr Speaker.

Mr Speaker: I always listen carefully to all Members, however much a strain that may be.

Mr McLaughlin: Not wishing to add to your burden, I will quickly get to the point.

I welcome and support the motion. Most Members will recognise very readily that telecommunications technology is essential to ensure that our economy is capable of competing in the global market. This technology will be a key element in ensuring that we establish a level playing field throughout the North, both in economic opportunity and development. Therefore, if we accept that the economy will either succeed and prosper or contract and fail depending on our ability to deploy this technological infrastructure, it is incumbent on us to address the clear problems that exist.

The public have considerable doubts and concerns, and those are based on significant, empirical evidence. However, in some instances, the concerns are based on lack of clarity, information, and reassurance, and we cannot, and must not, ignore them. Therefore, although I support the motion to implement the Stewart recommendations, including the exclusion zone around buildings — particularly housing, schools, and hospitals, which is an important part of the motion — in the context of the Minister's recent announcement on subjecting the deployment of this infrastructure to the full planning process, we also need to be reassured that the Minister will take powers not just to monitor the extent of mast-sharing, but to introduce an element of compulsion to ensure that we minimise the proliferation of masts.

I hope that the Minister will consider and respond to a second point; it relates to serious concerns about the implications for health. I ask the Minister to consider establishing — as a condition of planning permission — a device that has been used traditionally in planning to

ensure compliance with environmental concerns and other issues that pertain directly to planning. I do not wish to place any further disadvantage on the economic activity or development of this technology, but it is important that, as a planning condition, monitoring procedures financed by the industry, which will provide full information on emissions on an ongoing basis, are made available. That is the only way that we can overcome the public's reservations about the new technology. If it is necessary, the industry should be prepared to consider how to allay concerns and demonstrate that consideration in an open and participative way. I am certain that local communities would be prepared to be part of the monitoring process where such technology is deployed within their regions. Go raibh míle maith agat.

Mr Speaker: We have arrived at the moment of interruption. The debate is suspended and will be resumed after the statement by the Minister of Finance and Personnel, which will follow Oral Answers to Questions.

The debate stood suspended.

2.30 pm

Oral Answers to Questions

EDUCATION

Mr Speaker: Question 9, in the name of Mr McElduff, has been withdrawn. Question 10, in the name of Dr O'Hagan, has been withdrawn because it was responded to through the Minister of Education's statement earlier today.

Special Needs Requirements

1. **Mrs Courtney** asked the Minister of Education how he proposes to satisfy special needs requirements for children, given that the number of special needs cases far exceeds the places available. (AQO 1173/01)

The Minister of Education (Mr M McGuinness): This is the first time that I have seen Annie Courtney since her accident; I am pleased that she is back in the Assembly, and I hope that she is keeping well.

Under special education legislation, education and library boards have a duty to arrange that the special education provision, indicated in a statement of special educational needs, be made for children. The boards may place special education needs pupils in mainstream schools where they are satisfied that the placement will meet the children's needs, without detriment to other children's education and with regard to the efficient use of resources. When special education needs children attend a mainstream school, the board of governors must use its best endeavours to ensure that the special education provision required is given.

The incidence of children with statements of special educational needs has risen over the past four years, but I am not aware that the number of special needs cases far exceeds the places available. There are a small number of children whose needs cannot immediately be met in the educational setting named in the statement. However, the needs of children unable to obtain places are catered for through the provision of classroom assistants; additional support by peripatetic teachers in mainstream schools; outreach support; and, in a small number of cases, home tuition.

Mrs Courtney: I thank the Minister for his good wishes; they are appreciated. I was probably thinking more about my constituency when I worded the question. As the Minister will be aware, the closure of Templemore Secondary School in Derry has been proposed. It has a high percentage of special needs cases. They are currently in mainstream schooling. How does the Minister propose

to deal with that added burden, and will he make a statement to the House on this problem shortly?

Mr M McGuinness: The situation at Templemore Secondary School has been controversial. As Minister of Education, I can only respond to a development proposal on behalf of the Western Education and Library Board. The board said at its most recent meeting that it intends to issue such a development proposal to my Department, and, as Minister of Education, I will have to give that due consideration. However, there will be opportunity for everyone who is concerned about the situation at Templemore to make submissions to me.

Departmental Correspondence (Townland Names)

2. **Mr McCarthy** asked the Minister of Education what proactive steps he has taken to ensure that townland names are used in departmental correspondence.

(AQO 1158/01)

Mr M McGuinness: I recognise the importance of townland names as part of our local heritage. In replying to correspondence, my Department will use townland names where correspondents have included them in their addresses.

Mr McCarthy: I am disappointed with the Minister's response. Townland names are a precious part of our heritage. Unfortunately, during the early 1970s the new postal arrangements decimated many townland names. Fortunately, the Assembly voted to resurrect our heritage on postal addresses. I am disappointed to hear the Minister saying that he will go as far as he can, depending on the incoming correspondence. The Assembly voted that all Departments should initiate the use of townland names. That could be quite easily achieved through the Ordnance Survey of Northern Ireland, which is set up to provide such information. I plead with the Minister to tell his Department to issue townland names for all our rural communities.

Mr M McGuinness: My Department has no means to source accurate townland names easily for all addresses. I understand that the Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure is supporting work to preserve and promote the use of place names. Mr McCarthy may wish to seek further details from Minister McGimpsey.

I appreciate that there has been a long-running campaign for the revival of the use of townland names. The Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure is funding two projects to preserve and promote the use of place names: the common address file project, which aims to establish a standardised form of address to be adopted by all Government Departments and the private sector; and the place names project at Queen's University Belfast, which researches the origins and meanings of place names.

I am sympathetic to Mr McCarthy's point. It is an issue for all Departments that everyone should be concerned

about. My mother comes from an area of County Donegal where there are many very beautiful place names such as Meenahamish, Effishabreda, Crockahenny, Meentahalla and Glentogher. Those names are important to the people who live there, and the area where my mother comes from — Middle Illies — is used all the time in correspondence. I wrote to my uncle recently and I addressed the letter to John Doherty, Middle Illies, Ballymagan, County Donegal.

Teacher Redundancies

3. **Mr Dallat** asked the Minister of Education what steps he intends to take to protect the jobs of teachers facing redundancy. (AQO 1147/01)

Mr M McGuinness: The general uplift in recurrent spending in schools in 2002-03 is 4.9%, which in overall terms is more than enough to meet general pay and price increases. Decisions on redundancies are a matter for individual boards of governors, in the light of their individual school circumstances, especially changes in enrolment.

If, however, a board of governors considers it necessary to make a teacher redundant, it may wish to consider discussing the financial position of the school with its education and library board, which will consider what additional assistance it can give in the context of its local management of schools (LMS) arrangements. It must have regard to its responsibilities towards other schools in the area. I will continue to press for additional resources for our schools at every opportunity.

Mr Dallat: Is the Minister aware that the pupil to teacher ratios in the North Eastern Education and Library Board, which covers part of my constituency, are the worst of the five area boards? At a time when education resources must be directed at raising standards in the classroom, is the Minister satisfied that we are not losing valuable teaching expertise and experience through redundancies?

Mr M McGuinness: Redundancies can result from causes other than budget cuts and falling enrolments, such as organisational changes in a school and changes to the curriculum. However, individual circumstances may mean that some schools, especially those with falling enrolments, will have difficult decisions to make to ensure that they live within their budget.

Boards must continue to be proactive in ensuring that schools' spending plans are realistic and monitored closely to ensure that deficits do not accumulate and become increasingly difficult to recover.

With regard to the North Eastern Education and Library Board, the Department distributes funding for controlled and maintained schools through the education and library boards, and boards have full, delegated authority to allocate budgets to individual schools. Although boards are aware of the Department's policy on giving priority to schools' delegated budgets, some may find it necessary to award

a lesser uplift to schools because of pressure on budgets held centrally for specific services. Schools are expected to contain expenditure within their available budget.

Mr Paisley Jnr: Will the Minister confirm that the North Eastern Education and Library Board is the most underfunded board in Northern Ireland, and that 100 teacher redundancies are pending? They are victims of that underfunding. Does he agree that that underfunding is gross discrimination against those teachers and the pupils served by that area, which is the largest Protestant area in Northern Ireland? Will he do something about it?

Mr M McGuinness: Here we go again, sectarianising the education debate. The budget available to fund core board services has been distributed fully on the basis of a methodology that reflects relative needs across the education and library boards. When funding is allocated to each education and library board, the Department stresses that boards should continue to give priority to school-delegated budgets, although it recognises that each board must set realistic figures for school-related central budgets, some of which, I understand, are suffering pressures in the North Eastern Education and Library Board area.

Mr J Wilson: Is the Minister aware that the present funding arrangements for the North Eastern Education and Library Board disadvantages it to the point where there is the real possibility of 75 redundancies in the foreseeable future? Does the Minister agree that a simple explanation of the unfairness is the fact that the North Eastern Education and Library Board has 21% of the Province's pupils, but only 15% of the pupils who are entitled to free school meals? If he is aware of that underfunding, what measures does he propose to introduce to avoid those 75 redundancies being made?

Mr M McGuinness: I refer the Member to the answer that I have just given. I have explained that the budget available to fund core board services has been distributed fully on the basis of a methodology that reflects relative needs across the education and library boards. Those are issues that all education and library boards must deal with. There is no question of one board's being given preferential treatment over another. All boards must live with the established methodology, and the responsibility to deal with that lies with the boards.

I am aware that there have been discussions about this matter between Members and the North Eastern Education and Library Board. The Department monitors the situation constantly with regard to the difficulties experienced by education and library boards, and will continue to do that in co-operation with the boards.

Burns Report

4. **Mr Armstrong** asked the Minister of Education what assessment he can make in relation to the consultation process of the Burns Report. (AQO 1174/01)

Mr M McGuinness: Consultation is ongoing and will last until 28 June 2002. My Department is using a variety of methods to ensure that everyone has the opportunity to contribute to the debate. A detailed response booklet will be issued at the end of this month to schools, further education colleges, community groups and training organisations to facilitate consideration of the key issues and to help to structure responses.

In late May, my Department will issue a household response form to every household that will provide information about the review and it will seek the views of the public on the key issues. A household survey is planned to gather more in-depth views from the public. The Department is also considering how best to garner the views of young people. A summary analysis of the responses received will be published around the end of September.

I am engaged in a series of meetings involving the key players in our education system. I am keen to listen to suggestions, build consensus and stimulate discussion of the issues during the consultation period. I must emphasise that no decisions on future arrangements have been taken. I want to hear views on the Burns proposals, modifications to those proposals or alternative arrangements.

Mr Armstrong: Does the Minister accept that his press releases condemning the use of the 11-plus and academic selection, which do not provide ideas on how children should be allocated to oversubscribed schools, do not help the debate on the review of post-primary education?

Mr M McGuinness: It is important that we focus on the task at hand. The weaknesses of the current arrangements are unacceptable and must be addressed. Save the Children, the Gallagher and Smith Report and Prof Gardiner have outlined those weaknesses. An on-the-record statement from the Committee for Education states that change is both necessary and appropriate.

2.45 pm

There is a need for change, and it is widely accepted that the status quo is not an option. On several occasions, I have pointed out the need to address academic selection. The 11-plus has been widely debated, and, as a result of that debate, no one advocates its continuation. Anyone who wishes to make other suggestions about how we test children at the age of 10 or 11 must be aware that it is wrong to ask any Department of Education, or me as Minister of Education, to become involved in a process that would perpetuate the weaknesses that the 11-plus showed up.

The debate must be an informed one, and measures such as the video and household response forms contribute to people's knowledge. We must ensure that those who do not benefit from the current system can make their views known. Educational issues must be

considered above party political perspectives. I stress again that no decisions have been made on the Burns proposals or on any other issues. I have invited comments on the Burns proposals as they stand, and variations and modifications to the Burns proposals or alternative arrangements.

In respect of the other issues that the Member raised, the Department of Education is open to ideas and suggestions on issues such as the criteria for transfer from primary schools to post-primary schools. Burns made proposals on those issues, but we are not restricted to that analysis. Our minds are open about all of that. I am satisfied that the consultation has been properly handled, and I refute claims of bias. I issued press statements recently that reflected the views expressed to me in a series of meetings. I am undertaking, with keen interest, to listen to those views and to help to stimulate and inform the debate.

Mr S Wilson: What is the Minister's reaction to the resignation of the chairperson of the Governing Bodies Association (GBA), and to the chairperson's statement in a morning newspaper today that he resigned because Catholic bishops were unduly influenced by the educational establishment's politically correct views? The Minister has sought today — and in the consultation that has been sent out — to mislead the public by talking about schools that fail in Northern Ireland. Inspectors have not identified any of these failed schools. The Minister says that schools have failed youngsters, but in a reply to a Member less than a month ago, he stated that fewer people in Northern Ireland left school with no qualifications in the past six years than in England, Scotland or Wales.

Mr M McGuinness: I will not make any response to the resignation of the chairperson of the GBA. That is a matter between the chairperson of the GBA and the Catholic bishops. The Member must recognise that there are many myths in this area, one of which claims that we have a world-class education system that is the best in these islands. However, almost a quarter of our adult workforce is at the lowest level of literacy. Scotland has as many pupils achieving five and more GCSEs at grades A to C, and it has more young people entering higher education. England has more pupils achieving five GCSE passes at grades A to G.

A second myth is that academic selection provides a ladder to success for working class and disadvantaged children. However, currently only 8% of pupils in grammar schools are from low-income families, and in the Shankill less than 2% of pupils gained a grammar school place.

Who is speaking on behalf of those children?

Mr Speaker: Order.

Mr M McGuinness: Given some DUP Members' silence on the issue, perhaps I am a better bet for the

children of the Shankill Road than some of its representatives. *[Interruption]*.

Mr Speaker: Order.

Mr M McGuinness: Disadvantaged pupils are only half as likely to achieve five good GCSEs as other children.

The third myth is that a grammar school education is needed to get into university and to get a good job. Around half of the students at the University of Ulster, and many at Queen's University, did not take the traditional A-level route. That is food for thought.

Mr O'Neill: Does the Minister share my concern about the amount of available legislative time left to the Assembly? Will he prepare a timescale for dealing with any legislative consequences that arise from the Burns Report, so that the legislation will not conveniently, or inconveniently, run into the sand?

Mr M McGuinness: It is vital that the consultation period runs its course. That consultation will close on 28 June, and my Department will then spend time — not too long I hope — analysing the results. Regardless of the opinions expressed by the DUP today, I recognise that I have the important job of building a consensus on the matter. It is my passionate wish to build that consensus with the more positive and constructive Assembly parties, of which there are many: the Ulster Unionist Party, the SDLP, Sinn Féin, the Women's Coalition, the Alliance Party and the PUP. Those parties have a keen interest in children's education. As the Minister of Education, my next responsibility will be to present my ideas and proposals on how we should move forward. When a consensus is achieved, the Executive can decide how to proceed legislatively.

GCSE Engineering

5. **Mr K Robinson** asked the Minister of Education what steps he has taken to involve his Colleague, the Minister for Employment and Learning, in discussions with further education colleges and institutes to assist schools in upgrading their delivery of engineering and technology subjects in the light of the new GCSE examination in engineering. (AQO 1156/01)

Mr M McGuinness: The delivery of the new vocational GCSE in engineering does not depend on intervention by the further education sector. However, one cannot doubt the positive impact of teaching vocational subjects in schools, which can be brought to bear by drawing on the experience of the further education institutions, for which my Colleague the Minister for Employment and Learning is responsible.

Mr K Robinson: Does the Minister agree that the wasteful duplication of resources within and between Departments must be rooted out? Will he take affirm-

ative action based upon specialist investigations, and issue circulars to schools instructing them actively to seek partnerships with local further education colleges for the better delivery of engineering and technology at GCSE level, rather than giving limp, unspecified encouragement to schools and colleges to work together?

Mr M McGuinness: The relationship between further education colleges and schools on the issue is based on supply and demand. Schools may use their delegated budgets to buy in the necessary expertise to ensure that special subjects such as engineering are taught effectively.

Children from North Belfast (Educational Attainment)

6. **Mr G Kelly** asked the Minister of Education to detail the steps that he is taking to ensure that the educational experience and attainment of children from north Belfast does not suffer from the ongoing and recurring sectarian conflict in the area. (AQO 1176/01)

Mr M McGuinness: The schools in north Belfast have been operating under the most exceptional circumstances since last June and the onset of the protests at Holy Cross Girls' Primary School. It is a tribute to the commitment and professionalism of teaching staff there that their pupils continue to have a normal education in such difficult circumstances. Members will know from my announcements on 17 December 2001 and 27 March 2002 of the extent to which the Executive and my Department have responded to the needs of the worst affected schools in north Belfast. To date, a total of almost £3 million has been allocated for specific measures to deal with the problems identified by the schools.

On many occasions, I have said that a priority for my Department is to ensure that all children have access to high-quality education provision in a safe and secure learning environment. To achieve that goal, a long-term solution to the problems in the area must be found. My Department therefore plays an active role in the inter-departmental liaison group for north Belfast and provides information and advice to the North Belfast Community Action Project. I met that group this morning. Mainstream programmes that target social disadvantage and under-achievement will continue to be a priority in the main education programme.

Mr G Kelly: Will the Minister agree, and will he reiterate, that our schools should be left in peace to get on with the job of the education of children, bearing in mind that the Minister has put in as much money and effort as possible? That effort and money should not be necessary — that was given in special circumstances. The core of the matter is that schools should be neutral and free from sectarian attack.

Mr M McGuinness: I have consistently said that schools should be havens and that protests at, or attacks

on, schools are totally unacceptable. The difficulty in north Belfast is a community issue in which local school-children have unfortunately become embroiled. I have repeatedly urged politicians and community leaders, especially those who represent the local area, to engage in dialogue and work to reach an accommodation. It is only in that way that a resolution to the problem will be found and a normal educational environment restored.

As long as the situation continues, my officials and I will continue to monitor the problem and to provide support in all matters relating to the educational well-being of the children. My Department will continue to take an active role in the interdepartmental liaison group for north Belfast and to provide information and advice to the North Belfast Community Action Project.

The plight of the schoolchildren of north Belfast can be resolved through community dialogue — a willingness for all sides to come together and face up to their fears, concerns and perceptions. I ask people in north Belfast to look at the rest of the place and see people getting on with their lives. There are still some problems and difficulties, but people in north Belfast must consider what is happening elsewhere and be determined to live and work together to end the misery, which inflicts great hardship not just on themselves, but on their children.

Mr B Hutchinson: If the Minister were to check the records for the past 30 years, he would see the amount of money that has been spent on Protestant kids from the Belfast Boys' Model School who were attacked. What criteria did he use to give money to these schools? Does the money that Mr Gerry Kelly referred to include the money used to fund police protection for the Protestant children attending Ballygolan and Cliftonville Primary Schools, the Belfast Boys' Model School and other schools across north Belfast?

Mr M McGuinness: The situation in north Belfast is exceptional and requires a response to meet the circumstances. The education and library boards will continue to provide support services to all schools in their respective areas that require assistance. I am fully aware of the problems being faced by schools, not only in north Belfast, but also in other areas. My Department and the relevant education authorities will continue to monitor closely the situations as they arise. Where difficulties present themselves, appropriate steps will be taken to ensure the safety and well-being of pupils and the quality of the education they receive.

When I announced that my Department would be funding an extension of the Executive's support package to include a further 13 primary schools in the north Belfast area, I said that we had been faced with difficult decisions due to limited funding. After consultation with our education partners it was decided that the primary schools should be the main focus. However, the youth initiative is important, and all secondary schools in the

area could benefit from participation in such a scheme. My Department will therefore be bidding at the earliest opportunity for additional funds to extend the programme to all secondary schools in north Belfast.

Mr Hussey: I am tempted to ask whether the funding includes the Abbots Cross, Whitehouse, and Rathcoole Primary Schools and, if not, why not.

Can the Minister tell me what assessment has been made of the effects of conflict on educational experience and attainment, not only in north Belfast but also in areas such as west Tyrone, which, as he knows, has suffered more than most from decades of Republican terrorist activity? Can he assure the Assembly that the military wing of Sinn Féin is not preparing to return to conflict?

Mr M McGuinness: As someone who has been at the heart of the peace process during the past 10 years —

Mr Speaker: Order. I must interrupt the Minister and ask him to respond in writing, as we have run out of time.

Mr M McGuinness: The Member was saved by the Speaker.

Mr Speaker: Order.

3.00 pm

HEALTH, SOCIAL SERVICES AND PUBLIC SAFETY

Mr Speaker: Question 11, standing in the name of Mr Mick Murphy, has been transferred to the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment, and questions 8, 12, 16 and 17, standing in the names of Ms McWilliams, Dr Birnie, Mr McElduff and Mr Gallagher, respectively, have all been withdrawn and will receive written answers.

Availability of Incontinence Sheets

1. **Mr Dallat** asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what steps she will take against hospital trusts who have withdrawn the availability of incontinence sheets, thereby reducing the dignity of bedridden patients. (AQO 1151/01)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety (Ms de Brún): Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. Deirtear liom gur aistarraing dhá iontaobhas ospidéil, Green Park agus an tIúr agus an Mhorn braillíní neamhchoinneáltachta agus nach mbíonn siad in úsáid de ghnáth níos mó ag iontaobhais ar chúiseanna fheabhas caighdeáin. Tá éagsúlacht táirgí neamhchoinneálachta níos oiriúnaí ar nós pardóg agus brístíní ar fáil anois, a sholáthraíonn cosaint, comparad agus dínit níos mó don duine aonair.

I am advised that incontinence sheets have been withdrawn by two hospital trusts — Green Park and Newry and Mourne — and are no longer routinely used by most

trusts on quality improvement grounds. More appropriate incontinence products, such as pads and pants, are now available, and those provide greater protection, comfort and dignity for the individual.

Mr Dallat: Does the Minister agree that personal hygiene is a basic human right, particularly for people — young or old — who are confined to bed? Will she ensure that the suffering of those people is not added to by their constantly having to plead for disposable sheets of a size and number appropriate to their needs? Will she assure me that I will never again hear reports of disposable sheets being dried on radiators because fresh ones are restricted, unavailable in the appropriate size, or totally unavailable, as she has just said?

Ms de Brún: I hope that the Member has not misunderstood my answer. I said clearly that a range of incontinence products, which provide greater protection and comfort, and which may be more appropriate to the needs of the patient, is available. Such products may also provide other benefits, such as the prevention of pressure sores. I am advised that incontinence sheets have been withdrawn by two trusts, and I understand that that policy is continually reviewed. I stress that, in other trusts, they are no longer routinely used on quality improvement grounds.

Having said that, the needs of individual patients are determined case by case. The appropriate incontinence products are issued following a full assessment and the development of an appropriate treatment plan. If the Member wishes to draw my attention to a particular case, he may wish to write to me about it.

Foyle Community HSS Trust: Diabetes Care Team

2. **Mrs Courtney** asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to outline (a) if there is a psychologist employed in the diabetes care team for the Foyle Community HSS Trust; and (b) any steps she will take, if necessary, to address this situation.

(AQO 1148/01)

Ms de Brún: Tá an fhoireann cúraim diaibéitis do limistéar an Fheabhail comhdhéanta d'fhoireann ó Iontaobhas Phobal an Fheabhail agus Iontaobhas Ospidéal Alt na nGealbhan. I láthair na huaire, níl aon síceolaí tiomanta d'fhoireann cúraim diaibéitis i limistéar an Fheabhail — tá teacht ag daoine le diaibéiteas ar thacaíocht síceolaíochta trí chúram príomhúil agus seirbhísí meabhairshláinte speisialtóra.

The diabetes team for the Foyle area is comprised of staff from Foyle Community HSS Trust and Altnagelvin Group HSS Trust. At present, no psychologist is dedicated to the diabetes care team in the Foyle area. Psychological support is accessible to people with diabetes through primary care and specialist mental health services.

The Western Health and Social Services Board is examining its priority developments for 2002-03 and hopes to be able to develop dedicated clinical psychology care for diabetics in Altnagelvin Hospital. However, that will depend on finalising investment plans and the availability of funding.

Mrs Courtney: I am glad that that problem will be remedied in the near future. However, the consultant in charge is concerned that there is no psychologist at present. Diabetes is a killer. Many young and elderly people are affected. Some people go blind, and they and their families find it difficult to cope. They need psychological support immediately. I want the Minister to address that as soon as possible. I have written to the Western Health and Social Services Board. I doubt that there will be enough money in the current spending plans to make a psychologist available specifically to the diabetes care team.

Ms de Brún: Clinical psychology support is accessible to people with diabetes in all board areas through primary care and specialist mental health services. As I have said, the Western Board is currently examining its priority developments for 2002-03. When the plan is finalised and the amount of money available has also been analysed against the plan, the possibilities will become clear.

In relation to increasing the number of psychologists in order to have the necessary psychology input into different services, training at Queen's University Belfast involves a three-year course. The Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety has traditionally provided funding to support an annual intake of six people. In the past two years I have allocated additional funds for education and training that have enabled the intake to be increased to nine places. The Department understands the importance of making psychologists available through primary care, mental health services or dedicated input such as that which the Western Health and Social Services Board is examining at present.

Mr Kane: Can the Minister inform the House of the current level of expenditure on diabetes research, bearing in mind that the number of patients with the disease is on the increase?

Ms de Brún: Given the amount and the wide variety of work that has been taken on board — including that of the joint task force that has been set up by the Clinical Resource Efficiency Support Team (CREST) and Diabetes UK, which includes representatives from the Department — it is not possible for me to provide an accurate figure today. However, I will write to the Member with it.

Digital Hearing Aids

3. **Ms Lewsley** asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to give an update on her plans to introduce digital hearing aids. (AQO 1183/01)

Ms de Brún: Tá rún daingean agam áiseanna éisteachta digiteacha a thabhairt isteach a luaithe a bhíonn maoiniú ar fáil dóibh.

Ós rud é go bhfuil an buiséad forbartha atá ar fáil do sheirbhísí sláinte agus sóisialta teoranta agus go bhfuil brú leanúnach ar fud speictream iomlán na seirbhísí, ní féidir leithdháileadh a dhéanamh ag an tráth seo ar an mhaoiniú breise athfhillteach atá de dhíth le háiseanna éisteachta digiteacha a thabhairt isteach go háitiúil.

I am committed to introducing digital hearing aids as soon as funding permits. Given the limited development budget available to health and social services and the continuing pressures across the whole spectrum of services, it is not possible to allocate the additional recurrent funding that is required to introduce digital hearing aids locally at present. An Executive programme fund bid for that purpose was unsuccessful last year. However, the Department will continue to explore all possible funding avenues.

Ms Lewsley: Given that there are up to 100,000 hearing aid users in Northern Ireland, and that 70% of them could benefit from digital hearing aids, can the Minister confirm that a programme to introduce digital hearing aids here would cost £1.2 million? How does that figure compare to the amount of money that has already been spent on analogue hearing aids, which are of a bad standard? Digital hearing aids are better value for money in the long term.

Ms de Brún: I do not agree that analogue hearing aids are of a bad standard. I want digital hearing aids to be introduced, but that involves their assessment and fitting, which is a complex process requiring specialist equipment. Additional audiologists would have to be recruited to support provision.

It is estimated that provision of digital hearing aids to new users alone would cost around £1 million annually. Set-up costs, covering equipment, training and accommodation, would amount to around £300,000 each year. Roll-out of provision to existing users would take about eight years and cost a further £2 million each year. Set-up costs would be around £600,000. Therefore, in net terms, it is estimated that the additional cost of provision would be £750,000 a year to new users and £1.5 million a year to existing users over the roll-out period.

Mr Hussey: I have asked the Minister a series of questions on the costs of digital hearing aids. The answers have shown that the gap between the comparative costs of analogue and digital hearing aids has closed considerably. Has the Minister taken that into consideration? When digital hearing aids are introduced, will the Minister give an assurance that hospital departments will receive proper resourcing to ensure that the necessary internal infrastructure is in place to enable proper assessment and provision?

Ms de Brún: I have answered most of that already. I am aware that the gap in the costs of the aids themselves has closed considerably, as I said in answer to Ms Lewsley. However, assessment and fitting of digital hearing aids is more complex and requires additional audiologists, and that maintains a considerable gap in costs. The figures that I quoted are up to date.

As regards implementation costs, the additional 12 audiologists that are needed to support provision to new users alone would cost an extra £300,000 a year. An additional 24 audiologists to support provision to new and existing users would cost an extra £600,000 a year. The remainder of the implementation costs would cover the additional cost of the digital hearing aids, the average cost of which is estimated at £150 each — about £100 more than the current average cost of an analogue hearing aid.

The Department is examining the extra costs involved in the programme and looking specifically at what it would mean for the service — not merely for the aids themselves — to ensure that when they are introduced, it is for the maximum benefit of service users. I am committed to introducing them as soon as the money can be found.

Mr Speaker: Question 4 is in the name of Mr Molloy, but he is not in his place. I call Mr McCarthy.

Departmental Correspondence (Townland Names)

5. **Mr McCarthy** asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail her policy on the use of townland names in departmental correspondence. (AQO 1159/01)

Ms de Brún: Tacaím go hiomlán le húsáid a bhaint as ainmneacha bailte fearainn i gcaomhnú ár n-oidhreacht áitiúla, agus moltar don fhoireann i mo Roinn úsáid a bhaint as ainmneacha bailte fearainn agus iad ag freagairt do chomhfhreagras nuair a bhíonn na bailte fearainn curtha isteach ag comhfhreagraithe ina seoltaí.

I fully support the use of townland names in preserving our local heritage. Staff in my Department are encouraged to use townland names in replying to correspondence where correspondents have included them in their addresses.

Mr McCarthy: Once again, I must express some disappointment with that response, which was similar to that of the Minister of Education. The Assembly took a clear decision some time ago that all Departments would use townland names.

As I said earlier, the Ordnance Survey of Northern Ireland has each townland name at its fingertips. We talk about so-called joined-up government. There does not seem to be much evidence of joined-up government in either the Department of Education or the Department of

Health, Social Services and Public Safety. It is time that the Executive carried out the wishes of the Assembly. Will the Minister go to the Ordnance Survey and get the information out to rural constituents?

3.15 pm

Ms de Brún: A common address file project involving the Central Information Technology Unit is under way to establish a definitive index of addresses for use throughout the public and private sectors. One aim of the project is to ensure that the new system will include townland names for every address. The Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure is supporting work to preserve and promote the use of place names.

As with the Department of Education, my Department has no means by which it could, on its own initiative, easily and accurately source townland names to include in its replies. However, the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety has input into common address file project. I expect that the Department will be allowed to have that file on its records and to install the automated systems.

Eastern Health and Social Services Board: Infertility Treatment Waiting Times

6. **Mrs E Bell** asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the waiting time for patients awaiting infertility treatment in the Eastern Health and Social Services Board area and to make a statement. (AQO 1160/01)

Ms de Brún: Tá réimse cóireálacha ar fáil do neamhthorthúlacht, lena n-áirítear cóireáil drugaí, máinliacht, inseamhnú saorga agus teicnící chúnaimh ginte ar nós IVF. Beidh roinnt de na hothair atá ag feitheamh le cóireáil ar liostaí feithimh ginearálta, mar shampla ginéiceolaíocht agus ní féidir iad sin a dheighilt ó thaobh fáthmheas/faidhbe de.

Infertility treatment includes drugs, surgery, artificial insemination and assisted conception techniques such as IVF. Some patients await treatment on general waiting lists — for example, in gynaecology — and it is not possible to disaggregate those by diagnosis or problem.

Waiting lists have been established for the interim fertility service that commenced on 17 December 2001. It is not possible to give waiting times for those lists. Recent figures indicate that 299 local couples have been assessed as eligible for Health Service treatment and they await that at the regional fertility centre of the Royal Group of Hospitals. Every effort is being made to provide treatment as quickly as possible for those waiting.

Mrs E Bell: I tabled this question after many patients approached me about waiting times. I hope that the Minister agrees that this sensitive treatment should not be unnecessarily delayed, because that would further upset patients.

Ms de Brún: I agree that there should be no unnecessary delay. That is why I set up an interim service, rather than wait until all the work had been done to put the full service in place. I intend to publish a consultation document on subfertility services by the summer. The outcome of the consultation will inform the provision of a permanent service, but I implemented the interim service because I knew that to set up a permanent service would take time, and I was anxious that people in such sensitive circumstances should not have to wait.

Special Schools: Provision of Nurses

7. **Mr Neeson** asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to make a statement on the provision of nurses in special schools. (AQO 1162/01)

Ms de Brún: Soláthraíonn iontaobhais seirbhísí sláinte agus sóisialta éagsúlacht tacaíochta altranais do scoileanna speisialta. San áireamh sa réimse soláthar, tá altraí tiomanta ag freastal ar scoileanna i rith am téarma, tacaíocht ó altraí péidiatracha pobail, altraí do mhíchumais foghlama agus altraí ceantair, agus oiliúint arna sholáthar ag foireann altranais do mhúinteoirí agus do fhreastalaithe seomra ranga le cóireálacha agus drugaí a riaradh.

Health and social services trusts provide a variety of nursing support to special schools. Provision includes dedicated nurses who attend individual schools during term time, support from community, paediatric, learning disability and district nurses, and training by nursing staff of teachers and classroom attendants to administer treatment and drugs.

The report of the review of nursing services to children in special schools that was commissioned by the Department and issued to health and social services boards in 2000 did not recommend a dedicated nurse for each special school. Instead, it recommended that NVQ-trained carers with nursing support could meet the healthcare needs of children with special needs.

Mr Neeson: To what extent do the Minister and her Department co-operate with the Minister of Education and his Department on the provision of such needs?

Ms de Brún: There is co-operation, co-ordination and discussion between officials from the two Departments, and between local health and social services board representatives and education and library board representatives. However, it is for local health and social services trusts to determine the nursing support that is required by children with special needs and to decide how that should be provided, taking into account the available resources. Given the increase in numbers, health and social services boards, together with colleagues from education and library boards, are reviewing the nursing and other support required and the ways in which that might be provided.

Breastfeeding Mothers

9. **Mr J Kelly** asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to provide data on the proportion of mothers who choose to breastfeed their babies. (AQO 1186/01)

Ms de Brún: Léiríonn na torthaí tosaigh ó bheathú naíonán 2000 gur tharla méadú suntasach anseo ar mháithreacha a thug an chíos dá leanbh idir 1995 agus 2000. Mhéadaigh an líon sin ó 45% i 1995 go dtí 54% i 2000. I measc na mban a bhí ina máithreacha den chéad uair in aois 25 go 29 bliana, mhéadaigh an beathú cíche ó 60% i 1995 go 69% i 2000.

Preliminary results from the 2000 infant feeding survey show that between 1995 and 2000 there was a significant increase in breastfeeding here — from 45% in 1995 to 54% in 2000. Among first-time mothers aged 25 to 29, breastfeeding increased from 60% in 1995 to 69% in 2000. Although I am pleased with those results, we could do better, especially in lower socio-economic groups. For that reason, we recently appointed a breastfeeding co-ordinator to further promote breastfeeding here.

Mr J Kelly: I welcome the Minister's answer, especially her remarks about lower socio-economic groups. It is relevant that infants who are breastfed are less prone to allergies and the diseases to which infants are susceptible. Does the Minister intend to either promote or advertise the advantages of breastfeeding?

Ms de Brún: Several activities will be given impetus by the breastfeeding co-ordinator's appointment. Two hospitals and one community trust here have achieved World Health Organisation (WHO) baby-friendly status, which means that they satisfied the rigid criteria of WHO and UNICEF for actively implementing best practice in promoting breastfeeding. The appointment of the breastfeeding co-ordinator will give their work much greater impetus. In particular, the breastfeeding co-ordinator will develop a network of key individuals from boards and trusts, voluntary and community groups, and educational establishments in order to achieve the objectives of the strategy. I am delighted to say that Micheál Martin TD, the Minister for Health and Children in the South, has appointed the same co-ordinator to that Department's committee on breastfeeding. The co-ordinator's being a member of that committee provides an excellent opportunity to share ideas, to develop good practice on an all-island basis and to see what further work we can do to get the important message across.

Overcapacity in Adult Centres

10. **Mr Armstrong** asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what steps she has taken to address the overcapacity in adult centres. (AQO 1170/01)

Ms de Brún: Éilíonn mo thosaíochtaí do ghníomhaíocht 2002-03 go leanfaidh na hiontaobhais agus na boird sláinte agus seirbhísí sóisialta de bheith ag leathnú chúram lae agus cúram faoisimh do dhaoine faoi mhíchumas foghlama. Beidh cuid den mhaoiniú breise a leithdháil mé ar na boird le seirbhísí pobail a fhorbairt i 2002-03 ar fáil chun na críche seo.

Is faoi na hiontaobhais agus na boird sláinte agus seirbhísí sóisialta atá sé a chinntiú go mbíonn an réimse agus an méid seirbhísí chúram lae ann, lena n-áirítear áiteanna i lárionad lae do dhaoine fásta, le freastal ar an riachtanas áitiúil a aithníodh.

My priorities for action in 2002-03 require health and social services boards and trusts to continue to expand the provision of day care and respite care for people with a learning disability. Some of the additional funding that I have allocated to boards to develop community services in 2002-03 will be available for that purpose. It is for the health and social services boards and trusts to ensure that there is the range and volume of day care services, including places in adult day centres, to meet identified local need.

Mr Armstrong: Some parents whose children attend Kilronan Special School in Mid Ulster have been informed that their children cannot be guaranteed places in local adult education centres when they move on. Does the Minister have proposals to deal with that? Has she discussed the problem with the Minister for Employment and Learning so that they can work in partnership to achieve a satisfactory outcome?

Ms de Brún: The Member may need to write to me with the details of that matter. The Northern Health and Social Services Board has reviewed its day care provision. Its plans to stimulate additional day care capacity include moving older service users to more age-appropriate settings. I am not sure whether that is what the Member is referring to. The board wishes to develop local small-scale projects with the voluntary sector that will offer alternatives to facility-based activities.

Community Care Packages

13. **Ms Ramsey** asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety, in relation to her announcement of the creation of 1,000 new community care packages, what criteria are being used to allocate the distribution of the packages. (AQO 1187/01)

Ms de Brún: Tá mé ag súil go gcuirfidh na boird a moltaí mionsonraithe do bhaint amach a scair chaipitlíochta den sprioc 1,000 faoi mo bhráid go gairid. Áireofar ar na moltaí mionsonraithe sin pleannanna le leanúint le hinfheistiúocht a dhéanamh i seirbhísí pobail, ag baint úsáide as an réimse chuí scileanna SSSP, le tacaíocht a thabhairt do dhaoine i suímh sa phobal a éascaíonn filleadh ar an

neamhspleáchas agus laghdú a dhéanamh ar an ghá le cúram baile fadtréimhseach cónaitheach agus altranaís.

I expect boards to provide me shortly with detailed proposals for achieving their capitation share of the 1,000 community care packages. The proposals will include plans to continue investment in community services, using the appropriate range of health and social services skills to support people in community settings which facilitate a return to independence and reduce the need for long-term residential and nursing-home care. Boards and trusts are also required to look at the good practices in service provision, identified in the first report on the review of community care that I published today. The aim is to reduce inappropriate hospital admissions and to set targets for reducing the number of people who remain in hospital after they are found to be medically fit for discharge.

Ms Ramsey: I welcome the Minister's answer, and I acknowledge the fact that she has announced the review of community care today. Does she know what measures the boards will put in place to ensure that service users and their families are aware of the criteria they must meet to apply for a package?

Ms de Brún: From my knowledge of other work, I understand that one of our main aims is to make progress on the strategy for carers. That includes making carers aware of what provisions are available. Some of the good practice that is involved in the first stage of the community care review is concerned with ensuring that discussions take place when community care is being made available.

It is imperative that domiciliary care be one of the main planks of community care policy. I am aware that we must ensure that money is allocated to where it is most needed. The community care review has examined several projects, particularly those demonstrating innovation in the way that we deliver community care to older and more vulnerable people. We intend to take a further in-depth look at those projects in the second phase of the review so that the good practice may be replicated throughout the health and personal social services. Although the second phase of the review will take some time, I assure the Member that the work on good practice is ongoing.

Health Databases — All-Ireland Co-ordination

14. **Mr G Kelly** asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what steps have been taken, or are planned to be taken, in relation to all-Ireland co-ordination of data collection for health databases.

(AQO 1185/01)

Ms de Brún: Cé nach bhfuil aon chóras comhordaithe tiomsaithe sonraí ar bhonn uile-Éireann do bhunachar sonraí sláinte ann go fóill, bunaíodh dlúthnasc oibre idir eagraíochtaí éagsúla anseo agus sa Deisceart le tiomsú

agus taifeadadh sonraí a thabhairt le chéile. Sampla amháin de sin is é obair na Clárlainne Ailse anseo agus obair na Clárlainne Náisiúnta Ailse i gCorcaigh i mbunachar sonraí staitisticí ailse uile-Éireann a chruthú.

3.30 pm

Although there is not yet any systematic all-Ireland co-ordination of health data, close working links have been established between organisations here and in the South to harmonise the collection and recording of such information. For example, the Northern Ireland Cancer Registry and the National Cancer Registry of Ireland, which is in Cork, are creating an all-Ireland database of cancer statistics.

Mr G Kelly: The Minister said that there are no operational databases. Have there been moves to create databases relating to child abuse offenders, North and South?

Ms de Brún: Yes. The North/South Ministerial Council, in its education sectoral format, is dealing with that matter; therefore, it would be more appropriate to direct that question to the Minister of Education. There have been practical difficulties in creating other types of databases, due to differences in how data are defined and collected, and how services are organised, funded, and delivered. We will be examining all those issues.

Care of Residents in Nursing Homes

15. **Mr Ford** asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to outline the current position in discussions on the increase of contract prices for the care of residents in nursing homes. (AQO 1161/01)

Ms de Brún: Mar aitheantas ar an ardú ghéar i gcostais san earnáil chónaitheach agus tithe altranaís, tá 3.6 mhilliún breise curtha ar fáil agam in éineacht leis an ghnáthardú bhliantúil le méadú a dhéanamh ar na táillí a íoctar ar áiteanna sna tithe seo.

In recognition of the steep increase in residential and nursing home costs, I provided a further £3.6 million on top of the normal annual uplift to increase the fees paid for places in those homes. Fees will increase this year by approximately 5.5%.

FINANCE AND PERSONNEL

Mr Speaker: Question 1, in the name of Mr McEluff, and question 9, in the name of Mr Gallagher, have been withdrawn and will receive written answers.

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

Ministerial Transport Costs

2. **Mr K Robinson** asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel to detail (a) the names of all private hire

firms used by the Executive to supply ministerial limousines and transport for Ministers; and (b) the costs associated with the hire of such services and transport. (AQO 1191/01)

The Minister of Finance and Personnel (Dr Farren):

Crown Chauffeur Drive, Belfast, and W&N Services, Bangor, provide official transport for Ministers. In the 12 months ending 28 February 2002, Crown Chauffeur Drive was paid £101,000 for the service, and W&N Services was paid £260,000.

Mr K Robinson: The Minister said that the estimated cost of an in-house official transport service for Ministers and senior officials is £637,000, as opposed to £937,000 for a contracted-out service. Subsequent to that answer, he embargoed his reply as to which Ministers were using which service. He excluded details on the transport of the Minister of Education and the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety, which are the responsibility of his Department. Will the Minister explain why those Ministers were excluded, which Department pays for their transport, which contracted-out services they use, how much that costs for each Minister, whether the arrangements were subject to the normal tendering procedures, and how much cheaper their transport would have been if it had been carried out by an in-house service?

Dr Farren: Questions about services that are contracted by other Departments, rather than through the central service for which my Department is responsible, must be directed to the Departments concerned. The services for which my Department is responsible, and which are reflected in the costs that I gave, include Ministers and one junior Minister, but not the Ministers who are specified in the Member's question.

UK Spending Review — Northern Ireland's Allocation

3. **Mr Dallat** asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel to make a statement on discussions regarding Northern Ireland's allocation in the UK spending review. (AQO 1196/01)

Dr Farren: The First Minister and the Deputy First Minister have written to the Chancellor on behalf of the Executive, stating that they expect to receive a share of public expenditure in the 2002 spending review that will enable us to match the standard of public services that is affordable, and afforded, in England. Discussions are taking place at official level on a range of spending review issues. Those will be followed shortly by further ministerial engagement with the Treasury.

Mr Dallat: Dr Farren has said that the funds allocated from the Chancellor in his Budget speech will not adequately meet the needs of our Health Service or other public services. That shows the deficiencies of the Barnett formula. What steps is the Minister taking to increase the allocation for Northern Ireland?

Dr Farren: Public expenditure allocations to, and consequent spending in, Northern Ireland should be based on a fair and objective analysis of need. The key issue is the extent to which the Barnett formula addresses this. As I have said on several occasions, we have undertaken detailed and rigorous scrutiny of the Barnett formula. We have been looking carefully to see whether it meets our needs sufficiently both now and, more importantly in future. It is clear that we cannot continue to accept inadequate funding of the priority services that we have identified in health, education and transport. We cannot accept a situation where they are markedly less favourably treated than in England. That appears to be the consequence of Barnett.

The allocation that we will receive from the Budget statement shows how the Barnett formula will impact to our detriment in Northern Ireland. For example, in last Wednesday's Budget the Chancellor announced that spending in England would rise by 43% over the next five years, even allowing for inflation. Our share of this new funding amounts to almost £2.7 billion; if we translate that into percentage increases, the increase in England will be around 10% over the same period, whereas here it will be only 7%. We must continue to highlight the scale of need here and the inadequacy of the consequentials from the Barnett formula as far as our budgetary needs are concerned.

I want to take this opportunity again to reassure the Assembly that we are determined to seek a fair and appropriate outcome to this year's spending review, and that we will continue to press our needs vigorously with the Treasury.

Mr Close: The Minister has referred to some of the difficulties with the Barnett formula. Does he not agree that in the compilation of the Barnett formula, perhaps the greatest difficulty now lies in the comparability of Northern Ireland with England, Scotland and Wales? If so, is it not now time to freeze the amount of funding that we get through the block grant at its current level, and then add on the increases that are applicable to England, for example? Therefore where the Minister refers to a 10% increase for health in England, the read-across would be a 10% increase for Northern Ireland.

Dr Farren: The Member will be aware that over the short period since devolution, the Executive have on several occasions taken the opportunity to add considerably to the Barnett consequentials, particularly in allocations to health.

I will make a statement later this afternoon that will highlight in more detail some of the difficulties that we continue to encounter with respect to the Barnett formula and its consequentials. We will base our case on the scale of our need and will press that case as vigorously as possible. At present, there is a degree of reluctance in the Treasury — to put it no stronger — to a wholesale opening up of all the issues concerning Barnett allocations to the devolved Administrations.

Nonetheless, that objective must be pursued, and the only basis on which it can be pursued effectively is a clear and detailed analysis of our needs.

Mr Hussey: All Members of the Assembly will wish the Minister and the Executive well in their ongoing discussions. To counteract the effect of the diminishment of our Barnett allocation and consequential allocations and to redress years of capital underinvestment during the years of direct rule will the Minister state whether he or his officials came under any pressure about our own internal revenue receipts?

Dr Farren: On several occasions my predecessor and I made it clear that addressing the Barnett issue and attempting to open up the issue in a fundamental way is not a no-risk option. It raises questions that relate to the few, but significant, revenue streams over which we have control. We must address the fairness and adequacy of those revenue streams. If we do not take those initiatives ourselves, the Treasury will put pressure on us to do so.

NICS 'Human Resources Action Plan 2002-03'

4. **Mr Maskey** asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel to detail the progress made on the Northern Ireland Civil Service (NICS) 'Human Resources Action Plan 2002-03'. (AQO 1190/01)

Dr Farren: The plan underpins the corporate high-level strategy for the human resources management of the Northern Ireland Civil Service, which seeks to ensure a more open, diverse and professional Civil Service that will continue to put the public interest first and serve the whole community.

The Northern Ireland Civil Service 'Human Resources Action Plan 2002-03' has been agreed with Departments and made available to the Committee for Finance and Personnel. It takes account of corporate business objectives and priorities. From 1 April 2002 it will be monitored and evaluated regularly.

Mr Maskey: Will the review of Civil Service accommodation impact on the 'Human Resources Action Plan 2002-03'?

3.45 pm

Dr Farren: The review of Civil Service accommodation has made progress. We are anxious to ensure that we have not only the most appropriate form of accommodation to meet the needs of different Civil Service Departments but also to take action where required with regard to location. It is my understanding that the Member's question relates to that aspect of the accommodation review. If I am incorrect in my interpretation, he can advise me afterwards, and I will ensure that I address the question in the terms that he intended.

Rev Robert Coulter: How is the Northern Ireland Civil Service 'Human Resources Action Plan 2002-03' dealing with the unacceptably high levels of absenteeism in certain Departments? What percentage improvement does the Minister expect to achieve over the current financial year?

Dr Farren: The Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency (NISRA) has developed robust statistics to help Departments to identify underlying trends and areas for further in-depth analysis. Its most recent report is available in the Assembly Library. My Department is also helping Departments to reduce absenteeism through corporate initiatives such as the development of a web site called 'Attendance Matters', the production of a leaflet for GPs on the support and early return mechanisms available to the staff of the Northern Ireland Civil Service, and service-wide seminars and workshops on managing attendance.

I do not believe that it would be appropriate at this point to have an overall target, because levels of absenteeism vary between Departments. That requires us to address the circumstances that may be associated with absenteeism in each Department.

European Funding

5. **Mr A Maginness** asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel what measures are in place to ensure an equitable allocation of European funding across all sections of the community. (AQO 1168/01)

Dr Farren: The European Union operational programmes, which include the building sustainable prosperity and Peace II programmes, were drawn up after extensive consultation and were informed by equality impact assessments. The programmes are governed by principles and actions to promote equality of opportunity, including access across all sectors of the community as defined by section 75 of the Northern Ireland Act 1998. I wish to emphasise that project selection procedures take equality issues into account.

Mr A Maginness: What mechanism can the Department use to ensure that a balance is struck in the community divide, the urban/rural split and the geographical spread of allocations?

Dr Farren: Three horizontal principles govern how the operational programmes will be implemented. These are: balanced intervention or, in our language, equality of opportunity; new TSN; and publicity or transparency. The programmes' monitoring committees have a formal role to review progress made towards the achievement of the objectives of the programmes and the achievement of their targets, including performance against those horizontal principles.

The programmes' managing authorities — the Department of Finance and Personnel and the Special EU Programmes Body — will be required to take any necessary corrective actions agreed by the monitoring committees in the light of the evaluations that they make.

Mrs Nelis: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. According to the Noble and Robson indices, projects in high TSN areas such as West Belfast, Lenadoon and the Foyle constituency, as well as projects such as the Inner City Trust, have been refused funding. Will the Minister assure the voluntary and community sectors in those areas that his measures are equitable?

Dr Farren: All the practical procedures that flow from the principles that I have just stated are intended to ensure equity of treatment in evaluating all projects that are submitted for funding. I do not have the details — and I am not sure that it would be appropriate to comment on particular projects even if I did — but if the Member seeks further information I shall write to her.

Mr Beggs: Given the weak infrastructure in the Unionist community and the complexity of the EU application forms, and given the inequality that was experienced during Peace I, is the Minister satisfied that the arrangements will enable equality of opportunity and application? Will there be an equality of applications so that the opportunities will also be equal? If not, what action does he propose to take? When will there be an assessment of the interest expressed to date? Should the Department of Finance and Personnel be more proactive, just as other Departments were in encouraging applications to another community during Peace I?

Dr Farren: I do not accept that there was any inequity in the treatment of applications from either community during Peace I. I assure the Member that all Departments that have a role to play in encouraging groups and organisations to come forward with projects, in assessing those projects and in determining any allocations that they are deemed worthy to receive, are concerned about ensuring that projects are proposed by all sections of our community. They wish to ensure that all the areas to which the programmes apply receive as balanced a set of applications as possible. The Special EU Programmes Body, the local strategy partnerships and the intermediate funding bodies have a role to promote information and to assist in the preparation and submission of applications. Local strategy partnerships have been very proactive in organising information events on projects that they wish to see promoted. They have also been proactive on measures used to finance in their areas. The monitoring to which I referred will take place, and I would be concerned if there were any evidence to suggest inequity of treatment. However, we have taken sufficient steps to put all the appropriate checks and balances in place in order to achieve a fair and equitable outcome.

Aggregates Tax

6. **Mr Armstrong** asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel, pursuant to AQW 2707/01, how he will address the extra demands on the Executive Budget if aggregates tax is introduced. (AQO 1171/01)

Dr Farren: We return to an issue that raises considerable concern. The extraction of virgin aggregates for commercial purposes has been, as I am sure most Members are aware, subject to the aggregates tax since 1 April 2002. I hasten to add that the tax is not imposed by our Executive. Initial costs arising from the tax on virgin aggregates during 2002-03 are being met in the usual way from the Executive Budget. However, the pre-Budget report of November 2001 gave a partial temporary derogation to Northern Ireland for aggregate used in processing. Therefore processed materials will be exempt from the tax in 2002-03 and phased in until full implementation is reached by 2007-08. This measure remains subject to EU state aid approval, but the Treasury remains confident of a successful outcome within the next few weeks. A commitment has been given by the Treasury that the first year's exemption for aggregates used in processed products in Northern Ireland will be backdated to 1 April 2002.

Mr Armstrong: Has the Minister commissioned research and costings to project the financial burden and predict job losses in the quarry industry, especially where competition is strong from neighbouring quarries in the Republic of Ireland? I am sure that he has considered the financial burden that the aggregates tax will put on the construction of roadways, and I believe about £1.7 million of aggregates tax will be on the Toome bypass. This money will go straight back to the Treasury out of our Budget and will be of no benefit to Northern Ireland's people or the environment. Can the Minister assure the House that we are not poorer due to the aggregates tax, and has he discussed this dilemma with the Minister of the Environment and the Minister for Regional Development?

Dr Farren: The Member will be aware of the deep concern that has been expressed in the Executive and by many Members since it was announced that an aggregates tax was to be imposed. My initial answer set out the facts, but that of course does not mean that I am satisfied with the situation that exists. The Member will be aware that a total derogation was the desired outcome of the Executive, but we recognised the difficulties in achieving this.

The Member and others, particularly from his own and neighbouring constituencies where the introduction of this tax is felt most acutely, will be aware that my officials are leading a cross-departmental group consulting with industry representatives to develop an alternative strategy, which will be consistent with European state aid regulations, that aims to secure a more favourable outcome than the current measure. In seeking an alternative to the aggregates tax, the Executive recognise the need to achieve the original environmental benefits of the tax through other means. Therefore what we are trying to achieve is a complete overturn of the imposition of this tax yet also achieve the objectives that lie behind it with respect to the environment. Thus we would remove the burden

that the Member has underlined and which is being felt in many sections of the construction industry.

Investing for Health Strategy

7. **Mr J Kelly** asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel, in relation to the launch of the investing for health strategy, what extra moneys are being allocated to ensure the success of this strategy. (AQO 1188/01)

Dr Farren: In addition to the Departments' statements about what they can achieve with their existing resources, almost £5 million has been secured from Executive programme funds principally for the establishment of local investing for health partnerships, in the context of the investing for health strategy. Any further actions by Departments will require dedicated bids for resources through the normal bidding processes.

4.00 pm

Mr J Kelly: Will the Minister clarify that he intends to ensure that extra money will continue to be made available?

Dr Farren: Additional funds must be associated with specific bids. The Member will appreciate that the issue does not simply relate to the strategy his question refers to. The issue is about allocating additional funds when there is evidence to support a bid.

Madam Deputy Speaker: Ms Armitage is not in the Chamber to ask her question.

Senior Civil Service Review

10. **Ms Lewsley** asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel how he intends to take forward the work on the review of the Senior Civil Service. (AQO 1167/01)

Dr Farren: On 15 March I received the report of the review of the appointment and promotion procedures for the Senior Civil Service of Northern Ireland from Lord Ouseley, the review chairperson. As I have said before, the procedure was that I would consider the report and make recommendations on it and its future handling to the Executive. That is planned for early May, at which time the Executive will agree the consultation arrangements and procedures, along with the timetable for implementation and the wider publication of the report.

Madam Deputy Speaker: If the Minister has any further information, I must ask him to put it in writing to the Member as the time for questions is up.

IMPACT OF THE BUDGET ON NORTHERN IRELAND

Madam Deputy Speaker: I have received notice from the Minister of Finance and Personnel that he wishes to make a statement on the impact of the Budget on Northern Ireland.

The Minister of Finance and Personnel (Dr Farren): With permission, I will make a statement on behalf of the Executive on the implications that the Chancellor's recent Budget statement will have for people in Northern Ireland.

First, I will focus on public expenditure and the implications for our Health Service. The Chancellor announced several new measures that will have implications for public expenditure in Northern Ireland. The most significant implication is that during the next five years, health spending in England will rise by 43% in real terms. It is worth remembering that the cost of providing health services is rising more rapidly than the measure of general inflation that the Treasury has used. Under the Barnett formula, the Executive will be provided with approximately an additional £2.7 billion over the next five years. In the next financial year, the amount will be £73 million, and the larger amounts relate to the more distant future, rising to £1,037 million in 2007-08. The figures are set out in the table attached to the copies of my statement that have been circulated to Members.

(Mr Deputy Speaker [Mr J Wilson] in the Chair)

The Chancellor has confirmed two other small increases in our departmental expenditure limit. Barnett consequentials arise from the latest round of allocations from the Treasury's capital modernisation fund round, which provides an increase of £8.7 million in 2002-03. The final item is the sum of £500,000 in 2002-03 and 2003-04, which arises from an increase in funding by the Department for Education and Skills. It is for the Learning and Skills Council to provide support for small organisations to achieve the Investors in People standard.

I stress that these sums represent increases in our assigned departmental expenditure limit and, as such, they are not earmarked for any particular service. The Executive will have full discretion in allocating them to the priorities set by the Assembly. The additional sums available to us in 2002-03 will be added to those that remained unallocated after the February monitoring exercise, and we will be considering which services they should be allocated to shortly. The additions to our provision for 2003-04 will be considered in the context of the Budget 2002 exercise, which has recently started with the production of the departmental position reports.

The increases for the Health Service announced by the Chancellor have attracted considerable attention and interest. They are undoubtedly large increases and they

are welcome — although in reality the growth in health spending that the Chancellor is providing is very similar to the pattern set in the Budget of March 2000. The increases are also necessary, given the particular problems we face here. Such difficulties have been aired in the Assembly on many occasions.

The allocation of funds, including these additional funds, falls entirely within the discretion of the Executive, and we have many public expenditure and revenue issues to address in the wider context of the spending review. We must ensure that we have a clear view of our priorities — as distinct from those of the Treasury — and what we are trying to achieve. Health has been well established as a priority by the Executive and the Assembly, and the health sector faces many acute difficulties. For that reason — notwithstanding concerns about the adequacy of the additional funding — it is entirely appropriate that we should allocate the additional funds that flow from the Chancellor's Budget to health, and I will be recommending that to my Executive Colleagues.

In making these allocations I want to be sure that the increased funding has a demonstrable impact on the delivery of health services. To that end, the Department of Finance and Personnel, the Economic Policy Unit and the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety are jointly carrying out a needs and effectiveness evaluation on health and social care. I will work with the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to ensure that the public benefits from this new allocation as much as possible. It is vital that we address these issues if we are to make real progress in building a Health Service fit for the twenty-first century.

The most important issue is that the Health Service must meet the needs of patients. Together with the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety, I want to ensure that the additional funds result in a real difference in the care provided to the people of Northern Ireland. The Executive are committed to a major programme of reform of the public sector, and have begun to apply that in health and in other sectors. We must consider how best to apply in Northern Ireland the principles of reform that have been announced by the Chancellor and the Secretary of State for Health.

The new figures are significant. However, when we look below the headlines, what stands out is that Northern Ireland's share of the new expenditure will again fall short of what the Executive needs in order to match the growth in English spending on health. The first table and chart that I have attached to copies of my statement show that while English spending will rise by up to 10% per annum, Northern Ireland's allocation will allow growth of only 7.5% on average in the Health Service here. In real terms, growth — compared to the Chancellor's figure of 43% in England — is only 29% in Northern Ireland. Most of the supposed "real growth" is likely to be needed just to maintain services as they are now.

We are not party to the hype of last week, which overstated the benefit that the Budget will provide for the Health Service in Northern Ireland. The issue emphasises starkly our difficulties with the Barnett formula, which gives Northern Ireland less growth in spending than that of England. The Budget announcement has accelerated that trend. It means that if we were to add only the Barnett share to the health budget in Northern Ireland, the amount would be insufficient to meet the needs of the local Health Service. Indeed, objectively, if we allocate only the additional amounts that we receive under the Barnett formula, we will struggle to maintain the Health Service in its present highly unsatisfactory state. That is in contrast to the position in England, where the Chancellor has allocated enough to provide for real service improvements.

As things stand, if the Executive are simply to keep pace with the cash growth planned in England, without taking account of relative needs, over the next five years we will need more than £1 billion more than we have received in the Budget. The House will appreciate that the problem is not new. Since devolution the Assembly has given significant priority to health. Before this Budget, for the three financial years of 2001-02, 2002-03 and 2003-04, we received Barnett additions of £8.7 million from the Chancellor. However, we allocated just under £1 billion to the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety in that period — £192 million more than we had received.

It is worth pointing out a further important aspect of the Barnett formula that works against us. The arithmetic of the formula, on which I have focused so far, might perhaps be reasonable if we had higher standards of public services than in England. The important point is that the Barnett formula takes no account of our comparative levels of need. We have increasing evidence of greater need in relation to health than in England. An analysis of relative needs is part of the needs and effectiveness evaluation of health and social care that is currently being carried out by the Economic Policy Unit, the Department of Finance and Personnel and the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety. Before getting too far into the subject, it is important to stress that the comparisons with England are only one relevant factor in considering spending allocations. The Assembly has the right to set its own priorities, which may mean a different pattern of allocations than elsewhere.

The key issues for the spending review are whether we have a fair share of the Chancellor's total cake and whether we are drawing in an appropriate share of revenue for which we are also responsible. In a debate with the Treasury, it is impossible to address spending without looking at revenue.

4.15 pm

Although work on comparative needs has not yet concluded, the results suggest that to provide services at

a similar standard to that in England, we need about 17% more for each individual. Thus, for every £1 spent on health for each person in England, Northern Ireland needs £1.17 for each person. That is a conservative analysis, which excludes some factors that give rise to genuine additional costs here. Indeed, the research evidence could be interpreted as supporting a higher figure.

Despite the fact that more money has been allocated to health, the gap is increasing because of the Barnett squeeze. We have good evidence that, when need is taken into account, the Health Service needs an additional £300 million a year to match English standards of service. That will be significantly compounded if we, and the Treasury, do not address the divergence in amounts provided over the next five years. We cannot accept that situation. To provide effective public services across Departments, we must increase the amounts that we have to spend. Ways to achieve that include mounting an effective challenge to Barnett and closely examining our revenue sources.

Members will also be aware that we are moving ahead with an examination of how best to make private finance work to meet Northern Ireland's needs. I am already pressing the Treasury for more in the forthcoming spending review. Challenging Barnett is not something that can be undertaken lightly. As I have said before, it is not a no-risk option. It is not a matter of simply asking London for a peace dividend. We need a sound realistic strategy that recognises the realities of our position and argues our case strongly and responsibly.

My predecessor and I have made it clear that any challenge would open up the debate on sources of local revenue and lead to strong pressure from the Treasury that we should contribute more resources than at present. That would mean looking hard at the amounts that we raise locally.

At this stage, the key question is whether we are getting a fair share of the resources available to the Chancellor. Addressing that is a very complex and difficult task. One reason that Barnett has been accepted for so long is that it avoids that issue. The Executive have shown at Question Time and on other recent occasions that we are taking up that challenge.

While health spending is less well funded here than in England, particularly when need is taken into account, I must also sound a clear note of caution. For some programmes here, there is a much higher level of spending and less convincing evidence of need than in England. Nevertheless, the balance of evidence suggests that we have a strong case for something better than the Barnett formula can provide in this spending round.

However, that case is clearly and significantly undermined because we raise much less from local sources of revenue than England. The Treasury can be expected to look to us to address that issue as part of the examination

of our case for a better share of public spending — hence the importance of the fundamental review of rating policy on which the Executive have embarked. We are preparing to launch a detailed consultation process, during which everyone will be invited to make comment.

I hope that all parties will fully engage in the consultation process, which will be comprehensive and will cover both the existing system and possible alternatives. I emphasise that no decisions have been taken and no directions have been recommended. Let me make it clear that I am neither imposing nor proposing any particular type of charges.

Public services in Northern Ireland suffer from a legacy of underinvestment. It is well known to Members on all sides of the House that many of our services, especially health, education, water and transport, currently require levels of capital investment far in excess of the resources available to us. At present, the sums required to solve the significant problems that we face are well in excess of the amounts that the Executive have to spend. That is the underlying fact which guides all thinking and action on the issues of resource allocation. As we begin the process of setting our spending plans for 2003-04 and beyond, we have to think very carefully and be prepared to face, and take, tough decisions on the core issue of how best to improve public services.

The latest estimates put the deficit between what our current budget can sustain and what we actually need to do in terms of capital investment at a minimum of £6 billion over the next 10 years. I stress that much of that investment is likely to be needed in the next five years. I have some sympathy with the sentiments expressed in the report of the Committee for Finance and Personnel that we need a strategic focus for our infrastructure programme and effective organisational arrangements to deliver the strategy.

I now turn to some other measures in the Chancellor's Budget. Apart from the headline news on new expenditure, the Chancellor has continued his long-term theme of reforming the tax regime for workers and companies. Some of those changes are particularly welcome here; others are not. The small firm sector is very important in Northern Ireland. The proposals to zero-rate the smallest firms for corporation tax and to reduce the basic rate for the rest will provide benefits for up to 12,000 businesses. Those firms will also welcome the significant reductions in the administrative burden of value added tax.

A few of our larger companies will also be able to benefit from the new research and development tax credit, but only a few. We have been pressing the Treasury for a regionally targeted research and development tax regime to target regions such as ours. That could improve our present performance. The research and development tax incentive should, nonetheless, encourage local businesses

to invest for growth, and I trust that they will take advantage of it in that regard.

Unfortunately, the Budget was less helpful on other tax issues. The decision not to make any special arrangement on the duty on fuel does nothing to close the differential with the South, which has been an open incentive to smuggling and evasion. The failure to amend the air passenger duty regime in recognition of our heavy dependence on air links with GB was also very disappointing.

I welcome the simplification of the range of support for low-paid workers and those with children, the arrangements for which were announced in the Budget. Together with the new working tax credit and child tax credit, those arrangements will benefit an estimated 250,000 families in Northern Ireland.

I hope that my review of how the Chancellor's Budget will affect us here has been helpful to Members in outlining some of the issues that we face and what we seek to achieve. I am for public services and better investment in our infrastructure. I am determined to find effective and fair ways to deliver the services and facilities that our community needs.

I look forward to the continuing co-operation and support of my ministerial Colleagues. I trust that we can depend on the support of the Assembly and all those who are making the case for additional spending to pursue these goals. I will keep the Assembly and the Committee for Finance and Personnel up to date on how the issues develop.

The Chairperson of the Committee for Finance and Personnel (Mr Molloy): Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I thank the Minister for his statement and the accompanying figures giving more detail and explanation of how the Budget will affect us. I hope that this year's spending review and Budget process will bring about some change. Can the Minister give us details of the negotiations that have taken place with the Treasury on the spending review? What opportunities are there for additional funds to come from the review? Once again, I refer to the peace dividend. I accept the Minister's point that it is not simply a matter of asking for additional funding. However, to make a strong case for additional funding, it is important to be convinced that we need it.

The amount of taxation that is collected here must be shown on the balance sheet. I refer to the earlier question about the aggregates tax and the additional £1.60 per tonne that has been levied on gravel and aggregates. That will not affect the Assembly, but it means that its different schemes will cost more money. More money is going out, and the Assembly will not get any return. The Treasury does not have any qualms about imposing more taxes here. However, we need to get more resources.

Dr Farren: Implicit in my comments on the Barnett formula and the spending review negotiations are the lines that the Executive are pursuing in their discussions with the Treasury. In answer to an earlier question, I explained that our case is strongly based on our analysis of our needs. As I said in my remarks on the Chancellor's Budget, we have to spend £1.17 here to match the level of investment and standards in England, particularly in health, for every pound spent there. Those fairly straightforward figures give a simple and direct indication of our assessment of the needs.

Given my attempts to reassure the House earlier, the Member should be confident that the Executive are pursuing a vigorous line. In our approach we have included the case for what my party has described as a normalisation dividend.

We must explore more than one possible source of finance; for example, additional funding under the Barnett formula, public-private partnerships and revenue sources over which we have direct control. In particular, we must consider their fairness and adequacy. All those sources pose challenges and provide partial answers.

The block grant allocation under the Barnett formula will always form the most significant slice of our public expenditure cake. However, all the additional sources of funding are being vigorously pursued. I assure my Assembly Colleagues that the Executive are not remiss in considering those sources. I hope that the process will have a fruitful outcome that will be apparent when the spending review allocations are announced in July.

4.30 pm

The Deputy Chairperson of the Committee for Finance and Personnel (Mr Beggs): I welcome the additional funds that will be made available for public services in Northern Ireland as a result of allocations under the Barnett formula. Given the community's health needs, I recognise that the funds should be directed to the Health Service, and I would support the Minister's decision to do so. However, we must also ensure that we maximise the uses and the outcomes of the net result of the increased spending on health. Is the Minister aware that there is concern that the significant increases in funding to date have not resulted in health improvements in our hospitals or communities? Does he think that there is merit in mirroring the Chancellor's Budget proposals for the independent auditing of health structures? Does he acknowledge that the current auditing of health trusts by the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety is neither transparent nor accountable? Would he support such a change so that the community can have confidence in how our money is spent?

Dr Farren: It is important to acknowledge that a significant additional allocation to our Health Service is pending as a result of the consequential money that the

Chancellor announced last week. An additional sum of £2.7 billion is significant and welcome.

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety would be better able to provide a detailed response on the need to ensure that additional and existing finance for the Health Service is spent effectively. Although the language may be slightly different, we should acknowledge that the needs and effectiveness evaluations that the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety and several other bodies are conducting will provide evidence to account for about 75% of our public expenditure.

As the title suggests, these exercises are intended to address how effectively we spend what we allocate. What return do the people of Northern Ireland get from the vast amount of public money invested in these services, which includes the Health Service? The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety is aware of the need to assure the public about the effectiveness with which her budget is spent.

Ms Lewsley: I welcome the Minister's announcement and also his determination to battle for resources to make up the difference in spending levels between here and England. Can the Minister outline the implications of not securing extra funds through the Barnett formula to make up the differential in the future?

Dr Farren: In one sense the answer to that question can be put fairly simply — we would have much less to spend on all services. However, when we take into account the Minister for Regional Development's regional transport strategy, the need for significant improvements to our water services, the requirements that will undoubtedly follow from whatever recommendations and proposals come from the acute hospitals review, the proposals for investment that will come from any reorganisation of our educational services, and so on, we must acknowledge the deficit that would exist. I said in my statement that there would be a deficit of some £6 billion, and the investment that would be possible, were that to be available to us, would simply not take place.

That imposes a strong obligation on all Members — and they have the opportunity to do this in the various Committees on which they serve — to address the needs, to assess where the investment is likely to come from and to help to make the choices that will have to be made when we know what will be available to meet all those needs. Indeed, if we do not succeed in achieving all that we want to achieve from the investment available to us, Members should help to explain what choices have to be made — why certain choices will be made and others will not be made — with regard to all that we demand for the maintenance and development of our public services.

Mr M Robinson: The Minister indicated in his statement that for every £1 spent on health in England, £1.17 would need to be spent to deliver a service of the same

standard in Northern Ireland. Can he indicate what the comparative figure for transport is?

Dr Farren: I do not have the precise detail that the Member requests. I would have thought that the most immediate source for the answer to that question should be the Minister for Regional Development. Nonetheless, I will commit myself to providing the evidence of the needs in transport services — in roads and all the services associated with transport.

I am aware of the considerable deficit in infrastructural needs and the considerable investment that is required in the whole of our transport sector and its infrastructure. I am also aware of the general plans that the Minister has put out for public consultation in his regional transport strategy. I will be meeting with the Minister in the near future. Undoubtedly, we will be addressing not only transport needs but also the needs that he has identified for the development of the Water Service. He has impressed on me the considerable investment needs that exist there. He said that we need to put all the options relating to sources of revenue that might help us to meet those investment needs fairly and squarely before the public.

Mr Maskey: I thank the Minister for the clarity with which he has put many of these important matters to the Assembly. I welcome the fact that the Minister has dissociated the Executive from the hype around the Budget announcement last week and, secondly, that he will recommend that all consequential moneys should go directly to the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety. I thank him for that announcement.

Given the focus on the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety and the lack of spending on health over many years, health will feature largely in this debate. In the light of that, will the Minister reassert the comments that he made in his statement that, notwithstanding the amount contained there, if we allocate only the additional amounts we will struggle to maintain the Health Service in its present highly unsatisfactory state? Does the Minister agree that that is a startling statement in its own right?

Dr Farren: I am not sure what particular weight would be carried by the reiteration of what I have already stressed, directly or indirectly, several times. Given that I have been before the Assembly for almost an hour, I am sure that Members are tired of my voice, so I will spare them the reiteration. However, I reassure the Member that I believe what I said.

Mr Close: Does the Minister not share my alarm at the constant reference to pressure from the Treasury? Does he not agree that that pressure is tantamount to blackmail? Should the Treasury not be looking at the needs of the people of Northern Ireland, rather than bullying the Executive? Should the Executive not be fighting for the needs of the people of Northern Ireland,

rather than allowing themselves to succumb to that pressure and blackmail?

Does the Minister not further agree that the reference to this Budget as a “Budget for enterprise” is rather contradicted by the 1% increase through the tax for jobs, as represented by the National Insurance contribution imposed on employers? Does the Minister agree, given that the backbone of Northern Ireland’s economy is small and medium-sized enterprises, that this further tax on jobs will make it more difficult, if not impossible, to follow through with increases in rates, water rates and such other measures as the Minister has referred to?

Dr Farren: I could join with the Member in saying that the increase in National Insurance contributions is unwelcome for the business community here. However, I have pointed out that there are other aspects of the Budget that will benefit businesses. To assess fully the Budget’s impact on business, it must be looked at in its overall terms rather than focusing on specific items.

4.45 pm

Mr Close made a point about pressure. He must appreciate that the pressure from the Treasury is matched by the pressure from here. Pressure is a way of describing how forcefully we put forward an argument — and we are putting forward a very strong argument on behalf of the people of Northern Ireland by demonstrating the scale of need. That is what it is all about. It is not a question of simply accepting the Barnett allocation without making our case in the strongest possible terms.

I doubt whether my predecessor and I could have been more forceful in presenting the approach that we are adopting to the House. If all the comments on this subject are checked in Hansard, it will be seen that we have been expressing the case based on need very forcibly; and we are bringing that case to the Treasury. The case is being vigorously pursued at political level and more regularly at official level.

The Member may doubt my words; he has the luxury of doubting them because he is not present when the negotiations are under way. However, I ask him to accept that I mean what I say when I say that we are pursuing the case very vigorously indeed.

The word “pressured” may be a way of describing the Treasury’s response; for example, when we are asked to examine the sources of revenue that we control. The Member will know that we have undertaken preparation for public consultation of the rating system in a very concerted and detailed way. As a member of the Committee for Finance and Personnel, he knows that the issue has been going through a considerable gestation period, and that we are close, in terms of internal debate. The internal debate has involved all members of the Executive, including the Ministers who do not attend Executive meetings. They are fully aware of the issues

that have to be addressed, and they believe that the issues need to be addressed vigorously.

The Minister for Regional Development has made it clear to me, in correspondence and in face-to-face discussion, that he agrees that we should address all those potential sources of revenue, and put the options fairly and squarely before the people so that they know what they are, the choices that have to be made, and the consequences of not making certain choices. *[Interruption]*.

Yes, indeed, and before the Member pursues the issue too far, he might take it up with the Minister for Regional Development. Ask him precisely what he said to me in his written communications and what he has said to me in face-to-face discussions. I am not saying this in order to cast aspersions but to make clear the issues and the deep appreciation that exists.

Mr Paisley may think that it is a matter for some mirth, but delivering good, effective and efficient public services for the people of Northern Ireland is a very serious matter. That is what the Executive is about, and I am attempting, as Minister, to make clear to the public what is needed to achieve those objectives. I trust that he will have that detailed conversation with his Colleague, the Minister for Regional Development.

Rev Robert Coulter: I welcome the Minister’s statement and his efforts to acquire more finance for Northern Ireland.

In view of the deficit of confidence in the community, will the Minister ensure that the extra money will be directed through the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to specific patient needs? Will spending be independently audited and improvements monitored?

The Minister mentioned the exploration of many possibilities in his statement. However, no mention was made of the possibility of savings on administration. Given that an extra layer of administration involving over 300 people has just been added, will there be any monitoring of the money spent in that area?

Has the Minister had discussions with the Minister for Regional Development on the scale of investment required in the Water Service and on any plans he has to meet that need?

Dr Farren: I addressed part of the Member’s question in my previous response. I have had correspondence and a detailed discussion with the Minister for Regional Development. That discussion was helpful. The issues to which the Member referred were addressed in a serious and detailed way. There was a realisation that the challenge for the Water Service, for example, will require significant investment. If I have correctly recalled the Minister for Regional Development’s advice, about £3 billion will be needed in the next 10 to 15 years, much of which must be spent in the next five years. Therefore all the options must be addressed fully and

frankly with the public so that we appreciate the kind of choices that are before us and the consequences of taking certain choices and not taking others.

We have an obligation to present all the possibilities to the public. It would be dishonest to do otherwise. Let the public debate, let MLAs debate, let the Committees debate, and let them all advise on the way forward. That applies not only to the Department that the Member highlighted, but to all Departments, some of which have significantly greater spending requirements. It is important that, as we move away from a society that was characterised politically by what I would describe as “demand” politics, we move to “responsibility” politics. We shall demand high-quality services and the best infrastructure, because that is what our people deserve. However, we must do so responsibly; we must be aware of the choices that have to be made and the resources that are required to meet those choices. We must not run away from the hard issues. That is not what the Executive are in business for. They are in business to point out our aims and objectives, and what is required to meet them.

My answer to the Member’s comments on the Health Service is covered in my reference to the needs and evaluation exercises that are being undertaken so that we have the assurance that what is provided by way of investment, capital or otherwise, is done effectively and efficiently and to the highest possible standards.

Mr Dallat: The Minister said that since devolution more money has gone to health than the Barnett formula allowed. Will he elaborate on that? Does the Minister believe that the Minister of Health can now get on with managing the Health Service?

Dr Farren: Approximately £190 million extra — over and above the Barnett allocation — has been made available to the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety over the past three Budgets. I am subject to correction on that.

A Member: It was £192 million.

Dr Farren: Thank you. That is a significant additional amount. We have done that because we recognise that there has been serious underinvestment. We recognise the extent of existing needs. Those who visit our hospitals and those who work in the Health Service are also aware of the scale and location of pressing need. That is what we have done to demonstrate that health must remain a priority. Although the additional allocations lend scope for significant improvement over the next five years, they cannot meet our needs. We will continue to make that case because that is what the evidence tells us. At least there is now the prospect of a significant advance in delivering high-quality service that speedily meets the requirements of everyone in need, particularly in the Health Service.

I recognise and pay tribute to all those who are providing services in our hospitals and to the Health Service generally. More can be done with additional resources, and I want to believe that more will be done.

Rev Dr Ian Paisley: Does the Minister agree that this is probably the most serious statement that he will ever make from the Dispatch Box? He is saying that spending the money that is being allocated through the Budget now can only keep the Health Service at its current deplorable standard.

The abject reality is that if we allocate only the additional amounts that we receive under the Barnett formula, we will struggle to maintain the Health Service in its present highly unsatisfactory state. Every Member is aware of the unsatisfactory state of the Health Service. The amount of money that has been cheered on by Back-Benchers in the House of Commons may be seen when it is applied — if it is applied properly — to relieve the deplorable inconsistencies of the Health Service in England, but that will not meet the need in Northern Ireland. The Minister reckoned in his statement that if we took all this money and the extra that we would get in the Barnett domain and put it all together, we would not have sufficient funds to deal with the Health Service. We would have enough money only to maintain it in its current deplorable state.

Therefore, it is a serious statement.

5.00 pm

Surely the Minister’s representation must state that other public services in our country are not in a good state. The rest of the United Kingdom, and especially England, has trouble with transport, and we have trouble with transport. All the other Departments are also in serious trouble, not only in maintaining what they are doing but also in trying to remedy the tremendous and awful hole that they have dug. The Minister tells us that for every £1 spent on health in England, £1.17 is required here. He tells us that an additional £300 million a year is needed to match England’s spending on health.

I am glad that the Minister has been honest with the House. I am glad that the bald facts are being set out plainly. I am glad that the Minister is telling the British Government that they are selling us cheap and trying to get away with fraud. We shall be unable to maintain an advantage for our Health Service; we shall be able to maintain it only in its current condition — and we all know the deplorable state of the Health Service. Other public services are also crying out for help. However, as the Minister has said, if one service cannot be cured properly, what is the point of putting money into it if it can be maintained only in its current state?

Mr Deputy Speaker: Dr Paisley, I am not sure that I have heard a question. Do you have a question for the Minister?

Rev Dr Ian Paisley: The whole thing is a question, and I think that the Minister knows that. Does the Minister think that throwing large sums of public money at dissatisfactory aspects of the Health Service, or any public service, will remedy the situation? Public services require radical surgery so that they have the staff and the ability to cope.

Dr Farren: I thank Dr Paisley for his contribution, although I was beginning to wonder if I had lost my job. Nonetheless, I appreciate the fact that he acknowledges my honesty, and I trust that that honesty will be acknowledged in the House and beyond, because, as a Member of the Executive, I believe that we must put the facts and the situation, which the Member described graphically, before our people. I agree with much that he says, but I am not someone who curses the darkness. Rather, I acknowledge the opportunity to achieve the progress that is necessary for investment in all public services.

The Member referred to the need to address public services generally. The review of public administration that is under way will address many of the issues that are implicit in the Member's reference to public services. We have some additional resources for health, although, as I have underlined often, they are insufficient. We will ensure that those resources are allocated and invested effectively, and I am sure that the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety would wish to express her intention to ensure that that happens so that improvements will be made.

However, we continue the battle and the debate with the Treasury. In addition, we commit ourselves to considering to what extent our own sources of revenue are administered fairly and whether they adequately meet some of our needs. They will never meet all of our needs, but they can contribute to doing so. We will continue to explore other possibilities. We can complain that the money is insufficient, but I am not one to be churlish or to curse the darkness. I accept and welcome the implications of the allocations and the opportunities that they provide, but I will fulfil my responsibility to point out that we need much, much more.

Dr Birnie: I thank the Minister for his comprehensive statement. I hope that he has lit a candle, rather than cursed the darkness. Does the Minister agree that it is a well-established phenomenon that when any organisation, company, or even country, receives a large sum of additional money to spend in a short period, often that money is, perforce, used inefficiently in the circumstances? The Deputy Chairperson of the Committee for Finance and Personnel asked whether there was a strong case for independently auditing the extra spending, particularly on health.

Secondly, is there not also a strong case for educating the expectations of the public? In many cases it will take

several years, perhaps four or five, to appoint new personnel in order to achieve outcomes from the additional health spending.

The Minister said that there was a Barnett consequential of approximately £0.5 million relating to the Investors in People spending in Great Britain. Given the Minister's implication that all the consequential funding relating to additional health spending in Great Britain will be spent on health in Northern Ireland, should not the £0.5 million relating to the consequential from the Department of Education and Skills be earmarked for the Department for Employment and Learning?

Dr Farren: Dr Birnie is the Chairperson of the Committee for Employment and Learning, so I appreciate why he makes that point. We will be considering which services will receive additional allocations as the result of the consequential funding that he highlighted. There is a significant challenge to inform the public about matters that affect our public expenditure, such as the funds that are available and how they can be acquired.

I trust that Members will contribute significantly to promoting greater understanding of the constraints under which we operate, through their approaches to issues such as those in my statement, when making departmental allocations and in their work outside the Chamber.

I accept the point that we may need more external arrangements for auditing. There are mechanisms in place, but I assume that Rev Robert Coulter was referring to a mechanism that would be closer to the Departments. The Committees have an important scrutiny role, although they may need expertise to help them to carry it out. They have that responsibility; they have been contributing to scrutiny; and they will continue to do so. The Executive will give serious consideration to this.

Mr A Maginness: I congratulate the Minister on his cogent, comprehensive and honest statement. I note Rev Dr Ian Paisley's comments that it was also a serious statement. It is a timely reminder about the grave situation that we face with regard to public expenditure. The Minister said that we will require approximately £6 billion in extra funding over the next 10 years.

The Minister and his Department are trying to negotiate a reformulation of Barnett with the Treasury, and Members should support that. However, that is not solely the Minister's responsibility. It is the collective responsibility of the House and the Executive. If a reformulation of Barnett that is beneficial to Northern Ireland is achieved, it will improve public services significantly.

Finally, if the Minister fails to get a beneficial reformulation of Barnett, does he have a plan b?

Dr Farren: The Member's comments are helpful.

The role of a Minister of Finance and Personnel is, in many respects, invidious. The Minister has an overview of all Departments in the Administration and overall

responsibility for examining their spending requirements. He must highlight some of the difficulties associated with acquiring and allocating the resources that are available to the Executive. The Member rightly stressed collective responsibility, but the whole Executive cannot speak in chorus.

5.15 pm

It falls, therefore, to the Minister of Finance and Personnel to be the Executive's voice on these matters. Negotiating the Barnett formula is not a process that I am involved in on my own. At present the Executive are fully apprised from meeting to meeting — because the process is under way, because of what is transpiring and because of the emerging possibilities and difficulties. Advice is sought, and the negotiations are essentially led by the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister.

All of my ministerial Colleagues, including those who are not in regular attendance — or any attendance at all — at the Executive meetings, are aware of the issues as they emerge. Their advice, and the advice of the latter, if not available directly to the Executive, is available through correspondence and meetings with me, so that I can ensure that the Executive are fully aware of their needs and circumstances. I am not making any special pleading for the position in which I find myself. I am emphasising my role and responsibility and showing the collective approach that I am taking. The Executive and I are taking forward Members' concerns and those of the people we represent in the Treasury negotiations in as collective and concerted a way as possible.

With respect to the point that Mr Maginness makes on the Barnett formula, let us not contemplate failure now. Let us not try to predict the end of the race — if that is how Members want to describe the process. It is always tantalising to speculate. The block grant is by far the major source of Northern Ireland's public expenditure, and we must maximise the allocation of it. As I said at the conclusion of my statement, the understanding and support of Members for the enterprise that we are engaged in on their behalf are deeply appreciated and necessary to reflect — without silencing our different views — and demonstrate support for the objective of achieving the best possible allocation and, therefore, offering the best level of investment in Northern Ireland's services and infrastructure, which is what the people deserve and expect.

Mr Savage: I welcome the Minister's statement, and especially his comments on the small business sector, which is important to Northern Ireland. There are several other sectors in Northern Ireland that were missing from the statement — particularly agriculture — and I hope that that is not deliberate. Perhaps it will be raised on another occasion. It is important that it not be omitted. What incentives are being offered to encourage small

businesses to start up self-help schemes? Apart from VAT schemes, what else is being offered? Small businesses are the big businesses of tomorrow.

Dr Farren: The Member has invited me to stray into an area that might be addressed more fully and effectively by his Colleague the Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Investment. Although the statement focused essentially on the Chancellor's Budget and its immediate implications for us, especially on health consequentials and other, more minor, consequentials, it is inevitable that the debate is taking on a flavour that allows us to range over other issues. In my statement I welcomed several of those measures.

We are keen to support entrepreneurship and the development of local small and medium-sized enterprises. I am almost echoing what my Colleague Sir Reg Empey would say. Those businesses are at the heart of our economy, and they require considerable support. For the precise answers that are needed to answer the Member's question on other measures, I must defer to the superior knowledge of Sir Reg Empey.

MOBILE PHONES

Debate resumed on motion:

That this Assembly calls upon the Minister of the Environment and the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to ensure the complete implementation of the recommendations made by the independent expert group on mobile phones, as laid out in the Stewart Report, and further, to implement a change in legislation to ensure that no telecommunications masts are constructed within 300 yards of any dwelling without full public consultation. — [*Mr Shannon.*]

Mr Deputy Speaker: I remind Members of the Speaker's ruling that a maximum of five minutes has been set aside for each contribution.

Mr Close: I remind Members that confession is good for the soul. With regard to mobile phone technology, I am a Luddite. I neither own one nor rent one nor use one. In that respect, I claim to practise what I preach.

Most Members will recall that, prior to March 1996, the general public was reassured consistently that it was safe to eat beef. Precautionary advice was effectively downgraded, and the Government and so-called experts gave the distinct impression that BSE was not transmissible from an animal to a human being. A certain Government Minister appeared on television alongside a young child who was, presumably voluntarily, eating a beefburger. No doubt that piece of footage was broadcast in order to instil confidence in the message that the so-called experts were promulgating: namely, that it was safe to eat beef.

Most Members will, therefore, remember the deep sense of betrayal that was felt subsequently by the general public when, on 20 March 1996, it was announced that BSE was likely to have been transmitted to human beings. It is now a tragic fact that scores of people have died from variant CJD, and I express my sympathy to the Democratic Unionist Party on the loss of their councillor Mr Hunter as a result of that tragic disease. The link between BSE and variant CJD is now clearly established and is a tragic reality. A key finding of the Phillips Report that examined BSE and CJD was that precautionary measures should be enforced strictly, even if the risk that they addressed appeared to be remote.

Some Members will recall the feeling of wonderment when, accompanied by our parents, we went to shoe shops and were encouraged to stand on large pedestal-type machines to watch the skeleton of our feet move as parents and shop assistants decided what size of shoe we required. That large pedestal-type machine was an X-ray machine. It was considered safe by the so-called experts, and we were subjected to X-rays as a matter of form. How things have changed in 40 years. In hospitals today, X-ray machines are located behind reinforced concrete walls and radiologists don lead-lined vests because the potential dangers of X-rays are now recognised.

I looked at Dr Paisley. No doubt he can recall the days when sheets of asbestos were used in the building and shipbuilding industries, and in other trades. The experts also considered it to be perfectly safe. It was hammered, cut and sawn into all sorts of shapes and nobody gave a toss because it was "safe". The experts of 60 or 70 years ago saw no harm in it. However, we are left facing claims for compensation that run into millions of pounds, and many people's quality of life is impaired because they suffer from asbestosis.

Are mobile phones, and the technologies associated with them, the equivalent of the asbestos of yesteryear? Are the experts as wrong about mobile phones as they were about the possible health hazards associated with BSE and with X-rays?

When will our society ever learn to put the health of our people at the top of our agenda? When shall we learn to stop taking risks with people's health because of economic and financial pressures? It strikes me that a greater emphasis is given to what I would call aesthetically environmental concerns, such as siting a mast in an area of outstanding natural beauty, than is given to siting a mast on the top of a school in the middle of a built-up area, on the top of a leisure complex or, as was mentioned earlier, on good agricultural land where emissions enter the food chain. The Stewart Report recommended a precautionary approach to the use of mobile phone technologies until more detailed and scientifically robust information on any health effects is clearly available. That must be our role as legislators. I have seen young children who suffer from leukaemia — we must put them at the top of our agenda.

Mr Douglas: I support the motion. The issue of mobile masts is an emotional one, and a balance must be struck. On the one hand, there are businesses that wish to generate profit both for the telecommunications companies and for those who have paid huge amounts of money to acquire the licences to operate third-generation phones. Other companies also use telecommunications to improve their businesses and to benefit the wider community by creating more jobs. On the other hand, in the absence of concrete evidence to support the safety of the systems used, it is necessary for legislators to ensure that the general public is kept safe from harm.

A cautious approach should be taken on the issue until proper evidence shows that mobile phone masts are safe. Contrary to many representations made by mobile phone companies to councils and others, there seems to be no such evidence.

We should follow the precautionary approach already indicated by Mr Close and by the Stewart Report. Article 130r of the EU Treaty of Rome (as amended) states that the precautionary principle should be uppermost in the minds of all legislators in the Parliaments of European Union countries. Parliaments are urged to protect not

only the environment but, more importantly, the populations therein, especially young children who, due to their low body weight, are likely to be more affected in their growth years by the emissions.

The problem is that the technology is so new that there is little complete research. A few quotations from the 'Communications Technology in the Community' conference in March 1998 highlight the absence of a definitive policy on the issue among professionals in radiation and engineering fields. Mr John McAuley said that

"The safest place to be is at the bottom of the mast because the beams go over the top of the head. I won't comment on the safety of mobile phones or their base stations, just the levels."

5.30 pm

He is responsible for most of the non-ionising radiation hazard monitoring carried out in Ireland in recent years. Russell Owen, who is head of the radiation and biology branch of the United States Food and Drug Administration, is noted as saying that the jury is still out. The fact that people in such positions are not clear and unequivocal on the safety of the masts raises questions.

The main thread that runs through all research and through the opinions of independent experts is that although there is nothing positively to identify health problems now, many cancers do not present until there have been many years of exposure. Therefore the problem may start only in the next few years. In the meantime, there should be full public consultation before the erection of masts in controversial urban areas in which there are schools — it may be fair to say that all areas are controversial. Planning departments must respond to genuine local concern and not pay lip service to that aspect of the process.

As I said earlier, the Government will acquire significant finance from the sale of licences. Mobile phone companies will also make huge profits. There is no doubt that many individuals, including landowners and farmers who may diversify in order to receive money from mobile phone companies, will benefit from the erection of the masts — an issue that can be raised with councillors who oppose such schemes. Other companies and organisations in Northern Ireland will also benefit from the income generated by the mobile phone companies. However, it is the duty of each Member to ensure that, although benefits in the form of the accumulation of huge profits are available, the health of this generation and of future generations is not put at risk. I support the motion.

Mr B Hutchinson: I thank the Member for Strangford for highlighting this important issue, about which complaints will have been received in each of the 18 constituencies. Unlike the Member for Lagan Valley, Mr Close, I am not a Luddite when it comes to mobile phones. I use a mobile phone, which gives my constituents access to me after hours. Although, given that I live in north Belfast, perhaps I should not have bought a mobile phone.

We must focus on the Stewart Report in order to encourage a precautionary approach. Although the legislation is a step in the right direction, it does not go far enough. There are several points that we must consider. If we do not introduce legislation to implement safety zones for masts, we are not adopting the necessary precautionary approach, and Members must realise that.

Telecommunications companies approach sports organisations, such as tennis and bowling clubs, in the knowledge that they may be short of funding. They offer the clubs money in exchange for permission to erect a mast. A similar situation has occurred with Irish League football clubs. It is the responsibility of the committees that run such clubs to recognise that they may be situated in built-up areas in which children may play for long periods. When researching his report, Sir William Stewart studied schools because that was where he felt that children were for most of the day. However, Members can identify places in their constituencies where there are children about for many hours during the day.

If we do not recommend that an independent agency be set up to investigate the health complaints that result from the use of telecommunications equipment such as the masts or the telephones that are used by children, that will be a waste of legislation. Any Member who thinks that full planning legislation will resolve the issue is fooling himself or herself.

We all know that it is difficult to persuade the Planning Service to refuse permission, even when the community and the councillors are agreed that the application is wrong. Those of us who have served on councils know that particularly well, and we must be careful about that approach to solving the problem.

An independent agency must be funded by the mobile phone companies as well as by the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety and the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment. The situation must be checked every three years. Boyd Douglas was right to say that there is very little information on mobile phones because the technology is new. We need to update our knowledge regularly to ensure that mobile phones do not pose an increasing health risk.

The Minister should have come to the Assembly to make a statement instead of giving it to the media. Having read the statement, I thought that the Minister was defending the service even in the event of there being a health risk. He said that a health warning should be given but that it is important that we have high standards in telecommunications. Of course those high standards are important. I have said already that I am a mobile phone user, and I want to ensure that we have the best technology, because that will ensure that we attract companies that will provide jobs. However, we must also look at the disadvantages. If there are health risks, we must accept that and ensure that we protect

people from those risks. Belfast City Council has decided not to allow any masts to be erected on its property. Other people will have to consider that option if the legislation does not go far enough.

I remind the Minister that the proposal for full planning implementation will not resolve the problem. The only way to resolve the matter is to establish an independent agency that will check the health risks. Zones must be established to enable us to move masts away from certain areas, and several other health checks must be put in place. Without those, full planning implementation will not resolve the problem.

Ms Morrice: I support the motion. I welcome the new legislation that the Minister announced, but I agree that it should come before the Assembly, because there are many questions that we must ask on behalf of our constituents. Answers are needed, and fears must be allayed.

What happens to the masts that are already in place and the masts for which planning applications have already been submitted? There is no proper understanding of how the legislation will have an impact retrospectively. As the Minister knows, people are alarmed that mobile phone masts have been erected under prior planning approval without neighbourhood notification. That is a serious matter. The planning advertisements for the masts have been tucked away in small print on the back pages of local newspapers where people do not see them. Is that "consultation"?

In response to those concerns, the Women's Coalition is calling for an immediate review of the masts that have already been erected under prior planning approval and for an end to that practice. Neighbourhood notification and consultation must take place.

In my constituency of North Down, a mast has recently been erected on the High Donaghadee Road. I am not a great judge of distance, but I believe that it is no more than 50 metres away from housing and a children's playground. I understand that in Russia masts must be 2,000 metres away from housing. I agree with the call for safety zones. Some 35 masts have already been erected in the north Down area, and a further 14 sites have been proposed. What are we doing about that? In south Belfast, residents from the Belvoir estate approached Monica McWilliams because they were not consulted about the erection of a mast on the top of their building, which is owned by the Housing Executive.

Since that mast went up, residents have complained of headaches and nausea. The same problem exists with Breda flats, a location also owned by the Housing Executive. Then there is McCracken Memorial Church, for which a public petition has already been lodged with the Assembly, and Lagan Meadows. All Members have had complaints from people in constituencies throughout Northern Ireland. In Omagh, Beragh is where there is serious concern — despite objections planners have

granted permission for the erection of a mast. Also the area near a primary school in Richill is causing serious concern. These are just some examples of the issues we have been approached on.

I agree with Mr Kennedy who said it is disappointing that the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety is not here to hear the concerns of Members. We should be agreeing distances from residential housing, children's schools and playgrounds for the erection of masts. Masts are not tested in the way that pharmaceutical drugs are tested and monitored, and Séamus Close, Billy Hutchinson and Boyd Douglas mentioned this succinctly. We need monitoring here. Our acceptable levels of low pulse microwave radiation are much higher than those in Canada, for example. Greater studies are needed of the dangers involved so that the health concerns not only of the masts but of the phones themselves are properly addressed.

Finally, I want to touch on money. We hear about clubs, et cetera, being given money for renting their property for masts. If masts are being put up on land owned by the Department for Regional Development or the Department of the Environment, can the Ministers tell us how much money is being paid for this use of footpaths and so on?

The Chairperson of the Committee for the Environment (Rev Dr William McCrea): As Chairperson of the Committee for the Environment I support the motion. As Members know, the Department has been considering what to do about the planning issues with mobile phone masts since issuing a consultation document in November 2000. My Committee studied that document closely. We gave earnest consideration to the matters contained in it and issued a comprehensive response to the Department on 5 April 2001 after taking evidence from a wide range of parties. Our response included significant recommendations, one of which was to introduce full planning permission for the installation, alteration, and replacement of all mobile phone masts and associated structures.

We also recommended introducing appropriate references to the Human Rights Act 1998 into policy planning statement 10 (PPS 10), which is guidance used by planners when considering applications for mobile phone masts. We also suggested introducing discretionary measures such as exclusion zones of up to 500 metres, which actually goes further than the motion, a hierarchy of preferred sites for masts that avoid locations near residential areas and schools and some form of incentives to encourage mast-sharing.

The Committee welcomed the Minister of the Environment's announcement in July 2001 that he intended to introduce legislative changes, which would require full planning permission for all new mobile phone masts. After some delay and prevarication from the Depart-

ment, my Committee is at last looking at the proposed changes to the legislation and the revised PPS 10 document. I must add that we took grave exception to the fact that the Department clearly had plans to go public on both the legislation and the new PPS 10 without any further consultation with the Committee. Although some might say that this was an oversight, it was due only to the intervention of staff from the Committee secretariat that the Committee and, subsequently, the House was told of the Department's plans on this important legislation before everyone else.

5.45 pm

What has the Department asked us now? The Committee has had officials before it for the past two weeks — and they have been invited again this week — to explain the contents of the proposed legislation and the PPS 10. Members should note that although the proposed legislation will come before the House in the form of a negative resolution, the PPS 10 has been published already without the Committee's having been able to comment on its contents. To date, we have been able to consider only the proposed legislation, and we have had plenty to say about that.

The Committee's proper and full consideration of the PPS 10 is about to start. Although I do not want to anticipate the views or opinions of the Committee, initial consideration has not left me with much confidence that the Department has even tried to address the serious health concerns of the Northern Ireland public on the siting of masts. Sir William Stewart concluded that there can be an indirect adverse effect on people's well-being in some cases, and that

"the possibility of harm could not be ruled out with confidence and that the gaps in knowledge were sufficient to justify a precautionary approach."

I can find little evidence reflecting these concerns in the document before us. Instead, the Department's approach seems to be to continue to pass the buck on health issues to the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety on the basis of scientific readings of emissions against International Commission guidelines. This appears to ignore genuine public fears and health concerns about masts whether emissions fall below international standards or not. The Committee will consider this point and others in more detail.

I do not wish to pre-empt any consideration by the Environment Committee, but the House can be assured that we will do everything to ensure that people have the mobile phone service they need — we must accept that this is required — as well as the appropriate level of protection and proper consultation on the siting of mobile phone masts, which is equally needed. I ask Members to support the motion.

Mr Savage: I welcome this debate and support it to a certain extent, because this is an important issue. As I

often do, I would like to introduce an agricultural note. When I read the report by Sir William Stewart on mobile phones and the siting of radio masts, I found the same precautionary approach advocated that was taken too late with the BSE crisis. We should put the brakes on these masts until we have proof that they are safe. That is the prudent thing to do. If we had been prudent at the beginning of the BSE crisis, it would never have assumed the proportions it did.

Stewart wrote of the "subtle biological changes" caused by masts and said that the effects of these changes were not clear. In the absence of clarity, we should take precautions. We have a model for action in the Scottish Parliament, our sister Assembly. Its legislation is the strictest in the United Kingdom: all phone masts, both above and below 15 metres high, require full planning permission and so are subject to the full rigours of the planning process and public consultation. A similar measure here is the least we can expect in the light of mounting public concern.

I want to see a freeze on all new masts, particularly those sited near schools. I want to see some kind of intervention to stop or suspend the operation of radio masts erected before any new and more stringent legislation comes into force, which we may introduce. I have heard all the arguments about retrospective legislation, but they hold no water when public health is, or may be, at risk. The safety of the public must be a primary guide for lawmakers. The operation of phone masts, erected under prior, less stringent planning rules must be suspended. Much thought must go into this before there is any proof of safety.

I am concerned about a mast in County Armagh that was erected without any public consultation. In this day and age that is not good enough. It has been the cause of much public concern, and the public has a right to be heard. I always support the public on health matters.

The recipe is simple — a freeze on contentious existing masts, the full planning process for all new masts and a ban on all masts near schools, houses and hospitals until the research gives us clear answers one way or the other. That is the right way for us to proceed.

Phones are very important, and I can give examples. Two weeks ago there was a car accident on a very quiet road, and no one saw it happen. A car went over the hedge and rolled four or five times down the field. If the young girl in the car had not had a mobile phone, she would have been burnt to death because the car was about to go on fire. People came from about three miles away to rescue the girl. There are pluses and minuses.

When our local vet was out on call recently, an emergency call came through, and he was able to be on the spot within two minutes. Doctors can respond likewise. Mobile phones are essential. However, the Minister has a great deal of responsibility in relation to where the

masts are sited. I do not want to press him too much, but the onus is on him and the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety. Members of the Assembly cannot take this decision lightly.

(Mr Speaker in the Chair)

Mr Bradley: Since my election, and that of other Members, to the Assembly in 1998, no other issue that I have dealt with can match the public concern expressed about the long-term unknown implications of the erection of telecommunications masts throughout Northern Ireland. No one in a position of responsibility has yet arrived at, or expressed, a positive view regarding the health fears that exist because of the nature of the masts. Jane Morrice has already mentioned the health fears in relation to the phones themselves.

I am sure that all 108 Members of the Assembly have been lobbied about mobile phones. Some will probably have been lobbied more than others — particularly those who represent rural areas where the masts are being erected. People in towns may not be as aware of the masts as those in rural areas.

There are masts in my area in Glassdrumman outside Annalong, Killowen outside Rostrevor, Ballyholland outside Newry and Barnmeen near Rathfriland. I want to speak most about the one at the Corgary/Beech Hill area of Newry. The Minister is aware of the concerns of the Corgary and Beech Hill residents, and I thank him for meeting them at short notice and giving them a fair and reasonable hearing. I share their concerns.

The Sheepbridge area of the main A1 road about four of five miles north of Newry has a plethora of masts. One lady that I know looks out on five masts from her home. She has a small family, and it is impossible to understand her concerns unless one lives there. When she looks through every window she can see a mast.

The Minister is early into his portfolio, and I thank him for taking the concerns on board, and for the recent legislation that he has introduced. I hope that it is another step in addressing the concerns; it is not the final decision.

I support the motion. However, in doing so, I point out that in accepting the 300-yard limit referred to in Mr Shannon's motion, I am in no way putting that before the wishes of Newry and Mourne District Council, which I serve on.

For more than two years, Newry and Mourne District Council has continued to recommend an exclusion zone of 500 metres, and that remains my preference. I accept the motion without compromising my role as a Newry and Mourne councillor or its view on the preferred exclusion zone. The debate is timely, but we have other things to do. Every day our work is being taken up by the subject of telecommunications masts.

The biggest single problem is that the owners of the masts have money, while the protestors do not. The

owners have access to Queen's Counsel, King's Counsel and every kind of counsel under the sun. However, the people protesting do not have any money to fight them. It is as simple as that. Councils can be sympathetic, but they do not have the money to fight the telecommunications providers. I support the motion.

Mr M Murphy: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Although I support the motion, I have to ask the Minister why he did not include a statutory safe zone, which would have meant setting down a criterion that all masts should be built 500 metres from any dwelling, residence, hospital, school or commercial property.

We all know about the growing evidence linking cancer rates to mobile phones and masts. Although nothing is conclusive, why take the risk of bringing in weak legislation? The long-term health effects of non-ionising radiation being emitted from mobile phone masts has yet to be fully ascertained. The Minister should have adopted the requirement of the Maastricht treaty, which introduces a precautionary principle. Masts should be sited away from schools, hospitals and homes as a precaution. Children, because of their size, act as resonant aerials. Therefore siting masts close to schools increases the risk to children.

The Minister of the Environment, Dermot Nesbitt, has failed to develop an approach that will protect communities. The criteria proposed will not protect people's health and safety. We must take on board the general public's uncertainty and fear of potential health problems.

Masts sited on farms by contract with the telecommunications companies do not give a farmer a get-out clause when there are objections by the local community, and this is causing ill feeling and dissension in local communities.

I know that the Minister has taken on board the issue of the mast at Jerrettspass. I hope that it will be relocated. Does he understand the concerns of Jerrettspass residents, and that in order to relocate the mast, he should take into consideration the recommendation of Newry and Mourne District Council that it should be located 500m away from homes and dwellings?

There are many points to be taken on board. I recognise that the Minister is considering a change in the legislation. However, it is important that all new masts, regardless of size, should require full planning permission. It is unfortunate that the changes in the legislation are not retrospective. There will be a great rush of planning applications for phone masts. Full planning permission only requires that two criteria be taken into consideration. The first is domestic amenity — the effect of a proposed mast on property value. The second is land form — the impact on the appearance of an area. Even then, objections on either ground will not guarantee that a planning application would be rejected.

There is an absolute requirement for planning to take into consideration the concerns of the community.

Several countries, such as Australia and Russia, have statutory safe zones. That means that no phone mast can be built within 500 metres to 2,000 metres of any residential dwelling or commercial property.

6.00 pm

There is growing evidence linking cancer rates to mobile phones and phone masts. While nothing is conclusive, we should not take risks by bringing in weak planning legislation. We are moving into the third generation of transmitters where masts such as the new BT Tetra mast are four times stronger than many of the early phone masts, and we need to be very careful.

We also need to tighten up the legislation around the monitoring of microwaves from phone masts. There is no point monitoring the output of a single mast. We need to monitor the output of mast networks to look at the compounding of microwaves, and we need to measure the impact inside dwellings, not just at source. Legislation is to be brought in by Statutory Rule; therefore, it will not be scrutinised as thoroughly as a Bill.

In conclusion, if the mobile base station meets the International Commission on Non-Ionising Radiation Protection (ICNIRP) guidelines for public exposure —

Mr Speaker: Order. Time is up.

Mr M Murphy: — the planning authority will not have to give any further consideration to the health aspects of the station.

Mr Wells: This is without doubt the most controversial planning issue in my constituency of South Down. I am aware of 15 contentious masts in the constituency, all of which are opposed by residents' groups. I have attended meetings about most of them, and the clear message is that many constituents feel that the legislation does not go far enough. The vast majority of objections to masts are based on health concerns, and nowhere in the proposed legislation is there a definite commitment that those concerns will be taken on board. Amenity and traffic are taken into account but not health. Until that bridge is crossed, the public will be most concerned.

There is a solution to this problem, and it has not been suggested by any of the Members who spoke in the debate. There are sufficient telephone masts in Northern Ireland to cover all the needs of the telecommunications industry. The fundamental problem is not that there are not enough masts but that there are five companies that all want to have their own masts serving small areas. It is rather like Northern Ireland Electricity and four other companies being given the right to supply electricity in the Province and having five sets of poles and five sets of wires, when we know that we need only one set of poles and one set of wires.

The simple solution to the problem is to say that there is no need for any further masts in Northern Ireland and to force the present companies to share bandwidth. If I travel through Europe my mobile phone will roam from one mobile phone mast to another and one mobile phone company to another. When I come home I will get an itemised bill that will have five or six different companies on it because of the iniquitous roaming charges. They will all charge me for the use of their masts because my phone can roam on to the strongest signal available. We should force the mobile phone companies in Northern Ireland to adopt a similar policy. If I were in Annalong and could not get a signal on the Orange mast, I could roam on to the Vodafone mast, pick up a signal and use that. I have been to site meetings where companies have insisted that they need a mast, but then my mobile phone rings, and I discover that there are a full five bars on some other company such as Orange or Cellnet. There is, therefore, already full provision for that area by one mobile phone company, and another company wants to duplicate that coverage. There is no need whatsoever for it, and we simply cannot tolerate a further proliferation of masts.

Four companies have been established in Northern Ireland, with Hutchison 3G coming along. The Republic's phone company, Eircom, also wants to establish itself in Northern Ireland. We could have six companies wanting six sets of masts. That is absolute nonsense and is not required. Some cognisance should be taken of the special situation in Northern Ireland. In England it is perfectly possible to site a phone mast 500 yards away from the nearest occupied dwelling. In fact, you could site it three miles away from the nearest occupied dwelling because of the nucleated form of settlement in England and Wales.

However, the dispersed rural community in Northern Ireland makes it difficult to find a dwelling in the lowlands that is not within 300 metres of a mast. If we forced telecommunications companies to roam within bandwidths and to share bandwidths, the problem would not exist.

I wish to raise two other issues that are especially relevant to South Down. I am concerned about a recent proposal to install a telephone mast in a grain silo. That is an unacceptable attempt to disguise the mast. Phone masts should not be permitted because they are hidden behind other buildings; they must be considered on the basis of their impact on health.

In a more insidious example in Annalong, about which I wrote to the Minister, a telephone company described its application to erect a telephone mast as an installation of telephone communications apparatus. Local residents who read the Planning Service advertisement in the newspaper were none the wiser and assumed that the application concerned a switchbox, but it was to erect a mast. All advertisements sanctioned by the Planning Service must be accurate. Local residents must know exactly what is

being considered and should not be hoodwinked about plans for their area.

In summary, health issues must be considered in the legislation, and companies must be forced to share bandwidth to ensure that there is no further need for controversial mast applications, which create so many problems and so much work for Members.

Mr Armstrong: A modern communications system creates massive benefits for people, including industry and businesses. The use of mobile phones has increased dramatically in Northern Ireland in the past few years. We have enjoyed the convenience of mobile phones; however, we are also concerned about the location of telecommunication masts. It is vital that masts are designed and sited sensitively, so that their environmental impact is minimised. There are too many telecommunications companies, and we must encourage them to share masts. There is much public concern about the possible health effects associated with mobile phone technology, and the tougher planning control of mobile phone masts would be a major step towards tackling the issue that affects my constituency of Mid Ulster and the whole of Northern Ireland.

The planning recommendations in the Stewart Report, which was carried out by an independent expert group on mobile phones, have taken into account the fears of the public about the erection of masts close to built-up areas, schools and hospitals. Those fears must be addressed, and more stringent planning controls would help to do that. Although we cannot confirm the exact risk to those who live close to base stations, a full template of protocols for the erection of masts is needed. In addition, there must be an ongoing report detailing the position of all masts across the country, and an audit of each site to ensure that companies continue to comply with the agreed specifications and exposure guidelines. I welcome the recent planning policy statement on the matter, which will help to develop legislation to introduce the full planning control of mobile phone operators' telecommunications developments.

Mobile phones have been in our pockets for nearly 15 years, although they used to weigh almost as much as a brick. If mobile phone operators had foreseen the popularity of such a necessary device, could satellite systems not have been introduced? The cost of satellite technology would have been redeemed ten times over, and I presume that it would have been a superior and healthier system.

We live in an electronic age. Although mobile phones were once a luxury, they are now a necessity, not only for ourselves, but for teenage, and younger, children; health considerations are, therefore, paramount. The Stewart Report recognises the lack of research on mobile phone radiation and its health effects. Therefore, it would be wise to take a precautionary approach until more research is carried out. It is important that the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety takes this issue seriously

and gives good advice on the matter. Mobile phone manufacturers must be encouraged to ensure that the health of all users and those living close to masts are guaranteed. I recommend the report to the House.

Mr A Maginness: Unlike Mr Close, I do have a mobile phone, which was forced upon me.

Mr Speaker: I trust that it is switched off?

Mr A Maginness: It is switched off, Mr Speaker. I would not dare to come in here with it on. The SDLP press officer forced me to get one. I resisted for many years, but in the end I gave in. The press officer refused to do anything for me unless I obtained a mobile phone.

We depend on mobile phones, and there is a price to pay — there must be telephone masts, otherwise we will not have a system. However, the UK Government received such a bonanza from mobile phone licences that they were prepared to concede the most lax rules and regulations governing the installation of masts. Therefore, we have the system of prior approval.

I agree with my Colleagues that the matter has caused great public concern. In my constituency, North Belfast, there seems to have been a plethora of applications, possibly because of the elevated topography of the Antrim Road. They have been met by stout resistance from the residents, and rightly so, because the jury is out on the health implications of the masts. Until we receive an independent assessment of the health risk, it is not right for parents or the public to endure the invisible risks of these masts.

There must be stricter regulations. I am glad that the Minister is introducing legislation to put stricter regulations into effect. I do not know how far it will go, but I emphasise to him the importance of looking retrospectively on masts that are already in place and that could be changed. That dimension must be considered carefully when legislation is being prepared. There may be changes to the type of equipment currently in place: it could be made stronger or deadlier; we just do not know. There must be regulations to control that aspect. Although permission has been obtained to erect masts in the past, companies cannot be allowed to retain masts or change them at will.

We must adopt a precautionary approach. We must take on board the findings of the Stewart Report, and we must safeguard the health of our children and the population. Masts should not be situated near schools, housing estates or residential areas.

It is time to introduce tough legislation, which the Minister has promised. It is to be hoped that that legislation will genuinely restrict operators who are only interested in profit and not in the health implications for the majority of our citizens.

I agree with Mr Billy Armstrong who mentioned mast-sharing. There is no reason why companies should not share masts. That is one of the criteria used to determine prior approval.

Unfortunately, it was ignored in the past; I hope that it will not be ignored in future.

6.15 pm

The Minister for the Environment (Mr Nesbitt): I have listened to the debate with genuine interest, and I thank the Members who have remained to hear its conclusion.

The Administration represents partnership and trying to work together both politically, in the institution, and with the community. Members may ask why I am promoting partnership. People, with the possible exception of Mr Close, want mobile phones; the telecommunications industry wants to provide masts; and the Department of the Environment wants to facilitate the provision of masts in a way that is conducive to the environment and allows people to use mobile phones. To satisfy those requirements, all the players must work in partnership. I trust that the Assembly, the Department of the Environment and others will be responsive and realistic in providing the required combination.

When the Stewart Report was published in 2000, the Department initiated a full, comprehensive, public consultation, which took into account all the planning implications of the report. The consultation was wide, and those who made submissions to it expressed conflicting views — it would not have been a genuine consultation otherwise. After that consultation the then Minister, Mr Foster, proposed options to the Executive on 6 June 2001. The matter was fully discussed at an Executive meeting on 14 June 2001 and was made public the following day. The Department stated that it would opt for full planning permission and that a planning policy statement would be created in conjunction with full planning. Mr Foster reiterated that announcement on 17 July with a further statement to clarify what was being done.

I am disappointed that it has taken from July last year until now to propose actual legislation with the accompanying policy planning statement. However, it has taken time to get the policy planning statement right. One reason for that was that the health issue had to be dealt with fully. I will speak about that in more detail later, but I wanted to establish the chronology of the consultation first.

I said that partnership was important. Mr Savage mentioned getting the balance right between various demands and wishes. We must take into account the local community, the political institutions and the business community. My Department and I spoke to representatives of the business community this month, and, for the record, we had a good discussion. The Department made it clear that a balance must be struck between what the business community wants and the deliberations that the public expects before masts are erected.

The Department also asked the businesses to fully implement the 10 commitments that they promised, including considerable consultation with the people who will be affected by the masts. We expect the business community to participate fully in the partnership. The Department gave an assurance that, with full planning being implemented, it would ensure that it was carried through as effectively and efficiently as possible with one deferral to counsel, which is now its policy.

Assuming that the Assembly passes the legislation, the Department also said that after six to nine months it would review how the policy was working with the business community and others. The Department is committed to ensuring that the telecommunications sector in Northern Ireland is at the forefront of developments. However, it is also committed to consulting fully with those who are affected by the location of masts. It is not political opportunism on the part of any Member to go for full planning permission. Rather, it represents a response to the many needs of the community.

The Department consulted with the business community on 3 April 2002 and proceeded as quickly as possible to bring the statute and the policy planning statement before the Assembly. Indeed, I want to put on record that the Committee for the Environment stated openly and publicly that the Department should implement the Executive Committee's decision without further delay.

I noted what Dr McCrea said, and I want to put on record that he apologised to me for having to leave before the end of the debate. I accept his apology. I told him that he could read what I had to say in Hansard. The enduring word is the written word. With regard to implementation, the Department brought the Statutory Rule and the policy planning statement to the Committee for the Environment on 9 April 2002 to inform members that the issues were being dealt with and that the policy planning statement would be published on 11 April. The statement was duly published.

The Statutory Rule was laid before the Committee for consultation, and it examined the issues comprehensively. Dr McCrea referred to five aspects of the planning process in his summary. He stated that the Committee wanted full planning permission; the Department has stated that that will happen. He referred to the introduction of the Human Rights Act 1998; there is no need to mention human rights, because it is assumed that human rights are integral to the business of the Assembly. It is part of the convention. No section of the policy planning statement is in conflict with human rights.

Dr McCrea also referred to exclusion zones and incentives for mast-sharing, and I will discuss both issues later. He also referred to a hierarchy of preferred siting; the public can consider where a mast should be located as part of the environmental aspects of the planning process. The Department has reflected fully on

the principal concerns of the Chairperson of the Committee for the Environment.

I wish to work fully with the Committee. Since I became Minister, I have consulted with the Committee as much as I can, whether orally, by telephone — without stating which type of telephone — or in writing. However, the Assembly has its proper place at the centre of events. The Department of the Environment and I should reflect and collaborate closely with the Committee.

Dr McCrea mentioned departmental prevarication and also referred to issues on which he thought that the Department had failed to consult with the Committee. A week ago, he had strong words for officials. I am responsible for the operation, direction and control of departmental officials. If Dr McCrea has a problem, it should be addressed to me. I will give the House an example.

The rules were laid before the Committee on 9 April. We allowed the Committee seven days to consider the rules, which was normal. A departmental official alerted me that the Committee was concerned about that time period. I immediately told the official to double the period to two weeks — twice the normal time period — so that the Committee could fully deliberate on the Statutory Rule and the Department could take on the Committee's recommendations. The change of the two dates in the press advertisement was due to my direction in response to what I perceived as a need of the Committee. I want to make it clear that that is not something that merits criticism of my officials.

It is more important to look at the motion. There are two elements to it. It calls for the full implementation of the Stewart Report and requires that no telecommunications masts be erected within 300 yards of a dwelling without consultation. Some Members said that there should be an exclusion zone. However, one Member correctly said that that is not part of the motion. The motion, which I endorse, calls for consultation.

The first element of the motion concerns the Stewart Report. Rev Dr William McCrea said that full planning control is one of the Committee's key elements; it is also a key element of the Stewart Report. Northern Ireland is the only part of the United Kingdom to have accepted that.

We recognise and respond to the need for full planning control in the decision-making process for locating masts. Compared with current prior approval, that will involve several significant changes, notably greater consultation and much more time for scrutiny by officials. Let me make it clear: the process will ensure that there is a press advertisement for the proposed location of every mast. There will be neighbourhood notification and statutory consultation with district councils. In other words, the public will be more fully engaged in the process.

Mr Shannon said in his opening remarks that absolutely no regard was shown for the people. I do not deny that,

in the past, certain things were done where the public were perhaps disregarded. Our aim is to ensure that that does not happen in the future, and we look to full planning control to deliver that. Mr Shannon said that masts

"should not be placed in any schools without the consent of the school".

If a mast is to be put on a school building then, of course, the consent of the owners — in a sense, the school board of governors — is needed. That is normal civil law. However, if a mast is to be located in an area that is generally geographically close to a school, we want full consultation and notification with both the public and district councils. The process will be open and transparent, and we want the public to be fully involved.

Councils will have an important part to play in dealing with all planning. In addition, as part of the partnership I referred to, full planning control now offers greater opportunity for negotiations to take place between the telecom operators and local people. That has occurred to a certain extent in the past, although it may have been sporadic and geographically dispersed. However, the new rules will ensure a more fully rigorous consultation between the telecom operators and the local public. It is hoped that that will make the telecommunications companies more cognisant so that, before they apply for planning approval, they will have considered, with the public, where the mast should be located.

Telecommunications businesses must play their part in this partnership; so must we.

We also look to the community and district councils to play their part. Therefore, the operators must think carefully.

6.30 pm

The policy planning statement aspect came up often, and Mr Kennedy, Mr McLaughlin and Mr Bradley mentioned the sharing of masts. Mr Kennedy talked of over-intensification; Mr McLaughlin said that we should not only monitor, but ensure. The policy planning statement will ensure that, to the extent that if any mast is to be approved, the telecommunications industry must demonstrate that it consulted, tried to locate the mast elsewhere and found that that was not possible. Otherwise, no additional mast will be allowed. I hope that that will take care of intensification and of Mr Bradley's point about siting five masts together. The sharing of masts and the whole environmental issue will be considered, because there must be measures to mitigate visual and environmental impact. Perhaps that can be taken care of by having smaller apparatus, by better design, by using existing structures or buildings, and by sharing mast locations.

The final key area deals with health. In his introduction, Mr Shannon said that people have health concerns. I fully recognise those concerns, but in the same breath I recognise that my Department is not a Department of Health. It deals with planning and other aspects of local

government. Part of the development of the policy planning statement was to discuss and negotiate with the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety. It is, therefore, for the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to advise on health matters. We are fully aware of that; it is part of the policy planning statement. The health advice is very clear, in that telecommunications development must meet certain standards — the International Commission on Non-Ionizing Radiation Protection (ICNIRP) standards — in all respects. Not only must it do that, but the operator must state that it does so. We are clear about health.

Timing is wonderful in politics. It was interesting that just as Mr Shannon said that we should agree to precautionary exclusion zones — no-go areas in towns and schools — his mobile phone went off. In all probability, if there were no-go zones in urban areas his phone would not work. The timing of that phone ringing was wonderful. In the end, he commented that mobile phones are a part of life. That is true, and George Savage referred to it. Mr McLaughlin also referred to precautionary exclusion zones.

We must strike a balance. With the exception of Mr Close, who stands as a paragon of virtue — he neither has one, wants one, nor will be forced to use one — the vast majority of people use mobile phones. Precautionary exclusion zones are mentioned in the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety's guidance, and the Minister, Bairbre de Brún, has commented on that, as has the Stewart Report. I must make it clear that the Stewart Report, which we are to implement as part of this motion, has not recommended exclusion zones. Nor has it recommended any precautionary approach in that context, but I shall come to that in a moment.

I shall make one other point. We are taking the Minister's advice as part of the policy planning statement. However, were we to disregard her advice, or act in its absence, I should not be surprised if we were challenged in the courts for so doing. That point is worth noting.

Let me return to Mr Close. He said that he did not like emotive words. Mr Speaker, I am conscious of the time, but this is an important issue and I am almost finished.

Mr Speaker: You have less than one minute.

Mr Nesbitt: I should perhaps speed up, but I shall address this point. Mr Close referred to precautionary aspects. We are taking on board the Stewart Report's view of the word "precautionary". Abolition of prior approval is part of what we are doing. We are adopting the public exposure standards of ICNIRP. With respect to the audit of the emissions, they are being monitored and tests have been conducted in Northern Ireland.

Mr Shannon spoke of the need for funding for health research, and Ms Morrice talked about the need for

mobile phones. Seven million pounds is available for health research, of which £4 million has been allocated. A lot of that was allocated to deal with the effects of mobile phones, as distinct from the effects of the masts.

I conclude as I started — there are many sensitive issues. A partnership is needed, not just for the Assembly, but for those in the telecommunications industry and the public, because we need phones and masts. Therefore, we must find a way to provide for and satisfy both.

Mr Shannon: I thank the Members who contributed today. Fourteen Members spoke, on recurring themes. I understand the system; therefore, I am disappointed that the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety was not available to hear the debate, because her input and that of her Department could have been used to draft further legislation that may be needed.

A clear point of view has come through in the debate. Each Member spoke on the health issue. Many mentioned the need for more stringent planning applications. Many voiced their concerns for children who use mobile phones. Each Member mentioned the need for an independent body to monitor the emissions. With the exception of my Colleague from Lagan Valley, Mr Close, who is fortunate enough not to need a mobile phone, most Members acknowledged that need. I am sure that all Members in the Chamber use one. There are technological advances — *[Interruption]*.

Mr Nesbitt: Will Mr Hutchinson allow me to make a brief point of information?

Mr Speaker: I am not sure about Mr Hutchinson, but I am sure that Mr Shannon will.

Mr Nesbitt: My apologies, Mr Shannon. It is for the United Kingdom Government, not Northern Ireland as a regional jurisdiction, to decide on an independent health agency.

Mr Shannon: Regardless of what happens with the legislation, the health issue is clear. People have legitimate concerns and fears about the perceived dangers of telecommunication masts. Those fears have not gone away. Members should never underestimate the opinions of their constituents.

I am concerned. Through the district council, I champion various groups in my constituency on behalf of those who are opposed to telecommunications masts for several reasons. Health concerns are a prime cause for anxiety, but it is also worrying that applications have gone through retrospectively without any consultation with local people. Applications have appeared in the press in small print, and within a month a telecommunications mast has been erected. People in Ballywalter found that a telecommunications mast was erected in the main street overnight. Although people protested, and I contacted the telecommunications firm, it made no difference — the firm insisted on going ahead. Things like that have happened over and

over again, and I am concerned that despite all our protestations, the applications went ahead retrospectively.

The Minister indicated that planning law in Northern Ireland has been tightened. It has been tightened, but it does not address many of the issues raised today. What difference would the measures that we have discussed today make? Planning applications would appear in the paper; people would be notified if they live adjacent to the proposed site; and although those people could then respond and tell the planners that they are still unhappy with the position of the telecommunications mast, the decision would still be made to approve it. Therefore, have the regulations and planning changes introduced by the Minister really addressed the problem?

Although I do not mean to criticise the Minister — and I hope that he does not interpret my remarks in that way — the proposed legislation has no teeth and cannot give people what they need. The Minister said that there was particular concern about the possible health effects associated with mobile phone technology. I accept that his Department is not responsible for health, but that is a key issue.

All Members mentioned the need for an independent body to monitor radiation emissions — the Minister said that that would be done — and for action if the emissions should exceed the prescribed limit. The problem is that there is no one to monitor emissions. If mobile phone usage increases in a certain area, the emissions will increase, as will the threat to people's health. Members are concerned that monitoring should be done, about how it should be done, and about how that information should be passed on to elected representatives and their constituents. Emissions should be monitored by an independent body that could collate the evidence and statistics and make them available to anyone who wishes to see them. Action should then be taken on the basis of that evidence. Telecommunications companies should pay for that body, because they are making a fortune from mobile phone users.

Members mentioned planning regulations and discussed the problems of obtrusive masts being located in conservation areas and Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty. Many mast applications were slipped in through the back door, and companies have used the opportunities afforded by holidays, and so on, to get planning approval.

I mentioned the concerns about the erection of masts in locations such as residential areas, schools, hospitals, town centres and shopping areas. Where a mast is hidden behind a building, it does not mean that people have no concerns about its dangers. The Minister says that the legislation will be tighter in Northern Ireland than it will be in any other part of the United Kingdom; however, it is not tight enough. It is not sufficiently far-reaching, and it has no teeth. We welcome what has happened to date, but it is not enough to address people's concerns.

Most Members mentioned Government assurances. Mr Close mentioned that, as did Mr Savage. The Govern-

ment assured us that there was no problem with CJD and BSE, asbestosis or overhead lines. However, over time, it has become apparent that those are very real problems. Therefore, no one could claim that assurances by Government bodies are enough to convince us that everything is all right.

Rev McCrea quoted Sir William Stewart's very good statement that if there were any "indirect adverse effects" on people's health and welfare, we should take precautions. This legislation does not constitute a precautionary approach. If there are dangers — and many of us believe that there are — we should err on the side of caution.

The Minister mentioned the motion. If those who live within 300 yards of a proposed mast are fully consulted and say that they are unhappy, their concerns should be responded to. We need such input into the legislation. If the residents concerned say that they do not want a mast, the Minister should respond by ensuring that their wishes are upheld.

We cannot ignore the planning issues or local people's concerns. A seminar at Queen's University, which Sir William Stewart attended, was bunged with people from all over Northern Ireland who were concerned about telecommunication masts. Sir William Stewart made some excellent proposals in his report, and we should endorse those. What we have today is a response that gives some portion in relation to planning, but it does not address the overall concerns.

6.45 pm

Sir William Stewart advised people to err on the side of caution and to take a precautionary attitude to these planning applications. I believe that we have no option but to follow that line of thought. If there is any indirect adverse effect on the health and welfare of people, then we are duty bound, as elected representatives, to respond to that and to articulate that point of view on their behalf. Looking at this legislation, many will feel that it has not gone far enough.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That this Assembly calls upon the Minister of the Environment and the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to ensure the complete implementation of the recommendations made by the Independent Expert Group on Mobile Phones, as laid out in the Stewart Report, and further, to implement a change in legislation to ensure that no telecommunications masts are constructed within 300 yards of any dwelling without full public consultation.

Motion made:

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

MAINSTREAM FUNDING FOR BALLYBEEN WOMEN'S GROUP

Mrs I Robinson: As so often is the case within the social fabric of Northern Ireland, women are to be found at the forefront of projects, programmes and schemes aimed at enriching the social well-being of local communities and benefiting the individuals who live within those communities. Likewise, the organisations that they have formed to facilitate the provision of services have been the driving force behind the campaign to have their work recognised and formally backed and funded by central Government. Without the necessary finance, these committed individuals, through their organisations, would not be in a position to maintain and develop the services that they currently provide to the community. The work done over the past number of years has been such that if the services were to be lost, there would be very tangible, negative effects on the health and wealth of the local community.

You might ask what exactly those services are, and, if they are so important, how it is that we do not already know about them. The services provided by Ballybeen Women's Group, and by other similar groups across Northern Ireland, are many and varied, and history has proved that their operation has been an understated success.

The education and training programme of Ballybeen Women's Centre is a first step back into full-time education, training, and, ultimately, employment for many women. The centre endeavours to make that transition as easy as possible through a number of measures. It offers courses that are free or where costs are kept to a minimum, which is essential as Ballybeen has been recognised as an official TSN area. It provides free crèche facilities to all participants, which are crucial for mothers wishing to avail of the centre's services. The timing of courses is set to meet the domestic responsibilities of local women. The structuring of courses at suitable times of the day, which takes into account the domestic responsibilities of women, works hand in hand with the crèche provision to make courses as accessible as possible for all who are interested.

Away from the directly educational and training purposes of the courses provided, the centre offers a warm, friendly and supportive learning environment for all who attend. It serves as an emotional outlet for mothers and others to escape from the pressures of everyday life, to relax and to recharge their batteries. The aim of this particular facility is to provide access and support for women who may need additional basic skills support while on courses — women who wish to improve their basic skills for their own self-esteem or to assist their children with homework. The objective is to equip women

with the necessary basic skills to encourage and enable progression to further education, training or employment.

As for the nuts and bolts of the education and training programmes offered, the centre facilitates a range of accredited courses through the Royal Society of Arts (RSA), City and Guilds, GCSE, and Open College Network formats, as well as non-certified courses. The centre is also a member of Belfast Women's Training Services, which provides two Open College Network-accredited pre-vocational courses, free to women through the Women Moving On and Women Progressing programmes.

Information and communication technology (ICT) is one area of business that has expanded rapidly in the past 10 years and has become ever more important in the fields of both education and learning. Therefore, it is essential that women from the Ballybeen area be provided with the opportunity to expand their knowledge in this field. The group works in conjunction with Dundonald Flexible Learning Centre to provide opportunities to gain various ICT skills and qualifications on site, including RSA, computer literacy and information technology (CLAIT), information business technology and word processing courses.

The provision of ICT training facilities is crucial to the development of local women, and that has been compounded by plans to close the Dundonald outreach centre of Castlereagh College of Further and Higher Education this September. That closure will result in the loss of 161 ICT places, stripping the TSN area of Ballybeen of its main centre for training and further education. This has been done with the knowledge of the Department for Employment and Learning. With Adult Learning Week only three weeks away, that makes complete nonsense of the Department's policy on this crucial matter.

This development makes the continued existence, growth and success of the Ballybeen Women's Group infinitely more important. If it should fail to attract the necessary funding, Ballybeen would become an educational and training desert. As a provider of further education, the group operates as an outreach centre of Castlereagh College of Further and Higher Education, with which it works closely and through which tutors are provided for several of its courses.

Good-quality childcare has important benefits for individuals, families, communities, society and the economy as a whole. The Ballybeen Women's Group promotes the value of education for all ages, from early years upward. There is an emphasis on quality provision in the services for under-fives, which ensures that children are better prepared to move on to mainstream education. Children who experience good pre-school education, particularly those from disadvantaged backgrounds or with special needs, are better prepared for school, learn more quickly and have fewer emotional and behavioural difficulties in later life. The better the start children have

at school, the more likely they are to use their school experience positively.

The Ballybeen Women's Group has successfully developed and provided quality childcare services for the under-fives in the Ballybeen area since 1989. As well as providing crèche facilities, Ballybeen Women's Group also provides facilities for the operation of pre-school and toddlers' groups. The crèche facility is available to anyone using the education services in the centre or drop-in facility. The pre-school operates five morning sessions every week, Monday to Friday, for those aged from three and a half to four years old. The toddlers' group caters for children aged from two years, nine months to three and a half years.

Last year, the organisation succeeded in opening new premises to meet the demand for its pre-school programme and to relocate crèche facilities to the vacated pre-school. It is a testament to the commitment of those involved that structural and renovation work was completed in four months.

The centre also operates a special needs training course, aimed at developing students' knowledge, understanding, confidence and competence when working with children with a variety of special needs and providing fundamental knowledge to any student who wishes to be assessed at NVQ level. This course enables students to understand the need to develop relationships with both parents and professionals and to understand the need for, and to devise, a structured programme for the child with special needs in consultation with parents.

Perhaps the most progressive and ambitious project led by the Ballybeen Women's Group is the peer education programme, which is a community-based health project for young people between the ages of 10 and 25. The programme is aimed at providing a sensitive and non-threatening environment in which young people can discuss sex education and alcohol and drug abuse and the impact that those issues have on society. Young people can identify their own needs and discuss how they can be addressed.

At present, the centre has a pool of educators who are involved in training other young people of a similar age. Those educators are volunteers who have undergone intensive training in health issues and accredited training in communication and group-working skills. That training has provided them with the ability to make what is an imaginative and innovative programme work for those who participate.

The programme gives young people the chance to discuss their attitudes towards their sexual activity and the impact of HIV and single parentage, and to reflect on their feelings. One exercise involves a young person taking responsibility for a simulated baby, and the centre has obtained two of those. The simulated babies replicate a real child's behaviour and illustrate the complexities of

being responsible for a child. The aim is to provide an experience for young adults that simulates the parenting of a baby and explores the emotional, financial and social consequences of becoming a real parent.

Those issues tend to be more common in areas —

Mr Speaker: Order. I advise the Member that several other Members wish to contribute to the debate. If she could bring her remarks to a close reasonably soon, it would give them all an opportunity to speak.

Mrs I Robinson: I understand. Thank you. Those issues tend to be more common in areas of social deprivation. The programme serves to provide information on the issues to those that are most likely to come into direct contact with them.

I want support for the Ballybeen Women's Group, so I shall leave it at that and allow other Members to speak.

Mr Speaker: If other Members could keep their speeches to just under eight minutes, that would give the Minister 10 minutes to reply, as is the normal custom.

Ms Lewsley: I thank Mrs Robinson for introducing this Adjournment debate. I tutored the Ballybeen Women's Group on the subject of "women into politics", so I am aware of the services and support that it provides to women in Ballybeen.

The issues and problems facing Ballybeen Women's Centre are duplicated in women's centres throughout Northern Ireland. To say that the role of women in the community is vital may sound clichéd, but I make no apology for stating the obvious. The majority of women work at grass-roots level in the community, and women's centres are an essential part of that work. According to the Northern Ireland Council for Voluntary Action's publication, 'State of the Sector II', 10,322 women were employed full-time in the community sector in 1996-97. That amounts to 31% of the total workforce. Some 8,270 part-time jobs amounted to 25% of the workforce. However, there is a failure to recognise the importance of grass-roots development as a basis for a growing economy.

Women's groups across the Province are adversely affected by the lack of core funding. Those issues cannot simply be regarded as women's issues. They need to be seen as society's issues. Slightly more than half the population are women, and until they are enabled to take their positions and participate fully in public life at all levels, a serious democratic deficit will remain.

A society that excludes such a large section of the population from participating in the decisions that affect their lives cannot be described as a genuine and inclusive democracy. We cannot afford not to make use of the talents and skills that can bring better standards of living for all.

Many women's initial involvement in the community is based on a single issue. They concentrate on matters

such as children's play areas, traffic-calming measures, drug problems, or the setting up of after-school clubs. Those issues are crucially important, and many women see them as a stepping stone to developing an infrastructure for the whole community. They also give them an opportunity to widen their horizons and use their experience as a launch pad to get involved in decision-making at a higher level.

There are many obvious pitfalls that await us in the real world when we try to get actively involved in the community, and underfunding is the main one.

7.00 pm

Women's groups provide an invaluable service for the whole community: not just for women. Often when applying for funding to continue services, groups are passed from one Department to another. At this point, I would have liked to ask the Minister for Social Development, whose Department has responsibility for funding the community and voluntary sectors, why women's groups have constantly to battle for funding given that the Harbinson review — which was led by the Department for Social Development — looked into funding in the voluntary sector as a whole. I cannot do so, as the Minister has not seen fit to attend the debate.

This issue is not solely a matter of gender policy; it falls within the remit of the Department for Social Development's funding for community and voluntary groups and because of that I would have expected Mr Dodds to contribute to the debate. Perhaps he is boycotting the Assembly as well as the Executive.

I understand that OFMDFM is working with Departments on a strategy for gender policy and that an interdepartmental group has been convened to look at the issues surrounding women's groups. The petition concerning women's groups presented by Ms Morrice on 19 March has gone to the Committee of the Centre and is being considered. I hope that something positive and proactive will come from that.

We should never underestimate the amount of hard work, dedication and achievement that women have given to their communities and the wider effects on people in other sectors who have gained from those experiences. It is essential that the numbers, and calibre, of such women grow in the future. That can only happen by way of a co-ordinated approach across all sectors and in particular the Departments of the Assembly.

Mr McCarthy: I express gratitude to my Colleague, Mrs I Robinson, for bringing such an important subject to the Floor. I support the work of the Ballybeen Women's Group and all other such organisations that find themselves in exactly the same uncertain funding position. Ms Lewsley has mentioned that uncertainty.

Mrs I Robinson has fully explained what is needed. I shall simply say a few words about what I know of the

Ballybeen Women's Group. It is an important health, education and childcare provider. I had the recent pleasure of attending a distribution of merit certificates to successful students. I pay tribute to all recipients, and, of course, the administrators in all aspects of the work going on at the Ballybeen Women's Group.

As elected representatives, we must do what we can to ensure that this vital facility is not threatened. I am grateful that the Minister with some responsibility for these matters is in attendance. I appeal to those in authority in the Assembly to ensure that sufficient funding is in place, not only to sustain the present activities at Ballybeen but also to enhance and extend the work into new programmes. The group provides an excellent and valuable human and social service to a great many people, not only in the Ballybeen area but also to a much wider field, and that service must continue.

It would be proper to express gratitude to the organisations that have contributed to this group and to other groups. Ballybeen Women's Group recently had an important visitor: the Paymaster-General from the Treasury Office. She must have seen for herself the extraordinary work carried out by the group. Had I been in her position, I would have simply written a large cheque to enable Ballybeen Women's Group to get on with its work, sound in the knowledge that the service will continue without worry or concern. I ask the Minister and all Departments to do what they can to ensure that the work of the Ballybeen Women's Group continues.

Ms Morrice: I welcome today's debate, which gives us another opportunity to raise the issue of the disgraceful situation that women's groups that provide such a tremendous resource for the community have to scramble around for funding.

There is no proper reward or recognition for the tremendous work being carried out in these centres. Mrs I Robinson listed the particulars of Ballybeen, and Ms Lewsley and Mr McCarthy said that such work is replicated throughout Northern Ireland. However, for some reason, Ministers' eyes are blinkered: they will not go and look at the centres and they will not recognise the type of work being done there. I could go into detail about that work, however, Iris Robinson spoke at length about the different areas. We are talking about health, education, training and social services.

It may be better to think of this topic in budgetary terms rather than in terms of social affairs. These groups are saving money and are helping health budgets because of the advice and counselling they provide to women who are vulnerable to illnesses such as depression. The psychiatric support being given in these centres reduces pressure in some parts of the Health Service. There are good budgetary reasons for supporting these centres.

The centres provide basic skills for women — reducing pressure on the Training and Employment Agency. Women

are given the confidence to try out their skills in information technology in a safe, warm, friendly atmosphere. The centres reduce the pressure on training budgets that would require people to go elsewhere for assistance. They also reduce pressure on childcare provision and on the Citizens Advice Bureaux. The value of their work must be recognised.

Iris Robinson mentioned youth services, and that is an important project for peer education and the fact that young people can learn about sex education. They can also learn about the use and abuse of drugs. How do we measure the value of that to our community, and where is that recognition being given? There are accredited courses; special needs training courses and free crèche facilities.

An important thing that has changed in society is the education of our children. They are coming to the centres and are being educated: their mothers are being educated also. Charles D McIver once said:

"If you educate a man, you educate an individual; if you educate a woman, you educate a family".

I believe, and I accept, that things are changing, but I know that Mrs Robinson totally agrees with me. The centres are vital, and that must be recognised by our society.

I was interested in Ms Lewsley's figures that approximately 10,000 women are employed full-time in the centres, and 8,000 are employed part-time. Those people would otherwise be unemployed — so that is reducing pressure. If Ministers only understand the parlance of economic policy, then they should look at the different areas where centres are reducing pressure.

Undoubtedly the EU, in the Peace I programme, recognised the value of centres and paid money to support them: that is where the original money came from, and I am ready to stand corrected. The big problem now is that Peace II is not providing the facilities for funding the centres. Why was their value recognised under Peace I, but, suddenly, not valued under what is supposed to be the same programme?

What is going on here? It is time that the Government recognised the value. That is why we are calling for core funding for Ballybeen and all the other centres. They should not have to scramble about from one Department to another filling in application forms. Things must be made easier for these women. They provide an important and valuable service. If we cannot provide core funding — and we should not accept an "If we cannot" — at the very least we have to provide some sort of safety net. Those who apply for Peace II funding and do not get it should have their applications looked at again so that they can get that funding. If they do not meet the criteria, then the criteria are wrong. Change the criteria and get the funding through to these groups.

Mr M Robinson: I would like to thank my Colleague Mrs Iris Robinson for tabling this Adjournment debate today. It is extremely important that the subject of mainstream funding for the community and the voluntary sector is addressed.

Once it had been noted that this Adjournment debate was to be held today, I received a call from the Windsor Women's Centre in my constituency of South Belfast. They asked me to highlight the difficulties in relation to funding which are facing women's centres across the Province. I would like to focus on and to highlight the marvellous contribution that the voluntary and community centres make to Northern Ireland and how groups such as women's centres are of relevance to every community within the Province. Centres such as Ballybeen Women's Centre and the Windsor Women's Centre help the community to grow by adopting a bottom-up approach and, in doing so, provide services that are delivered and managed by the people. These organisations have vast amounts of experience in dealing with women's issues and deliver much-needed support to women of all ages and to the community as a whole.

Women's centres provide a valued service, and they play a major part in the lives of our communities. The Ballybeen Women's Centre and, indeed, the Windsor Women's Centre are both situated in areas of high unemployment, and both areas have a high rating under the Noble index with regard to deprivation. Both groups go a long way to support vulnerable and socially isolated women. They deliver their services based on the needs of women and their families. These include affordable quality childcare provision, education classes, young mother's groups, baby clinics, elderly women's groups, youth clubs and advice units. These centres also operate on a cross-community basis and provide support to both sides of the religious divide, therefore opening up communication between the different communities. Many strong friendships and relationships have been formed as a result, which makes for a more stable and peaceful community.

The funding process is often a complex and fragmented one in that these groups are dependent on several different funding streams for a variety of different budgets. The funding process can also be painfully slow and complicated, and as a result these groups have to prove their eligibility for funding due to the competition for resources. Unfortunately this means that many groups are suffering as a result.

I would like at this point to examine the community fund, which shares out money raised by the National Lottery to charities and to voluntary and community groups. The community fund recently launched its new strategic plan for 2002 through to 2007, and unfortunately the expected grant income falls from £287 million for 2002-03 down to £215 million for 2004-05. This will mean that financial support will not be given to as many projects as before, and tough decisions will

ultimately have to be made in order to ascertain which project should be funded. At most, women's centres have previously been guaranteed perhaps three years funding, but the recent trend of budgets being cut has led to the closure of many centres or has led to certain projects being suspended. Many women's centres have operated on a shoestring budget for many years, and at present there is no continuity of funding.

Unfortunately, this sector is living from one year to the next, not knowing if it will be provided with funding to allow it to continue with its valuable work.

7.15 pm

We must not underestimate the role that the voluntary and community sector play in providing support and its contribution to the development of social inclusion and equality. We must be encouraged by the work of these organisations to address issues associated with women and the emphasis they place on the personal development, training and upskilling of individuals to encourage and better equip them to escape the benefit trap.

There is a real pressure on these groups, and funding is required to sustain their valuable support services. Finance is crucial to the success of the voluntary sector, and I therefore call on the Government to promote and support this work through the provision of mainstream funding. By achieving that, women's centres will have more stability and recognition of their valuable work and will be free to raise funds for other projects in the various centres thus enabling them to deliver the community development aspect of their work.

Mr Shannon: Mr Speaker, I rise to support the motion.

It's clamant that Ballybeen's Weimen's Curn gets ahauld o mainstream sillier, for it's a lyfelyne ti monie o the weimen as gies it a cry-in. The curn pits sillier inti upbring an skuilin for weimen fae thae airts sae as thai can get examins as wul mebbe gie thaim a heft oot o the fankil o puirtith. This lyfelyne o edication is growein in importance, sin yin o the countie's mukkleast employers is eftir layin aff mair an mair o its wirkars in the bygaen seiven month, maist lyke as an affcum o the Septemmer 11 disaster. This haes left monie faimlies on the breidlyne, aften wi nae pey cummin intil the housshauld.

It is imperative that Ballybeen Women's Group gains mainstream funding, because it is a lifeline for many of the women who attend it. I was fortunate to be invited by the group one morning to hear a wee bit about it, and I shared their scones and coffee.

I learnt what the group does and its impact on the estate. The group invests in training and educating local women so that they can gain qualifications that may help to lift them out of the trap of poverty. The lifeline of education is increasingly important, as one of the country's main employers has laid off more and more of its workers in the past seven months, apparently as a

repercussion of the September 11 disaster. That has left many families on the breadline, with low wages going into the households. Groups such as the Ballybeen Women's Group have offered a lifeline to such families, giving the women an opportunity to re-educate themselves and learn skills that will help them to find gainful employment. Skills such as computer literacy are learnt at such groups, which many did not have the opportunity to learn at school. Many women only need to brush up on some skills, and they find that the women's group has a less intimidating feel than the regulated and bewildering environment that local colleges may present.

Many women progress to local further education colleges, once the informal and nurturing atmosphere such women's groups around the countryside provide has restored confidence in their ability. Many have been out of the workplace and learning sphere for as much as 20 years, and they find that the encouragement they receive from the women's group is what is needed to encourage them to achieve anything they set their minds to.

Not all the courses are strictly academic. Many help women relax. My wife often tells me that she needs to get out of the house and away from the children at least one night a week just to keep her sanity. There are classes on crafts, sign language, first aid and assertive parenting. These courses are designed to attract women of all interests and give them time out, indulging in something purely for themselves, which can only be good for them. If the Ballybeen Women's Group does not receive funding, these services will be lost, and the group will have to break up after being in existence for 18 years and helping countless numbers of ladies in the estate.

The Ballybeen Women's Group has been at the centre of promoting women's issues, bringing to local women the facts about such things as cancer screening programmes. The help that the group has brought to the community cannot be measured. By bringing facts about such things as breast or ovarian cancer to the fore, ultimately the lives of countless women will be saved. When someone is distressed and frightened by what she thinks she may have, the women of the community find the information they require in a simple and clear way.

Those groups are incredible sources of strength and understanding to the people that attend them. Friendships are struck up that might not be formed otherwise in this busy and sometimes anti-social twenty-first century, where people are more concerned about themselves than about the community. The women form the sort of support networks that have not been readily available since the beginning of the last century. The women that attend are the grandmothers and mothers of teenagers, newborn babies and toddlers. They all converse and offer advice and a helping hand to each other.

That type of networking was once the mainstay of society. However, in our modern, technologically advanced

world, the art of communication with our neighbours has been lost, and reaching out to others is sometimes fraught. The women's group provides an environment in which people can talk to others on the same platform with acceptance guaranteed.

One of the most attractive and supportive aspects of the Ballybeen Women's Group is the provision of a crèche for toddlers and pre-schoolchildren. The mothers and the women who work there form a support network, and they can train to become qualified childminders. Therefore by using common sense, this group has helped three parts of the community — those who wish to take an hour's break from the children to participate on a course or catch up with friends can do so knowing that their children are being cared for; the children who socialise with others and gain social skills; and the childcare students who get hands-on experience, while being fully supervised by experienced childminders. The women's centre is a model of good practice for service delivery. The Assembly, and the Government as a whole, should mirror the joined-up approach that it takes to community needs.

These centres, of which the Ballybeen group is only one, are first-class examples of how to provide vital services, which will disappear if funding is not found for them. That would be disastrous for the policy of targeting social need and for the workforce as a whole. I support the motion.

The Junior Minister (Office of the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister) (Mr Leslie): My Colleagues in the Office of the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister and I appreciate the valuable work that women's centres do. I am acutely aware that, as Ms Lewsley pointed out, at least 50% of the population may be affected by their work.

I acknowledge the valuable work that is done in education and training, and particularly the contribution that is made towards bringing women into the workforce or getting them back into the workforce, according to circumstances. They also provide family support, childcare, after-school projects and a range of other services.

It is clear that women's centres are an important resource for the community as a whole. Ballybeen Women's Group has made a considerable contribution to a large community where there are high areas of deprivation. Recently my Colleague, Mr Haughey, met representatives of women's organisations to gain a better understanding of the issues. As a result of that meeting, we have taken the initiative of bringing together an inter-departmental group to explore issues relating to the funding of women's organisations.

Members will appreciate that several Departments are involved, and officials from my Department are in discussions with them to agree a final position paper with a view to identifying how the problems can be most

effectively addressed. That paper will be ready within the next few weeks.

The funding difficulties of women's centres are not unique to the voluntary and community sector. Funding requirements are not a unique subject for debate in the House. Ministers' jobs would be much simpler if the reservoir of funding were always full. It is important that women's centres' funding requirements are examined in the context of the funding for the voluntary and community sector as a whole.

That was recognised in the recent Harbinson Report, with which some Members may be familiar. That review was led by the Department for Social Development. It recommended that a task force be established to look at funding issues across the voluntary and community sector. An integral part of the work of that task force will be to examine the funding of women's centres.

I must emphasise that although I am responding to the debate because the Office of the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister felt that it was important that I should do so, the funding of women's centres is principally the responsibility of the Department for Social Development. We have asked our officials to work with those in the Department for Social Development in order to identify, as a matter of importance, the most pressing needs of such groups and how those needs might be addressed.

On the issue of Ballybeen Women's Group, which Mrs Iris Robinson has brought to the attention of the House, I understand that the centre has in recent years been successful in obtaining funding from a variety of sources, including over £360,000 from the Peace I programme. Ms Morrice raised the issue of obtaining funding from the Peace II programme, in which some of the criteria may be different.

Peace II and the EU building sustainable prosperity programme can supply funding. However, applicants must meet the criteria. The criteria for Peace II are peace orientated. The activities for which funding is applied must address the legacy of the conflict and/or they must develop the opportunities that are presented by peace. I hope that within those criteria there will be scope for women's centres to make successful applications.

Ms Morrice: I want to raise a point in relation to European funding. It is interesting that the Minister mentioned the criteria for Peace II, which were exactly the same as the criteria for Peace I. It was recognised that women's centres did contribute to peace and reconciliation. Indeed, they made a vital contribution to peace and reconciliation in Peace I, so why not in Peace II?

Mr Leslie: There is no particular "why not" regarding Peace II. I believe that opportunities will be there under that programme.

Ballybeen Women's Group also received funding under the early years development fund of £100,000 until the

end of the 2003 financial year. I understand that that funding comes from the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety and that the Department will endeavour where possible to continue that support on a project basis.

During 2001-02 Ballybeen Women's Group was funded by a grant of £67,000 from the Belfast Regeneration Office. Earlier in the calendar year, the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety made an outline submission to Belfast Regeneration Office for further funding of £92,000 to support the Ballybeen Women's Group during the 2002-03 financial year. The

Belfast Regeneration Office has given that a high priority classification and has asked for a full application. My understanding is that when the full application is received it is likely to be looked on favourably.

I am conscious that the future funding of this sector is a crucial matter and one of grave concern to those involved in women's groups. That is why the Office of the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister has set up the task force, which is the body that will examine future funding. We must now look to the task force to carry out its work and to make its recommendations.

Adjourned at 7.29 pm

NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

Tuesday 23 April 2002

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

Members observed two minutes' silence.

AMENDMENTS TO STANDING ORDERS

Mr Speaker: Members will see from the Order Paper that 15 motions to amend Standing Orders have been tabled. Those relate to the Committee on Procedures' report, 'Review of the Legislative Process in the Northern Ireland Assembly', which the House debated on 26 February 2002. Four motions are substantive; the others are consequential. However, as amendments to Standing Orders, all motions will require cross-community support if they are to pass.

I propose to conduct four debates on the four substantive motions. Members have not only the Order Paper and the Marshalled List of amendments for debates scheduled for later today, but a proposed grouping of the 15 motions into four sections. The first debate will take place on motions (a), (b) and (o); the second debate on motions (c), (h), (i), (j), (k), (l) and (m); the third debate on motions (d), (e), (f) and (g); and the fourth debate on motion (n).

Although the motions are not pieces of legislation but changes to Standing Orders, the Business Committee took the view that the business should be conducted as if the House were dealing with amendments to a Bill, as that is what the House is most familiar with. I shall call the first motion, and then we shall debate motions (a), (b) and (o). We shall then continue through the other debates as I have outlined. If that is reasonably clear, we can proceed.

The Chairperson of the Committee on Procedures (Mr C Murphy): I beg to move:

In Standing Order 25(1)(a) line 2 delete "or Standing Order 72 provides" and insert "or Standing Orders provide".

The following motions stood in the Order Paper:

In Standing Order 25(1) line 12 and line 13 delete "Such decisions shall require cross-community support" and insert: "Such decisions mentioned in sub-paragraph (b) shall require cross-community support within the meaning of Section 4(5) of the Northern Ireland Act 1998". — [*The Chairperson of the Committee on Procedures (Mr C Murphy).*]

In Standing Order 40(3) delete all and insert:

"(3) Where, exceptionally, a Bill (other than a Budget Bill) is thought to require accelerated passage, which shall exclude any Committee Stage, the Member in charge of the Bill shall, before introduction of the Bill in the Assembly, explain to the appropriate Committee:

- (a) the reason or reasons for accelerated passage;
- (b) the consequences of accelerated passage not being granted; and, if appropriate,
- (c) any steps he/she has taken to minimise the future use of the accelerated passage procedure.

(4) Before Second Stage the Member in charge of the Bill shall move a motion "That the Bill proceed under the accelerated passage procedure".

In moving the motion the Member shall explain to the Assembly:

- (a) the reason or reasons for accelerated passage;
- (b) the consequences of accelerated passage not being granted; and, if appropriate,
- (c) any steps he/she has taken to minimise the future use of the accelerated passage procedure.

A motion under this Standing Order shall require cross-community support within the meaning of Section 4(5) of the Northern Ireland Act 1998." — [*The Chairperson of the Committee on Procedures (Mr C Murphy).*]

Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. This first group of motions arises from the Committee on Procedures' report on its review of the legislative process as debated by the Assembly on 26 February 2002. They will give effect to the recommendations contained in that report, which the Assembly has already endorsed. I covered the background to the recommendations at some length during that debate. Therefore, I do not intend to go over the arguments for those changes in detail.

The first group of motions relates to the recommendations of the Committee that the requirement for accelerated passage be reduced from leave of the House to cross-community support.

The substantive motion outlined at (o) in the Order Paper makes a change to Standing Order 40. Consequential motions are required to Standing Order 25, and those are detailed at (a) and (b) on the Order Paper. The consequential motions are technical amendments that simply make it clear that Standing Orders can make provision for decisions of the Assembly to be resolved by more than simple majority.

During the debate on 26 February, concern was expressed by the Chairperson of the Committee for Social Development about potential abuse of the accelerated passage procedure. In its consideration of the comments expressed by Members during the debate, the Committee on Procedures acknowledged that concern. It, therefore, proposes that if a Minister wants accelerated passage for a Bill, his or her reason must first be explained to the Committee. I emphasise that that does not impose a requirement for a Committee's consent; however, it does mean that the Committee is aware of

the intention to seek accelerated passage and the reasons behind that intention. These motions insert into Standing Orders what we have been advised should happen as part of a Department's pre-legislative consultation.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved (with cross-community support):

In Standing Order 25(1)(a) line 2 delete "or Standing Order 72 provides" and insert "or Standing Orders provide."

Resolved (with cross-community support):

In Standing Order 25(1) line 12 and line 13 delete "Such decisions shall require cross-community support" and insert: "Such decisions mentioned in sub-paragraph (b) shall require cross-community support within the meaning of Section 4(5) of the Northern Ireland Act 1998". — [*The Chairperson of the Committee on Procedures (Mr C Murphy).*]

Mr C Murphy: I beg to move:

In Standing Order 29(d) delete all and insert:

"(d) Further Consideration Stage: an opportunity for Members to consider and vote on amendments proposed to the Bill."

The following motions stood in the Order Paper:

In Standing Order 33(14) line 1 and line 3 delete "Further". — [*The Chairperson of the Committee on Procedures (Mr C Murphy).*]

In Standing Order 33(15) line 1 delete "Further". — [*The Chairperson of the Committee on Procedures (Mr C Murphy).*]

In Standing Order 33(16) line 2 delete "Further". — [*The Chairperson of the Committee on Procedures (Mr C Murphy).*]

In Standing Order 33(16) line 3 delete "Final Stage" and insert "Further Consideration Stage". — [*The Chairperson of the Committee on Procedures (Mr C Murphy).*]

In Standing Order 33 after paragraph (16) insert:

"(17) If such a motion is agreed to after the Further Consideration Stage of the Bill has begun but before that stage has been completed, the Further Consideration Stage shall be adjourned until an Ad Hoc Committee on Conformity with Equality Requirements reports to the Assembly.

(18) On resuming an adjourned Further Consideration Stage, the Assembly may, instead of considering the remaining amendments in the order in which the relevant clauses or schedules stand in the Bill, on a motion moved by the Member in charge of the Bill decide to consider them in a different order, and to consider again and amend, provisions of the Bill which have already been agreed, and to consider new clauses and schedules even if the time for considering them has passed.

(19) If such a motion is agreed to after the end of the Further Consideration Stage of a Bill, no date shall be determined for the Final Stage of the Bill until an Ad Hoc Committee on Conformity with Equality Requirements reports to the Assembly." — [*The Chairperson of the Committee on Procedures (Mr C Murphy).*]

In Standing Order 35 delete all and insert:

"35. PUBLIC BILLS: FURTHER CONSIDERATION STAGE"

(1) Any amendments proposed to be made to a Bill at Further Consideration Stage shall be deposited with the Clerk in time for inclusion on a Notice Paper circulated on a day before the day appointed for the Further Consideration Stage, and shall be arranged in the order in which the Bill is to be considered;

provided, however, that at the discretion of the Speaker, amendments may be moved in very exceptional circumstances without such notice.

(2) During proceedings at Further Consideration Stage, debate and vote shall be confined to those amendments which have been selected. The amendments shall be considered in the order in which the relevant clauses or schedules stand in the Bill.

(3) Any amendments selected which relate to the long title shall be considered after those relating to the clauses and schedules of the Bill.

(4) Members may speak more than once in debate during the Further Consideration Stage.

(5) At the conclusion of the debate on the Further Consideration Stage the Bill shall stand referred to the Speaker." — [*The Chairperson of the Committee on Procedures (Mr C Murphy).*]

Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. This group of motions deals with Further Consideration Stage. The substantive motion is outlined at (m) in the Order Paper. During our review it became evident that, although it was important that Members had a second opportunity to amend a Bill, the present procedure for the Further Consideration Stage as a complete re-run of the Consideration Stage should be refined to avoid Members being asked to vote again on clauses or schedules that may have already been agreed in the previous week.

The proposed amendment to Standing Order 35 will have the effect of focusing Further Consideration Stage on amendments proposed. Therefore, the Assembly will not be asked to vote to let a clause or schedule stand part of a Bill. Instead, in future, debate and votes at Further Consideration Stage will be only on amendments selected. That is in keeping with the practice in other places.

Seven amendments arise from this proposed change. The substantive motion at (c) is to amend Standing Order 29(d) to make the definition of Further Consideration Stage consistent with the more focused purpose now proposed.

The six consequential motions that are detailed at (h), (i), (j), (k), (l) and (m) are technical and relate to Standing Order 33, which deals with the establishment of an Ad Hoc Committee on conformity with equality requirements. Those amendments are necessary because they facilitate the interruption of Consideration Stage and Further Consideration Stage should a motion be agreed to for the appointment of such a Committee after either of those stages has begun.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved (with cross-community support):

In Standing Order 29(d) delete all and insert:

"(d) Further Consideration Stage: an opportunity for Members to consider and vote on amendments proposed to the Bill."

Mr C Murphy: I beg to move:

In Standing Order 31(3) line 3 delete "calendar days" and insert "working days".

The following motions stood in the Order Paper:

In Standing Order 31(5) line 1 delete “of thirty days”. — [*The Chairperson of the Committee on Procedures (Mr C Murphy).*]

In Standing Order 33(5) line 8 after “thirty” insert “working”. — [*The Chairperson of the Committee on Procedures (Mr C Murphy).*]

In Standing Order 33(7) line 7 after “thirty” insert “working”. — [*The Chairperson of the Committee on Procedures (Mr C Murphy).*]

This group of motions deals with the extension of Committee Stage. The substantive motion is at (d), and (e), (f) and (g) are consequential amendments. A key recommendation in the Committee’s report was that Committee Stage should be lengthened from its current 30-day calendar limit. Committees have complained that 30 calendar days do not give them enough time to scrutinise Bills. Indeed, our research has shown that to be true, because the average length of time taken for Committee Stage is nine weeks. As I said during the debate on the Committee’s report on 26 February, the Committee is confident that if the Executive pick up on the Committee’s recommendation that draft Bills should be submitted to Committees as part of the pre-legislative consultation, that nine-week average will be reduced. As such, the Committee believes that it is more appropriate to lengthen Committee Stage from 30 calendar days to 30 working days, which will give Committees six weeks. It is therefore proposed to amend Standing Order 31(3) accordingly. Consequential amendments are required to Standing Orders 31(5), 33(5) and 33(7), which will clarify that Committee Stage will now be 30 working days instead of 30 calendar days.

As I said in the previous debate, the change has been introduced to make our procedures more efficient. However, if the change, like the others tabled, does not work, the Committee will revisit the issue.

*Question put and agreed to.**Resolved (with cross-community support):*

In Standing Order 31(3) line 3 delete “calendar days” and insert “working days”.

Resolved (with cross-community support):

In Standing Order 31(5) line 1 delete “of thirty days”. — [*The Chairperson of the Committee on Procedures (Mr C Murphy).*]

Resolved (with cross-community support):

In Standing Order 33(5) line 8 after “thirty” insert “working”. — [*The Chairperson of the Committee on Procedures (Mr C Murphy).*]

Resolved (with cross-community support):

In Standing Order 33(7) line 7 after “thirty” insert “working”. — [*The Chairperson of the Committee on Procedures (Mr C Murphy).*]

Resolved (with cross-community support):

In Standing Order 33(14) line 1 and line 3 delete “Further”. — [*The Chairperson of the Committee on Procedures (Mr C Murphy).*]

Resolved (with cross-community support):

In Standing Order 33(15) line 1 delete “Further”. — [*The Chairperson of the Committee on Procedures (Mr C Murphy).*]

Resolved (with cross-community support):

In Standing Order 33(16) line 2 delete “Further”. — [*The Chairperson of the Committee on Procedures (Mr C Murphy).*]

Resolved (with cross-community support):

In Standing Order 33(16) line 3 delete “Final Stage” and insert “Further Consideration Stage”. — [*The Chairperson of the Committee on Procedures (Mr C Murphy).*]

Resolved (with cross-community support):

In Standing Order 33 after paragraph (16) insert:

“(17) If such a motion is agreed to after the Further Consideration Stage of the Bill has begun but before that stage has been completed, the Further Consideration Stage shall be adjourned until an Ad Hoc Committee on Conformity with Equality Requirements reports to the Assembly.

(18) On resuming an adjourned Further Consideration Stage, the Assembly may, instead of considering the remaining amendments in the order in which the relevant clauses or schedules stand in the Bill, on a motion moved by the Member in charge of the Bill decide to consider them in a different order, and to consider again and amend, provisions of the Bill which have already been agreed, and to consider new clauses and schedules even if the time for considering them has passed.

(19) If such a motion is agreed to after the end of the Further Consideration Stage of a Bill, no date shall be determined for the Final Stage of the Bill until an Ad Hoc Committee on Conformity with Equality Requirements reports to the Assembly.” — [*The Chairperson of the Committee on Procedures (Mr C Murphy).*]

Resolved (with cross-community support):

In Standing Order 35 delete all and insert:

“35. PUBLIC BILLS: FURTHER CONSIDERATION STAGE

(1) Any amendments proposed to be made to a Bill at Further Consideration Stage shall be deposited with the Clerk in time for inclusion on a Notice Paper circulated on a day before the day appointed for the Further Consideration Stage, and shall be arranged in the order in which the Bill is to be considered; provided, however, that at the discretion of the Speaker, amendments may be moved in very exceptional circumstances without such notice.

(2) During proceedings at Further Consideration Stage, debate and vote shall be confined to those amendments which have been selected. The amendments shall be considered in the order in which the relevant clauses or schedules stand in the Bill.

(3) Any amendments selected which relate to the long title shall be considered after those relating to the clauses and schedules of the Bill.

(4) Members may speak more than once in debate during the Further Consideration Stage.

(5) At the conclusion of the debate on the Further Consideration Stage the Bill shall stand referred to the Speaker.” — [*The Chairperson of the Committee on Procedures (Mr C Murphy).*]

10.45 am

Mr C Murphy: I beg to move:

In Standing Order 40(1) delete all and insert:

“(1) There shall be a minimum interval of five working days between each stage of a Bill, save in the following cases:

- (a) between Second Stage and Committee Stage; and
- (b) where a Bill is subject to the accelerated passage procedure in accordance with paragraph (2) or (4).”

This amendment would remove the five-day period required between the Second Stage and the Committee Stage. When a Bill passes its Second Stage and is referred to a Committee, the Committee cannot commence its consideration until five days have elapsed. That reduces the 30-day period that the Committee has to consider the Bill and report on it. As I said earlier, Committees believe that the time allocated to the Committee Stage is too short. The amendment would give Committees an additional five days. The five-day rule would be removed only between the Second Stage and the Committee Stage. It would remain in place between the other stages of the legislative process.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved (with cross-community support):

In Standing Order 40(1) delete all and insert:

“(1) There shall be a minimum interval of five working days between each stage of a Bill, save in the following cases:

- (a) between Second Stage and Committee Stage; and
- (b) where a Bill is subject to the accelerated passage procedure in accordance with paragraph (2) or (4).”

Resolved (with cross-community support):

In Standing Order 40(3) delete all and insert:

“(3) Where, exceptionally, a Bill (other than a Budget Bill) is thought to require accelerated passage, which shall exclude any Committee Stage, the Member in charge of the Bill shall, before introduction of the Bill in the Assembly, explain to the appropriate Committee:

- (a) the reason or reasons for accelerated passage;
- (b) the consequences of accelerated passage not being granted; and, if appropriate,
- (c) any steps he/she has taken to minimise the future use of the accelerated passage procedure.

(4) Before Second Stage the Member in charge of the Bill shall move a motion “That the Bill proceed under the accelerated passage procedure”.

In moving the motion the Member shall explain to the Assembly:

- (a) the reason or reasons for accelerated passage;
- (b) the consequences of accelerated passage not being granted; and, if appropriate,
- (c) any steps he/she has taken to minimise the future use if the accelerated passage procedure.

A motion under this Standing Order shall require cross-community support within the meaning of Section 4(5) of the Northern Ireland Act 1998.” — *[The Chairperson of the Committee on Procedures (Mr C Murphy).]*

“FRIENDS OF HOSPITALS”

Mr Speaker: Amendments to this motion and the next motion have been proposed. Both motions are time-limited; therefore, I ask the proposers to limit themselves to around seven minutes and those who are speaking — whether to amendments or to the motion — to around five minutes. There will then be the opportunity for the Minister to sum up, and for both the proposer of the amendment and the proposer of the motion to make a winding-up speech.

Rev Robert Coulter: I beg to move

That this Assembly calls upon the Minister and the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to set up urgently a separate funding network for the provision of matching funds for items and/or projects identified by local groups commonly known as “Friends of Hospitals”.

I tabled this motion because we have heard so much recently about the funding problems faced by the Health Service. Looking at the current position of the Health Service takes me back many years to a time when the community in Ballymena became concerned about the high level of cardiac problems in the area.

Several of us got together and decided that something had to be done to assist the local hospital and, in particular, the specialist whose wonderful cardiac research was being inhibited by a lack of funds and equipment. We met the business community, and in the course of a few years a tremendous amount of money was collected and specialist equipment was installed in the hospital. Great work was done in the Waveney Hospital in Ballymena, and the effort was such that it became the pattern for hospitals, not only throughout Northern Ireland but across the UK.

The idea came to me some time ago as a result of hospital visits. Staff were saying that they had problems with the provision of capital equipment, the lack of space and the funding of nurses and other staff. I began to think about the voluntary element of the Health Service. Volunteers have been a feature of health provision since the beginning of healthcare. Florence Nightingale, the lady with the lamp who nursed the sick and wounded of the Crimean war in the 1850s, and who is widely credited with the foundation of the modern nursing service, was a volunteer. The concept of volunteers in the hospital service is not a new tradition, but a long and honourable one. It has its roots in the Christian philanthropy of the industrial revolution during a pre-welfare age, when the only provision was voluntary. It is interesting that Bishop Maddox of Worcester is credited with being the founder of the movement in 1746.

When the National Health Service began in 1948, the then Health Secretary, the formidable Aneurin Bevan, spelt out the role of volunteer workers in a welfare age. His words are still relevant today. He said that personal

and voluntary work in hospitals would always be needed, and here is the punchline:

"to feel where the foot pinches and apply relief."

The National League of Hospital Friends was formed by 49 representatives from 40 hospital leagues. It later became the National Association of Leagues of Hospital Friends. In 1998, to reflect the growing importance of its work in the community, the title was changed again to the National Association of Hospital and Community Friends. It has 804 affiliated groups. Voluntary work is a thriving tradition and a significant element of Health Service provision. The National Association of Hospital and Community Friends conducted its most recent survey in 1999. It shows that leagues of hospital and community friends had 36,000 members who actively and voluntarily contributed some eight million hours of work a year to the National Health Service. However, what intrigued me most was that the survey also found that the leagues donate some £36 million a year to NHS hospitals.

I could go on speaking about such statistics, but I came across one statement that brought the point home to me. Neil Hidgely, a 22-year-old volunteer from Reading, said that the youthful "Friends of Hospitals" in Reading had many volunteers in their teenage years or in their twenties. His group had presented a chair to one of the hospitals. He said:

"Seeing the nurses and the people being really thankful because they had been given a chair made me feel angry, but it also made me feel good because I was making a difference."

The "Friends of Hospitals" in Northern Ireland — those little groups that look on the local hospital as their hospital — are quite willing, as my contact with them has proved, to play their part in assisting the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to achieve what could not otherwise be achieved because of limited funding.

It would give the community a sense of belonging. In other words, it would be the community's hospital, and people, having received healing, help and health through the work of their hospital, could give something back to it. It would reduce departmental spending. If the Department were to match pound for pound the amounts raised by the community groups — the "Friends of Hospitals" — expenditure would be reduced. That would also foster a team effort in the community that would bring everyone together.

I must reject the amendment, especially the restrictions that would be placed by the wording in the final line, which says:

"the Programme for Government and Priorities for Action."

I want the community to be free, in consultation with its local hospital board, to decide on the priorities that can be met through its contributions.

Mr Speaker: I have received one amendment to the motion. It is published on the Marshalled List of amendments in the name of Ms Sue Ramsey and Mr John Kelly.

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

I beg to move the following amendment: Delete all after "to" and insert

"provide matching funds for items and/or projects identified by local groups commonly known as 'Friends of Hospitals' where these fit in with the Programme for Government and Priorities for Action."

In moving the amendment, I wish to pay tribute to "Friends of Hospitals" and congratulate them on the immense contribution that they have made to hospital care. The amendment does not seek in any way to detract from the very good work that they have done. Rather, it seeks to broaden the scope of that work and to ensure that social need is met. We need to avoid a situation in which the rich would become healthier and the poor would become sicker. We need to have an equitable distribution of the funds that are available to the Department, and that is why we have moved the amendment. We do not seek in any way to diminish, demean or dismiss the work done by the charitable organisations.

There will always be room for the charitable provision of extra items and projects, but it is essential that charities should not be called upon to provide core funding. The Health Service should have sufficient funds to meet its obligations. We could see a situation arising in which the Government would be quite happy to see charitable organisations carrying out the functions for which they should be responsible. They might not provide the money for health that they should do because charitable organisations were trying to provide it.

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

Targeting social need is important. The current situation requires much greater funding than is provided under the Barnett formula, which needs to be strongly opposed by the Minister of Finance and Personnel. Given the lack of resources for the Health Service, it is important that the resources that we do have, including those that come from the charitable sector's sterling efforts, are used as fairly and efficiently as possible.

That is why, at Executive level, the Programme for Government is agreed and why, at departmental level, priorities for action are drawn up. Those are used carefully to identify the greatest needs and to allocate resources accordingly. If we abandon the Programme for Government and the priorities for action, we abandon the possibility of co-ordinating services. Moreover, we abandon the chance to assess the appropriateness of the use of public money, and we abandon safeguards against the possibility of a needless duplication of services. Most dangerously of all, however, we abandon the system by which the equity of resource allocation is ensured.

If the motion were to become departmental policy, the communities that could raise the most charitable money would get the most money from the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety. It is not hard to imagine that those communities would be the richest ones. Therefore we would have a situation that would make a mockery of the Department of Health's campaign to end inequalities in health provision. As I said in my opening remarks, the rich would become healthier and the poor would become sicker.

Having said that, I commend Rev Robert Coulter for tabling the motion and congratulate the "Friends of Hospitals" on the immense contribution that they have made to hospital care. However, these are the small dangers — maybe great dangers — that we envisage in the adoption of this motion. I support the amendment.

11.00 am

Mr Gallagher: I stress that I am speaking on this matter as an Assembly Member, and not on behalf of the Committee for Health, Social Services and Public Safety.

I welcome the opportunity that this motion gives us to speak on the involvement of voluntary groups with the Health Service, and Colleagues will agree that support from local groups such as "Friends of Hospitals" is to be welcomed. Members are only too aware that severe budgetary constraints on the Health Service have meant that it has not always been possible to provide better facilities and more comfortable surroundings through public funds. Voluntary fund-raising undoubtedly helps, creating a sense of ownership of the public services.

Although I welcome the endeavour and enterprise of community groups in raising funds for local projects, I strike a cautionary note about making a commitment to match public resources with a carte blanche. Substantial capital investment in hospital equipment, such as MRI scanners, can bring with it heavy recurrent running costs, which need to be factored into future budgets. We have to bear in mind that investment in new technology will be accompanied by the administrative and staffing costs of the nurses and doctors who man it. The Health Committee's two inquiries into children's residential care and cancer services both strongly highlighted the importance of the voluntary and community sectors, working collaboratively with the Department, the boards, and the trusts to address priorities in the Health Service.

There is clearly a need for substantial fund-raising activity to improve the comfort of patients. However, that work has to be co-ordinated closely with the work and objectives of the Department in order to fully optimise the benefits for everybody in the region.

Mrs Courtney: I agree with the spirit of the motion. However, the proposed amendment fits in with our Programme for Government and priority for action, and, therefore, my party will be supporting the amendment.

In too many instances, the amount of money needed far exceeds that which "Friends of Hospitals" can raise. However, without that money hospitals would be unable to cope with the demand for sophisticated and up-to-date equipment. I worked in Altnagelvin Hospital from 1961. As everyone is aware, it was the first hospital to be built in post-war Britain. The fact that it took almost 11 years from planning through to construction and the commissioning stage meant that equipment quickly became obsolete — not by the design, but by technology.

At that time there were four acute hospitals in the Derry, Limavady, and Strabane area, plus two psychiatric hospitals, Stradreagh and Gransha, each with a group that raised funds. We had Friends of Roe Valley, St Columbs, Stradreagh, Gransha, Strabane, and Waterside. Altnagelvin replaced all four acute hospitals, and currently Friends of Altnagelvin raises valuable funds through flag days, cake sales, the sale of Christmas cards, and other activities. They raise around £10,000, which, although invaluable, is generally spread quite thinly. Having it doubled would help.

Over the years these groups have bought some invaluable equipment, as have other groups that have raised funds specifically for areas such as cardiac services, neonatology or pain relief clinics. However, other funding priorities have seen donations dwindle, as people try their best to support other charities. For example, in my area, the Foyle Hospice for the terminally ill and relatives' respite care, Macmillan Cancer Relief and various cancer charities would find it difficult to cope without that community support.

I will give a few examples. In the north-west edition of last night's 'Belfast Telegraph', there were appeals for the sensory impaired and a children's cancer unit, which has currently raised £47,000. A chain walk across both bridges in Derry has been organised for the weekend. It is hoped that 3,000 people will take part in the event to raise a further £3,000 for the children's cancer unit. Money is also being raised for a 10-month-old child who was born without a brain stem. Children from the Cathedral Youth Club in the Fountain raised money, through a sponsored walk, to give him an easier lifestyle. We also had an appeal for Help the Aged. These charities are well worth supporting, and any extra funding would benefit them.

Recently, the wife of one of my friends died. She was treated in the Mid-Ulster Hospital. Unfortunately, the time from the diagnosis until her death was short. My friend wished to do something to help the hospital. I can give examples of some of the equipment that the hospital said that it needed urgently: two Colleague intravenous infusion pumps, each costing £1,600; a critical blood pressure monitor, which costs £2,000; an infant resuscitator costing £9,000; a foetal monitor, which costs £5,000; a sofa for the midwives' restroom at £850; an electric couch for a treatment room at £810; and a new incubator for the children's unit at £15,000. In total, almost £36,000 was

raised, which for a small community was an excellent response to an appeal that lasted only four months. It is obvious that such people give much more to the community and deserve our thanks. Anything that improves funding for vital services is needed.

There was a fire at Altnagelvin Hospital last night, and 60 elderly patients, including stroke victims, had to be evacuated from the geriatric unit. Thanks to the excellent care and extra service that was provided by the hospital, the Fire Service and the ambulance crew, all the patients were evacuated safely to other parts of the hospital. I commend not only the staff there, but those who returned during their off-duty time to ensure that the elderly were not left in a more traumatic condition. As we know, it is difficult for an elderly person to be moved to unfamiliar surroundings. For that reason, all those members of staff deserve our thanks.

Last month, the Committee for Health, Social Services and Public Safety visited Altnagelvin Hospital and saw the stroke unit. We know how difficult it is to move stroke patients, and they too were safely moved out during the fire. We support the spirit of the motion because all aspects of the Health Service would benefit. However, the amendment keeps any action in closer line with the Programme for Government and the priorities for action; therefore, the SDLP will be supporting the amendment.

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety (Ms de Brún): Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Caithfidh mé mo bhuíochas a ghabháil leis an Oirmhinneach Robert Coulter agus leis an Uasal McFarland as an díospóireacht thábhachtach seo a thabhairt anuas ar an chomaoín a bhfuil muid fúithi ag na daoine sin a oibríonn gan scíth ar son othair ospidéal agus daoine leochaileacha eile.

D'éist mé go cúramach lena moladh gur chóir dúinn níos mó úsáid a bhaint as an earnáil dheonach lenár seirbhísí a fhorbairt, agus is maith a thuigim a smaointe.

Tugann díospóireacht an lae inniu deis dúinn machnamh a dhéanamh ar an ról fiorthábhachtach atá ag an phobal ag forbairt agus ag coinneáil na gcaighdeán is airde cúraim inár n-ospidéal agus ar fud na seirbhíse.

I thank Rev Robert Coulter and Mr McFarland for stimulating this important debate on the debt that we owe to those in the voluntary sector who work so tirelessly in the interests of hospital patients and others. I also endorse Annie Courtney's support for the staff who coped magnificently with safely evacuating the elderly from Altnagelvin Hospital last night. It is at such times when the support of the local community and "Friends of Hospitals" is welcomed.

I appreciate the suggestion by Rev Robert Coulter that we should make greater use of the voluntary sector in developing our services. Today's debate provides us

with an opportunity to reflect on the enormously important role of the community in developing and maintaining the highest standards of care in our hospitals and throughout the service. That recognition was expressed by all Members in the debate, and I welcome that.

The Rev Robert Coulter highlighted the noble tradition of personal and voluntary endeavours in aiding our hospital services. There has been a long history of voluntary sector involvement in the development of hospitals and many other services here. Some of our hospitals were established by local communities through public subscription. Others have been supported through the years by generations of local people who have voluntarily given up their time and money. The new wing at the Mater Hospital was made possible by the efforts and dedication of the local community, and I was delighted to visit it recently. Other Members have spoken of similar visits that they have made to hospitals in their areas.

Voluntary organisations and community groups play a vital role in representing their communities. Those groups often draw their membership from individuals who have direct experience of illness, either personally or through someone close to them, and they may want to give something back to their community. They contribute in many different ways. I pay tribute to all those communities and individuals for their dedication, the commitment of their time and energy and the vital role that they play in the development of our services. They are part of our caring society, and they enrich it.

I also want to pay tribute to the support that "Friends of Hospitals" have given to our trusts. Over the years their contributions have ranged from the provision of support for training to the purchase of much-needed specialist equipment. Given the current funding pressures on our services, and the history of underfunding, their efforts are doubly valued.

I recognise and appreciate the intentions behind the motion. The excellent work and support of the "Friends of Hospitals" are valued by the service, and it is important that their work continues to complement and augment existing services. Therefore, to be of maximum benefit, it is essential that we build on the Health Service's existing close working relationship with voluntary trusts, societies and the voluntary sector to ensure that such input generates the best return in terms of improvements to patient care and treatment.

It is vital that that collaboration take place to ensure that projects complement and contribute to public service priorities. I need hardly add that if proposals generate a recurring commitment, they must be factored into our spending plans, otherwise they risk skewing resources from priority areas. It is important, therefore, that each proposal be looked at on its merits and that we target support to accord with our overall priorities. Consequently, a separate funding network would not be in the best

interests of our service. Indeed, any blanket arrangement for separate funding could divert vital resources from key priorities. That would place greater pressure on our front line services, rather than improve services, and, as John Kelly said, it might also adversely impact on important programmes such as new targeting social need and the equality agenda, which aim to provide care for all our people on an equitable basis.

Although the proposed plan is not the optimum choice at this time, there are real opportunities to consider individual proposals case-by-case. There are many examples where that has worked well, and important projects have been taken forward successfully in partnership. Trusts must listen to the communities that they serve when developing their priorities, and, where a given proposal complements the overall strategic aim, an appropriate business case can be jointly developed to examine the viability of a project, while identifying its benefits and its full capital and revenue implications.

Therefore, our best way forward is to be able to consider proposals case-by-case, with the closest possible linkage between the statutory sector and the voluntary and charitable trusts, and the building of a business case with local trusts to ensure that the tremendous voluntary efforts are advancing the priorities that we have agreed.

11.15 am

Ms Ramsey: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I thank Rev Robert Coulter and Mr McFarland for tabling the motion. Although I agree with the sentiment and the thinking behind it, support for the motion will cause concerns, which several Members highlighted. Agreeing the motion would result in affluent areas such as parts of north Down and Ballymena, which can raise about £100,000, having that amount matched by the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety. Areas such as Falls Road, Shankill Road, and parts of Derry and Tyrone, which might be able to raise only about £10,000, would be entitled to have only that amount matched by the Department. That gives me concern, given that we have priorities for action, a Programme for Government and targeting social needs.

With that in mind, John Kelly and I have tabled an amendment that covers many of the concerns that other Members raised. I thank and commend groups such as "Friends of Hospitals" for their hard work, commitment and dedication in raising much-needed finances for local hospitals. I am sure that without their work, some services would be worse off. The amendment is based on reality. Although a group in north Down could raise £100,000 for an MRI scanner, that might not be a priority for the people there. The Department's money would be tied up because it would be duty-bound to match that £100,000. That goes to the core of the matter.

I agree with Tommy Gallagher, who added a note of concern to the original motion. Fund-raising must be carried

out in conjunction with the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety, which has produced priorities for action. Those priorities are supported by the Committee for Health, Social Services and Public Safety, which has a part to play also.

I do not agree with Rev Robert Coulter's contention that the amendment restricts people's ability to raise money; it does not do that. We should be thankful that people are raising money. The amendment is designed to ensure that the money will go to the heart of the problem, targeting the established priorities and problems of the community.

I agree with the Minister's assertion that community groups and voluntary organisations have an important part to play in the Health Service. However, trusts must listen to the communities that they serve. That ties in with the priorities for action and the Programme for Government, and it is upon that reality that John Kelly and I have based our amendment.

The fundamental issue of the motion and the amendment is that the Health Service has been seriously underfunded for many years. I welcome yesterday's commitment by Dr Farren to provide more funding for health. The Executive have said that health is a priority. My concern, however, is that the additional money is not enough. It is a welcome start, but we need to get to the core of the problem: if we want changes in the Health Service, we must address underfunding.

I ask Members to support the amendment. Although we cannot prevent people from raising money in good faith, we must not allow those who are unable to raise similar amounts to be discriminated against. The rich will get healthier and the poor will get sicker. We need to ensure that everyone in society has the opportunity to become healthier. Go raibh maith agat.

Mr Hamilton: First, I welcome the Minister's addressing the problem, and I thank her for acknowledging the voluntary sector's vital role in assisting the Health Service and hospitals and helping out sometimes, when the Department cannot find appropriate funds. I thank her for acknowledging the work of "Friends of Hospitals" and for her commitment to continue developing relationships with such groups.

I shall be brief. Mr Gallagher spoke about the contribution of voluntary groups and the vital role of "Friends of Hospitals", with their ability to provide equipment and services that the Department may not always be able to fund. He talked about the need to work with the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety — it has never been the intention of "Friends of Hospitals" to work without full consultation with, and in conjunction with, the Department. Rev Robert Coulter's motion covers that point.

Mrs Courtney mentioned the number of hospitals in her constituency that, at different times, have experienced difficulties with the provision of equipment and services. She too acknowledged the vital role that organisations such as “Friends of Hospitals” provide in meeting the needs of the area that she represents.

Rev Robert Coulter has given the reasons why the Ulster Unionist Party cannot support the amendment. We would like “Friends of Hospitals” to be able to operate with total freedom to meet the needs of the hospitals that they represent, and, in collecting for their hospital, contribute to the needs of that hospital and help it to develop the services required in their area.

Ms Ramsey: Will the Member give way?

Mr Hamilton: No. Therefore, we urge Members to reject the amendment, because it does not provide fully for that. This has been a timely debate, and it is a worthy motion. The proposer highlighted its success in other parts of the UK. The Department should consider seriously the motion. I, therefore, urge Members to reject the amendment and support the motion.

Question put, That the amendment be made.

The Assembly divided: Ayes 28; Noes 36.

AYES

Alex Attwood, P J Bradley, Joe Byrne, Annie Courtney, John Dallat, Bairbre de Brún, Pat Doherty, Mark Durkan, David Ervine, Sean Farren, Tommy Gallagher, Carmel Hanna, Billy Hutchinson, John Kelly, Patricia Lewsley, Alban Maginness, Alex Maskey, Alasdair McDonnell, Gerry McHugh, Eugene McMenamin, Pat McNamee, Monica McWilliams, Conor Murphy, Mick Murphy, Mary Nelis, Eamonn O'Neill, Sue Ramsey, John Tierney.

NOES

Ian Adamson, Billy Armstrong, Roy Beggs, Billy Bell, Paul Berry, Esmond Birnie, Mervyn Carrick, Wilson Clyde, Fred Cobain, Robert Coulter, Ivan Davis, Nigel Dodds, Oliver Gibson, John Gorman, Tom Hamilton, David Hilditch, Derek Hussey, Roger Hutchinson, Gardiner Kane, Danny Kennedy, David McClarty, William McCrea, Alan McFarland, Michael McGimpsey, Maurice Morrow, Dermot Nesbitt, Ian Paisley Jnr, Edwin Poots, Iris Robinson, Mark Robinson, George Savage, David Trimble, Peter Weir, Jim Wells, Jim Wilson, Sammy Wilson.

Question accordingly negatived.

Main Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That this Assembly calls upon the Minister and the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to set up urgently a separate funding network for the provision of matching funds for items and/or projects identified by local groups commonly known as “Friends of Hospitals”.

SCREENING SYSTEM FOR EARLY DIAGNOSIS OF AUTISM

11.30 am

Mr Byrne: I beg to move

That this Assembly calls on the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to introduce a screening system for all pre-school children to assist in the early diagnosis of autism and to make adequate provision for the needs of autistic children.

In the past year, the plight of autistic children and their parents has been brought into sharp focus through events that attracted the attention of the media. In Britain, the fears surrounding a possible link between autism and the measles, mumps and rubella (MMR) vaccination reopened issues relating to the causes of autism, provoking considerable controversy and disagreement among healthcare professionals and Government Ministers. In the Republic, the Supreme Court decision in the Sinott case, and the publication of a special task force report on autism, raised public awareness of the provision of educational services for autistic children. In recent weeks, the announcement by Ministers McGuinness and Woods of the first all-Ireland centre of excellence for autism education marked a step in the right direction and brought a long overdue recognition of the increasing level of concern about autism and autistic spectrum disorders on the island of Ireland.

The purpose of the motion and the subsequent debate is neither to come to conclusions on the causes of autism, nor is it to agree on a single approach to the education of children with autism. The purpose of the debate is to increase Members’ and Ministers’ awareness of autism and to agree on what all parents and professionals who work in the field of autism already know: the earlier that formal diagnosis is made of children who suffer from autism, the earlier effective educational methods can be employed to ensure those children have the opportunity to lead normal lives.

Our Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety and our Department of Education have responsibility for the diagnosis of autism and appropriate interventions, such as speech and language therapy. However, owing to the mix of Departments and professionals involved, there has been an ad-hoc development of autistic services in Northern Ireland. Voluntary organisations such as Parents’ Education as Autism Therapists (PEAT) and Parents and Professionals & Autism (PAPA) have been left to bear the brunt of promoting the needs of autistic children and their carers.

An important piece of recent research, which represented a major step forward, was the Northern Ireland scoping research into the diagnosis of autism. Although advances were made in the 1990s in the early diagnosis of autism compared with the situation in the 1980s, the report’s recommendations were not fully implemented

at trust and health board level. Today, individual trusts have different referral paths, and there is a wide range of differences between the level of services offered by the North's health trusts and boards. Only the Down Lisburn Trust, the Homefirst Community Trust, and Newry and Mourne Trust offer formal diagnosis services. They have been innovative and proactive with their respective health boards. Other trusts have lagged behind. Some are even in denial and refuse to accept the reality of the illness, or disability.

It is generally recognised that the early diagnosis of autism, which leads to early treatment and intervention, can have huge benefits and make a significant difference to the quality of life for autistic children and their parents.

A major piece of work is currently being conducted by a task force that consists of the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety, the Department of Education and voluntary groups. It is essential that its report contain proposals from the Department of Health recommending the introduction of a screening programme for all pre-school children. That is vital — according to the National Initiative for Autism: Screening and Assessment (NIASA), almost 50% of children are not diagnosed as autistic until they are 16 years old. Many parents and children in Northern Ireland are living with the consequences of autism and a failure to diagnose their children's illness at an early stage; some of those parents are here today.

I shall elaborate on the nature of this illness, the effect that it has on children and their parents and why early diagnosis and intervention is vital to its treatment. Autism is an illness of which I was aware, but, like many, I never appreciated fully the effect that it has on children and their families until a mother in my constituency contacted me to express her concerns about her child, who has not yet been formally diagnosed as suffering from autism. She also expressed her fears about the level of education services available. Her child was born healthy, without complications and with no history of serious illness in the family. After 19 months, the parents became increasingly concerned that their child was not developing normal communication and social skills. Despite the fact that two years have elapsed since their concerns surfaced, their child has not yet been formally diagnosed as suffering from autism, even though the child is displaying all the symptoms of the illness and is approaching school age. The mother was told authoritatively in a private consultation that her child was autistic, but the health authorities have not yet recognised that.

The symptoms of autism include a difficulty in acquiring, using and understanding speech, and using other forms of communication, including gestures and facial expressions. Children who are autistic can often relate well to their parents and carers, but not to other children. Autistic children also have a highly restricted

range of behaviours and interests, may have repetitive body movements and a preference for routine, and may have a preoccupation with certain objects and activities. Those three characteristics are known as the "triad of impairments", and they are familiar to many families in the North who live with them 24 hours a day, seven days a week.

Autistic children often represent a considerable challenge to those who care for, train, educate and support them. Children who suffer from autism need constant care and attention. In many cases, parents, like the mother who asked for my help and, indeed, that of the Assembly, have had to give up their employment to care full-time for their children. That has put considerable pressure on many families, who feel that they have been abandoned by the authorities, especially by the Health Department.

Autism will not go away, and the Minister of Health must take it seriously. Autism-UK stated that during the 1990s the rate of children being diagnosed with autistic spectrum disorders rose significantly. For example, some areas of Britain and Northern Ireland are recording rates as high as one in 200 children; overall the illness affects four times more males than females.

Once formal diagnosis has been made, early intervention is essential. Specialist education is critical. Delivered in a structured environment it can minimise behavioural difficulties and enhance an individual's skills and life experiences. The two most effective methods are TEACCH (treatment and education of autistic and related communication handicapped children) and ABA (applied behaviour analysis). The latter, which entails intensive behavioural intervention, shows an autistic child how to learn academic and behavioural skills. ABA programmes, which can involve intensive learning of up to 40 hours a week with a trained professional, can be tailored to suit the individual needs of a child. Properly designed and delivered, ABA programmes contain most, if not all, of the necessary components for the effective treatment of children with autism. However, in Northern Ireland, the majority of parents who choose that teaching method must finance the programme themselves. They must deal with hostile attitudes towards the inclusion of ABA in the statementing process, despite the fact that research findings have shown that up to 40% of children with autism can benefit from ABA to the extent of being indistinguishable from normal children.

Due to varying resources and recognition of the gravity of autistic disorders by different trusts and health boards in Northern Ireland, there is glaring inequality in access to diagnosis, intervention and educational services. That must not continue. Why should parents and children who live in Tyrone and Fermanagh, for example, be denied the same access to, and standards of, services that are available in areas where the health trusts have the foresight and commitment to deal with autism?

11.45 am

That contrasts sharply with recent developments in the Republic of Ireland, where a more centrally planned, consistent approach to autism has been adopted.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Will the Member please draw his remarks to a close.

Mr Byrne: In March 2002 two new units were opened in the Republic to deal with autistic children.

The lack of clear direction and commitment of resources for autism by the health authorities has been marked. The Minister must take the issue seriously and take the lead on it, as her counterpart in education has done. Under the new equality legislation, the Minister and the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety have a public duty to ensure that all parents have equal access to the same level of diagnosis and intervention services. We eagerly await the publication of the task force report, which is due at the end of this month.

Autistic children and their parents do not have the luxury of time. They urgently require a screening programme for all pre-school children and equal access to services for autistic children throughout Northern Ireland.

Mr Deputy Speaker: The Business Committee has allocated one hour for the debate, so I must ask Members to restrict their speeches to five minutes.

I have received one amendment to the motion, which is published in the Marshalled List of amendments.

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

I beg to move the following amendment: Delete all after “to” and insert:

“introduce a training programme for Health Visitors, School Nurses, Keystage 1 and Nursery School Teachers to facilitate the early detection of autism and to make adequate provision in collaboration with the Department of Education to meet the needs of autistic children.”

I thank Mr Byrne for bringing to the Assembly an issue that vexes parents and society, because autistic children are special.

Ms Ramsey and I tabled the amendment because there is no widely acceptable, credible tool for universal mass screening. We believe that the use of any such mass-screening tool could create more problems than it solves, by creating false positives and negatives. In other words, children may be diagnosed as autistic when they are not, and autism may remain undetected in others.

There are also serious resource implications to consider. The cost of providing a mass-screening tool may impact on resources for treating autism. By training health visitors, school nurses, and Key Stage 1 and nursery teachers we can establish a framework for individual assessment that will be much more effective in detecting the spectrum of autism.

The key issue, which was missed by the well-intentioned motion, is that we must allocate more resources and support to meet the needs of autistic children, and their parents and carers.

It was in that context that Sinn Féin tabled the amendment. I thank Mr Byrne for bringing this difficult and vexing issue to the House. However, the amendment will much more effectively provide for those difficulties that are suffered by autistic children and their parents.

Rev Robert Coulter: I congratulate Mr Byrne for bringing this motion before the House. It is fitting that the Assembly should debate the matter today. However, I support the amendment, because it reaches beyond the original proposition and adds much more strength to what we are aiming at.

Early intervention is essential in the diagnosis of autism. The sooner that therapy begins, the better chance there is of a child's speech and behaviour progressing. Professionals are understandably reluctant to label a child autistic. However, many children reach the age of six or seven — sometimes even adulthood — before being fully diagnosed. Health boards and trusts should work closely with education boards to ensure that parents and teachers have an early route for those children who reach school without being diagnosed. Health visitors, nurses and doctors should also receive specialist training in the symptoms to look out for, as in the majority of cases an autistic child is diagnosed as a result of an initial diagnosis of hearing or speech problems.

As well as early diagnosis being essential for a child's development, financial and practical help is also available once a diagnosis of special needs has been made. Pre-school teachers, special nursery places, and occupational and speech therapy can then be availed of, as well as financial help for struggling parents who are often forced out of work because they must look after a child with learning difficulties. The disability living allowance (DLA) also needs to be re-examined. Many cases exist of parents of autistic children being turned down for that benefit. They have to undergo the trauma of an appeal to prove that their child needs help. A diagnosis of autism should be enough for DLA to be granted.

My views come not only from my interest in autism as a member of the Health Committee — they are expressed from the heart of a grandfather of an autistic boy. My grandson, who has just turned seven, was diagnosed with autism at the age of two and a half when he was referred to a speech therapist. He still has no speech. However, he was one of the lucky ones who benefited from early therapy, a nursery school place and a place at a special school where the staff were experienced in dealing with autistic spectrum disorder. His parents have also been greatly helped by Parents and Professionals & Autism (PAPA). I pay tribute to the work of that organisation.

Many autistic children in Northern Ireland have gone undetected and will continue to do so until we channel funds and personnel into that vital work. Some dictionaries describe autism as being “divorced from reality”. It is time that MLAs woke up to reality and realised that autism is on the increase. We must be vigilant and help the health professionals. It is not only the need for early diagnosis that is essential. We must also implement a thorough programme of research that is aimed at finding the root causes of autism.

There has already been considerable debate within the community about the alleged links between autism and the MMR vaccine. I wish to emphase that I am not opposed to the vaccination of children. However, Northern Ireland is a democratic society, and one of the foundation stones of any democracy is freedom of choice. Parents must have the freedom to choose whether they want their children to be vaccinated with the single MMR jab or to receive those vaccinations separately. The MMR vaccine’s reputation has become tarnished because of its alleged links with autism.

One of the tragedies of autism is that, as yet, there is no known cure. Early diagnosis is therefore essential, as is an in-depth research programme into the causes of autism. It is also vital that a full independent inquiry be carried out into the safety of the MMR jab. I support the amendment.

Mrs I Robinson: I support the motion, and I thank Mr Byrne for tabling it. I shall include in my comments the needs of autistic adults, because they too require proper attention and adequate provision from the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety. Public awareness of autistic spectrum disorder and the Government’s duty to target and fund measures against the illness must increase and must reflect better direction. We must all understand exactly what autism is, and how it affects both individuals and those who care for them.

Autism is a disability that disrupts the development of social and communication skills. It is believed that approximately 70% of those who suffer from autistic spectrum disorder also have learning difficulties. Whatever their level of ability, which varies widely — some have incredible special talents — they all share a common difficulty in making sense of the world in comparison with other children of a similar age and background. The common denominator is a clear difficulty with social relationships. The individual’s ability to join in social activities is clearly impaired, as is his or her capacity to understand the feelings of others. Most sufferers of autistic spectrum disorder experience great difficulty in acquiring, using and understanding speech; they also have problems with facial expressions and gestures. Typical behaviour and characteristics of autism include: resistance to normal teaching methods; sustained, odd play; lack of eye contact; apparent insensitivity to

pain; a stand-offish manner; crying and tantrums for no apparent reason; and resistance to any change in routine.

Research suggests that there is no single cause for autism, but that it is a physical problem affecting those parts of the brain that integrate language and information processed from the senses. The condition is of physical, not emotional, origin and can be identified by the age of three in most children. Unfortunately, there is no known cure for autism, but with appropriate education and support services, sufferers can be helped to live with as much dignity and independence as possible. We in Northern Ireland can help to deliver that through the Assembly.

The significance of the central aim of the motion, namely early intervention, cannot be underestimated. Coupled with specialist education, early intervention is vital if children with autism are to develop their full potential in life. Early diagnosis of the disability is the first crucial step towards helping them to lead full lives. The later a child is diagnosed, the more he or she has had time to feel different and isolated from others, and the greater the trauma and worry for the family.

Over the years, several constituents whose children are autistic have contacted me. The effect that autistic spectrum disorder has had on the child and the family unit is shocking. For the family, it is hard to cope with a child who cannot mix socially and is indifferent to other children. Inappropriate social behaviour, tantrums and disruptive actions can cause much distress and worry within the family, so support and direction from those who know and care about autistic issues are essential. Isolation does not affect only the sufferers of autism; in many circumstances, their families experience it also.

I am often asked: “To whom do we turn? What help can we get?” There are groups and individuals who are making a serious attempt to help autistic spectrum disorder sufferers and their families to come to terms with the condition and to provide a decent life for them. Autism is a lifelong illness; the sooner it is diagnosed and cared for, the better for the child and his or her family.

The hard work and dedication of groups such as PAPA and Barnardo’s, which encourage and initiate training and research into the subject to facilitate better diagnosis and early intervention, cannot be praised highly enough. I support the motion.

12.00

Ms McWilliams: This is a timely motion, given the recent public debate. The Committee for Health, Social Services and Public Safety debated the link between the measles, mumps and rubella (MMR) vaccine and autism when it became a crisis in the community. For that reason, it is important to debate autism exclusively.

There are several reasons why Joe Byrne’s motion is useful. It is strong because of the great public concern

about the incidence of autism in children, and, until we find out how extensive that is, it will be very difficult to allocate resources to deal with it. Indeed, as other Members said, the earlier that autism is diagnosed, the earlier help can be given not just to the child, but to carers and supporters of families with autistic children.

Debate on autism has also been taking place in Britain. It is interesting that the Minister of State for Health, Jacqui Smith, has said that she will look positively at a national screening programme if it facilitates understanding of the syndrome. Others have talked about the spectrum of disorders. If officials in Britain are giving serious thought to a national screening programme, we must do likewise in Northern Ireland.

According to research conducted in the United States and recently published in the *Journal of the American Medical Association*, there has been a fourfold increase in autism. The research suggests that autism has not suddenly become more widespread because of a recent occurrence, but rather that it is now detected more often. If that is the case, it is due to screening.

If the detection of the condition is on the increase, not only are health professionals being better trained, but screening has been introduced to determine the extent of autism. The message from the United States and Britain is that we would do well to consider introducing a screening programme here.

It is also important to urge people who are concerned about the link between MMR and autism to follow advice and opt for the triple jab, rather than single vaccines, given the dangers that can arise as a result of delays in individual inoculations. Single jabs would increase the risk of disease and would also have huge resource implications. It may lead to people not having their children vaccinated, because single vaccines take much longer to administer than triple jabs. Triple jabs save resources.

If we advise that the link to autism is not proven, and promote the triple jab, we must not leave it at that. We must respond to those who are concerned and confused about the links between MMR and autism. As was suggested in the Health Committee and elsewhere, a national screening programme is the only way to allay the fears of those who write to us: the parents of autistic children, and other parents who demand the introduction of single vaccines in their GP practices. We must answer them; the best response is to continue to advise parents to choose the triple vaccine, and to introduce a screening programme for autistic spectrum disorders alongside it.

I welcome, as did Rev Robert Coulter, the announcement of the new centre, which is supported by parents and professionals in the field of autism. For many years, we have known that self-help and support groups have much to offer. They work alongside professionals and the task forces that deal with autism, bringing together

all their knowledge and expertise. That inter-agency approach is extremely important.

However, the amendment in its own right is not to be ignored. If screening is introduced, it will be necessary to have the training in place.

Mrs Courtney: I congratulate my Colleague Joe Byrne on tabling the motion and for mentioning the bodies that are available to help parents whose children have been diagnosed as autistic.

PAPA was formed in 1989 by a group of concerned parents and professionals. It is a registered charity in Northern Ireland, whose aim is to promote the needs of those with autistic spectrum disorders and their carers. A central office was established in 1992, and a western regional office in 1999. PAPA was first established with a staff of three. It was given a recurring budget of £40,000 per annum for three years. There are now between seven and nine staff. Unfortunately, however, its central funding remains the same. The service could not survive without volunteers.

In my own area, the Foyle Community Trust in the Western Health and Social Services Board used to allocate some funds, but was unable to help in the last financial year. I have spoken to health professionals, and the consensus is that two problems stand out as critical to care. The first, mentioned by every Member who has spoken, is early diagnosis. The second is increased central funding. It was said yesterday that to underline the dire need for increased funding in the Foyle area for autistic spectrum disorders, we have simply to look at the number of doctors who can treat or diagnose patients with autism or associated disorders in the area. At present, there is only one part-time doctor who is qualified to diagnose patients with the condition. The waiting time for this doctor stands at 10 to 11 months. That is unacceptable.

The crucial point seems to be that until a child or individual is diagnosed, the family and the child are in a state of limbo. Once diagnosis has taken place progress can be made, but an 11-month waiting list is perceived as being simply not good enough. Yesterday, the Foyle Community Trust manager for learning disability services said that it provides a service for any child with a severe learning disability. However, medium and milder cases do not receive care. A child who is just above or below the set requirements will miss out because the funding is not there.

PAPA provides parents and carers with leaflets that give valuable information; however, as specialist education and structured support can assist in maximising a child's skills and in minimising any behavioural problems, the right education and care programmes are essential. For example, all children — not just autistic children — throw tantrums. Unless professionals are trained to recognise symptoms of the condition, sufferers can be left undiagnosed until adulthood.

I therefore support the motion, but a serious attempt to address the problem must be made by education and library boards so that it can be recognised by all health professionals. Central funding must also be addressed so that children can avail of specialist help and parents are not left to cope with the problem alone. The educational needs of autistic children are paramount also.

I support the motion.

Rev Dr William McCrea: There is a requirement to address the challenge of screening, diagnosis and early intervention for children with autism. Why does this need exist? The answer is simple: for too long, early diagnosis has been a struggle for many people to achieve.

Screening leading to diagnosis should in turn lead smoothly to intervention by the appropriate health authority. However, many parents, particularly those with young children of pre-school age, have spoken to me — and I am sure to many others in the House — about falling into a black hole immediately after diagnosis, and the Assembly seeks to fill that void. Many parents, indeed several from my constituency, believe that the present system has failed them and that they have been left with no other recourse than to seek alternative expensive private consultations. They hope that their child's condition will be diagnosed properly, that his or her abilities will be assessed, and that that will lead to a genuine consideration of the child's future health and education needs.

Like other Members, I can produce many letters from parents expressing their distress at what they see as a failure in the system. It saddens me that they think that the system that was designed to offer them support and guidance when they are most needed has failed. There is a strong consensus among professionals about that, and Joanne Douglas of the Spectrum Diagnostic Assessment and Theory Centre of Queen's University, Belfast said:

"Early intervention is beneficial for children with autism, partly because it is thought that they need intensive support to reach their optimal learning, and partly because early intervention is known to help reduce challenging behaviour."

No doubt, it will be argued that the current guidelines do not recommend universal screening for pre-school children with autism on the basis that there are no suitable screening instruments. However, if an autistic spectrum disorder is not identified at an early age, it follows that the extent of the need for provision will not be recognised either — that is a catch-22 situation.

There is a clear consensus that early identification must be achieved through the increased professional awareness of all community staff who have contact with young children and their families, particularly GPs, health visitors and educational psychologists. The consequences of not diagnosing autism at an early stage are worth bearing in mind. A survey conducted last year by the National Autistic Society said that only 43% of children at the less able

end of the spectrum were diagnosed before the age of five, despite

"Having urgent needs that could have been addressed through early intervention."

Approximately 18% of people at the lower end of the spectrum did not receive a proper diagnosis until the age of 16 or beyond, yet evidence suggests that autism is becoming more prevalent, and I have statistics from other parts of the United Kingdom that show that. When I tried to ascertain the number of cases of autism in each health board area in Northern Ireland, I was disappointed to be informed by the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety that those statistics were unavailable. Does that not therefore acknowledge that if the information is unavailable, the appropriate provision for children is also unavailable?

Another survey conducted by the National Autistic Society showed that only 38% of adults with an autistic spectrum disorder admitted to having had a community care assessment. For many, slipping through the net until adulthood brought further complications, and those left to struggle without support more often than not spiralled into mental decline. That is a disappointing scenario, given that people with Asperger's syndrome have several occupational strengths that make them excellent workers.

In recognising the need to care for children with autistic spectrum disorders, it follows that we must have professional care that can be delivered by those who are specifically trained to support individuals with those disorders. Only then will children benefit from the support of staff who have appropriate knowledge and experience of teaching children with an autistic spectrum disorder, and specialist training must be provided for teaching and support staff who work with autistic children. I support the motion.

12.15 pm

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety (Ms de Brún): Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Tá mé buíoch den Uasal Byrne as an deis a chur ar fáil domh plé a dhéanamh ar scagthástáil le haghaidh uathachais a thabhairt isteach do pháistí réamhscoile agus ar sheirbhísí a chur ar fáil le riar ar a riachtanais. Tá a fhios agam go bhfuil an-suim ag móran Comhaltaí san ábhar.

Is féidir uathachas a aithint ar chomharthaí luatha lagaithe i sóisialú agus i gcumarsáid agus ar an iompraíocht athchleachtach. Cuimsíonn an speictream mí-eagair uathaigh páistí atá faoi lagú trom intleachta agus páistí eile atá ar ard-fheidhmiú, ar a dtugtar Siondróm Asperger.

I am grateful that Mr Byrne has provided an opportunity to discuss the introduction of autism screening for pre-school children and the provision of services to meet their needs. Autism is of considerable interest to many Members. It is defined by early signs of impairments,

socialisation and communication difficulties and repetitive behaviour. Autistic spectrum disorders affect children of varying intellectual ability and impairment — from the severely impaired to those with high-functioning autism, termed Asperger's Syndrome. Approximately one third of children with autism appear to lose skills in their second year, but the significance of the cause and life course of the disorder is unclear.

As stated again and again during the debate, the consensus among experts on autistic spectrum disorders is that early diagnosis and support are of great importance if the best outcome is to be achieved. Autism can manifest itself before the age of two and can be identified in some children at that early age. However, some children may not be diagnosed early because of the variability in the onset and severity of the condition. Several tests can be used to screen for different types of autism, including CHAT, the checklist for autism in toddlers, and DISCO, the diagnostic interview for social and communication disorders. Those tests can be useful in certain cases, but no one test is reliable for all autistic spectrum disorders.

Missing genuine difficulties or raising unnecessary worries are serious problems. For that reason, several studies in diagnostic screening procedures have been carried out. In March 2001, the Department of Health in London commissioned the Medical Research Council (MRC) to provide it with a clear picture of what scientific research has revealed about the epidemiology and causes of autism. The MRC report of December 2001 states that

“To date, there is no screening instrument that would identify all and only those children with ASDs”.

‘Health for All Children’ is the periodic report of the joint working party on child health surveillance. The current draft of the fourth edition states that

“Formal screening for learning disabilities, developmental delay and cerebral palsy are not currently recommended”.

Reference was made in the debate to the National Initiative for Autism: Screening and Assessment (NIASA). For the past 15 months, it has been examining screening, diagnosis and early interventions for autism. Its view is that there is no adequate screening tool for autism. Therefore, it could not recommend the introduction of screening.

Figures on the prevalence of autism vary according to the criteria applied. Therefore, I must treat with caution some of the figures that were referred to today. Those supplied by health and social services boards in September 2001 show that 732 children were known to trusts as having been diagnosed with an autistic spectrum disorder. Although there has been some increase in prevalence — the exact levels and causes of which require further research — there is no definitive evidence of an increasing incidence of autism in children. The increased professional awareness and higher public profile referred to in the debate may be contributing factors to the rise in

public awareness of the condition, which may in turn lead to an illusion or suggestion of a higher prevalence rate when that is not the case.

The child health surveillance programme monitors the development of babies and pre-school children and is the primary means of early identification of impairments in development. However, some children may not be identified early because of the variability in the onset and severity of the condition. Given that autism affects communication and behaviour, it is difficult to identify the condition before children reach the age of two, when impairments begin to become noticeable.

However, behavioural communication impairments may not become apparent until a child has started school. The school health service, therefore, has a key role in identifying developmental disorders in school-age children, and it can refer children to a range of professionals, including speech therapists and child or educational psychologists. In that regard, education professionals work closely with their counterparts in health and social services.

If a child is identified as having autistic tendencies by a health visitor or other healthcare professional, he or she will be referred to relevant clinicians for formal diagnosis. That will trigger a referral to the appropriate health and social services and support, including that provided by voluntary organisations such as PAPA. I take this opportunity to add my praise and thanks to that of others for the work of the voluntary organisations, as well as those working in the service.

The Department sponsored a diagnostic scoping study that was carried out by PAPA and the University of Ulster between June 1997 and December 1998. The purpose of the study was to evaluate the effectiveness of diagnostic provision for people with autistic spectrum disorders and their families, and to make recommendations for the enhancement of service provision. The key principle is that diagnosis should take place as early as possible in the child's life to sustain the family's adaptation to the outcome of the diagnosis and to maximise and enhance the child's developmental potential. The report on the study was issued to health and social services boards to inform service development.

Healthcare professionals' awareness of autism and autistic spectrum disorders has increased significantly in recent years and continues to do so. We are committed to developing that understanding further. The improved understanding is resulting in better diagnosis, which, in turn, is informing service development. For its part, PAPA has been instrumental in rolling out the treatment and education of autistic and related communication handicapped children (TEACCH) education programme. It has also provided important awareness training for professional healthcare staff. Health visitors and school nurses receive autism awareness training through a

one-year postgraduate course at the University of Ulster. Training is not currently provided in the early detection of autism. However, as part of the standard five-year review, a group that is made up of community nurses, nurse managers and representatives from the University of Ulster and the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety, is examining the content of the curriculum. The issues raised during the debate will be fed into that review.

Iris Robinson asked about autistic adults. Service provision is made through the community learning disability services.

With regard to the weight of research evidence on the safety of the measles, mumps and rubella (MMR) vaccine, the World Health Organization, the Medical Research Council, the Medicine Safety Committee and the Joint Committee on Vaccination and Immunisation have all stated that there is no link between the MMR vaccine and autism. I have seen no credible evidence to the contrary. The Medicine Safety Committee and the Joint Committee on Vaccination and Immunisation also advised recently that the MMR vaccine is safer than giving the vaccines separately. Our Chief Medical Officer wrote to GPs and other healthcare professionals in February to update advice on handling parental concerns. The purpose of the letter was to update professionals on the most recent studies on the MMR vaccine and to assure them that the Department and independent medical experts remain convinced that the vaccine is both safe and the most effective way to protect children from measles, mumps and rubella.

Mr Byrne raised a point about applied behaviour analysis, which is one of many interventions that have been suggested as beneficial for people with autism. Various elements of behavioural therapy are already being used by healthcare professionals in that field. Although it is recognised that behavioural therapy can be beneficial, the particular intervention used is determined by a clinical judgement based on the assessed needs of the child. I am not aware of the case that Mr Byrne mentioned, so he may wish to write to me about that.

The Department of Education's task force on autism took evidence from boards and trusts, rather than formally involve the Department. The report will be out for debate, and I look forward to that. I reiterate that healthcare professionals accept the need for early diagnosis and intervention, as has been stressed here.

Annie Courtney asked about support for PAPA. In the last three financial years, departmental support for PAPA has totalled £239,000. The Department has provided the project funding for the diagnostic scoping study, and will consider any funding proposals submitted by PAPA. Of course, these will go alongside other proposals.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Minister, I must ask you to conclude your remarks soon.

Ms de Brún: The health and social services boards are reporting on developments in services for children with autism, and these are being progressed on a board basis. One of my Department's priorities for action requires boards and trusts to continue to develop therapy provision to reduce waiting times for children's and adults' services. We will continue to monitor developments in screening, and review current arrangements in the light of positive developments. Officials are involved in discussions with PAPA about how additional awareness training for healthcare professionals might be provided. The care and development of children with autism is a shared responsibility across a number of Departments, and a holistic approach will offer a better and brighter future for these children, which is an absolute commitment on all our parts.

Ms Ramsey: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I thank and commend Joe Byrne for tabling this motion. John Kelly and I proposed our amendment because there is no widely accepted, credible tool for universal mass screening. Other Members pointed out that autism has been brought to the fore lately, and that the issue has been raised with political parties. With that in mind, I commend PAPA and other groups for placing autism not only at the top of the political agenda, but at the top of the general agenda.

I welcome yesterday's announcement by the Minister of Education that videos will be developed and produced for the parents of children with autism and dyslexia, and that a CD-ROM will be provided for their teachers. He also said that the Centre for Cross Border Studies would engage a special education teacher on secondment to organise and facilitate a jointly funded programme designed to promote dialogue and co-operation among professionals in the field, which is key.

People want a statement. It is on record that the four reports that the task group has commissioned highlight the need for the training of classroom teachers to identify children who may have an autistic spectrum disorder or dyslexia, to address their difficulties, and to meet their needs. The reports also point out the importance of the involvement of parents in the assessment of their children's difficulties, and the training of parents in suitable approaches to meeting their children's needs, so that a continuity of care and learning approach can be provided throughout the child's day. That ties in with our amendment. We are calling for early intervention. Health visitors, nursery schoolteachers and school nurses should be involved in early intervention. Key to our amendment is that by providing this crucial training and development of health visitors, school nurses, Key Stage 1 teachers and nursery teachers, we would create a framework of individual assessment that would be much more effective in detecting autism.

It is also vital to provide resources to meet the needs of people with autism and their families — that is what

people want, it is what parents want, and what the groups are telling us is needed. The key requirement is early intervention, and I agree with Bob Coulter, who has first-hand knowledge of autism, that the amendment goes further than the original motion. We do not need, and cannot allow, children to fall out of the loop by creating false positives or negatives. The recent cases of inaccurate screening for breast cancer and of misdiagnosed breast cancer in Hammersmith Hospital should make us all cautious. There is no universally accepted issue about mass screening.

12.30 pm

Several Members have spoken about a joined-up approach, which is key. We need a joined-up approach from the Department of Education and the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety. That is exactly what our amendment is about. There is no point saying that we need this and that, when the motion calls for only one Department to provide what is needed. The Department of Education and the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety must get together; one has as much responsibility as the other.

I agree wholeheartedly with Annie Courtney that the professionals need to be trained to identify the problems. That is the key point of our amendment. I commend Joe Byrne for tabling the motion, and I do not want to take away from that. However, our amendment takes it a small step further. It puts the onus not only on the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety, but on the Department of Education, which is crucial. I urge Members to support the amendment.

Mr Byrne: The debate is timely, because many parents and children suffer as a result of this disability. They feel that they are on their own and are not being taken seriously, especially by the health authorities. My reason for tabling this motion is that many children and parents are suffering. This has been a neglected disability for many years.

I want a screening system to be introduced because there must be a more formal process of diagnosing those children who suffer from autism. The current system is too haphazard. I accept the amendment's sentiments; it is trying to address the issue of training. However, I would not want the amendment to be an escape clause, for we would be failing the people who want us to seriously address the issue.

It is completely unfair that families who suspect that their child has major behavioural problems feel that they must seek a private medical consultation with autism experts. There is something wrong with our healthcare system if we neglect those parents who feel that they need that due attention. That is why I chose carefully the words of the motion. I accept that all who have spoken during the debate have done so in good faith. They are

genuinely concerned about the problem and want to try to improve the situation.

John Kelly made the case for the amendment. He said that early diagnosis is the crucial issue — a point that was emphasised by several other Members. Parents are seeking reassurance on that issue. They want early diagnosis so that intervention and treatment can occur. Bob Coulter brought real-life experience to the debate when he spoke about how he has witnessed the problems of children who suffer from this disability. I was encouraged by his words, and I accept the sentiments and the content of his speech.

Bob Coulter and other Members praised the work of PAPA. It has been in existence for only 12 years in Northern Ireland, yet it has highlighted this difficulty and disability in a co-ordinated way. I pay tribute to those who are involved in voluntary organisations like PAPA, who are trying to highlight the problems and issues. They seek to bring it to the attention of the authorities that help is required.

Mrs Iris Robinson also supported the sentiments of the motion and made reference to autistic adults. There is a feeling that they are often abandoned. In particular, elderly parents worry about what will happen to their adult autistic son or daughter. They worry about who will look after their child when they die.

There is ongoing debate about which diagnostic technique to use. I am not entering that debate, but I hope that the Health Department will not cop out because it feels that no definitive technique of screening exists.

This is not a time for cop out. I appeal to the Minister to see that her Department takes the issue seriously and gets involved in co-ordinating the efforts of the health boards and trusts across Northern Ireland. The people of Tyrone and Fermanagh should not be neglected. I know people in Belfast who have had to fight very hard, and attend case meetings, to try to get people to take the issue seriously.

Parents are annoyed because they feel that they must fight and agitate. They often feel that the medical professionals doubt their sincerity when they try to get them to take the issue seriously. I support the National Health Service, but I find it intolerable that people must resort to private medical consultation.

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

Mr Byrne: I thank the Minister for attending the debate and for the content of her speech. I appeal to her to take the matter seriously. Let us have action in the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety. I support the task force endeavours to have proper co-ordination of the healthcare diagnosis, the treatment and the education provision needed.

In the interests and spirit of what has been a worthwhile debate, I accept the amendment. However, the amendment must be understood as being an addition to the spirit and sentiment of my motion. The Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety must take the matter seriously and work in collaboration with the Department of Education.

Question, That the amendment be made, put and agreed to.

Main Question, as amended, put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That this Assembly calls on the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to introduce a training programme for Health Visitors, School Nurses, Keystage 1 and Nursery School Teachers to facilitate the early detection of autism and to make adequate provision in collaboration with the Department of Education to meet the needs of autistic children.

BURNS REPORT

Mr S Wilson: I beg to move

That this Assembly notes the publication of the Burns report on 24 October 2001 on the review of post-primary education.

One reason for tabling the motion was to give Members an opportunity to comment on a report provided for a Department in the local Administration that has generated the most widespread contributions and responses from Members and from people in our constituencies.

I receive four or five letters every day from people who are concerned about the Burns Report and the way in which the Minister intends to use it to follow his narrow socialist agenda. Despite assurances from the Minister — and there have been many — that he has not made his mind up on the issue, and that he wishes to listen to the consultations and the responses to the consultations, he is clearly on record, from the first day that he took the job, as saying what he intends to do. He described the selection process as “inhumane” — something that many of us took with a pinch of salt, given that it came from someone who carried out, and who directed others to carry out, some of the most inhumane actions in Northern Ireland in the past 30 years.

When the Minister spoke to the Council for Catholic Maintained Schools (CCMS) recently, he said that academic selection must go. That was hardly the view of someone approaching the subject with an open mind. Hence, widespread concern exists in the community that a Minister, because of the system in the Assembly, can make decisions for which he need not account. He can impose his will on the education system in Northern Ireland.

I have no doubt about what the Minister intends to do; he has made that clear. He intends to destroy the existing system as systematically and as totally as he and his compatriots destroyed the centre of Londonderry when he was the commander of the IRA there. The Burns Report has provided him with educational Semtex with which he intends to destroy the system. I am not sure about Mr Burns’s intention; however, I know what the Minister’s intention is, because he has made it clear.

There is a public outcry, and desperation is creeping into the Minister’s actions as he goes around looking for support. He is a man who knows that his day is going. He will be Minister for only one more year, and I assure the House that, come the next election, when the DUP is the biggest party in the Assembly, neither Martin McGuinness nor any of his compatriots will be in the Northern Ireland Executive. Unlike David Trimble, when we say that we shall not have terrorists in Government, we mean that we shall not have terrorists in Government.

There is urgency about the task that the Minister has set himself. He is now trying to go on the offensive. A massive propaganda campaign is under way, which would

have done Joseph Goebbels proud, in which £600,000 of taxpayers' money is being used to produce 15,000 videos and to circulate pamphlets to every household in Northern Ireland that outlines the Minister's case for destroying the education system. The pamphlet is not a balanced piece of work; it is full of inaccuracies. However, it has been paid for by taxpayers' money. I have no doubt that, should the Minister feel that the pamphlet is not going to convince people, the IRA/Sinn Féin election machine will go into business, and there will be multiple collections of forms to ensure that the outcome that he wants for his mini-referendum is achieved.

I could say much about the Burns Report, but I shall leave some items to other Members for comment. Let us look at issues such as the collegiate system, with the levels of bureaucracy that that will entail. There will be a board of principals; a collegiate support centre; a collegiate liaison council and a collegiate standing conference. We are heading down a road in education that is being disparaged in health, where there are levels of bureaucracy in the form of trusts. Almost every week in the Assembly I hear people railing against such bureaucracy.

Mr Weir: Does the Member agree that the only thing missing is a collegiate civic forum?

Mr S Wilson: Even that might come eventually. The proposal has not been costed, and there is no indication as to how it will interact with the education and library boards — that is an entire debate in itself. The costing issue has been dismissed by the assertion that the proposal will not really be that much more expensive.

Under the Burns proposals, everyone will be entitled to school transport in the collegiate system. Mr Burns seems to think that that will not cost a great deal of money.

12.45 pm

The Burns Report states:

"We propose that transport assistance should be provided to any suitable school within the Collegiate which is designated as the 'local Collegiate'."

That could multiply the transport budget by five, and yet no indication is given of that. That is a whole debate at which we must look. However, Burns's contention that we should end academic selection is central to it all. The Minister has tried to portray this as ending selection, but that is a fraud, because Burns does not say that. Burns says that he wishes to see an end to academic selection, but he then goes on to say that schools will be oversubscribed for a long time and that there will have to be some selection criteria for those schools.

Mr Burns states that that selection criteria will be fairer because they will be based on parental choice. However, as some schools will be oversubscribed, it stands to reason that parental choice will be a fraud because parents will not have a free choice. That is why he then had to introduce all kinds of social criteria, not

academic criteria. The most damning social criterion of all is a pupil's proximity to the school. He said that it would be used only as a last resort. Most principals whom I have spoken to have said that the first three criteria — parental choice, siblings at the school and whether your parent is a teacher at the school — would leave about 95% of the places undecided. Therefore, it will come down to where a pupil lives or whether a special case can be made.

Believe me, when it comes to making special cases, people who are socially advantaged will have the advantage, not the people who are socially deprived. Those who are socially advantaged can get reports from consultant psychologists. We shall not move away from selection, but we shall move away from selection that is based on ability and the best educational route for a youngster to selection that is based on social standing. If any Member believes that the socially deprived have a better chance under a selection system that depends on their social standing, they must live in the clouds. We shall not have a fair system, despite the fact that all the arguments that the Minister has advanced are about the system being fairer.

The most bizarre argument that I have heard from the Minister is that he now wishes to become the champion of working-class Protestant children. It is a pity that he did not think about that 30 years ago when he was blowing them up, shooting them and making them orphans. Anyone who believes that Martin McGuinness is concerned about the well-being of Protestant children from working class backgrounds needs their head felt.

The other argument is that our system has failed. Mr Burns makes that argument, and the Minister repeats it parrot-like *ad infinitum* — some people would say *ad nauseam*. The Minister seems to revise his opinion all the time; yesterday he said that we are not as good at the top end as we should be, and we are no good at the bottom end. He tells us that he was deprived, that he was denied a good education, and that that is why he had to become a butcher boy; of course, he then moved on to being a master butcher. However, I would have thought that at least he could have understood his press statements and the answers that he has given to the House. If he did not understand them, perhaps his officials could have explained them to him.

The Minister said in a press release that he was delighted that schools in Northern Ireland were improving their performance and that year 12 pupils who got five or more GCSEs had risen to 56% this year. That figure was better than in England or Wales, where only 48% of students reached that standard. According to his press release, we do better at the top end. He gave an answer to my friend, Mr Weir, less than a month ago, and I am sure that his short-term memory cannot be that bad. He said that when it comes to the bottom end, we have done better than Scotland, England or Wales over the past five years with regard to the number of students who leave

school without any GCSE qualifications. Therefore, where is this nonsense coming from that we have a system, which tries to slot people in according to what is best for them educationally, that hurts the very good students, the very bad students or those in between? That is not the case on the basis of the figures that he has provided to the House and to the public.

Children have different abilities and aptitudes and need different educational experiences, which, ironically, Mr Burns talks about in his guiding principles. Youngsters' abilities are different and varied, yet the Minister wants to fit them all into schools that cater for all abilities. He cannot have it both ways. If one says that children have different aptitudes, skills and academic ability — and they have — one must have different routes open to them. The alternative is to take the discredited system, which was introduced in England in the 1960s, that says that everyone should go to the same kind of school, supposedly in the interests of equality, for exactly the same training in spite of their differing abilities.

Mr McCartney: Does the Member agree that the present system of education on the mainland is withdrawing from the comprehensive system and passively recognising that it has been a failure?

Mr S Wilson: They use the words of the Prime Minister's adviser that the system, which the Minister and Mr Burns wish to impose in Northern Ireland, is "bog standard". The Minister takes his socialism to the nth degree when he says:

"Equality in my view does not just mean equality of opportunity, it means the equality of outcome."

Does that mean that everyone must leave school with 15 GCSE A-grade passes, or that everyone must leave school with a mediocre education? That is the only meaning that I can take from that statement, and that is what is driving his agenda.

Mr Burns talks about the pupil profile, which would include more than simply academic ability and testing, and says that that should be available to all parents. I have a couple of difficulties with that. First, there is no evidence that it will advantage the people it is supposed to advantage. When we had this in the 1960s, it was found to be even more socially divisive because it fell down when it came to extracurricular activities. Many middle-class parents can provide more support for youngsters than parents from working-class areas, where there is not the same income to support a wide variety of experience — dancing classes, music classes, et cetera.

We must be careful if we go down that route. If we want to measure the wide ability of youngsters — their sporting talent, their musical, dramatic or artistic talents — that is fair enough. However, objective testing is still required and puts everyone on a level keel. That testing leaves teachers less open to the accusation of favouritism, and in an age of litigation leaves teachers less open to

court action. Teachers would be forced to be the sole arbiters of those pupil profiles, and they would be mad to go down that route. Outside objective testing is required, and whether that is done over a long period with less intrusive tests or as one test a year in each of the final three years, it does not matter. However, the principle of having outside testing is an important one.

There is no point in the reports, when available, going only to the parents; they must also be made available to the receiving schools. The argument against that in the Burns Report is that that will put teachers under undue pressure. However, the report later states that once the schools received the reports, they could be used to stream youngsters. Where is the logic in that? If the reports are to be used by the schools to stream the youngsters, why do the schools not have them in the first place? Moreover, how do the schools protect the teachers by saying that the reports are only used after the youngsters are admitted, when they can be used to stream them? That does not make sense. It is important that the parents should have sight of the reports with an objective measured by some outside agency. The schools should also receive the reports.

Another argument is that the selection procedure fails youngsters. If the Minister believes that, it shows his academic shallowness. Is it so that suddenly, when children reach the age of 10, in the month of November when they do the tests, they move from being successes to being failures? Academic and educational failure has its origins long before children ever sit a test — failure sometimes takes root shortly after birth. The environment into which they are born or their early years in school may affect them. The problem needs to be addressed then and not by scrapping the means of testing youngsters to see the best way forward for post-primary education. I did want to mention post-primary schools, but I am sure that other Members will do that later in the debate.

The Burns Report is a recipe for disaster. In the hands of the Minister of Education it is a dangerous weapon. I hope that the Minister will not try to bypass the Assembly when making decisions on the subject and that the Assembly will show good balance and common sense when making its judgement.

The sitting was suspended at 1.00 pm.

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

2.00 pm

Madam Deputy Speaker: I have received many requests to speak to this motion, and, in order to facilitate as many of them as possible, I will set an initial time limit of seven minutes.

Mr McCartney: On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. You said that you would set an initial time limit of seven minutes. Does that mean that subsequent Members who speak might have more than seven minutes?

Madam Deputy Speaker: Absolutely not. I used the word “initial” to allow me to reduce the time from seven minutes if necessary.

Mr Kennedy: I am glad to have the opportunity to participate in this important debate. Members have had the chance to consider in detail the proposals in the Burns Report, and they can now comment on them and offer constructive criticism.

The Ulster Unionist Party has several concerns about the proposals and is therefore unable to endorse them. It is considering the recommendations in detail and analysing their potential impact on education in Northern Ireland. However, it will be making more workable recommendations for education, and it encourages full participation in the consultation process.

The main proposals of the Burns Report can be outlined as follows: an end to the transfer tests; the prohibition of academic selection for grammar schools; the possible closure of up to 40 schools — a worrying prospect that would have a serious, adverse impact, especially on rural areas; the development of pupil profiles; the requirement of all schools to use the same specified admission criteria; and the creation of networks of post-primary schools.

The basic conclusion of the Burns Report is the introduction of a comprehensive system of education. The report places much emphasis on the need to ensure that there will be equity among schools and pupils. However, it does that at the expense of a sharp examination of our schools’ standards and how they might be improved. That lack of focus on objective standards and the failure to explain how the proposals would raise standards are serious shortfalls.

Most people accept that there are problems with the transfer test. However, the recommendation that academic selection should end is also unacceptable. That sort of approach would inevitably lead to the creation of a comprehensive system of education, and it is disingenuous of the report’s supporters to argue otherwise.

One problem is that it is doubtful that there is support for a comprehensive system. Parents’ views must be considered, and the report contains no evidence to support

the view that such a system would improve standards overall. The experience of the comprehensive system in GB suggests that the reverse is true. It would be ironic if Northern Ireland were to establish a comprehensive system, when GB is attempting to move away from that failed system.

The establishment of pupil profiles is sensible; however, receiving schools must be able to view them. What is the use of such profiles if they cannot be used to help place pupils in the most appropriate schools? The Burns admission criteria also show a lack of understanding of how the system is likely to work. I believe that they would lead ultimately to selection by postcode. The report appears to overlook the fact that once distance is a prime consideration, that will exacerbate the problems of oversubscription. At present oversubscription is limited because it is known that some pupils are likely to be admitted to popular schools, so it is incorrect to argue that distance will come into play only as a last resort tie-breaker, and the Assembly must consider that.

On the creation of collegiates, it is desirable to have closer co-operation between neighbouring schools. However, the problem rests with the report’s view that the arrangements will be central to the system and will create, in size and composition, a system that is so bureaucratic that it will not work practically. It must also be stressed that there is no experience, internationally or otherwise — there is not even a pilot scheme — on which to base a collegiate system. It is worth noting that, given the announcement made by the Northern Catholic bishops last week, the collegiate proposal contained in the Burns report is dead in the water.

The Minister is mishandling the consultation process that he instigated. It is no longer being conducted in a fair and equitable manner. Unfortunately, officials in the Department of Education appear to have allowed themselves to become mere cheerleaders for the type of education system advocated by the Minister and his party. That goes beyond their remit and is not acceptable. The video that was produced by the Department, and the household pamphlet that is in the making, are clear examples of the lack of impartiality shown by the Department, which will not assist the proper consideration and resolution of this important issue. In relation to the household pamphlet, provision should be made for granting public funds to allow groups that are opposed to those ill-thought-out proposals to put their alternative proposals to parents, thus preserving objectivity.

There are many more issues; however, time does not permit me to address them. I want to apologise to Sammy Wilson, who proposed the motion, because I may not be able to stay until the end of this important debate. There is no discourtesy intended.

Ms Lewsley: It is important that people realise that Northern Ireland needs an education system that is effective

and well-resourced. We need a system that is open, inclusive, flexible enough to cater for all needs, and responsive to the society that it serves. It is vital that there be a new all-ability system to offer education on an inclusive basis, guaranteeing equality of opportunity for all.

There has been much opposition to selection, on the grounds that the system is unfair, divisive, ineffective and damaging to children and society. I acknowledge the benefits that were brought about when the 11-plus was introduced. In a post-war society, in which standard education finished at age 14, it opened the door to secondary-level education for a new generation of children. However, we are now in the twenty-first century, and the system must be adapted to reflect the needs of modern society.

I broadly welcome the Burns Report. However, I have reservations that I will refer to later. In general, the principle and objectives of the report reflect the intention to develop a high-quality education system that will allow each young person to develop his or her full potential and will reflect the value of each child. The report acknowledges the untold damage that was inflicted on generations of children by inaccurate testing, artificial segregation and damage to fragile self-confidence. The assessment that the current system is inflexible, fragmented, wasteful of valuable resources and lacks equality of opportunity is valid also.

There is a compelling case for the fundamental reform of transfer procedures from primary to post-primary schools. My office has received numerous letters from parents, all agreeing that the 11-plus should be abolished and that academic selection for 11-year-olds should end. There is also broad support for increased emphasis on choice. That can be seen as a positive step towards equality and can bring benefits in human terms by reducing the damage to self-esteem.

However, as I said before, I have concerns about equality of opportunity and parity of esteem. There is still an apparent intention to retain distinct types of schools that tend towards more vocational studies. I have reservations about categorising 11-year-old children in that way, even if it is not intended to be fixed or final. The proposals to broaden options at post-14 years should help to improve parity of esteem, though it may be difficult to change attitudes while retaining distinctive pathways from age 11.

I am also concerned that, despite all the good intentions, streaming in line with social and economic backgrounds, rather than individual preference or potential, will still occur. That is backed up by European evidence that academic school populations are made up of children from better-off backgrounds. The high academic standards of the present can be maintained and offered to more children through the teaching of 11- to 18-year-olds

together, alongside improved vocational and social development.

The report recommends change. It is at the consultation stage, and nothing has been set in stone. That is why this debate is important. It is also important that grammar schools should not feel threatened or cause panic in the community by informing parents that their children will not be eligible for entrance under the new criteria. The main principles behind the report should be increased opportunity and choice for all. The review body has been most thorough in dealing with issues such as the transfer to post-primary education and the incorporation of the wide-ranging needs of young people in schools.

Mr McHugh: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I welcome the opportunity to speak on the Burns Report, even though it is the second time that the matter has been raised. We could go over the old arguments ad infinitum, but that would not change who says what in the House. I thought that we were having some impact on the Chairperson and the Deputy Chairperson of the Education Committee by agreeing that there was a need for change in education and that people want that change. That is open to debate and disagreement.

The Burns Report has taken us to a new level in the education debate in that we now have a way of finding the change that meets present needs, rather than those of 40 or 50 years ago. It must be done; people agree that it must be done, including teachers and parents. That fundamental point must be addressed. Some parents in some areas are not being addressed by their Assembly representatives. The situation has not changed over the past 50 years or more.

This debate is about equality and giving a voice to everyone, especially the most vulnerable and the most disadvantaged in our society. Research by Gallagher and Smith on the impact of academic selection has clearly shown that there is a strong correlation between the transfer test and a child's socio-economic status. The percentage of grammar school pupils who are entitled to free school meals ranges from a fraction of one per cent to around twenty-five per cent. In secondary schools it ranges from 20% to 70%. In other words, of all post-primary pupils who are entitled to free school meals, 15% are in grammar schools and 85% are in other schools.

2.15 pm

Several arguments are made in favour of grammar schools. It is said that they offer opportunities for able children to succeed irrespective of socio-economic status. However, the main indicator of socio-economic status is the percentage of pupils who are entitled to free school meals, which offers stark and startling evidence to the contrary. It is argued that selection is made on the grounds of academic excellence, not according to a pupil's socio-economic background. Schools, representatives

and others should note the evidence that the poorest children in the Western Education and Library Board and South-Eastern Education and Library Board areas are between five and 10 times more likely to be in a school other than a grammar establishment.

Another argument is that significant numbers of children from poorer backgrounds attend grammar schools; that is not so. Academic selection and greater affluence are closely and inextricably linked. The argument that a comprehensive system would lead to selection by postcode is arrogant and hypocritical. The polarisation by postcode, as evidenced by the figures, is astounding.

That grammar schools ensure high standards of academic excellence for few is dramatically outlined in these and other figures. Grammar schools are not for the many, and, in particular, they are not for children from poorer backgrounds. The argument is for the preservation of privilege; it is not for the equalisation of opportunity.

People claim that grammar schools serve communities well and that children from poorer backgrounds are admitted to them. In neither case is that true, and that is especially so regarding children from the Protestant community. Who is representing the Protestant children from the areas that I mentioned?

A point was made about the Minister's concern. The Minister is concerned about children in all areas. Do those who purport to support grammar schools and academic-based selection represent everyone in their constituencies? Do they represent people in deprived areas? Do they represent those who vote for them in the matter of education, given the figures that I have outlined? People in such areas would agree that they have certainly not been represented over the past 50 years. The problem is that people have voted along sectarian lines and have failed to use their votes to help themselves educationally.

The problem is academic-based selection. People have been carried along by the arguments made today by Sammy Wilson and others, without examining the subject in detail. It is important that the issue be debated in such a way as to bring us into a new era, and that it should not be about simply sticking to the same old sectarian lies.

Parents, particularly those from deprived areas, need to examine the arguments closely. There are deprived areas in many of the constituencies of Members who purport to represent people as MLAs. People must look closely at what will be best for their children's future. What will represent the best future for all children, not just the few? Do the representatives of the 8% who attend grammar schools from deprived areas, particularly TSN areas, represent all children in those areas properly? Are they representing the few elitist groups who are pushing them harder in this debate? Go raibh maith agat.

Mrs E Bell: The debate is opportune as there is obviously an interest among the public. However, I was concerned and disappointed by some of Sammy Wilson's speech. Like many Members, I have been inundated with letters from parents who are concerned about the repercussions of the Burns Report and its implementation.

Last October, I said on behalf of the Alliance Party that we welcomed the Burns Report as a basis for studying alternatives to the discredited 11-plus transfer procedure, but that we were — even then — concerned about implementing it in its entirety.

There are practical problems with the setting up of collegiates, which would, it is hoped, provide a flexible education system that would benefit all children. The advantage of such a system is that it would require real working together if it were to be a success for all pupils. The one thing that was generally agreed by most people is that the 11-plus is an inequitable system that divides children at an unnecessarily early age into successes and failures. We must make it a priority that, whatever comes out of this report, the trauma and tension for pupils, parents and teachers should become a thing of the past.

The new system must be flexible enough to allow all children, with the help of teachers and parents, to be able, at a responsible stage — not during the transfer from primary to post-primary education — to make their own decisions about their educational future. That could be regarded as personal selection, but one that is made with the knowledge of one's capabilities and aspirations.

The Alliance Party will be making its submission, as will other parties, after we have studied in detail this report with the party's education group. It will then be approved by the party council, so I will not make specific comments. However, our view is that a qualifying entrance test should not be the method of transfer. Also, more investment should be made, whatever the system, in nursery education. Closer attention could be paid to the integrated system, which the Alliance Party feels is inclusive, and which could be seen as a possible pilot scheme to show the impact of the abolition of the 11-plus in Northern Ireland. We will be discussing the appropriate number of collegiates, because there may not be a need for so many. We will be looking at practicalities such as transport — the transfer between schools depending on the curriculum subjects that a child chooses. We should not throw out the good aspects of secondary and grammar schools that have existed until now, but we must ensure that all children are allowed to make their own free choices with the acceptance of parents and the advice of teachers.

I want to read part of one of the many letters that I received in support of grammar schools. The writer concludes:

"I feel that grammar schools should remain an essential and integral part of any future educational system and should not be seen

as an elite institution catering for a few, but should be seen as part of a system combining academic, vocational and technical training so that the needs and abilities of all children are met. In addition, greater freedom of movement between the different types of schools should be possible so that all pupils can achieve their full potential”.

I, and the party’s education group, see no problem with that, and we will be examining the matter.

As I said earlier, there are questions to be asked. The Minister will be aware of them. We must know where the money for that will come from. There are worries about the capital programme and other budgets. Last week the Education Committee was deliberating over the bids. So, where will the money come from? There are worries about the pupil profiles. There is also a very practical problem that we cannot escape: how will transfer between schools in sensitive areas be achieved so that the system works properly? We must also look at training and the morale of teachers, and the contribution of parents must not be undermined. It must be clarified so that they can play their part in full.

Given the years of trauma that we have experienced, we need radical proposals that will allow modern society to develop. Children and education have changed, and we must ensure that education is in keeping with our hopes for a good future for our children. We should always remember that pupils must be the first priority. We must provide systems that will allow them to achieve their potential, whoever they are. That will mean a better future for them and for society in general. I support the motion.

Mr Roche: The Burns Report has two core proposals. One involves the destruction of the grammar school system, the most successful sector of secondary education; the other involves the introduction of a so-called collegiate system that would effectively introduce comprehensive education to Northern Ireland. The entire thrust of the Burns Report is contrary to the best current educational thinking and Government policy.

The argument about the transfer system — effectively the destruction of the grammar school sector — seems to be based on an aversion to academic selection, with which the 11-plus test is identified. Therefore, it is important to ask what type of test it is. The current transfer test essentially examines English, mathematics and science. In other words, it tests numeracy and literacy skills and is, therefore, an examination of two areas of education. If pupils are not proficient in numeracy and literacy, they could not possibly be proficient in anything else, because those skills are prerequisites for any educational success.

Northern Ireland is well down the list of international comparisons of literacy and numeracy skills. However, we are not exceptional, as the same situation applies to the Republic and the rest of the UK. Instead of doing away with this type of testing and the emphasis at primary level, which is where we lay the basis for literacy and

numeracy achievement, we should be trying to enhance the focus on English, science and mathematics as prerequisites for success at secondary and tertiary education.

Nobody wants to say that a particular form of transfer that properly focuses on English and mathematics should not be assessed occasionally — of course it should. A cursory reading of the Gallagher Report shows that it failed to make any substantive case against the present system. Its case was based on anecdotal evidence, mainly from secondary school teachers who were expressing their disillusion and a lack of morale, rather than giving an objective evaluation of what the test means for students.

Pupils must transfer from primary to secondary education at some point. We can debate from now until doomsday about the age at which that should take place, but again the Gallagher Report did not mention the need for radical change. At 11 years of age, students will have been at primary school for about six years; they mature earlier. By the time children have reached age 11, they almost certainly want to move to secondary education.

2.30 pm

Therefore, the case for abolishing the transfer system, with the emphasis on those prerequisites, has not been made. The idea that we can dismiss focus on English and mathematics by derogatorily categorising them as academic is nonsense.

The transfer test, and the fact that we must have a system that enables students to progress from primary school to secondary school in order to get the education that is most suited to them, is not the problem. The problem is failure in the non-grammar sector. The level of achievement in that sector is appalling. A vast number of students — probably in excess of 60% — leave the sector with virtually no qualifications. That must be addressed to ensure that children outside the grammar sector are placed in another secondary stream that can offer them highly rated vocational and technical education. If there were real choice for students in the secondary sector, involving highly rated technical education and grammar school education, the sense of failure associated with the current transfer system would disappear. I remember my primary school days. Children who left primary school to go to technical college were proud of that achievement. They felt no sense of failure.

Members have mentioned social deprivation, which is an important issue. In looking at educational achievement in certain sections of the community, Members must face the fact that, in many areas of Northern Ireland, the family and social infrastructure for success in anything, including education, is entirely absent. Members must realise that if they decide to pour more money into those areas they might as well pour it into a bottomless pit, because they will make no significant change to what such people can achieve.

I am intrigued by the mindset that would want to destroy the best in education in Northern Ireland and do nothing to improve the worst. I imagine that it belongs to a person who did not achieve anything and is determined that no one else will.

Mr B Hutchinson: I thank the Member for East Belfast, Mr Sammy Wilson, for tabling the take-note motion. Members' discussions are timely. I welcome the abolition of the 11-plus. The Burns Report does not go far enough for my party. It is messing about with the idea of collegiates, while trying to keep those in grammar schools happy. If we are to address those issues, we need a comprehensive system. If we wanted to do something about children's education, we would not start at age 11 — we should start from birth.

The previous Member to speak, Mr Roche, said that he would not waste money on people in socially deprived areas. That is not the issue. We must be concerned about the start that people get in life. The difficulty in society in the UK is that we accept that care starts at birth and finishes at age three, at which point the Minister of Education takes over. That should not be the case. There must be a seamless transition between care and education. People from deprived areas do not have the same opportunities, because not enough is done for them from birth to age three.

It has been proven in Scandinavian countries and elsewhere that a strategy for the years from birth to age six works. We should not put four-year-old children in school uniforms behind desks. It is submitted elsewhere that children should be taught how to interact through play — a measure that has not been adopted in our society. Failure to adopt such measures prevents working-class Protestants from attaining success.

Whether those on the Unionist Benches like it or not, I know that a person brought up in my community as a working-class Protestant or Loyalist or Unionist — whatever you wish to call it — has a one-in-eight chance of going to a grammar school. That is a social injustice. A person brought up on the Falls Road as a Republican or Nationalist has a one-in-three chance of going to a grammar school. There is something very wrong with that. Are people telling me that there is something genetically wrong with Protestants because they cannot achieve? That is what Mr Roche said. Given the opportunity, those people could achieve as much as anyone else. However, they are not given that opportunity, and we must address that issue.

Burns continually mentions pupil profiles. What use is a pupil profile to someone from north Belfast? Some 37% of 11-year-old Protestants in north Belfast have a reading age of nine. Numeracy and literacy must be dealt with between the ages of 0 and 6. The Burns Report alone will not solve the problem — other measures need to happen if progress is to be made.

Primary school teachers say that when children begin primary school they are not ready, and they blame the nursery teacher. The principals of secondary schools say that when children begin secondary school they are not ready and that they have a reading age of nine, when it should be 11. We have got it wrong, and we must correct it.

Members have been talking about selection at the age of 11 and the evidence for its effectiveness. When Sir Cyril Burt introduced selection, he had only anecdotal evidence — he had no empirical evidence to suggest that a child should be tested at the age of 11. Primary education covers a child's formative years, and children must work in all-ability classes. Primary school teachers will say that their job is to teach children, but secondary school teachers will say that they teach subjects. We have got that wrong. The children should be at the centre of the system — they should decide where they go after primary school.

We have heard nonsense about grammar schools being vocational and everything else. Everyone in the Chamber knows that parents send their children to grammar schools because the children are academically bright and the parents want their children to achieve. People do not send their children to grammar schools to learn how to be joiners or bricklayers. Do not be kidded that the grammar schools will change. Those schools are elitist and exist for those pupils who perform best. Such schools do not want pupils who cannot achieve good grades or who will bring their results down. Grammar schools want only the best pupils, and we must focus on that issue.

It is important that we look at the source of the problems. If we do not do that, and if we do not address the matter of children's early years, we shall not win. Burns has a discussion on the issue, but that is all that it should be. The report should be used to help us to get on to the right track. We should look at the Burns Report — especially from a Unionist point of view. We could throw the report out tomorrow, but we must address the problem of getting children from working-class backgrounds to achieve. We must also remember the statistics on the educational achievements of Catholics and Protestants, and ask why Catholics are doing better.

In north Belfast, 67% of Protestant children who leave school at the age of 16 do not have any formal educational qualifications. What does that say to people in that society?

Mr Boyd: That the system is a failure.

Mr B Hutchinson: Yes. However, it also tells young people that they have no future or stake in society. We must give them both. That is why we are here, and we must get it right. We must find out why Protestants are not achieving. We cannot say that it is because Catholics have more brains. There is more to it than that, and we must look into the problem. The last thing that we need is

to condemn another generation of Protestants or Catholics to the scrap heap.

We should look at the Burns Report to see whether we can tweak it or whether we should throw it out and replace it with something different. We must come up with a system that does not have social injustice, because that is what the problem is about. It has nothing to do with the supposed trauma of the 11-plus — children can cope with sitting the 11-plus. The problem is that we are telling children that if they do not achieve, they will be put on the scrap heap. There is plenty of evidence of world leaders and others who did not pass such exams but went on to get university degrees.

Madam Deputy Speaker: The Member will draw his remarks to a close.

Mr B Hutchinson: We must do away with selection.

Ms McWilliams: This is the third time that we have debated the issue of post-primary education, and rightly so, as it is probably one of the most important issues that will arise during this term of the Assembly. How we educate our children and, indeed, what sort of society we want in Northern Ireland should be matters of incalculable importance to every single Member. Already in the Chamber there is a sense that people care. They care in different ways and, of course, have different views on the subject, which is surely what Burns is trying to get to the bottom of.

We should take the opportunity to reflect for a moment on the process so far. I suggest that it has been quite rigorous. Many comparisons were made in the reports that were prepared, and the Burns Report did not just base its analysis on what was happening in Northern Ireland. If we are to be in a global society, and if the Executive are about joined-up thinking, then it is quite right that the Burns Report looks not only at the UK, but at what is happening elsewhere in Europe. As a member of the Committee for Employment and Learning, I hear that there are serious issues about literacy and training. Therefore, if we are now talking about lifelong learning, perhaps that is what we need to address in post-primary education. If there are serious literacy problems let us address those.

Where do we start? Billy Hutchinson put forward some serious proposals. He talked about birth to three years of age, and the fact that we are sending our children to school far too early, which is a point that may not have been addressed sufficiently. Paddy Roche talked about children being at primary school for six years. However, some are only babies when they go through the school door. In other countries they would still be in kindergarten or nursery school, not sitting at desks with books and pencils being told that that is what faces them from then on. No wonder many want to run out the school gate. Many attend for the first day and, at the age of four, say: "Been there, done that, do not want to go back."

That is what the Women's Coalition would have liked to look at, but the terms of reference were so limited that we could only consider children between the ages of four and 11.

I have no doubt that other parties will take different things out of this, but in the end we must obtain some consensus and take most of the people with us as far as we can go. That is what change is all about. On that, I commend the Committee for Education, the Minister, and the Department for struggling with this issue. It is right to spend time on it, to give it a rigorous analysis and to come up with a genuine way forward.

The Women's Coalition has already put its proposals to Burns, and I am not going to reiterate them — I have stated what we wish to see as the way forward. We endorse wholeheartedly the values of excellence, equality, inclusion and diversity on which Burns is based. I do not say for one minute that we hand our teachers the problem of trying to resolve this conflict. As Paddy Roche, Sammy Wilson and others have said, the problems of inequality in this society are not based solely on education. We have to look at all the factors that make people unequal — location, housing, family circumstances. That is where I take issue with Paddy Roche. No matter what one thinks about their parents, those children must be given a chance. I disagree with him about deprivation. Even if the parents are prisoners, or have committed acts in the past, that is not the fault of the children. We must build a society that gives those children a chance, and that is what Burns is trying to do. Equally, I suggest that the issue of diversity is one that should enrich a society and add to it.

Selection at the age of 11 is inappropriate. Others will disagree that it is unfair and discriminatory. Again, having listened to the points made by Paddy Roche and Sammy Wilson, I would suggest — and I thought that we had achieved some consensus in recent debates — that the test is not appropriate and that there must be some other way. Some Members may suggest that there should be another test, although others may suggest that it should not be taken at the age of 11. Burns suggested other possibilities, such as the compilation of profiles over several years.

2.45 pm

Recent experience has shown me that we are teaching our children tricks when we show them how to complete those tests. Children with good memories will remember how to do the tests. The tests are multiple-choice, and children do not read books and receive the same literacy skills as other 11-year-olds who do not sit the tests. Teachers will say that half the primary 6 year and the first part of the primary 7 year are taken up with explaining the test to the children and having them complete tests over and over again until they are successful. Children who remember the tricks and who achieve 70% or 80% will pass; the

others will not. The system had to change, and I thought that consensus was being achieved on that point.

We should welcome the proposal of guided parent and pupil choice at the appropriate stage of young people's educational careers.

Our schools have not collaborated and co-operated in the past. Perhaps it is time for them to respond to the Burns proposals.

We have not had enough information about collegiates. Perhaps the Minister would provide more information when he speaks later. The issue is inflammatory, both inside and outside the education sector. A model has been proposed, which we might adapt in the future. However, can collegiates inject the dynamism, change, co-operation and collaboration needed? The proposal may come up against the churches, as we have seen in the past few days. Teachers' unions have risen to the challenge and some businesses have also pledged support. My concern is that the issue is bigger than political identity. I would like to know if the churches would support the collegiate way forward.

Change is difficult, and I have said before that this may be an opportunity and not a threat. We may need a Burns 2 — if that does not sound too painful. I do not mean a scolding; I mean a proper, informed way that will ensure as much Assembly support as possible.

Mr McCartney: The Burns Report contains a series of half-masticated, ill-digested concepts about the nature of education, clothed in the garb of dreamlike utopian language that is as nebulous as its ideas.

The truth is that the fundamental question that Burns addresses, and that we should address, is: what is the basic function of education? Is it to do our best for the individual child? That would certainly be the basis for education in the Western liberal tradition. The corollary of that — if the concern is what is best for the individual child — is equality of opportunity. Every child should have equality of opportunity, according to his or her several abilities. A child from a middle-class family who is bright and sharp and well suited to an academic education should have an academic education; a child from a working-class ghetto should have the same opportunity.

I can speak with authority on this subject, because I am the youngest of eight children, born in what is now designated a deprived area, the Shankill Road, and I lived in a two-up, two-down house. I passed the 11-plus examination in 1948, the year of its introduction. Subsequently I attended Grosvenor High School, which was the first local authority grammar school. Some 95% of the boys and girls who attended that school were from working-class homes; middle-class children were a rarity there, almost non-existent.

Therefore, I do not buy into any of this guff about the Shankill Road or about why it is deprived. One reason

that north Belfast, the Shankill Road and other areas are deprived is that the community structure and family commitment have broken down. It is due to the flight of people who, in many cases, observed the principles of community, church and family life, and who were committed to the education of their children. Much of what we are seeing now has been brought about by the terrorism and political instability generated in those areas by the Minister of Education's party and, to a large extent, those whom Billy Hutchinson would purport to represent. That is the reason: it has nothing to do with the education system.

However, there is another aspect to the subject, and it is the Minister of Education's ideological drive, which is behind the Burns Report. Prof Simon, a noted Marxist and Communist, advanced the philosophy in the early 1960s that it is the purpose of education — and this brought about the comprehensive education system in the 1960s in the UK — to provide equality of results, not equality of opportunity. Equality of results was for the community. In Russia, it was for the state. People there were not educated on the basis of equal opportunity according to abilities; they were educated according to what the state required from them. People were educated on the basis of equality of results. That is the ideology that is driving this review.

Despite attempts to gloss over its results, comprehensive education has comprehensively failed on the mainland UK. It has failed in comparison with tripartite education. The improved GCSE results show that the biggest contribution, outside the grammar schools, in improvement has been from the secondary moderns — not from the comprehensives. When we look at a new system of education, we must look at one that provides equality of opportunity. The Burns proposals do not do so.

Children with the intellectual capacity to benefit from academic education should have that opportunity. They should have that opportunity whether they are working class, middle class or any other class. We are not equal. The 16-stone boy will never ride a Derby winner. The eight-stone, five-pound boy will never play in the front or second row for Ireland. Those are physical examples. The child with an IQ of 140 or 150 may well become a nuclear physicist or a neurological surgeon, but the child with an IQ of 80 or 90 will not.

We face a system where society has determined what is offered respect. Many parents would rather have their child working as a white-collar clerk in an insurance company when he has hands that can produce a Hepplewhite chair or a piece of Bellini silver. That is a condemnation of the values of our society. That is what we should be addressing. We should be ensuring that the academically qualified have an equal opportunity, and we should ensure that the child who has other skills and capacities for providing a real contribution to society should have the money, backing and educational system

to allow his capacities to flower. Burns does not provide for that.

Mr Weir: This is one of the most important issues that the Assembly has faced. Many charges have been levelled against Mr McCartney in his time but lack of intellectual ability has never been one of them. Had the Burns Report been available in 1948, Mr McCartney would not have gone to Grosvenor High School. It is doubtful whether, under the Burns Report, he would even have gone to a grammar school — so much for the enlightened Burns Report.

It is a pity that we are debating a report that has made such a mess of the offer that it brings for the future. I would describe it as a dog's dinner, except that any discerning dog would be keen to avoid the mess described as the Burns Report.

Eileen Bell touched on the central issue: the most important point is what is in the best interests of the pupils. What lies behind the Burns Report, and, more importantly, what lies behind the Minister's assessment of post-primary education, is not the best interests of the pupils, but pure and simple dogma. It is a desire to produce, in the Minister's own words, equality of outcome rather than equality of opportunity.

Things start to go wrong when there is a driving dogma pushing a comprehensive system at the expense of what is in the best interests of pupils. At least the Minister has always been consistent on that point. The Burns Report even lacks that ideological and intellectual courage, because it tries to hide in a mist of proposals about collegiate systems and other bits of administration. It tries to disguise the fact that it is essentially a proposal to have comprehensive education via the back door. It lacks the honesty to at least argue the case for comprehensive education.

What are the problems that face the education system? They are clearly not the lack of academic achievement in Northern Ireland — we have been consistently above everywhere else in the United Kingdom. Compared with the rest of the United Kingdom, our system has produced the brightest and best. The argument has always been that, despite that, we are still producing the highest number of pupils with no qualifications. That may have been the case in the past.

However, the Minister's figures — not figures from any pressure group — produced in response to a question for written answer from me, show that we now have fewer pupils leaving school with no qualifications than England, Scotland or Wales. Northern Ireland is not at the bottom end.

Is it, as a general rule, a fact that kids from working-class backgrounds have an overall lower level of attainment? There is a degree of truth in that. However, the number of people coming from working-class backgrounds

in Northern Ireland and going on to third-level education is the highest in the United Kingdom. Those are not the problems.

It has been identified that we have low levels of attainment in certain parts of the country, especially in working-class areas. However, the key question is whether the Burns Report will solve those problems or whether it will exacerbate them. I think that it will exacerbate them. For example, take the pupil profiles, which will not be made available to schools. The Burns Report is being driven on the wishes of parents, and the level of ambition that parents have for their children, and the amount of drive and push involved. Anyone who thinks that that will benefit the socially disadvantaged is not living in the real world.

Where will the greatest push for children to go to grammar schools come from? It will come from areas of middle-class Northern Ireland where expectations are higher, and where there is a certain amount of social pressure on those children to attain grammar school places. Pupil profiles used in that way would exacerbate the problem.

We have not done away with selection. We have replaced it with selection by postcode — selection, ultimately, by ability to pay. The first two methods of selection are that if a sibling is at that grammar school, preference will be given, and if a child is the son or daughter of a teacher, he or she will get preference — presumably that is a device to keep the teaching unions as quiet as possible on the matter.

The Minister, who belongs to a party that feels itself so much in the modern world that it decries the hereditary monarchy and the hereditary system that was in the House of Lords, wants to have a system where we have hereditary places at grammar schools. If a child happens to be born into the right family and lives close to the school, that child will gain a place in a grammar school.

3.00 pm

In reality, this will introduce a comprehensive system by the back door. Instead of creating a new egalitarian society, we will witness falling standards as were seen when comprehensive education was introduced in England and Wales. In addition, several schools will become independent. Grammar schools will ape what has happened in England, and they will move towards a public school system, in which selection will not be on the basis of academic ability, but on the basis of ability to pay. That is fundamentally wrong.

I, and many like me, come from a generation that had the opportunity to go to grammar school. That opportunity was not available to the generations before us. I ask people who have benefited from that system not to pull the ladder up behind them. Do not deprive people,

particularly those from working-class backgrounds, of the opportunity to realise their full potential. Reject Burns; let us preserve what is best in the current system and look at what changes we can make to improve that system. *[Interruption]*.

Madam Deputy Speaker: Order. Given the number of Members who wish to speak and the time available, I ask all Members to limit their contributions to five minutes.

Mr Morrow: I see that I am to be a victim of your new declaration, Madam Deputy Speaker.

I wish to draw to the attention of the House the guiding principles in the Burns Report. Those of us who see little merit in the report are not suggesting that the present system is flawless. The report's guiding principles are great in theory. However, the real test is in the outworking and application of those principles. Most of them have been at the heart of our education system for many years. No one would disagree with the principle of an education system that is child-centred, values children equally and gives breadth of opportunity to all the skills and talents that children possess. However, a close study of the great vision of Burns reveals that the principles are not as wholesome as was first thought. The revolution that the Burns Report will trigger will undoubtedly lead to a catastrophe. For example, the report proclaims:

"Each young person should be valued equally",

and that

"There should be equality of opportunity, access and excellence for all."

However, since the review proposals will potentially disadvantage the very best children academically, as well as most of the less able, these principles are turned on their head. The Burns recommendations mean that there will be less suitable opportunity, reduced access to the schools most suited to children's needs and reduced opportunity for all sorts of excellence for most, if not all, children.

The report states:

"All young people should be enabled to develop their talents to the full".

It is obvious to everyone except the review body that owing to the impact of their new neighbourhood comprehensive schools, many academically able young people, especially those from outlying areas and the outskirts of large towns, will not be able to develop to the full. Equally, many children placed in academic schools are likely to suffer.

Another guiding principle suggests that schools should enable children to have a commitment to lifelong learning. Really? Perhaps there is a lifelong love within certain specialisms such as reading, language and mathematics. However, young people have no notion of lifelong learning at ages 16 or 18. What type of children have the

Burns review members been teaching in the past 10 years? It would be interesting to find out. Perhaps the reason for such a lack of realism in education and school management terms is that it would appear that not one member of the panel has been a practising teacher during that time. Five of the 11 members of the review body have never taught at all. The rest have only been involved indirectly in the practice of teaching.

The report states:

"Education should have regard to the changing needs of society and the economy."

That is a partial truth.

There is a huge need for good doctors, accountants and lawyers, but there is an even greater need for good electricians, plumbers and mechanics. Burns does not begin properly to address the latter shortcoming. The notion that tradesmen and professionals can be developed satisfactorily side by side in all schools is a complete nonsense and impractical. That is not to value one profession higher than the other; it is simply to recognise a general truth that most teachers and pupils naturally recognise.

There are many things that I want to say about principles, but time is passing. I refer the Assembly to a research booklet by Dr John Marks, an academic. The booklet is in the Library if anyone would like to consult it. It makes interesting reading. His book 'The Betrayed Generations: Standards in British Schools 1950-2000' shows how for many decades the comprehensive system has failed in the four parts of the UK to provide children with as good an education as that which Northern Ireland's children have been fortunate to receive.

The main findings of his research are that pupils in comprehensive schools make up 85% of the age group but they obtain 75% of good GCSE passes. At A level, the proportion of passes by comprehensive school pupils falls to about 65%, and the proportion of A grades that they gain falls to about 50%. The results for selective schools taken together throughout GB are about 35% better than those for comprehensive schools. That indicates substantial underachievement by many comprehensive schools, and perhaps a further 60,000 pupils would achieve good GCSEs if GB had a selective system. At GCSE level, 25% of comprehensive schools perform less well than the average secondary modern school.

The Chairperson of the Committee for Employment and Learning (Dr Birnie): I will begin by speaking as the Committee Chairperson. No one could argue with the proposition that we should treat education from the age of 11 through to either 18 or 21 and beyond as an integral whole. The creation of a Department of Education that is separate from the Department for Employment and Learning has probably, on balance, been a good development that has provided greater focus in both cases. However, it has brought with it greater scope for

creating cross-departmental concerns. The Burns issues touch on such cross-departmental matters of importance. The Committee for Employment and Learning will wish to comment on the Burns Report. I cannot prejudge what conclusion it will come to, but our consideration is likely to include the following: where and how careers education can best be delivered; how we can widen the range of social access to further and higher education; how we can promote educational equality of opportunity as opposed to equality of outcome — Mr McCartney drew that distinction; and the valid principle of meritocracy. Finally, how can we encourage the study of subjects by 11- to 16-year-olds or possibly through to 18 years, which will equip individuals for satisfying careers and will meet some of the likely labour skills shortages?

I will now make some personal comments, while still focusing on the interrelationship between the Department of Education and the Department for Employment and Learning, because some real weaknesses emerge in the recommendations of the Burns Report. The case has not yet been adequately made to suggest that we should move to mixed-ability or comprehensive schools. It has not been made in moral or pragmatic terms with respect to examination results, and Mr Morrow referred to this when mentioning the statistics produced by Dr John Marks in his book about schools in England, Scotland and Wales over the last half century.

The Burns Report, despite what it may claim, is inclined towards the practical introduction of comprehensive schooling. I favour the retention of some schools that have a so-called grammar school ethos, while upgrading others through so-called parity of esteem, especially technical and vocational schools. In parts of Germany, Switzerland and Austria, those schools have developed more strongly than they have in the United Kingdom. More than mere academic excellence is required. Excellence is best promoted by having a variety of specialist schools rather than — dare I say it? — bog-standard comprehensives. Practices in city technology colleges in England and in the magnet schools in the larger American cities should be examined.

The concept of collegiates is problematic, because that would add another layer of bureaucracy to an overcrowded field of administrative bodies. It is not envisaged that further education colleges would be full members of the collegiates, but they would have to interrelate. That would be confusing. The Burns Report recommends that collegiates should promote the crucial links between education and business, and that they should take the lead on careers education. That could turn into a turf war over the role of further education colleges. There are still serious funding inequities between further education colleges and sixth-form colleges.

The Minister of Education and his Colleague at the Department for Employment and Learning have much to discuss. I support the motion.

Madam Deputy Speaker: I am aware that Dr Birnie has an important appointment and that he may have to rush off.

Mr Gallagher: Although there have been different reactions to the Burns Report in the Chamber, I welcome the fact that beyond the Chamber there is general agreement about the proposal to abolish the transfer test. I am encouraged by other proposals in the Burns Report — for example, the introduction of pupil profiles and the promotion of greater co-operation between schools in the post-primary sector.

Before the Burns Report was published, Prof Gallagher and Prof Smith conducted a review of the selection procedure. I will recap quickly on some of the options that they identified as a possible way forward: separate academic and vocational schools; comprehensive schools for 11- to 18-year-olds; and common lower secondary schools followed by a differentiation at upper level in secondary schools. The Burns team analysed those options and was unhappy with all of them. Regardless of our views about the Burns Report, at least it contained a definite proposal that could be discussed. I hope that that proposal, and the options in the Gallagher and Smith Report, will help to inform responses to the Department of Education.

Paragraph 6.3 of the Burns Report, which deals with modern research on intelligence, is important. It states that the idea of intelligence being measured narrowly is no longer valid; that cannot be denied. Intelligence is seen as having many facets, and multifaceted intelligence is referred to. In the past, transfer tests assessed intelligence in a narrow and academic way, which limited our view of children and their abilities and aptitudes. If we introduced pupil profiles, the measurement of multifaceted intelligence would pose a major challenge, and unfortunately the Burns Report does not go into detail on that. However, before it is introduced we need to know more about the demands that will be placed on children and teachers by the additional assessment of all facets of education.

3.15 pm

The element relating to structures and the collegiate system is probably the most controversial part of the report. In its response, the SDLP suggested greater co-operation between schools, so we welcome some of the aspects that are highlighted under the collegiate system. We want to see all post-primary schools working together on the basis of co-operation rather than competition. We are told that the proposals in the Burns Report do not threaten any of the existing schools, yet, as we know, many schools are not reassured and do not accept this. Currently, responsibility for managing schools rests with local management boards and the governors appointed to them. They have control over the values and the ethos of the schools, and many give their time and expertise to

provide good education for the children in their areas. Under the Burns Report, they see their roles being downgraded in favour of the collegiate support system and the collegiate liaison councils. Although I support partnerships, I do not support any that undermine the roles or existing rights of school management boards.

In conclusion, we should bear in mind that in the past all good initiatives in education — and there have been few over the years — have come from the teachers. Imposition has almost invariably resulted in failure, and the experience of our educators testifies to that.

Mrs Nelis: The motion is not set in stone. We will be able to challenge the existing transfer system, which most of us accept is a legal form of discrimination that brands 60% of our children as failures every year; a system that reinforces educational and social apartheid; and one that was founded on the elitist notion that only a minority of children are academically gifted and that a child's ability is fixed at the age of 10, or perhaps at the age of four, as Billy Hutchinson and Monica McWilliams said. The current system is a more accurate gauge of poverty and wealth than many of the statistics presented to us. Billy Hutchinson is right in saying that the worst results in the 11-plus exams each year are from the poorest areas of Belfast — the Shankill Road and the Falls Road. This system is emotionally, socially and culturally damaging, and it must go.

I congratulate the Minister for his commitment to the future education of all children and for providing us with the opportunity to end this divisive system, once and for all. We pay dearly for it. Research shows that educational underachievement is linked to poverty, unemployment, ill health and other social disasters. Our two-tier education system tells a long tale of underachievement, and an excessive number of people leave school with few or no qualifications. The system keeps a section of people in poverty and preserves a cycle of disadvantage, and we pay dearly for it. The exact cost has not been calculated, and it is time that it was.

In the Twenty-six Counties, the economic consequences for early school leavers are manifest at individual and social levels. There is an increased likelihood of long-term unemployment, low-skilled and poorly paid employment, and social and economic marginalisation. In Canada, additional expenditure on remedial programmes to help cope with social problems affecting the aboriginal people is costing the Government £1.7 billion. Are we aware of what we spend on remedial programmes? Equivalent research has not yet been carried out here.

If we continue to condone a two-tier education system that labels children at ten and a half and divides them from each another on mainly socio-economic grounds, some young people will destroy themselves and their environment, such will be their disaffection and hopelessness.

Many myths have been propagated about how the grammar school system is superior to comprehensive education, and some Members have suggested that today. The first myth is that the comprehensive system has failed in England. There are 3,569 secondary schools in England, of which 166 are grammar schools. Eighty-seven per cent of secondary pupils in state schools in England are in comprehensive schools. There are no grammar schools in Scotland and Wales. In 1965, when 8% of secondary pupils were in comprehensive schools, 17% acquired five passes at GCSE level. By 1998, when 86.7% were in comprehensive schools, 88% got five passes at GCSE level. Many young people attending comprehensive schools stay on and go to university.

The second myth is that Burns will be implemented without proper consultation, and that these beacons of excellence, the grammar schools, may be closed. The Burns Report is not about closing schools; it is about creating excellent schools in every neighbourhood for all children. All schools now have a common curriculum and pupil-led funding, and that will not change if grammar schools admit local children rather than selecting. Many secondary schools are beacons of excellence — there can be excellence without selection.

Another myth is that there should be a mix of grammar schools and other schools because we need choice and diversity. Supporters of selection must justify the need to put children through the hurdle of selection when there is no evidence that selection provides the best educational opportunities for all children.

Mr Gibson: Much of what needs to be said about the Burns Report has already been covered.

Of the many representations that I have received, not one supported the Burns Report. In fact, a large organisation such as the Ulster Farmers' Union felt compelled to respond with comments that have been echoed in the Chamber today. That group represents about 25,000 families. The proposals will disadvantage children in rural areas, and we do not want that. The Burns Report has no rural perspective.

The current selection procedure may be wrong, but selection itself is not wrong. Pupil profiles are a possible alternative. The admission criterion of proximity to pupils' homes is unacceptable. The proposal that pupils may be moved from different schools in a collegiate to study alternative subjects is theoretically possible, but that would be impractical for rural schools. The suggestion has been made that there may be a rise in the number of independent schools, but low farming incomes would not allow children from many farming families to attend such schools. The return of technical colleges should be considered.

Members of the Education Committee have received hundreds of responses that contain similar echoes of concern. It has been clearly stated that the principle of

comprehensive education is based on a theory of egalitarianism. Venerable theologians would have it that people are equal only in that they are all equally sinners. However, the ideas of Marx and Engels have emerged. Mr McCartney and Sammy Wilson identified the issue that pervades the Burns Report. The burning issue, which is implied but never stated, is not equality of opportunity; it is equality of outcomes. The Minister made that telling point in his press release.

All the research, especially that of Dr John Marks, has indicated that the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) studies offered a comparator of existing tripartite and comprehensive systems. The research carried out by the OECD and John Marks, as well as national research on education, indicates that comprehensive education is a deterrent to the raising of school standards. Therefore, the report's basic tenets are wrong. Not only is the report wrong in principle but it follows a political ideology that has been abandoned by most of Europe.

The Burns Report mentioned that it had examined the tripartite system operating in Germany, Austria and Switzerland. The OECD examined that system and said that it was in advance of any system in the British Isles, and that its pathways were suitably tailored to the needs of the pupil.

I was touched by Billy Hutchinson's point that the report should have been child-centred. The Burns Report is not child-centred; it is centred on an outdated Marxist ideology that has long been surpassed by educational thinking. I most detest Burns's resorting to jargon, which implies that he was scared to define his position. He never spelt out the philosophical alternatives that are possible in education. Instead, he resorted to jargon. As Archbishop Temple reminded us in a worthy report in the House of Lords, if a man does not define something, the definition remains with him.

Mr K Robinson: I have no intention of repeating the excellent points made already. I want to focus on the consultation on the Burns Report. I have observed, with growing concern, the manner in which the Minister of Education has led the consultation process on the Burns proposals. Although everyone has a right to express their views on that contentious report, a Minister of Education should have exercised prudence when overseeing the public debate that the proposals were designed to provoke, as they have done today in a generally positive way.

In fact, the Minister has sought to adopt a different role. In a series of unfortunate and imprudent statements, he has sought to steer the process and to spin the outcome of that steer. Meetings have been held with carefully selected individuals and interest groups. On 1 March 2002, while speaking at the annual Irish National Teachers' Organization (INTO) conference, with the subtext "academic selection means rejection", the Minister told

delegates that he had identified what he claimed were two myths, one of which was that academic selection was a ladder to success for working-class children.

Speaking as someone who comes from a working-class background — as do many others in the Chamber — I am glad that that ladder was there for me and others, to climb, and that my parents felt that it was worth sacrificing many things to enable me to climb it. I am grateful that it was there for my children to avail themselves of. I hope that my grandchildren can benefit from similar opportunities in the future.

3.30 pm

If low percentages of working-class pupils currently benefit from that opportunity in parts of the Province, could it be possible that the extra-curricular activities indulged in by the Minister's Colleagues over the past 30 years played a significant part in driving families out of inner-city areas? Those were families who in a normal society would have sacrificed many pleasures to give their children the gift of a good education and who would have provided the real leadership in those communities, had they not felt it necessary to protect their children from the unfolding scenario of violence and intimidation.

A girl whose family lived in a Nationalist area of Belfast recently told me that the only good thing that her father could ensure was that she got a good education that was commensurate with her obvious academic talents. He made sacrifices, and his daughter received a top-class education alongside the offspring of the better-heeled members of her community. She currently holds a senior position in her chosen career. I asked her whether she would deny that opportunity to others. "No way" was the answer. I recall many parents from my former schools who worked hard — often taking on a second job — to ensure that their child would have all the necessary extras that second-level schools require from their new entrants.

On 23 March 2002, the Minister met the Progressive Unionist Party to discuss the post-primary review. The Minister again trotted out his usual mantras, only this time he added the Republican harp orchestra's rendition of "Protestants, Catholics and Dissenters". It is good myth, but it is bad educational practice. The Minister has introduced a sectarian edge to his tired, worn-out, oversimplified and outdated 1970s-style socialism, which was something that I noticed in yesterday's Hansard that he attributed to another Member of the House. That tiresome dialectic may have struck a chord with his Loyalist audience, as no doubt it was designed to do.

The Minister's strategy — and he has had some practice at that over the years — may have equipped him in his "divide and conquer" role, but I ask him the inconvenient question of where the good families who lived on the Shankill Road and the Crumlin Road, and

who provided numerous transfer pupils for nearby schools, did move to. Who or what caused those families, who were the backbone and pride of their communities, to leave? Was that population movement not echoed in west Belfast by families also seeking a better future for their children? Interestingly, the Minister's press release fails to tell us the views of the PUP representatives. Perhaps Mr Billy Hutchinson was expanding on that today.

On 8 April, the pace was quickening because presumably the Minister and his acolytes were aware of the mounting popular distaste for the whole business of the unfolding Burns saga. The education and library board chiefs were treated to ministerial mantras. However, in their valedictory statement, the chief executives, to their credit, pointed out that they were anxious to see coherence among all three major reviews of education — the review of funding, the review of the curriculum and the review of post-primary education.

I agree with Mr Billy Hutchinson's comments on the nought to three-years-old aspect of children's education. The early years are a vital part of the process, and it is one that will be addressed shortly by the Committee for Education. To the chief executives, Burns was only one of three issues, and not the great cure-all —

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

Mr K Robinson: I am sorry, Madam Deputy Speaker. I shall leave my comments hanging in the air at that point.

Mr M Robinson: I would like to begin by thanking my Colleague Mr Sammy Wilson for tabling today's debate. We are dealing with education, which has affected every single one of us at some stage in our lives and will continue to do so through our children.

It is an extremely emotive issue, and I am not surprised at the feelings that have been generated, particularly among concerned parents and teachers. I have been inundated with calls and correspondence from parents and teachers, asking that I use my position as an elected representative to highlight the many deficiencies in the report. I hope that through this debate I can convey these concerns. Yes, we need a vision for the future, but I do not think that the majority of parents or teachers would subscribe to the vision laid out in the Burns Report.

I do agree that the current system of selection is far from perfect, but the solutions set out in the Burns Report offer a very poor alternative. In his report, Burns makes no attempt whatsoever to answer the key question: does comprehensive or selective education provide the best overall results? He has failed to grasp that the comprehensive system has actually reduced educational opportunities on the mainland whilst the system in Northern Ireland has moved from strength to strength.

This document does not provide the way forward. Schools in Northern Ireland have undoubtedly proved their worth in every way. The education system in Northern Ireland is recognised throughout the United Kingdom, and examination passes bear testament to this fact. Our post-primary structure has produced the best results in the whole of the United Kingdom. More importantly, not only for those children who go to grammar schools, but for those who attend secondary schools, there is a mass of statistical evidence that shows that separating children according to their educational ability and needs enables schools to stretch the more academically able and cater more effectively for those with different aptitudes. The superior performance of the selective system in Northern Ireland over the comprehensive system in England in terms of GCSE and A-level performance, once again, would bear this out.

We have an education system in Northern Ireland that has many strengths, but I do acknowledge that certain weaknesses exist, and those weaknesses must be addressed if we are to create an education system that benefits each and every single child.

There have been considerable changes in the education system in Northern Ireland as a result of the Education Reform (Northern Ireland) Order 1989, particularly in relation to the national curriculum. The introduction of the national curriculum instructed all schools, whether grammar or secondary, to follow the same curriculum. This meant that pupils who moved from primary school to secondary school would be offered the same examinations as those pupils attending grammar schools. This effectively enabled secondary school pupils to follow a path to third-level education.

Secondary schools in Northern Ireland have been very successful at meeting the needs of a very distinct range of abilities. They have been able to facilitate this through applying the concept of streaming classes according to ability, with a flexible aspect in place to allow pupils to move up and down according to attainment. This has ensured that all pupils, regardless of ability, have received an education that is tailored to their needs.

In Northern Ireland, we cannot provide a twenty-first-century education for all by destroying the best part of our system and offering a watered-down alternative. We need a solution that provides a different system, allowing for both vocational and academic schools. It could be said that our present system does not cater adequately for the non-academic, so we must therefore direct our energies to providing vocational and technical education for those children whose talents lie elsewhere than in academic study.

Burns goes on to examine the collegiate system. The collegiate system in fact replicates a comprehensive system, which, as I have already stated, has reduced educational opportunities on the mainland. The collegiate

system is unwieldy and bureaucratic. The collegiate system is unworkable, as it groups together schools of dissimilar ethos, religious affiliation and academic standard. This system is also yet to be proven. Why introduce a system that has not yet been tested? Effectively, Burns is using Northern Ireland as a guinea pig, which could, in fact, produce disastrous results. We cannot afford to get this wrong, as we are dealing with the education of our children.

Mr Poots: No two children are the same. All children are born with different abilities. Some are prepared to work harder to achieve their goals, but the goal of education is to bring out the best in all children and bring out the best of their abilities.

I am surprised that the Minister, who professes a "Brits out" attitude in everything else that he does, when it comes to education he wants to ape the failed English system and introduce comprehensive education to Northern Ireland through the back door. The comprehensive system in England has failed. At the age of 14, pupils in Northern Ireland's selective system are 18 months ahead of pupils in England in English and mathematics, and they achieve GCSE results that are 10% better than those of pupils in England. That shows that the selective system is better for all pupils, for those at widely underrated secondary schools as well as for those at grammar schools. Before comprehensive education, A-level results in Northern Ireland were lower than those in England, yet shortly after the introduction of comprehensive education, Northern Ireland's A-level passes exceeded those of England and have continued to do so ever since.

The changeover to comprehensive schools has led to the following shortfalls in England: each year, approximately 60,000 16-year-olds, who would otherwise do well, fail to achieve five or more GCSEs. Approximately 80,000 18-year-olds, who would otherwise do well, fail to achieve two or more A levels. The increased access to universities for working-class students up until 1960, primarily due to grammar schools, has gone into reverse with the spread of comprehensive education. Some 31% of working-class pupils go to university in Northern Ireland, compared with 23% in Scotland, England and Wales. The selective system appears to enable pupils from the lower social classes in Northern Ireland to achieve better GCSE and A-level results and to obtain more university places than those in the rest of the United Kingdom. Taken together and compared with comprehensive schools, selective schools perform 37% better in maths, 27% better in English language, 28% better in science subjects, 32% better in geography and 70% better in French. Taking an average of all the main subjects, the advantage is approximately 35% in favour of selective schools.

Teachers and parents ask why there was not one practising school principal on the review body who had hands-on expertise in the daily running of schools. Why does Burns not report that 85% of respondents want grammar schools to remain while wishing to see an end

to the 11-plus tests? Why impose a completely untried system unheard of anywhere in the civilised world? Should our children be punished in such a way? Why should our children be thus disadvantaged? How collegiates will work is unclear; history shows that children perform best alongside children of similar aptitude.

Why is pastoral care omitted from the report? It is a recognised fact that the percentage of Northern Ireland boys and girls achieving fewer than five GCSEs has dropped in the past five years to 3%. That performance is significantly better than in other areas with similar socio-economic conditions.

Billy Hutchinson's views reflect those of some in the Unionist community. No one makes points to reflect the views of a significant number in the Nationalist community who want to retain grammar schools and a selective system. Shame on the Nationalist representatives in the Chamber that they do not represent the views of their people, many of whom have had to come to us to have their views expressed.

I regret that this is turning into a Unionist versus Nationalist debate, because the matter transcends constitutional politics, Unionism and Nationalism. The debate is universal, and it is a shame that Nationalists have not represented the views of the many who send their children to grammar schools and who wish to retain the grammar school system.

I went to a grammar school, but we chose a secondary school for our first child in spite of his having achieved a grade that would have secured him a place in a grammar school. We sent him to a school that would best suit his needs. We must look sensibly at the selective system and allow children to be assessed by their academic ability and not by postcode.

Mr Shannon: I agree with my two Colleagues and with Mr Sammy Wilson, the mover of the motion. His contribution set the scene for the debate and summed up the feelings of many in the Province, certainly of those in the community that I represent. The Minister of Education is making a huge error of judgement. He is advocating a comprehensive system of education, similar to the one across the water. That system has failed miserably and has resulted in lower educational standards.

3.45 pm

We have a system in Northern Ireland that has produced the best results in the whole of the United Kingdom for pupils in secondary and grammar schools. My Colleague Edwin Poots graphically outlined the successes of each education sector and how Northern Ireland seems to be streets ahead of the rest of the United Kingdom. It is a fact that 56% of pupils in Northern Ireland are achieving five or more GCSEs. On the UK mainland, the average is just 48%. At the other end of the spectrum, the Northern Ireland figure for those

leaving school with no qualifications is much lower than the UK average. It is 3.5% in Northern Ireland and 6% on the UK mainland.

Even though the figures prove that our education system is well and working, it is the Minister's opinion that a working system needs changing without investigating the alternatives. The Minister is out of touch with the people of the Province and out of touch with what they wish to have. I am a parent. I have three boys who have gone through, or are in the process of going through, the education system. The system has worked well for them, and it has worked well for most people in the Chamber today. Those who claim that the post-primary education system is failing are talking nonsense. Some 35% of children go to grammar schools, and a further 35% of pupils from a working-class background in Northern Ireland — the background that I come from — go on to university. That compares favourably with the situation in England and the rest of the UK.

I accept that some changes are needed in order to modernise the system and to bring it into line with other excelling countries in Europe. Transfer should be deferred until the age of 12. We could perhaps have a transfer test carried out by way of continual assessment, instead of two examinations, the results of which depend on the mood or condition of the child on a given day.

Post-primary schools are redefining themselves all the time, and they should be encouraged to do so. They should offer academic, vocational and technical courses. In that way, we can reduce the number of children who are leaving school with no qualifications. Such courses would also reduce the number of truants — those pupils who stay away from school because they cannot handle the academia, but who are suited to hands-on student work. Students should be able to transfer between schools. We often find that grammar school children drop out at the age of 16. They have passed the 11-plus but have, for one reason or another, not got to grips with what grammar schools have on offer. Many schools in rural areas — and Craigavon is an example of this — have a school that provides all-through education for children. That provides stability, and many friendships are maintained throughout school life because the cut-off at age 11 does not take place. The system works well for students, teachers and parents.

Some bureaucrat who has not investigated the full implications of changing the system should not be able to interfere with it. The aim should be to protect the best and improve the rest. We should not let the Minister destroy the whole lot simply because it is a British system. He is opposed to anything that has even a hint of Britishness about it. His views have more to do with politics than educational standards.

The Minister is at odds with the Committee for Education, the schools and the greater number of

pupils, teachers and parents, and he should consider the motion proposed today and the comments that Members have made. The Minister's opinion is at odds with the views of the people.

The Minister of Education (Mr M McGuinness): Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I welcome the opportunity afforded by Sammy Wilson's motion to discuss the review of post-primary education. I agree with Peter Weir that it is currently the most important issue facing the education sector. Many contributions have been made today. Many have been thoughtful, although some were not so thoughtful. Overall, it has been a good debate, and I have no doubt that there are people on all sides of the argument who hold sincere views. However, the object of the exercise is to build consensus and ensure that the House and all political representatives recognise the challenge before us. We politicians have a huge responsibility to put in place the best possible education system for all our children.

We have been given a real opportunity to put in place post-primary arrangements that will meet our needs in the twenty-first century and that will equip our young people and future generations with the knowledge and skills that they need in a rapidly changing and increasingly global world. As we engage in the debate, we are all obliged to ensure that we are properly informed and that our arguments are based on facts and data rather than on myths.

Yesterday in the House I referred to the three great myths about our education system, and we have heard more of that today. The first myth is that we have a world-class education system that is the best in these islands. Mary Nelis spoke eloquently on that myth. I am the first to acknowledge that we have a high proportion of pupils who achieve good examination results, yet comparisons show that as many pupils in Scotland achieve five high-grade GCSEs in its comprehensive system. Scotland also has markedly more people entering higher education. More people here than in England achieve five high-grade GCSEs, but even England, which is often caricatured as having a failed comprehensive system, has fewer pupils who do not achieve five GCSE passes. We still have the highest proportion of children in these islands with low qualifications, and that is the long tail of low achievement that has been highlighted by research.

Paddy Roche referred to international comparisons, as did Robert McCartney, Peter Weir and Edwin Poots. I remind Members that recent international research into standards found that, among 15-year-olds, our pupils performed on a par with pupils in England and Scotland, but did substantially less well than the top performers. Where were the top performers? They were in Finland, South Korea, New Zealand and Canada, all of which have non-selective systems. When people talk about comparisons, they must take a broader view and consider that there is a bigger world outside England, Scotland

and Wales, and, indeed, here. We must recognise that other systems in the world are doing well, and we have a responsibility to look at that and learn lessons.

More critically, the variation in our best and worst scores was among the widest in the participating countries, which highlights the recurrent theme of an education system with high achievement and substantial low achievement — a system that performs well for some but poorly for the rest. The 1996 International Adult Literacy Survey found that almost one quarter of our adult workforce has the lowest level of literacy. That legacy has been left to us by our so-called world-class education system, and the sooner we wake up to that, the better.

The second myth is that academic selection provides a ladder to success for working-class and disadvantaged children. Peter Weir, Bob McCartney and Ken Robinson dealt with that. Bob McCartney was particularly disappointing when he repeated that point in what I thought was an intellectually barren and narrow-minded contribution. We must look at the facts. Under our current system of academic selection, children from low-income families make up only 8% of pupils in grammar schools, and that proportion has fallen in the past four years. Far from being a ladder for working-class children, academic selection is an increasingly slippery pole.

Consider the transfer test results: the least disadvantaged pupils who sit the 11-plus are almost three times as likely to achieve a grade A as the most disadvantaged pupils. That hardly supports the case for academic selection as an escape route from poverty.

Which group in our society achieves the worst results in academic selection? The answer, which may be unpalatable, is the most disadvantaged sections of the Protestant community. The poorest 11-plus results are achieved in controlled schools with high levels of free school meals that serve working-class Protestant areas. David Ervine and Billy Hutchinson of the Progressive Unionist Party told me that, in many working-class Protestant areas, a grammar school place is beyond the reach of almost all pupils. In the Shankill, less than 2% of pupils gain a grammar school place. If that is not a damning indictment, I do not know what is.

The proportion of pupils from the most disadvantaged controlled primary schools in other areas of Belfast who obtain a grammar school place is also appallingly low — 4% in west Belfast, 5% in east Belfast, 8% in north Belfast and 15% in south Belfast. Those figures demolish the myth that academic selection provides a ladder to success for disadvantaged children, especially in Protestant communities.

Members raised an important and perplexing matter, which I responded to during Question Time yesterday, that has not yet been satisfactorily answered. In the light of those disturbing figures, why do the main Unionist parties support the continuation of an academically

selective system that impacts most negatively on disadvantaged Protestant communities?

That is an issue for those parties to consider, but I shall make my position, as Minister of Education, clear. Some Members may dispute it, but it is sincerely held. I want fairness and better educational opportunities for all children, whether they live on the Falls Road or the Shankill Road, in the Bogside or the Waterside, in Crossmaglen or Portadown, regardless of their colour or creed, whether they are well off or disadvantaged, and whatever their abilities. Every child must be given the opportunity to succeed. I shall work to ensure that the new arrangements deliver that opportunity.

Someone said recently that the idea that every child can succeed is a myth. I totally disagree with that. As educationalists, we have a responsibility to create an education system in which every child can succeed and fulfil his or her full potential. During the debate, Mr Shannon said that we should keep the best and improve the rest. I want the best for everyone, regardless of where they live or who they are.

The third myth is that, in order to go to university and get a good job, a grammar school education is necessary. Traditionally, grammar schools have been the main providers of university entrants. However, the world moves on. Currently, 35% of pupils obtain places in grammar schools, yet the participation rate in higher education is much greater at 44%, and is projected to increase. A place in higher education is not dependent on a grammar school education now and will be even less so in the future.

Prof Gerry McKenna, vice-chancellor of the University of Ulster, told me that only approximately 50% of its students have traditional A levels, with the rest coming from a variety of routes. Significantly, the university found no difference in academic outcome, irrespective of the route that students had taken. Prof George Bain, vice-chancellor of Queen's University, informed me that many of its students, including some of the best, did not follow the traditional A-level route.

The facts do not support the three great myths, which are that we have a world-class education system, academic selection is a ladder to success for working-class children, and grammar schools are an essential route to entry to higher education and university.

Local research has strongly confirmed the clear and pressing need for change. Prof Gallagher and Prof Smith found that the current arrangements distort the primary curriculum and create a sense of failure in two thirds of our children. I heard about that sense of failure this morning when I met with representatives of the Northern Ireland Council for Voluntary Action (NICVA) in Belfast.

We have schools that do not achieve good results. In addition, disadvantaged children come from low-income

families and cause unnecessary pressure and anxiety. Our discussions this morning focused on those issues. When the people around the table spoke of their experiences with colleagues in colleges in this city, a great deal of pain and hurt was revealed.

4.00 pm

(Mr Deputy Speaker [Mr J Wilson] in the Chair)

Prof John Gardner's research highlighted the technical inadequacy of the 11-plus. Save the Children used children's own words to make the most powerful case for change. I have been criticised by some people for quoting them, but we must listen to what children tell us. I make no apology for repeating their views. Commenting on the test, one child said:

"I felt so nervous on the morning of the 11-plus I was nearly sick. I barely got to sleep the night before and when I did I woke up at 3.00 am to find myself sleepwalking. I never sleepwalk and to make matters worse I was changing into my uniform. I didn't want to eat my breakfast in case I threw up but Mum made me eat some."

Another child gave her view on the test, and she said, most tellingly:

"If you're smart you go to a grammar school but if you're stupid you go to a secondary school and that's where I'm going, to a secondary school because ... I'm stupid."

The complete absurdity of the 11-plus was succinctly expressed by another child when she said:

"People judge you by 2 hours in your life."

I ask Members how they would feel if their children said that to them. I cannot and will not accept educational arrangements that make children sick with nerves, make them feel stupid and that judge them on two hours of their lives. There must be change, and I am pleased that the Committee for Education agrees. In its report, the Committee concluded that change is both necessary and appropriate. I have been encouraged greatly by the almost unanimous agreement that change is needed and by the shift in the debate from the question of whether change is necessary to what kind of change is needed.

Billy Hutchinson hit the nail on the head — his contribution was thoughtful and knowledgeable, and his remarks about social justice were well made. He also addressed the issue of early intervention, which is important. I agree that there is a need for early intervention and support, and the Department of Education has already undertaken some initiatives: the pre-school education system has been greatly expanded; the Making a Good Start initiative was established; classroom assistants have been employed for primary 1 classes, and that provision has been extended to primary 2 classes in the most deprived schools. The local management of schools (LMS) common funding formula will skew more of the available funding towards the primary sector, and the review of the curriculum that is under way will examine what

children learn and when they learn it. All those matters are important.

The Burns proposals that were published for consultation in October 2001 set out one possible model for change, and I must address several misconceptions about the consultation process. First, it is important to stress that no decisions have been taken about the proposals. Some people think that this is a done deal; nothing could be further from the truth.

Secondly, the choice is not between the Burns proposals, in their entirety, and nothing. The Burns Report offers one way forward, but it may not be the only way. Therefore, I have invited comments on the Burns Report and asked for suggestions for modifications to the report, or alternative approaches.

Thirdly, there is a view that there is no point in responding to the consultation because no one is interested in what people have to say and that Ministers will simply make decisions anyway. That may have been how things were done in the past, but we now have a local Administration and Ministers who are accountable to the electorate. Everyone's views count.

The publication of the Burns Report has generated a huge and ongoing public debate, and it is useful to take stock of how the debate is developing. Despite the impression that is often given through the media, significant areas of consensus are emerging on the guiding principles that underpin the Burns proposals, particularly the view that each child should be valued equally, the abolition of the transfer test, the value of the pupil profile and the value of collaboration and co-operation between schools.

There are also areas of contention, and, in seeking to advance the debate, I have stressed the need to focus on academic selection. This is central to the shape of any new arrangements, and Oliver Gibson referred to this crucial issue.

There is a view that the 11-plus can simply be abolished — clearly this cannot happen unless another process of academic selection is put in its place or academic selection is abolished. The review body made clear its view that simply to replace the test with another form of academic selection would perpetuate many of the weaknesses of the present arrangements. The 11-plus and academic selection are inextricably linked. The sole reason for the 11-plus is to provide a means of academic selection for grammar schools. The issue is not about the test but about academic selection, and we must be clear on this. Academic selection for some means academic rejection for most of our children. We must all look beyond the symptom — dissatisfaction with the 11-plus — to the cause, which is academic selection and rejection. That is what the debate must be about. I welcome the growing concentration on this key issue in public discussions, and I am holding meetings with interested

parties to discuss the issues raised by the post-primary review.

Esmond Birnie referred to the need for a cross-departmental approach, and I welcome the interest of the Committee for Employment and Learning. I have already met representatives of higher and further education, the chief executives of all five boards, the main teachers' unions, the CCMS, the Progressive Unionist Party, and the Belfast partnerships. Some consistent views have been expressed, including a general recognition that there are serious problems with our education system and a widespread acceptance of the adverse effects of academic selection, which is considered to be socially divisive. CCMS, the five main teachers' unions, the vice-chancellors, further education principals, the Belfast partnerships and the Progressive Unionist Party all agreed that academic selection should end, and the boards want a system that puts children at the heart of the process. The same strong message was given to the Education Committee and is set out in its report. It states:

"A clear majority of those submitting evidence to the review stated that formal selection as currently organised in Northern Ireland should be abolished."

I have planned further meetings with principals of primary schools, Catholic and controlled grammar schools, NICIE (Northern Ireland Council for Integrated Education), NICVA (Northern Ireland Council for Voluntary Action), the Transferor Representatives' Council and my Colleague at the Department for Employment and Learning. I have also written to the other political parties inviting them to discuss the review, and I hope that they will all accept this invitation.

A meeting has also been arranged with the Governing Bodies Association (GBA), and I look forward to hearing its perspective. I have welcomed its statements supporting the need for change. The GBA has concerns about the Burns proposals but has given a commitment to identify an acceptable method of happily matching pupils to schools. This is a positive and responsible approach, but time is moving on, and no proposals have yet been produced. If the GBA has developed acceptable proposals, I urge it to make them available for public scrutiny and consideration as soon as possible, certainly before the end of the consultation period.

The recent statement by the Northern bishops was a crucial contribution to the debate. They are the trustees of the majority of Catholic-managed grammar and secondary schools, which represent almost half our post-primary schools. They have given a clear message to the whole of the Catholic-managed school sector that academic selection by testing at age 11 or later is not acceptable. The bishops stated that pupils and parents, guided by teachers and career guidance counsellors using continuous assessment, should make decisions about educational pathways on the basis of election and choice. The bishops' statement has moved the debate on

significantly in the Catholic school sector, which can now focus on how best to develop arrangements that meet the bishops' aim of providing an education system that fosters justice, social cohesion and reconciliation and maintains and enhances quality but does not promote elitism. I encourage others to consider the key issue of academic selection as the first crucial step in progressing their response to the review.

My Department's consultation on the post-primary review is the largest ever undertaken on an educational issue. We have issued a consultation pack, including a video to all schools, further education colleges, training organisations, community organisations and public libraries in order to encourage and stimulate discussion of the issues. These bodies will also receive a detailed response booklet at the end of April. The views of the public are important, and we will be gathering those through a household response form that will be issued to every household in late May. The massive scale of this consultation reflects the importance of the issue. I want as many people as possible to take part in the debate and to submit their comments to my Department.

I want to deal with as many of the issues raised as time will allow. Sammy Wilson raised the issue of the meeting with the Council for Catholic Maintained Schools. It was alleged that I stated that academic selection must go. It was the CCMS that stated after the meeting that academic selection must go, not me. Mr Wilson's other more political comments clearly show that, after all this time, he is still in absolute denial about the Good Friday Agreement. His hope that after next year's Assembly elections the DUP, as the largest party, would prevent Sinn Féin being involved in Government shows that the DUP is not only running away from the Good Friday Agreement, but it is running away from the issue of post-primary education. The issue will not go away and will have to be faced up to.

Sammy Wilson also raised the issue of academic selection and the transfer tests. It was suggested that I had called for an end to selection, whereas Burns referred to the abolition of academic selection. I have said throughout this consultation that academic selection is the key issue that must be addressed. Transfer tests and academic selection are inextricably linked. There cannot be a selective system without a means of selection. The transfer test cannot be abolished unless some other process is put in its place.

Sammy Wilson also raised the issue of the household response form and its neutrality. The response form provides everyone with the opportunity to contribute to the debate; therefore, it is important that its content be politically neutral. The response form will include a summary of the main proposals made by Burns and will ask several questions on the key issues. It is important that we consider educational issues and raise the debate above any party political perspective. I provided the

Committee for Education, of which Sammy Wilson is the Deputy Chairperson, with a copy of both the household response form and the detailed response booklet before they were finalised so that members could make suggestions about how they could be improved, and to clarify the issues and help to facilitate responses.

Sammy Wilson, Danny Kennedy, Patricia Lewsley and Peter Weir discussed admissions. It is difficult for children from disadvantaged areas to access grammar schools. I am aware of the allegations expressed by some that the admissions criteria proposed by Burns would lead to selection by postcode. Others say that our existing education system is socially selective and that it disadvantages the working class. It is also claimed that a comprehensive system based on neighbourhood schools would lead to social selection and would be accompanied by the introduction of private schools. These are difficult issues, but I do not rule out the possibility of devising alternative arrangements for making decisions on school admissions to avoid some of these problems. There are examples in other countries that we could consider.

I have noted the concerns expressed specifically about the admissions criteria, including the use of proximity as a final criterion. Let me make it clear: I have invited alternatives to the Burns proposals. It is open to everyone to suggest alternative or additional criteria.

4.15 pm

Peter Weir and Sammy Wilson raised the issue of pupil profiling. The establishment of pupil profiles is one of the key recommendations in the report. The intention is to provide a better basis on which parents and pupils can make decisions on their post-primary school. I welcome comments on that as part of the response to the full report. Concerns have been expressed that it would increase the administrative burden on teachers and schools. I am conscious of the bureaucratic burden on teachers, and I will continue to work to reduce that in any new arrangements that are implemented.

Using the pupil profile for admission purposes would not be another form of academic selection. The full range of information contained in a profile would have to be reduced to a single letter or grade. That would be difficult to do and would run counter to the whole purpose of a holistic pupil profile. The use of the pupil profile in that way would not overcome the weakness that two thirds of the pupils are regarded as failures at the age of 11, and they suffer a huge and enduring blow to their self-esteem.

In addition, using the pupil profile would put more pressure on teachers and parents, and it is unlikely to have the broad support of the teaching profession. It has been suggested that the pupil profile could be used for selection purposes. Teachers' unions are adamantly opposed to the use of the pupil profile for any form of selection.

Danny Kennedy and Ken Robinson said that the consultation was biased, and that the Department was not conducting a fair and open consultation. I am satisfied that the consultation has been handled properly, and I refute any claims that it has been biased. My role in the consultation is to facilitate and encourage debate on the key issues by everyone who has an interest or an opinion. It is important that all sides of the arguments be voiced so that there is an open and balanced debate.

Recent press statements that I issued reflect the views that were expressed to me. I am holding a series of meetings with key interests to listen to their views and to help to stimulate informed debate on the issues. The video and support materials, the household response forms and the detailed response booklets are politically neutral and were made available to the Education Committee for comment. Several helpful comments and suggestions were incorporated into the materials. I intend to publish a summary of the responses. It will take time to analyse those responses, but I expect to be able to publish a summary by the end of September 2002.

I want to place on record my appreciation of the valuable contribution made by the Education Committee, and the fact that it was able to respond to tight deadlines dictated by the timescale for the consultation. That illustrates my good working relationship with the Committee, and I look forward to that continuing as the review progresses.

Paddy Roche raised the issue of grammar schools. Our grammar schools provide high standards of attainment for one third of our pupils. However, we need to think about the impact of our academically selective arrangements on the large majority of children who do not get to a grammar school. There is evidence from Scotland, and from the recent Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) study of the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) countries, to suggest that other systems can achieve comparable, or even better, results.

There is a significant variation in the performance of our grammar schools. The percentage of pupils achieving three or more A levels can range from 30% in the lowest-achieving schools to 68% in the highest-achieving schools. The percentage of pupils achieving seven or more GCSEs at grades A to C can range from 75% in the lowest-achieving schools to 98% in the highest-achieving schools.

I hope that the voluntary grammar schools will support and participate in whatever new post-primary arrangements are put in place. Any school that is thinking about becoming independent will have to consider the financial implications. Parents would have to meet tuition costs and any future school capital development costs —

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order. I ask the Minister to bring his response to a conclusion.

Mr M McGuinness: There is an issue about the recovery of capital grants paid to the schools by my Department. Teachers in independent schools would be removed from the current pay and pension arrangements. Fees would be determined by each school and would vary from school to school. The annual fees in independent schools in England range from £6,000 to £10,000.

There is a pressing demand for change, and it is incumbent on us to focus on the needs of children rather than on party politics or the interests of particular institutions. The challenge for us all is to recognise that change is necessary, and that we must build the maximum possible consensus on new arrangements.

Mr S Wilson: In his final remarks, the Minister has shown the House how sincere he is when he talks about consensus on the subject. It is clear that those who do not go down the route that Martin McGuinness wants will have the financial and the administrative Armalite held to their heads as they are pushed into acceding to the Minister's wishes. I am glad to see that the gloves are coming off in this fight. I hope that the Minister's last remarks will be a wake-up call to all those who have sat back complacently, believing that the decent thing will be done, because this Minister does not intend to do the decent thing by education. As other people have said, he intends to ram through his 1960s socialist dogma regardless of whether there is consensus or not.

This has been an interesting debate. We have had a range of views. Patricia Lewsley stuck her head in the sand and ignored the views of the many middle-class Nationalists who are flocking to grammar schools. However, Patricia Lewsley's answer is to have all-ability comprehensive schools with all-ability classes and no streaming. That really is going back to the failed policies of the 1960s. I very much doubt that too many SDLP voters will be sympathetic to that.

As usual, Eileen Bell sat firmly on the fence. She wants to keep the best aspects of the grammar schools but do away with selection. I do not know how that can be done. Perhaps she will explain it to us some other time. Mary Nelis was also stuck in the 1960s. The only thing missing from Mary Nelis's speech about elitism and class discrimination was a rendition of 'The Red Flag' at the end.

The Minister displayed his usual stuck-needle approach. I have heard and read his speech before. It went to the INTO conference and to the CCMS, and now we have had it in the Assembly. At least he could have done the decent thing and dreamt up a new speech for today. He started off by saying that the debate had to be based on properly informed opinions and on data. He may even have used the phrase "robust data". What did we get? We got three stories about wee girls waking up in the middle of the night and sleepwalking. Is that robust data? *[Interruption]*.

No.

This is what the Minister is using: emotional blackmail or emotional claptrap. Either the argument is based on data and facts, or it is based on the kind of nonsense that we got from the Minister today. That is not the way to proceed. When it comes to data, I would have thought that he would have learned the lesson from his long years of interrogation by the police, the Army and others — get your story straight before you open your mouth or else keep it shut.

The Minister tells us that 8% of working-class youngsters get to a grammar school. Gerry McHugh tells us that 15% of those who go to grammar schools are on free school meals. Which is it? Is it 8% or 15%? Perhaps it is something different. However, we are told that our arguments must be based on data — myth number two or three, or whatever it was.

The Minister tells us in England fewer pupils leave school with fewer than five GCSEs. That is not what he told Peter Weir on 21 March. My understanding is that 11% is greater than 8%, but perhaps I am wrong. That is what the Minister said in a written answer to Peter Weir. If he is going to base these claims on data, he should get the data and the story right. However, the evidence and the arguments do not matter; the Minister is determined to go down a certain route.

He mentioned that you cannot have a selective system without some form of selection — that is right. The end of academic selection will not mean that there will be a non-selective system. Mr Burns made that clear when he stated in his report that there would still be over-subscribed schools. Will the Minister tell us how people will be selected, if he is not going to select on the basis of what is best for them academically? Let us make it clear that selection does not involve academic rejection; it is a selection for the best route. You are not rejecting people; you are saying that one route is best for some people and that another is best for others. The use of emotional language is the final appeal of someone whose arguments are bankrupt. If you are not going to select people on the basis of their academic ability and what is best for them educationally, what are you left with? You are left with only two other kinds of selection — economic selection or social selection. Socially deprived people would come out far worse on those counts than they do on the basis of academic selection.

We have the evidence in England of the Prime Minister's escaping the bog-standard system of education that people want to introduce into Northern Ireland by paying for his youngsters to go to school. Half of his Cabinet have turned their backs on their socialist principles — or perhaps they do not have any socialist principles. In any case, they have turned their backs on their rhetoric, and they pay to send their youngsters to school. That is the alternative to academic selection. Trade unions are opposed to pupil profiles being used

for any form of selection. Mr Burns also pointed that out:

“If assessment outcomes in primary schools are used by post-primary schools to select children, for enrolment or for the purposes of ability streaming or banding, pressure grows at primary school to coach for assessment tests, and ultimately results in distortions and inequalities in teaching and learning”.

Schools may be prevented from seeing those profiles before youngsters arrive, but when they get those profiles, one cannot stop them from using them for streaming. They can do whatever they wish with them then. The things that the Minister told us that he would abolish will not be abolished. In fact, they will be stretched out over one, two or three years. I am not saying that; Mr Burns said it, and the Minister admitted it.

The trade unions do not want pupil profiles to be used for any form of selection, but, once they are published, neither the trade unions nor the Minister nor anyone else can stop them from being used for that purpose. Let us not pretend that these issues are clear-cut. I want to pick up on a point that Billy Hutchinson made because there is an attempt to drive a wedge between Unionists. I represent a working-class constituency, but I could no longer describe myself as working class. Given their incomes, I do not think that any Members could describe themselves as such.

Nevertheless, let me say this. The sacrifices that my parents made to send me to a grammar school, which I earned a place in, enabled me to climb up the ladder. I have taught numerous youngsters from working-class backgrounds in a grammar school, and they have since been able to climb up the ladder as a result of the system. There are many others who will be advantaged by the continuation of a system that caters for diverse needs by providing different institutions for them.

4.30 pm

However, there is a problem, and Bob McCartney highlighted one answer to it. It is not only a matter of the 11-plus — it is a whole attitude in society. How do we value those who go a different educational route? A change in the 11-plus, or increased spending at the lower end of education, will not answer that question. Many complex issues need to be addressed, and I hope that, in the coming months, we shall have the opportunity to do that. As I said earlier, I trust that the Minister will not run away from the House when it comes to making decisions; that he will listen to the Members of the House; and that the big stick that he wielded at the end of his speech does not show the way in which the debate will be conducted.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That this Assembly notes the publication of the Burns report on 24 October 2001 on the review of post-primary education.

RECYCLING OF WASTE

Dr McDonnell: I beg to move

That this Assembly calls for the immediate establishment of an effective recycling agency to assess, develop and promote all aspects of the recycling of waste from industrial, commercial and domestic sources in Northern Ireland.

I hope that the exodus of Members does not reflect their interest in the subject that I am about to discuss and that I hope to do something about. I shall ignore those leaving the Chamber and get on with the business. I do not need to remind Members that waste management is one of the biggest bread-and-butter issues to face us at this time, whatever our party or constituency. Each of us is concerned from time to time with very local aspects of waste management, such as litter control. At times we may focus more on the domestic side of waste management. Some of us yearn for separate bins — blue bins, white bins, green bins and yellow bins — for glass and paper in order to separate organic and garden waste so that it can be used for compost, and to set aside residual general waste. However, if we want to make a difference, we must deal with the bigger picture. We need to step back and have a long-term view on the problem.

The issue is bigger than Northern Ireland; it is an all-Ireland and, indeed, an all-Europe issue. Approaches to it should be on the agenda for the relevant cross-border ministerial meetings and involve co-operation between Departments, North and South, as there are no politics in this as such. If we cannot find solutions by working together and by giving mutual support; North and South; we shall disappear under the ever-growing mountain of rubbish.

I am intrigued by Minister Noel Dempsey's efforts in the South; his recent taxation of plastic bags was interesting. Overnight there was a rapid reduction in the number of bags blowing about in hedgerows across Southern Ireland, and the public reacted favourably. My difficulty with our current efforts on waste management and recycling is that we all talk the talk, but we do not walk the walk. We speak the jargon, we have all the clichés, but we do nothing substantial, and the waste management strategy remains fragmented, piecemeal and effectively useless.

Much of the responsibility for handling our waste rests with local district councils, and in many cases they dispose of waste into landfill sites. However, it is the Department of the Environment that sets the policy, even though overall responsibility does not appear to rest anywhere. There is a magic circle in which the buck keeps being passed. To overcome that and get everyone on board, we need a cohesive, dynamic partnership between our Government — regional government and local government — and the environmental interests in the

broader community. A free-standing agency that can relate to all interests will best meet that objective.

There is a problem with our current approach. We do not have a lack of raw material, as there is any God's amount of it. We do not have a lack of public interest — if a member of the public recognises someone as a public representative, whether at local government or Assembly level, he or she will get an earbashing about waste management. The difficulty is outlets and markets for the product — or the by-product — and the lack of meaningful vision to take a large-scale, long-term view and make a difference.

It behoves us to find ways and means to create opportunities and outlets to allow recycling to flourish. Why does the Department for Regional Development, which is involved in the big infrastructure contracts, not specify that recycled concrete from brick rubble and the like can be used as hard-core fill for road and other infrastructure schemes, such as car parking? I am not suggesting that it should be used to resurface a road, although 25% to 30% of the hard-core rubble that goes into much of those developments could be derived from recycled material.

We must have commitment as an Assembly, and we must create that commitment and stick with it until we have solved the waste problem. We need to act in a meaningful, functional joined-up mode, and the only way to do that is to create a strong, powerful agency in the North to work closely with whatever authority exists in the South. Better than that would be an all-island agency like Tourism Ireland Ltd to manage this crisis aggressively and with authority.

We have to begin to sort out the bigger aspects. I shall now deal with construction, demolition and industrial waste rather than domestic waste, which we tend to focus on more often.

The problem of domestic waste will be resolved. There was an interesting EU Directive recently about recycling electrical appliances or returning them to the manufacturers. I am not sure how that will work, but I shall monitor it with interest.

If the next Department of Agriculture and Rural Development contract for a road scheme were to specify that 20% of the hard core is to be from recycled sources, that would make a vast difference. Many people in that business are struggling. They stockpile a certain amount of recycled material and must dump the rest as landfill because there is no market for it. If there were an outlet for the material, a conveyor-belt system would be created that would allow construction and demolition waste to be reused. If we had a market for such waste, even for industrial waste, much of which is metal in the form of old engines or machines, the problem of domestic waste could be resolved through pre-selection into separate bins for different destinations.

Some of us were excited by what we saw in Denmark, where in the middle of Copenhagen, there is a large non-toxic incinerator that generated masses of electricity at a low cost and also supplied the neighbourhood for a mile around with relatively free heating and hot water. That incinerator fascinated me. It burned wood, clothing, paper, some plastic bags and even disposable nappies. Few Members will be aware that the biggest element of domestic waste in a home in which there are small children is disposable nappies. They do not make useful landfill.

Food and organic waste can go into compost heaps, and we have to create the culture for that. Many people will be happy to make such provision. Garden waste and hedge cuttings can also go into the compost heap.

The UK is the second-largest producer of construction and demolition waste in the EU. The EU produces 180 million tonnes of construction waste a year. That is a massive amount. Reusing even a fraction of that would help. Europe-wide, 30% of construction waste is recycled: 70% goes to landfill. Some 40% of the waste comprises bricks, concrete, et cetera, 50% is stone and soil, and the remainder comprises small amounts of metal, asphalt and tar.

Northern Ireland produces 1.8 million tonnes of construction waste each year. Southern Ireland produces 2.7 million tonnes. All the waste in the South goes to landfill initially, but they manage to recycle 40% of that. Those figures need to rise up to 75% or 80%. Mobile crushing machinery is now available that can go onto a demolition site, grind the concrete and dispose of the waste as fill for somewhere else. I stand to be corrected on this matter, but I understand that some of the demolition waste removed from the M3 flyover was used in the Odyssey project.

Other demolition waste was used for some of the developments around the Titanic Quarter. The UK uses around 420 million tonnes of aggregates each year. Northern Ireland uses about 15 million or 20 million tonnes. One million tonnes of that could be derived from recycled materials.

4.45 pm

Other Members may wish to comment on domestic waste, but I wish to refer briefly to opportunities for recycling industrial waste. Iron and scrap metals, as well as other materials, can be recycled rather than dumped in landfill sites.

I am grateful to the Minister for attending the debate. It is not enough to cry about recycling and the problem of waste management. Markets must be created as an outlet for recycled products and by-products, so that recovered metals can be reused and gain some added value. However, that will not happen if there are no markets.

I do not wish to bore Members with the variety of opportunities —

Mr Deputy Speaker: It would be helpful if the Member would draw his speech to a close, as many other Members wish to speak.

Dr McDonnell: I shall summarise the main points.

Members must take waste management seriously. It is a major industrial and domestic issue. Let us set meaningful targets for the reuse of so-called waste, whether it be concrete, wood, paper, iron or other metals. Let us consider seriously the possibilities of incinerating pre-selected, suitable waste and generating cheap electricity — God knows our electricity is expensive enough. It may be possible to distribute the waste heat from that process to heat water or to provide central heating for people in the neighbourhood.

We must try to ensure that departmental contracts specify that a percentage of recycled products would be desirable. My understanding is that, unless the contracts specify such requirements at the outset, nothing will be done.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Given that the Business Committee has allocated 90 minutes for the debate and many Members wish to contribute, I ask Members to limit their speeches to six minutes.

The Chairperson of the Committee for the Environment (Rev Dr William McCrea): I support the ideas behind the motion. Throughout the life of the Assembly, the Environment Committee has been proactive in encouraging everyone in Northern Ireland — industry, commerce, the public and Government — to play an active role in waste minimisation and recycling.

Last month, the Committee hosted a reception for the chairperson and members of the UK Sustainable Development Commission, whose task it is to alert society to the challenges of sustainable development. Sustainable development is about returning to the most basic assumptions about the working of the economy and about learning to live within ecological and social limits. Innovative policy-making and departmental co-operation will be required to meet such challenges. The Committee for the Environment has taken, and will maintain, a keen interest in sustainable development through its encouragement of local councils to develop and implement effective waste management plans, which, when adopted finally, will underpin the Department of the Environment's waste management strategy.

The Committee for the Environment welcomes moves by the Department to increase public awareness of waste minimisation and recycling through the Wake Up to Waste campaign, which promotes partnership with local authorities to achieve the key objectives and to bring about an important change in the public's attitude to waste.

However, the determination and dedication of the Committee for the Environment has been a significant factor in progressing the Wake Up to Waste campaign. The Department launched its waste management strategy in March 2000, yet there was little or no progress on plans for waste reduction, recycling and education until September 2001. In July 2001, the Committee pressed the Department, not only on the slow progress of waste management plans but on the need to develop urgently a parallel programme of waste-recycling education for householders, businesses and schools. A key role in waste reduction lies with manufacturers, whose products and production systems must be modified urgently to minimise waste and maximise recycling opportunities.

The Committee encouraged the Department to extend the Great Britain waste and resources action programme to Northern Ireland. The GB programme promotes sustainable waste management. Its role, through the Waste Management Advisory Board, is to remove barriers to waste minimisation, to reuse and recycle, and to create stable and efficient markets for recycled materials and products. Such activities, and good waste data studies, if efficiently implemented, fulfil the role of a recycling agency that is envisaged in the motion.

With regard to regional waste management plans, which are essential to the development of Northern Ireland's long-term strategy to deal with waste, the Committee was most concerned to learn that in the September 2001 monitoring round, the Department was forced to surrender £1 million of the £3.5 million that was allocated to waste management for 2001-02. Indeed, until the Committee intervened, there was a real danger that even more of the £3.5 million would have been lost. The Committee was so concerned with the lack of progress that it twice met — in September 2001 and in January 2002 — representatives of the three regional waste management district council partnerships and officials from the Department's Environment and Heritage Service to urge progress on the development of the waste management plans.

The Committee also monitored progress through regular correspondence with the three regional partnerships and with the Department, especially on the Department's scheme to distribute waste management funds to district councils. Members will, therefore, understand the Committee's pleasure when the Minister announced the launch of the Wake Up to Waste campaign on 7 February 2002. It welcomes that campaign. However, I must emphasise that it is simply an important starting point. Much remains to be done, and I assure the House that the Committee for the Environment will continue to monitor progress and will actively intervene if progress is not evident.

I shall leave Members with this thought: it is not enough for Government to educate industry and the public on the importance of waste minimisation and recycling.

Government Departments and all public bodies, such as health boards and education boards, must lead the way by giving practical support, by improving their own waste management performance and by developing sustainable procurement policies. Imagine the effect of that one act on the market for recycled and recovered materials in Northern Ireland. I support the thought behind the motion.

Mr Armstrong: Waste is an enormous issue for everyone in Northern Ireland — a relatively small country that produces its fair share of industrial, commercial and domestic waste in every corner of the region. Failure to utilise waste successfully could result in the diminution of Northern Ireland as a tourist attraction, a place of economic opportunity and, most importantly, a natural and healthy place to live. Therefore, it is of great importance to find effective methods to recycle waste.

There is no point in creating mountains of plastic, aluminium, paper, metal or glass. We do not need any more mountains in Europe. We remember the great push for paper, plastic and glass recycling in the 1970s and the resultant bankruptcies of firms that were left with stockpiles of products that had no commercial outlets. The initial concentration on efforts to recycle paper and aluminium was a mistake.

The raw material of paper production, if properly utilised from forests where planting is in balance with felling, is a sustainable resource. Moreover, if correctly processed, paper is a biodegradable and necessary ingredient in making compost. Aluminium, on the other hand, is most plentiful and there is no excuse for wasting it.

One needs only to look at our river banks to see the environmental deficit as a result of the use of plastic. Many fast-flowing rivers whose levels rise rapidly during heavy rainfall almost have clothes lines of plastic sticking to the bushes that line the river banks. That is the more obvious and unsightly downside of the misuse of plastic. What impression does that picture leave with tourists, who are another scarce commodity in our area? There must be complete awareness of the problem, and we must start with the youth.

Legislation that lays out a definite timetable must be put in place. Plastic carrier bags, used extensively in the retail sector, should be phased out. Woven paper products are now available that rival plastic for strength. Paper, as I have already said, comes from an infinitely renewable source. Plastic designed for use in industry and agriculture should be totally biodegradable.

Legislation will concentrate minds, as it did when leaded petrol was phased out. Business and industry will come up with an alternative when faced with an imperative. All valued or troublesome waste should be categorised. The important question should be: "Is there a destination? Is there a market?" If not, one should be developed. Plants could be set up across Northern Ireland to categorise waste and incinerate it to produce energy

and heat. Different filters for each different type of waste could be used to eradicate toxic waste.

There is surely a ready market for compost — horticultural outlets and garden centres are only two examples. District councils have their part to play through the use of compost in parks and flower beds.

There is a high level of waste on farms and other agricultural establishments because of modern farming methods. Biogas plants, such as that proposed at Fivemiletown, are to be commended, but funding for that type of system is a big problem. The operation of biogas plants, as seen in Sweden and Denmark, makes a significant contribution to solving several environmental problems in agriculture, waste recycling and greenhouse gas emissions. The use of anaerobic digesters on farms, in agriculture industries and in sewage treatment works should be promoted and encouraged.

It is of the utmost importance that all waste be made into a product. Where there is a product, there is no waste. People with small minds create much waste. The Assembly should take up the issue of utilising all waste to make a profit and to make Northern Ireland a healthier and more environmentally friendly place to live. The public should be left in no doubt that recycling will cost money, but it also costs money when waste is not recycled. It will be a cost worth paying if generations to come are to have a future.

5.00 pm

Mr M Murphy: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I welcome Dr McDonnell's important initiative and the opportunity to discuss waste management. Sinn Féin recognises, and is pleased that others recognise, the importance of recycling as part of a co-ordinated waste management strategy. However, Sinn Féin believes that our sights must be set higher and that the highest possible standards must be met. On 24 October 2000, Mitchel McLaughlin and I tabled a motion calling on the Minister of the Environment to work progressively towards zero waste targets.

As political leaders and activists, many in the Assembly have worked closely with local communities on environmental and planning issues. Two important lessons have been learnt. The first is that collective action by communities, with support from the public, can achieve real and positive change and solve environmental problems. That leads to an overall heightening of public awareness of the importance of environmental issues. The second lesson is that environmental problems are not only local or national matters, but have global implications. Waste management must encompass not only recycling, as seen in the very good advertisements by the Department of the Environment, but we must also consider reducing the amount of waste produced, and a means of dealing with waste material that cannot be recycled.

Last week I asked the Minister of the Environment, Mr Nesbitt, if he had any plans to implement the Waste Framework Directive (75/442/EEC), which relates to packaging waste. I also asked him what he proposed to do about plastic bags from retail grocery outlets. Each week thousands of plastic bags end up in landfill sites, and I called on him to introduce the Regulations, introduced by Noel Dempsey TD, that apply on the rest of the island. The charge levied on plastic bags to encourage their reuse and to reduce the amount going into landfill sites has had a significant effect across the Twenty-six Counties. Unfortunately, I was not too happy with the Minister's reply.

Unless we address the gap that persists between the rapid development in smart technology and the new economics of resource efficiency, Ireland will inherit a waste management infrastructure that was originally designed for the nineteenth century. Over the coming decades, our society will have to adapt. Zero waste represents a new planning approach and defines the discipline required to create a more viable pattern of interaction with our natural world, including the principles of conserving resources, minimising pollution, maximising employment opportunities and providing more local economic self-reliance.

The guiding principles on zero waste must be translated into practical policies and measures. Responsibility for waste management must pass from the taxpayer and local authorities to the manufacturers and producers of goods, who can ensure that the design and packaging of their products include plans for the recovery of the material waste. Incineration is not the answer. Yesterday we debated the risks of mobile phones to health. We must be very careful. People do not want further health problems or fears of the unknown.

Local authority engineers and other officers must be retrained to depart progressively from the landfill and incineration approaches to waste disposal and led to adopt a modernised procedure. These techniques aim to create enabling frameworks for producers and consumers to increase the resource productivity and reduce hazards through the design of products and processes. Manufacturers could close the loop by using materials collected through recycling programmes to produce new material and packaging; there could be initiatives to encourage households and businesses to reduce waste and to recycle, and a scheme could be introduced to bring about changes in waste disposal and recovery of material.

I do not have time to complete my speech, but we must establish an effective recycling agency to assess, develop and promote recycling —

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order. Will the Member bring his contribution to a conclusion.

Mr M Murphy: I make one final point — we need to involve communities in recycling. Go raibh míle maith agat.

Mr Ford: The responsibility for waste management has been split between the Department of the Environment and district councils for many years. There is undoubtedly a view among district councils that the Department dumps the problems on councils and takes credit for the easy bits. Fortunately that position has changed a little in recent years. The waste management strategy published two years ago is undoubtedly good. The problem is that it took too long to prepare and is perhaps too much of an overview of the situation rather than getting down to the practicalities.

Northern Ireland district councils are, by and large, too small to carry out the full range of waste management responsibilities, which is why we have three regional groups preparing plans. However, they are creating several problems for themselves because of the simple lack of co-ordination. There are up to a dozen district councils, with different political agendas and individual problems. That is why, as highlighted by the Committee Chairperson, the arc21 group in the eastern region effectively lost £1 million from last year's budget because it was taking time to prepare a detailed plan rather than rushing into expenditure. We must learn from that. In the shire counties of England, it is a district council's responsibility to collect waste and a county council's responsibility to dispose of it; there has to be that application of scale. I am not yet convinced that we are starting to deal with those waste problems, although we are moving in the right direction.

Our recycling rates are dreadful when compared to many other parts of the UK. District councils such as Sutton and Eastleigh in England are setting us a good example with recycling rates of three or four times those of councils in Northern Ireland. Of course, we have had problems. When I was elected to Antrim Borough Council nine years ago, the council was developing a plan for a new landfill site, which would have included a recycling facility. The council is still waiting for the Department — because of the regional development strategy — to take a decision on that plan. We must learn some of those lessons and get away from the environmentally and financially unfriendly situation of having waste transported. I thought that the distance between Toome and Ballyclare was long until I heard of waste being transported from Ballymena to Scotland. That issue is of concern to several councils.

The Department of the Environment has limited areas of responsibility and it has, therefore, limited ability to influence decisions on the reuse and recycling of waste. If we had joined-up government in its fullest sense other Departments and Government agencies would use their influence to improve things.

Dr McDonnell gave examples of things that should be done. With the exception of his apparent enthusiasm for incineration, I would not disagree with many of them — the jury is still out on the validity of incineration.

Undoubtedly, as regards the markets that need to provide outlets for recycled material, Departments such as Enterprise, Trade and Investment and Agriculture and Rural Development need to be involved.

We must ensure that the spirit of recycling pervades the Government and is not confined merely to the Department of the Environment. If we do not, we will return to the situation from which we hope we are moving away. Mr Deputy Speaker, you know Mallusk as well as I do, and areas such as that will continue to be blighted not only by past dumping but by the threat of future dumping if the matter is not dealt with properly.

Although the primary responsibility rests with the Department of the Environment and the district councils, we must look at other uses of waste by other Departments and public agencies, and that is why I am slightly concerned by the wording of Dr McDonnell's motion. We have all more or less agreed with his sentiments so far, and, as I have said, there is no doubt that matters are moving better than they were. Indeed, Dr McCrea highlighted that point in his formal response on behalf of the Committee for the Environment. However, the precise wording of Dr McDonnell's motion calls for

"the immediate establishment of an effective recycling agency"

and that suggests to me that he has given up hope of the district councils and the Department of the Environment solving anything. It also suggests the potential for the problems associated with using another quango rather than our current structures.

Looking back over recent years, I can see why an active district councillor might have given up hope that the Department of the Environment would respond appropriately. However, from my perspective on the Committee for the Environment, it seems that the Minister and the civil servants appear to understand the problems and are attempting to work in a better partnership with district councils than they were previously. I hope that the Minister will confirm that in the debate. If he gives assurances that the Department will take its responsibilities seriously, I hope that we can join in supporting the sentiments of the Member who moved the motion. At the same time, however, it would be valuable if Dr McDonnell accepted those sentiments, banked them and did not push the motion to a vote. If he does push for a vote, the debate will become more divisive than it needs to be.

Mr Boyd: Many of my constituents in South Antrim and indeed people throughout Northern Ireland, as Mr Ford said, have had to endure untold problems caused by landfill. Real alternatives for managing waste are long overdue. With recent European Union Directives on alternatives to landfill waste, we must prioritise an effective strategy as well as a co-ordinated response by the Department to manage all aspects of waste recycling.

I am disappointed that the SDLP Member who moved the motion brought a wider political aspect to the debate by suggesting an all-Ireland agency. That is unnecessary, and we should focus on resolving our own waste management problems here. Establishing a Northern Ireland agency is what would be appropriate.

I welcome the Wake Up to Waste campaign, but we must provide practical solutions so that a recycling culture is created. I welcome the practical steps that my council in Newtownabbey has taken in recent years in creating a site at Bruslee for different types of rubbish to be recycled, including grass cuttings, electrical goods, metal, timber, paper and bottles. Each household in Newtownabbey has also been provided with a recycling bin for newspapers.

However, not all council areas here have taken those steps. For example, in the north-west, only 3% of waste is recycled and only 1% in the council area in Londonderry. The Northern Ireland average for waste recycling is 7%. Contrast that with the Netherlands, for example, where 45% of waste is recycled. We clearly have much work to do to create a climate of recycling.

Each household in Northern Ireland produces 1.4 tonnes of waste each year. It was stated recently in the 'Belfast Telegraph' that our discarded domestic rubbish could fill the Waterfront Hall every two weeks. At present 95% of rubbish is buried in landfill sites. With all the hazards associated with landfill, there must be alternatives. We need an agency that can co-ordinate the network of waste recycling and recovery facilities and reduce the dependency on landfill. A healthy environment is essential for the quality of our own lives and our children's lives. We have an obligation to protect our environment.

5.15 pm

Ms Morrice: I commend Mr Boyd, because he has taken many words out of my mouth. It is important to highlight the recycling culture.

I welcome the recent shocking television advertisement, which drives home the dangers that we face if we continue to stuff our bins, landfill sites and countryside with the ugly legacy of our consumer-driven society. I thank Dr McDonnell for tabling the motion, because it puts a new focus on an important issue and educates us about the dreadful facts and figures that are associated with waste products.

The Women's Coalition supports the spirit of the motion, which focuses on recycling and a recycling agency. Members know that three elements in the waste management package must operate in tandem: reduce, reuse and recycle. We cannot simply focus on recycling. In order to solve the massive waste management problem, we must go further back in the process.

Members have mentioned many different ways in which we could tackle the waste management problem.

Other proposals could include an incentive scheme, whereby industry is given rewards, such as a green tick or a stamp or an official recognition, for the operation of waste reduction policies. Supermarkets, many of which should be commended for their work, could be rewarded for either a reduction in the amount of packaging or for the use of biodegradable packaging.

Billy Armstrong mentioned the importance of a greater focus on the use of energy supplies from agricultural waste, which is an important issue that the Committee for Enterprise, Trade and Investment has considered in detail. Norman Boyd quoted huge domestic waste figures.

Should the new agency focus only on recycling? Should the Assembly create a new agency, given that it is trying to reduce the number of agencies? Would it be better to co-ordinate the activities of the existing agencies? A joined-up government approach is necessary. There may be a role for a senior cross-departmental group. Whatever the correct approach is decided to be, and we are not saying yea or nay, it is important that bodies such as the advisory board of the Environment and Heritage Service's waste management strategy be consulted.

The most important area to consider is best practice. I have nothing but praise for the work of non-governmental organisations. For example, in pilot schemes, Bryson House's kerbside recycling project has been excellent. Given that such non-governmental organisations lead the field, they must be given solid support. The valuable work of Friends of the Earth and Conservation Volunteers must also be recognised. The councils that lead the way in recycling and waste management must be rewarded.

On the other hand, we must spur on those councils that are dragging their heels. It is unfortunate that several councils in Northern Ireland have not got their act together on this issue. We need co-operation. David Ford mentioned that we need co-operation between non-governmental organisations (NGOs), local councils, Departments and, importantly, the private sector. We must involve the private sector so that recycling and waste management can become real issues on which work is co-ordinated. We need to change the culture that surrounds the issue, and treat waste properly — as a dirty word.

Mr A Doherty: I fell out of bed during the early hours of last Thursday. It may disappoint you to know that, when I was abruptly awoken, my first thought was not "What can be done about waste recycling?" My thoughts were more along the lines of "Where am I, and what am I doing here?" When I got back into bed, I drifted back into philosophical musings, as one does at three in the morning. Those are very profound questions. Even more profound is the seminal question "What am I?" As I nursed my damaged head, the answer came to me — not in a flash, but I finally got there — that I am a product, wrapped in a package. I am — we all are —

potential waste material. Having established a link with the motion, and before going on to the nitty-gritty, I shall develop that thought.

Our product is our intelligence, our sensory perception, our emotions, our capacity to create or destroy; in short, it is our spirit, our soul, our life — wonderful and terrifying. When our souls depart, as they will, although I will not speculate about where, what is left is technically, in today's terms, waste. As waste, it must be disposed of. Most traditional methods involve a landfill site or incineration; there is some recycling. Anthropophagy was one early form, and there have been some other gruesome practices. However, I will hurry on from that to mention the wonders of preserving life and restoring health through the transplantation of human organs.

I hope that no one feels that my comments are crude or tasteless. I am trying to deal with a sensitive subject in a way that I hope will spur people into a new mode of thinking and that will change the widely held idea that much, perhaps most, of what we produce from our ever-decreasing treasure house of natural resources is waste. We must stop regarding as waste all that packaging, paper and cardboard, all those plastic bottles and bags, all that expanded polystyrene and bubble wrap, and all those tins, bottles, leftovers and "worn-outs", scrapings, cuttings and clippings — all that stuff — that is left lying about when we finally get to the, sometimes tatty, product. It is not waste. It, too, is a product, waiting for a producer or a reproducer.

Having got that off my too-feeble chest, I turn again to the motion, which calls for the establishment of an effective recycling agency. I am all for that. Thousands of statistics could be quoted, detailing the vast amount of waste created, how much of it is shovelled into holes in the ground to fester and turn poisonous, and how little of it is recycled. I will not go into the details of subjects about which other Members know more. I will give only one titbit. Aluminium is the most plentiful metal in the earth's crust. It is a wonderfully useful material, but it is difficult and expensive in energy terms to mine and process. However, there are so many thousands of tonnes of aluminium — or should I say aluminum? — in the form of cans and containers in US landfill sites that it might be more economically viable, technologically simpler, and at least as environmentally friendly to mine the dumps for aluminium to reprocess than it is to rip more bauxite from the earth. Isn't that a thought?

The need for an effective agency to direct recycling is blindingly obvious. This is not a local, regional or national issue; it is a world issue, and if the world gets it wrong the consequences will be dire. Despite the worthwhile proposals being developed by district councils and council groups in their waste management plans, and, despite the good work being done regionally, it is essential that the organisations and machinery be in place and the

resources made available to ensure that the united and co-operative energies and expertise are combined to respond quickly and effectively to a world emergency. I fully support Dr McDonnell's excellent motion.

Mr A Maginness: Much has been said and, I suppose, recycled in this debate, and I do not intend to repeat what others have expressed, perhaps more eloquently than I could. I assure you that this is not a party political point, but it is important to develop a strategy that involves both parts of the island. The problems that affect Northern Ireland affect people in the Republic — there is no doubt about that. A joint strategy between the two parts of the island, as envisaged in the North/South Ministerial Council meetings, is to be welcomed, and I know that valuable work is being done on that. I want to emphasise this in a non-partisan way.

We face the common problem of the accumulation of waste. That accumulation arises from our own success — we are a successful economy and are becoming more successful. Our economic success means more production, and more production means more waste. That is the reality. The industrial and agricultural sectors account for a great deal of the waste going into our watercourses, lakes, rivers and streams. That is a considerable problem, North and South. We must use, reuse and recycle that waste. For example, mushroom farming in the border counties is affected by a problem with waste disposal. That problem is common to both sides of the border. It would be common sense for us to pursue a cross-border, all-Ireland strategy on waste. *[Interruption]*.

I see that the Minister of the Environment has just wasted a glass of water, but we will not allow that to distract us too much.

I welcome this thoughtful motion, which calls for an effective recycling agency. I endorse that, as would most, if not all, Members. We do require a cultural change — a cultural revolution — on waste. Unless we re-educate our citizens we will continue to add to the waste mountain that is the result of our affluence.

5.30 pm

We must become self-disciplining and educate our children in that regard. We must also put into operation ways and means of restricting the creation of waste at the point of production. In other words, we must look carefully at what we produce to see whether we can minimise waste and, particularly, packaging. We must break the link between economic production and waste. If we are ingenious enough to create a vibrant economy — which we have done and will continue to do — we are ingenious enough to tackle the problem at source.

We need a cultural revolution. We must consider how to minimise waste. As Dr McDonnell has suggested, we must be sensitive about recycling. That can be done through an agency, such as Dr McDonnell suggested,

and through the strategy that the Department of the Environment is developing. If there is anything that one can compliment the Department of the Environment on — and I am not loathe to compliment the Department of the Environment — it is its progressive approach to waste management. We must all give it our united support to free us from the mountain of waste.

The Minister of the Environment (Mr Nesbitt): I thank all who contributed to the debate. It was a debate full of nuance, and I choose that word deliberately. I was wrestling with the opening words that I would use in responding to the debate. The words that I intended to use were: "I agree with the sentiments". I noted that the Chairperson of the Committee for the Environment said that he supported the thoughts behind the motion. I do likewise. That is a better way of phrasing it. Mr Ford used the word "sentiments", and Jane Morrice spoke of the "spirit" of the motion. Alban Maginness referred to the "progressive approach" of the Department. There is much to think about. Judging from all the comments made, we empathise — if that can be an embracing word — with the thrust of the motion.

However, I am concerned that it calls for the "immediate" establishment of an agency. We all want to assess, develop and promote every aspect of recycling waste. I am sure that it was not the proposer's intention, but Jane Morrice commented that the motion refers only to recycling. That is correct, but there is more involved than recycling; there is reduction, recovery and recycling. One can see that there is support for the sentiments and the thrust of the motion, but I say genuinely to the proposer that I am not so sure that there is a totality of support for every element of it. I ask the proposer to think about that before he comes to his winding-up speech.

We have an agency that deals with waste — the Environment and Heritage Service. It has a waste management unit, which has recently been expanded.

We also have the waste management board looking at that. It is an independent body that was set up recently to bring together all the stakeholders, and its function is to assess and promote waste management.

We must ensure that we are outcome-focused, as has already been said, and we must ensure that what needs to be done is done. I note the comments of support and the contribution made by the Environment Committee in the development of what needs to be done. We have in place the framework by which we can develop and bring to fruition the outcomes. If, therefore, after wide consultation, and, if we have a process that can potentially deliver, it would not be timely to interject with some new independent agency that would be established immediately. That does not reflect the tenor of the debate, and I note sentiments of support from Dr McDonnell.

The framework is very clear. It could be argued that it took a long time to prepare and deliver, but we have it

now, and I concur with that. It wants to see waste management fully developed. Mr Mick Murphy said that reduction was the key element. Reduction, recovery, recycling, and — as has been mentioned by many Members — the market for recycled waste is the key element.

I agree with Dr McDonnell that markets are the big problem, and we must find ways and means to create the markets to allow recycling to proceed. He appealed to the Minister to create the markets — and not just cry about recycling. I endorse every sentiment expressed in those words. The markets are the fundamental fulcrums around which all of this will work or not work.

Key stakeholders must be involved. A founding principle is that those who produce the waste should be involved in the solution. That may sound trite, but we are all part of the problem, and therefore we must all be part of the solution.

I do not tell councils that waste is their problem. It is a problem for us all, and we must all work together. Mr Ford wanted an assurance about working together, and I give him that assurance. We are taking the lead in implementing that aspect through the waste management unit in Environment and Heritage Service.

Some Members referred to key targets. We must have a recovery of 25% of household waste by 2005. We must recover 25% of the waste from landfill and reuse it, and we must recover 40% by 2010. We must reduce landfill of industrial and commercial waste to 85% of 1998 levels, and we must bring the biodegradable aspect to 75% of 1995 levels.

Mr Boyd said that we need an agency to reduce landfill. I totally accept that landfill must be reduced, but, in taking the sentiments of the debate, I am not sure that immediately creating a new agency would deliver the outcome we want, and we should be focused on outcomes.

There are secondary targets, including end-of-life vehicles. By 2005, 85% of end-of-life vehicles must be recovered. By 2004, 90% of waste electrical and electronic equipment must be recovered. I could go on. For example, 85% of waste tars must be recovered by 2005.

(Mr Speaker in the Chair)

I do not want to bore the House with any more statistics. These are challenging targets for us all — the Assembly and the community that we represent — to fulfil. However, we will not fulfil those targets unless we put in place the mechanisms that will deliver them.

Let us look at the actions that are needed. The first key action is education and awareness, which Alban Maginness mentioned. Dr McCrea told us that the Wake Up to Waste initiative was an important starting point in the campaign to challenge public attitudes and awareness. I thank him for those comments. The worst system will work if people make it work. No matter how good a system we have, it will not work if people are not aware

of it. That is a key issue. Education is therefore a key priority, and we have been involved in that.

The second key action is the segregation of materials — the diversification away from landfill and segregating into waste that can be recycled. If segregation is achieved, that will lead to the third key action — the new methods of processing and treatment. Above all, however, the markets must be there. If they are not, it could be argued that it is no good having education or segregating waste. There is no good in having the new processing and treatment facilities if there are no markets to take it. That was a key point made by Dr McDonnell.

One of the most important elements is co-operation. I noted Mr Ford's comments that this approach is now working. I also note that he asked that we do not push the motion to a vote. Perhaps it will work, because that co-operation has to exist not only in the Assembly but among all the key stakeholders. Industry, local authorities, Government and the voluntary sector will all play their part.

Mr Ford stated that the district councils were too small to take on the task. I concur with that assessment. When I first met the members of the Waste Management Advisory Board for Northern Ireland, I put that question to them, and they agreed. We welcome the co-operation among the 26 district councils with the eastern, north-western and southern regional groups. They are publishing plans, as Dr McCrea and others have said, for working throughout the region to ensure that the outcome is delivered. Those plans are an important part of the strategy. They will inform us about future decisions, the most important of which are about funding.

There are milestones to be set and targets to be achieved. Monitoring and reporting are also important. It is no good having a plan and a target and funding unless the process is monitored to ensure that you are achieving what you want to achieve. The plans are out for consultation. They will be submitted to the Department in June to be deliberated upon. It is hoped that the plans will be published in October 2002. That is the target.

We have already been granting money to assist in that regard, both last year and this year. The Waste Management Advisory Board has been helping us. It has three committees: one concerned with reduction, recycling and recovery, and another dealing with education. The board played an important part in the Wake Up to Waste campaign. I remember going home one day and seeing an advertisement on a bus, which bore the legend "Mountains to Mourne" — the word "of" had been replaced by the word "to". The Mourne Mountains were in the shape of the word "waste". We do not want to be mourning the mountains, the ones that I can see from my home on occasions if certain things do not get in the way. We will leave that for another day.

Other things are happening as well. We are involved in the waste resources action programme, a new UK-wide organisation, in which Whitehall, Wales, the Scottish Executive and Northern Ireland are all involved as partners to provide help in the delivery of markets.

We hope to set up — and more detail will come forward in May — an industry fund through which we will provide money through the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment and the Department of the Environment as a pilot scheme to see if we can develop sustainable markets, which is the key element.

5.45 pm

I will briefly mention the North/South Ministerial Council as Alban Maginness referred to it, and it is important. The Belfast Agreement states that we should co-operate where it is to the benefit of both to do so, not for political purposes. I concur with that. I have met with Minister Dempsey several times, and we are trying to see what we can do over the coming months to deal with the fridges that are “frozen”, as it were, and waiting to be disposed of.

Mick Murphy mentioned plastic bags. That would involve primary legislation to be decided on by the Treasury in London, so at this stage we cannot do anything about that. However, I note the success elsewhere, and we will monitor that closely. If it proves to be as beneficial as it seems, we will try to introduce it in Northern Ireland. Mr Ford said that the jury is still out. Dr McDonnell made an interesting comment about the large non-toxic incinerator that caused no harm and generated much energy. That was an interesting comment as the word “incinerator” and the other words are emotive and, therefore, must be treated with respect. We must not be emotional, and we must be measured in our tone.

In conclusion, we have a blueprint and we have education. We need to get the segregation, the reprocessing and, above all, the markets. Given the markets, there will be the opportunity, and, given that opportunity, there will be the means. If we have the opportunity and the means, there will be the motive, and that is what we are about.

Sentiments were expressed widely for the content of the motion. Whether it should be put to a vote or not is another thing. I would very much like it if we could note the debate and, in noting it, have the motion withdrawn. However, I empathise with the sentiments of Dr McDonnell, the Chairperson of the Committee for the Environment and the other Members who spoke.

Dr McDonnell: Mr Speaker, I am honoured that you have returned to listen to the winding-up speech. I was deeply disappointed when I rose earlier to have only a Deputy Speaker — *[Interruption]*.

Ms Morrice: Shame.

Mr Speaker: He was recycled into a Speaker.

Dr McDonnell: All joking aside, I very much valued the Deputy Speaker's efforts and the efforts of those Members who stayed in the Chamber when it might have been easier to disappear elsewhere.

The main reason for tabling the motion — and it has lain on the No Day Named list for about six months — was to move the debate on and to retain a focus on this major issue. I purposely wanted to focus on what needs to be done and the outcomes that the Minister referred to earlier, rather than cry more about what needs to be done. I focused more on the industrial and construction side of things because the vast majority of waste comes from there, yet we tend to focus on the bits that we know best, such as domestic waste. However, I feel that if we deal with the big industrial waste, domestic waste will dovetail in behind.

I have no difficulty with the sentiments expressed by some Members agreeing with the spirit of the motion, and I apologise if my construction of the motion was slightly defective. I was trying to grapple with something, and I suppose it is easy to agree with the spirit of the thing. I am not word-perfect; I am not a lawyer, and I am not an expert at drafting and getting these things in focus. I wanted to get everybody on board, to get everybody focused and for everyone to get a sense of ownership of what is going on out there. There is no real difference between us, although we may have disagreed on minor points.

I agree strongly with the reduction, reuse and recycling sentiments expressed by David Ford and Jane Morrice. I tried to deal with reuse and recycling, and I knew that other Members would deal with reduction. However, there is a recycling bottleneck, and unless there is a back door, we cannot continue to bung in more through the front door.

I understand the frustration over the proposal for the immediate establishment of an agency. However, I accept that changes are taking place, and I do not want to force a vote. I simply want to see some change. I do not want to see another landfill site on the north foreshore, which Belfast City Council closed and had to reopen to dump another 10 ft or 15 ft of waste.

I was fascinated by what has been achieved in Denmark. It has an incinerator where we have the Waterfront Hall. It produces vast amounts of electricity, hot water and central heating, which are available to anyone within a one-mile radius who wants it. That approach probably ameliorated neighbourhood objections. However, it works well, and it is clean.

I thank Dr McCrea for his generally supportive contribution about the minimisation of waste and sustainable development.

Billy Armstrong mentioned aluminium, glass, paper, plastic bags and the threat to health and tourism.

Mick Murphy wanted to set the sights higher, and he referred to the earlier debate and zero waste tolerance. I have no difficulty in agreeing with that.

David Ford mentioned the split between the Department of the Environment and the district councils. That is one of the main points, and we must get beyond that.

Although Norman Boyd disagreed with me on some issues, I do not think that they were terribly important. We are trying to make progress towards something that makes a difference to the lorry-loads of waste that are being gathered on our streets every day. He reiterated one of my points, which was that 95% of our household waste is going into landfills.

Jane Morrice mentioned the spirit of the motion and the incentives to promote waste reduction.

Arthur Doherty supported me well, although I felt threatened somewhat when he started to talk about the human dimension, because I was not sure whether he was going to bury, burn or recycle me. I do not intend to facilitate him for a little while. However, I welcome the fact that Mr Doherty mentioned aluminium, because that presents a major opportunity. It is connected with the high price of electricity, which is too high to recycle the aluminium that we have.

Alban Maginness mentioned an all-island strategy. In reacting to the Minister's summary, I emphasise that I am not making a political point; it is a practical point. It would make good business sense, because Derry may want to work with Donegal, or Newry may want to work with Dundalk. It concerns common purpose, not political points.

The Minister made a grand tour of all the issues, and I shall not mention all the points he made. I thank him for being in attendance and for the detail of his response. However, he is on probation. On this occasion, I shall not push the motion to a vote. We shall revisit the motion next year and shall hold him to account if we do not see results in the meantime. I beg leave to withdraw the motion.

Mr Speaker: The mover begs leave to withdraw the motion. Is it the will of the House that the motion be withdrawn?

Motion, by leave, withdrawn.

Motion made

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

CAR PARKING PROVISION AT GARRYDUFF PRIMARY SCHOOL, BALLYMONEY

Mr Paisley Jnr: I want to draw to the attention of the House the issue of car parking provision at Garryduff Primary School in Ballymoney. Car parking provision at this rural primary school is a disaster waiting to happen if it is not addressed urgently by the Minister of Education, the Department of Education and the North Eastern Education and Library Board, where responsibility lies.

Garryduff Primary School is situated between Ballymoney and Dunloy on a stretch of rural country road where the traffic is fast. The school is well established and is expanding steadily; it has an excellent teaching reputation, a healthy enrolment and good examination results. However, in one regard it needs immediate, urgent and expeditious capital expenditure development.

The need for capital investment in car parking provision was identified over three years ago in a departmental focus review report, of which I am sure the Department is aware. The report commended the school's teaching standards, but it also contained a health warning. It stated that there was a serious health and safety issue with regard to car parking arrangements for teaching staff and for parents dropping children off at school and collecting them. If the issue is not addressed, there could be a serious road traffic accident.

I emphasise that it is not the responsibility of the Department of Education to provide car parking facilities for parents. However, the Department has a duty of care and responsibility not only for the children in its care but also for the teaching and auxiliary staff. It is essential that a car parking facility should not only address the health and safety problems of the teaching and auxiliary staff but should also remove a danger that children must face every day. A child may not be knocked down or killed, but he or she could be seriously injured.

Urgent consideration must be given to the provision of minor works to this school, because it would make a major difference to the lives of the pupils, and parents would not have to face the heartache of dropping their children off at a dangerous school.

In June 2000, the North Eastern Education and Library Board made financial provision to purchase a field adjacent to the school to develop a car park. That transaction has still not taken place. In March 2000, the Roads Service stepped in to help the Department with the immediate problems. The Department for Regional

Development should be commended for identifying some serious road hazards. I received a letter from the then Minister for Regional Development, Gregory Campbell. It stated:

“The road safety problems at the school would be greatly reduced by the provision of a dedicated car park to provide for the safe delivery and collection of children and for the safe parking of teachers’ vehicles.”

Unfortunately, no further progress was made. By June 2001 the Department of Education recognised that there was some urgency. A letter that I received from it stated:

“Although the farmer has sold the site, this is now an urgent case, and we are actively pursuing this matter, and when I have something positive to report, I will write to you again soon.”

That was almost a year ago. Parents and teachers believed that very little was being done. I am pleased to report that, at the beginning of this week, planning permission was given for the car park. The Department now has the choice of acquiring the land, which has been valued by the district valuer. I hope that it will acquire the land immediately. However, acquiring the land and obtaining planning permission is not enough to address the parking problem. The Department must find some £50,000 to deliver on the arrangement.

I hope that the Minister gets his skates on and moves ahead to release the money from his budget for the provision of the school car park.

6.00 pm

As in every other constituency, there is a backlog of minor works programmes. In the North Eastern Education and Library Board there are 20 million identified minor works that could be carried out. However, this should be given top priority because of the significant health and safety issues for teachers and school workers, and also the better quality of life for children going to and leaving that school. Parents would also be relieved that their children could be left to school without taking their lives in their hands as they walk across that busy road on the way to school.

I hope that the Minister is able tonight to address the disaster that is waiting to happen if money is not immediately identified to make this car park provision. I hope that the Department is able to respond positively.

Mr Leslie: As Mr Paisley said, the risks posed by the haphazard parking arrangements at Garryduff Primary School have been a cause of concern for some considerable time. I commend the work that has been done by Ballymoney road safety committee, and also that undertaken by the board of governors of Garryduff Primary School, in the form of intense lobbying that has reached the MLAs. It has certainly hit the main target, which is the North Eastern Education and Library Board. We are on the brink of a resolution, and it will be a source of considerable relief if the car parking facility can be built, now that the planning permission is there,

along with the small adjacent play area. That would also be a good thing, as it would focus the children’s attention as they are waiting to be picked up.

The road leading to the school from Ballymoney runs straight for some distance and, inevitably, traffic will reach high speeds. Vehicles coming from the opposite direction have to round a bend, and thus tend not to be travelling at such breakneck speed. They are, however, coming from a blind corner. It is an area where vehicles reach high speeds most of the time. I have occasionally complained to the Roads Service about the bumps, potholes and general state of disrepair of the road, although on the whole that does contribute a little to slowing down the traffic, which is probably just as well.

During its inquiry into school transport, the Environment Committee examined the merit of adopting the practice of some US states that, when a school bus has pulled in, there should be no overtaking of that bus until it has moved on again, so that children can alight and cross the road safely. School buses stopping outside Garryduff Primary School would be a perfect case study of the merits of that approach. The argument in favour is clear: that the traffic should be stopped so that children can safely cross the road. The argument against, which was put strongly, is that although children know that they are safe to cross the road from a school bus, the same does not necessarily apply on other occasions when they are crossing the road. The situation is not clear-cut. Nonetheless, there is no question that, where a bus is parked, traffic can be unsighted and the situation is dangerous. We have been fortunate that no serious accident has occurred.

Therefore, I completely endorse Mr Paisley’s call to the Department of Education to fund the successful application forthwith. I trust that the Minister will give us such undertakings today.

The Minister of Education (Mr M McGuinness): I thank Mr Paisley Jnr and Mr Leslie for their contributions.

Garryduff is a controlled primary school and its car parking provision is primarily a matter for the North Eastern Education and Library Board. The board has advised that the school is situated on a dangerous stretch of road, and it acknowledges the need for a bus turning-circle and car parking facilities for parents who leave and collect children at the school. I understand that the board consulted the Roads Service about possible options to address the situation, and the only feasible solution was for the board to acquire additional land.

The board has recently concluded negotiations with the owner of a plot of land adjacent to the school, and its purchase has been agreed — subject to certain conditions set down by the Valuation and Lands Agency. In the light of that, and following close consultation with the Roads Service, the board submitted a scheme to the local planning office. The planners requested some amend-

ments, and those were incorporated in a revised scheme to which formal planning approval is pending.

The education committee of the North Eastern Board has approved in principle the inclusion of the scheme in the board's minor works programme for this year. Provided the planning approval is confirmed and the

conditions for the purchase of the land are met, the project will be brought to tender. I trust that the matter will be speedily expedited, and the understandable concerns of the local community and its representative will be removed.

Adjourned at 6.07 pm.

Committee Stage Records

**NORTHERN IRELAND
ASSEMBLY**

**COMMITTEE FOR
REGIONAL DEVELOPMENT**

Wednesday 6 March 2002

**RAILWAY SAFETY BILL
(NIA 3/01)**

Members present:

Mr A Maginness (Chairperson)
Mr Bradley
Mr R Hutchinson
Mr McNamee
Mr M Robinson
Mr Savage

Witnesses:

Mr J Glendinning:) Railway Preservation
) Society of Ireland

The Chairperson (Mr A Maginness): Mr Glendinning, welcome to our meeting about the Railway Safety Bill. We are interested in hearing your views about the position of heritage societies in Northern Ireland.

Mr Glendinning: We have outlined some concerns to the Department. One of them is the cost involved. We have to produce a full safety case for operations, and we are not quite sure what it will contain. Obviously, we will have to employ a consultant to vet our safety case and present it, and consultants are not generally cheap.

Another concern is whether we will be able to continue to operate heritage trains. I hope that we will. We have co-operated well with Northern Ireland Railways (NIR) in the past, which has always been a good friend to us, so I hope that we can negotiate with it again. We also operate short train rides at Whitehead, and they would have to be included in our safety case.

At present, we are writing a safety case for our Southern operation. We hope that we will only need to write one safety case. If we have to write two, there must be something wrong. That is our immediate concern, but we are starting to write it.

The Chairperson: Are you writing the safety case for Córas Iompair Éireann (CIE) or Iarnród Éireann?

Mr Glendinning: We are doing the groundwork for both jurisdictions at present.

The Chairperson: One would assume that both cases would be the same. Mr Hesketh said that the safety cases would be the same for both jurisdictions.

You are concerned about the cost of implementing the safety cases. I am afraid that the Committee cannot reassure you on that. The Department and NIR must deal with that. However, the Committee can note your concerns, because an excessive financial burden on the Railway Preservation Society will make the operation of heritage railways impossible.

You are concerned also about how far your safety case would need to go to satisfy NIR. You seem to be hoping for some sort of exemption or to be able to make a more limited safety case, is that correct?

Mr Glendinning: When we first read the consultation document we noted the word “heritage” and the exemption clause, so we asked where our organisation stands. Is it a heritage operator with a case for an exemption, or must we write a full safety case or just a risk assessment? We suspected that we knew the answer to that, but we needed clarification. We must produce a full safety case because we operate on the main line, as I understand it. However, that case must dovetail with NIR’s and Irish Rail’s safety cases. The case that we are writing for the South dovetails very well with Irish Rail’s safety case. We have not met with NIR yet to discuss its safety case. There is an interface between where NIR ends and the Railway Preservation Society begins, but there is a grey area in the middle, which is dangerous.

The Chairperson: Right, but there will be no exemption for the Railway Preservation Society?

Mr Glendinning: No. We cannot see that happening.

The Chairperson: I would have assumed that risk assessment was part of the safety case, is it not?

Mr Glendinning: Yes, it is.

Mr R Hutchinson: With the best will in the world, Mr Glendinning, no one can argue for safety exemption, because safety is of paramount concern to us all. However, I was very encouraged by NIR. You may have heard me challenge Mr Hesketh twice. NIR is willing to meet you and be helpful, so surely you can meet in the middle and come up with some sort of package, albeit limited, that will fit the railways. In England, most of the heritage lines are not main rail lines, so perhaps that is why they can get away with more than your society can. I was very encouraged by what Mr Hesketh said.

Mr Glendinning: I was encouraged too. The only thing that I would take up with him is that he said that steam railways are limited. There are many main-line steam operations in GB, but they work differently. In GB, the rail system is split up into different groups: the train operators and Railtrack. The steam-train or heritage railway operators who operate on the main lines use one or two particular train operators to run their trains. In a sense, we are negotiating with both the rail operator and the

train operator, because NIR does both. The Railway Preservation Society would not be where it is today without the goodwill of NIR, and I have no reason to believe that that is not still there.

Mr R Hutchinson: And you will work on that?

Mr Glendinning: Yes.

Mr Savage: How many trains does the society have?

Mr Glendinning: We have nine steam locomotives and 33 carriages.

Mr Savage: How far can they travel?

Mr Glendinning: They can travel on any gauges of 5ft 3in, if there are no restrictions where the line has been regauged to a different size. I do not mean the gauge between the rails; I mean the gauge of bridges or platforms that have been modernised in some way that means that we can no longer operate on the line. So far, we have been able to. The speed of other trains is the only problem.

Mr McNamee: Have you estimated the cost of preparing and implementing a safety case?

Mr Glendinning: We have not progressed that far yet, and we do not know exactly how much it will cost, because we must find a consultant. We are hoping that the Heritage Railway Association, which is an umbrella group for railway preservation societies, will be able to provide us with expertise, and we are hoping that it will not be as expensive as it might be otherwise. If it cannot

provide us with that expertise, we will have to go shopping for it elsewhere in the UK. It is the same in the South, and the legislation is slightly different there. Private railways must produce a full-blown safety case, and they are in the same boat as we are. Consultants exist, but I do not have the costs.

Mr Bradley: We all agree that there can be no concessions on safety. However, with regard to the risk assessment, we could take a leaf out of the book of those who do risk assessments for vintage and classic cars. Insurance companies, for example, treat them with a degree of tolerance, and they do not give away money. I do not know how the case was made for vintage and classic cars, or what governing bodies made the case, but surely the same type of rules would apply. Any risk would be less, although there can be no concession on safety.

Mr Glendinning: The insurance premium would obviously not be as high. Compared to NIR, we operate only 20 or 30 trains a year, so our insurance is lower. However, a risk is a risk, and it is the same whether you have one train or 2,000, so to minimise that risk you must address it.

The Chairperson: Thank you very much. It has been helpful, and if in the course of your investigations you get any further information that you wish to convey to the Committee, we will be happy to receive it.

Mr R Hutchinson: I wish you well in your endeavours. Keep up the good work.

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Witnesses:

Mr T Hesketh) Translink
Mr A Mercer)

The Chairperson: The Committee welcomes Mr Hesketh and Mr Mercer from Translink to the first formal evidence session on the Railway Safety Bill. We will have a question-and-answer session after Mr Hesketh's submission.

Mr Hesketh: We are glad to be here again and pleased at the interest the Committee is taking in these matters, not least in the issue of railway safety, which is very important to us as a business. I am the author of the response from Northern Ireland Transport Holding Company (NITHC)/Translink of which I understand the Committee has copies. Alan Mercer, who is director of human resources, aided and abetted me in the preparation of the submission. Mr Mercer is here not only as director of human resources, but as the senior manager at board level with responsibility for railway safety in the senior management team. He is involved in that work on a day-to-day basis.

Railway safety came to the fore as a result of the A D Little safety report, which was commissioned by Northern Ireland Railways (NIR). At that time the board was becoming seriously concerned about railway safety and hired external specialist consultants to prepare a report on the state of the railway. Our primary concerns, as the Committee knows only too well, were the state of the infrastructure and the rolling stock. In the report, AD Little rightly highlighted the fact that most of the legislation governing railway safety was out of date and related to the nineteenth century. Some 10 years earlier, the same could have been said of the railway in GB, but in antici-

pation of privatisation, all railway legislation had been brought up to date there. Enabling legislation was passed and successive legislation prepared. Our Department proposed treading the same path of passing enabling legislation and introducing secondary legislation in steps.

In response to the consultation, Translink proposed taking advantage of the body of legislation already in existence in GB and passing it all in one fell swoop as the quickest way of bringing Northern Ireland up to date; in other words, replicating the consolidated weight of railway legislation that exists in GB. That view did not prevail with the current Bill. Nonetheless, we have received a detailed list of the proposed further legislation, which takes care of our objections.

There are two other matters, which I would like Mr Mercer to speak about, to do with legislation relating to drugs and alcohol and the policing of the transport system. However, before that, I would like to mention a few other points for the Committee's benefit. We have good relations with Irish Rail. Northern Ireland Railways and Irish Rail meet regularly to discuss safety matters, because there are issues of interoperation between the North and the South. The other organisation that uses our network is the Railway Preservation Society of Ireland. We are working with that body to draw up a network agreement, which, if successful, will enable us to allow it to operate on the network. There are technical difficulties, mainly to do with insurance, but they are being addressed. However, until they are resolved, we cannot let the steam trains run, which is a very great pity, but we are endeavouring to deal with those matters properly.

Apart from the current Railway Safety Bill, developments on railway safety are coming over the horizon in Europe, and a fresh Directive is emerging on that. Among other things, it will deal with interoperability; the issuing of safety certificates; the recognition of each other's safety certificates by member states; setting down rules for accident investigation and the creation of bodies to investigate accidents; and a whole raft of other issues. That Directive will not have a direct bearing on this topic — I mention it only so that the Committee is aware of it. That is the end of my presentation. Perhaps Mr Mercer may address the issues that I mentioned.

The Chairperson: Yes, indeed.

Mr Mercer: Mr Hesketh referred to drugs and alcohol and security matters. Translink would have preferred the primary legislation, or the regulations that are planned, to make provision parallel to that of the Transport and Works Act 1992 in GB, which requires railway operators to carry out drugs and alcohol testing. NIR has a voluntary agreement with the trade union on drugs/alcohol testing, and we carry out tests regularly. However, we would be happier if that were enshrined in law, because if a case involving an employee were to arise, it could be challenged under human rights legislation.

This is an opportunity that is being missed. We all know the societal issues involved, and as we test for drugs and alcohol at all levels throughout Translink, we regularly have people who fail the tests. We are concerned about train drivers or people in other safety-critical roles slipping through the net.

The other issue is security provision. Attacks on public transport are well documented and attract a high level of publicity. We prefer formal policing arrangements for the security of public transport. It is not just a matter of employee protection, though we are very mindful of that. This problem undoubtedly gives us added difficulties when recruiting people for public transport jobs.

It is also well documented that a lack of personal security is a barrier to travel, and particularly so for women and evening travel. We want a resource, and we are not particularly concerned about who owns it. Special arrangements already exist — the Harbour Police and the airport police, so it might be appropriate for “transport police” to police the transport system; perhaps a dedicated unit of the Police Service. Regrettably the existing resource cannot meet our needs.

The Chairperson: Translink was hoping for a more comprehensive and substantive piece of legislation dealing with railway safety, and you adverted to this in your response to the Bill to the Department and in your comments this morning. The Department is not minded to go along that avenue and will introduce secondary legislation and create enabling legislation through the Railway Safety Bill. Are you content with that or is it simply a fait accompli that you are prepared to accept?

Mr Hesketh: The Department is the responsible body, and it decides the approach to be taken. I am happy with what is being done as long as secondary legislation follows quickly. My only concern is that there will be lengthy delays. We have had meetings with the Department, and satisfactory indicative timetables have been proposed. Where appropriate we take the GB position as best practice and anticipate implementation of the law here. We do not rely on the fact that just because the law does not apply here, we do not adopt the policy. Translink adopts a best practice attitude to this.

We are working with the Department. Complex approvals are required to introduce new trains. The Committee may have heard stories of large number of trains sitting in sidings across the water because of technical difficulties with approval procedures. We have worked closely with the Department to ensure that does not happen here. We have developed an outline approval procedure that is unique to our circumstances with the Department’s whole-hearted co-operation.

The Chairperson: To summarise: you welcome the Bill but have some concerns about it; you are prepared to live with the Department’s approach; and you believe that delays would not be damaging.

Mr Hesketh: They would not be damaging because of the attitude the company is taking in anticipating the legislation. However, I would be concerned if there were lengthy delays, and the sooner that secondary legislation is on the books the better for everybody.

Mr R Hutchinson: I was trying to read a document and listen to Mr Mercer at the same time, and that was not a good idea. My ears pricked up when you spoke about testing for alcohol and drugs. Are you less than satisfied with the procedure? What would you prefer to happen?

Mr Mercer: We are operating a voluntary arrangement at present. We have consulted with the trade unions, which have accepted, in principle and for the benefit of public safety, that drugs and alcohol testing should be carried out. However, they have reserved the right, if an employee falls foul of that, as is their role, to support that employee. As there is no legal basis for the tests, someone could take a case against the company under the human rights legislation.

Mr R Hutchinson: Are you saying that there is no mechanism for testing Joe Bloggs before he gets on the train?

Mr Mercer: We have a voluntary mechanism for testing at recruitment and promotion.

Mr R Hutchinson: There is a voluntary procedure, but if a driver has been drinking or taking drugs, obviously he will not volunteer to take a test.

Mr Hesketh: It is very simple: if a driver refuses a test, he does not drive. However, this is a grey area — and the Chairman knows a lot more about it than I. If somebody wants to leave the premises without being tested, and we say that he cannot go without taking the test, that could result in accusations of unlawful imprisonment under the human rights legislation. Mr Mercer was trying to show how complex this is, and if that were in the legislation, it would be a great help to us as employers.

Mr R Hutchinson: Have you any figures to show how many drivers have tested positive or been over the limit?

Mr Mercer: No drivers have tested positive for drugs or been over the limit for alcohol. Some employees have tested positive for drugs, and many job applicants have tested positive for drugs.

Mr R Hutchinson: Have many drivers been on the borderline?

Mr Mercer: There is no borderline for drugs.

Mr R Hutchinson: I am thinking about alcohol.

Mr Mercer: We have not had that situation with alcohol. By and large we work with very responsible people, but the regime is important. If someone refused to take a test, Translink would discipline him.

The Chairperson: If a person refuses to take a test and, as a consequence, is told that he cannot drive on that day,

surely there is an element of compulsion there that contradicts the idea that the test was voluntary.

Mr Hesketh: “Voluntary” came after the agreement with the trade unions, acting on behalf of the employees.

The Chairperson: The employee/management agreement is that there will be tests and if you refuse to take a test, you will not be permitted to drive.

Mr Hesketh: That is correct.

Mr Mercer: I have some statistics from recent recruitment for bus drivers, and they show that there is a problem. Out of 18 people who applied to become bus drivers, four people failed an initial driving test, and four people failed a drugs test.

Mr R Hutchinson: That is a high number.

Mr Mercer: It is very high. It is over 20%, but I am not saying that is typical.

Mr R Hutchinson: Is it correct that 20% of people who applied to drive buses were refused because they tested positive for drugs?

Mr Mercer: I am quoting the last assessment that we carried out with 18 people. That is not a normal figure with all applicants.

The Chairperson: Would you like some part of the primary legislation to deal with the problem of drugs and alcohol being used by employees and drivers in particular?

Mr Hesketh: We would like to see it flowing quickly, if it is not in the primary legislation. We are asking for legislative back-up for what is there by agreement with the trade unions. What we have is working well, but it is open to challenge, and that is where we could be in difficulty.

The Chairperson: This is a grey area, given the human rights legislation, and you could find yourself in difficulty. However, I want to put on record your preference that any measure dealing with this should be in the primary rather than in the secondary legislation, though it is all well and good if it is in the secondary legislation.

Mr Mercer: If it comes in a reasonable time, it does not matter which vehicle it comes through.

Mr R Hutchinson: I would like some clarification on the 18 applicants. When did this happen?

Mr Mercer: Within the last month.

Mr R Hutchinson: That is awful.

Mr McNamee: Mr Hesketh said that initially there were concerns that the Bill was not comprehensive, but that you have been provided with the detail of the legislation that will flow from it, and that eventually you will be satisfied.

Evidence from other submissions highlighted concerns about the piecemeal approach to producing legislation. Among the concerns — although I do not advocate this — was the division of responsibility for infrastructure, services

and rolling stock under a public-private partnership. Piecemeal legislation could make it difficult, in cases of joint responsibility for a service, to apportion responsibility after an incident, or to determine who is responsible for an investigation. Are you satisfied that the legislation that is proposed to follow on from the Bill sufficiently identifies accountability for incidents and responsibility for investigations?

In your initial submission, you stated that having viewed the approach of Irish Rail, a comprehensive Bill would be preferable to enabling legislation, which would be followed by other legislation. Given that Translink will operate a service in conjunction with Irish Rail, are you satisfied that the Bill, and the detailed legislation that will flow from it, is compatible with the Southern legislation?

Mr Hesketh: I will answer the last question first. There have been discussions between the two departments and the two operating companies. That aspect has been fully catered for.

The Bill does not anticipate every possible case in a privatised situation in Northern Ireland. A recent, stark example was the tragic accident that took place on Translink’s Bangor line while it was in the full possession of a contractor. Questions arose about who was responsible for carrying out the investigations, which have now been satisfactorily resolved.

Mr Mercer: We have not yet seen the detail of the supplementary Regulations. We have an outline of their aims, but Translink will need to see them in detail before it can be certain about them. We expect that the Regulations would cater for the points that Mr McNamee raised. The Department is keeping us fully abreast of its thinking, and it is liaising with its colleagues in the Republic who are dealing with the legislation there.

Mr Savage: Were the 18 Translink job applicants who tested positive for drugs or alcohol consumption male or female?

Mr Mercer: I do not have those figures.

Mr Savage: Soon of the new trains that are to be introduced soon will travel much faster than existing stock. Are the existing tracks capable of withstanding those new trains?

Mr Hesketh: That is, quite rightly, an issue. Translink was allocated, from the Budget that the Assembly agreed on 18 December 2000, the resources to upgrade the core network to an adequate standard. That work is ongoing, as evidenced by the relaying of the Bangor line.

Mr Savage: Has anything been done to eliminate disruptions, including hoax calls, to the service between Moira and Lurgan?

Mr Hesketh: Translink has launched several initiatives to prevent false security alerts; for example, it is working with local businesses to help community members to develop a sense of ownership of the railway company. In addition, it has worked with local elected representatives

and has been helped by church volunteers. Hoax calls are still made, but, thankfully, on a smaller scale. It is hard to judge whether such initiatives are successful, but disruptions happen less often now.

Mr Savage: A good deal of work is going on to eliminate hoax calls, which were very disruptive, and the Chairperson has thanked Translink for its initiatives.

Mr Bradley: Mr McNamee asked the question that I was going to ask. In view of Translink's links with rail services in the South, was it invited to provide input to the Republic of Ireland's Bill on railway safety, and did it do so?

Mr Hesketh: It did not have a direct input. However, because of the close working relationship between the two operating companies, Translink and Irish Rail, officials in Dublin were fully aware of Translink's views and the relevant issues. Therefore, although Translink was not directly consulted, its views were taken into account.

Mr Bradley: It would be ironic if Translink's views were taken into account in the South, despite the fact that the measures that it wants introduced here cannot be implemented.

Mr Hesketh: In transport terms, there are no borders. To operate railways on both parts of the island requires a professional working relationship, and Irish Rail and Translink work well together.

Mr Bradley: We have discussed the trains on Translink's tracks a good deal, but I assume that the Railway Safety Bill applies to all Translink property. For example, Translink's safety measures at railway stations such as Newry leave a lot to be desired, although they are the best that it can provide at the moment. Would those aspects be dealt with under the Bill?

Mr Hesketh: Many of those matters would be covered by general legislation.

The Chairperson: Mr Bradley is asking whether rail companies' premises come under the railway safety legislation.

Mr Mercer: The safety case Regulations will be key to the Railway Safety Bill. Those Regulations will require Translink, or NIR, to make a risk assessment throughout its operations and state what steps are taken to remove, control or deal with any residual risk. Therefore, those issues will be dealt with in the safety case that Translink must build.

Mr Bradley asked about the relationship between Translink and Irish Rail. In order to make the partnership work, the safety case regulations will be the key regulations on both sides of the border. The train operating companies will be in close liaison with their respective Departments and with each other. Translink will be required, as a train operator, to prepare a safety case to respond to the Irish legislation, just as Iarnród Éireann will be required to

prepare a safety case to respond to ours. Close liaison will ensure that the process is seamless.

The Chairperson: Does the same requirement to provide a safety case apply, North and South, in both cases?

Mr Mercer: Yes.

The Chairperson: One would assume that the same criteria would underline each safety case, North and South.

Mr Mercer: The detailed Regulations are not yet available, but both Departments are working on them, and both operating companies are working to ensure that co-ordination.

Mr R Hutchinson: We all want the highest standard of safety — that goes without question. How can we accommodate preservation societies and steam trains? Mr Hesketh, you and I travelled from Larne to Belfast on those trains when we were weans. How can we help those societies?

Mr Hesketh: The safety case concept applies to anyone who operates over the Northern Ireland Railways network, of which Translink is the custodian. The Railway Preservation Society of Ireland (RPSI) must satisfy Translink that it can operate safely. That is not simply a theoretical exercise. A historical train was derailed during my time as managing director, and that alerted us to the serious issues to be considered. Translink has been working with the RPSI for a long time to reach an agreement that will enable its trains to use the network. The process has involved both parties taking advice on the safest speeds at which to operate old trains and carriages.

Mr R Hutchinson: Is it possible to accommodate those trains? I would hate it if the steam train were to cease to operate. They work on a limited timetable, but it would be sad to lose them. Can an accommodation be reached between the preservation societies and Translink?

Mr Hesketh: I hope so, and, although certain constraints may have to be placed upon their operation, the RPSI could live with that. On the mainland, most preservation societies' trains operate on closed lines. The RPSI does a good job, and it maintains people's interest in vintage rail travel — a bit of nostalgia does us no harm. Translink wants to reach an accommodation with the RPSI, and it is working towards that.

Mr R Hutchinson: Is it the case, therefore, that the only obstacles to the RPSI's operation are the minimum safety requirements? Could you confirm that Translink will work with the RPSI, as opposed to pushing them aside?

Mr Hesketh: No, that is not the situation. The management team wants to maintain the preserved railway.

Mr R Hutchinson: Can I quote you on that, Mr Hesketh?

The Chairperson: It is on the public record.

Mr Savage: I love trains, and I take every possible opportunity to mention to Translink the need to develop

the Belfast to Dublin line. Although there is no chance of getting a direct line to Banbridge, the stop at Scarva, which is only one mile outside Banbridge, could be upgraded to allow passengers to board trains for Dublin or elsewhere. Translink should explore that opportunity to promote the rail network.

The Chairperson: Are you thinking about the introduction of a park-and-ride scheme at Scarva?

Mr Savage: Such a development would enable passengers to travel to and from Scarva to Dublin, at a cost of up to £65 return. Translink should not miss that opportunity.

Mr Hesketh: I will bear that in mind. At present, Translink wants to provide 150 to 200 car parking spaces for Lisburn rail station, specifically for park-and-ride passengers.

Mr Savage: Can I quote you on that?

Mr Hesketh: Yes. We are on record.

Mr Savage: That opportunity is waiting to be developed.

The Chairperson: Mr Mercer mentioned that new European Directives on railway safety might be introduced in the near future. Might we have to review the Railway Safety legislation, once it is enacted, in the light of European Directives?

Mr Mercer: There might be a need to introduce additional Regulations through the Railway Safety Bill. Our department will pick up the many European issues that will emerge over the next few years, and it does so at present.

The Chairperson: Can the Committee do anything in anticipation of those changes?

Mr Hesketh: The White Paper entitled 'European Transport Policy for 2010: Time to Decide', which comprises what is known as the railway package, contains five proposals, one of which relates specifically to a Directive on railway safety. I will leave samples of that with the Committee Clerk. Although the Department has examined the proposal in anticipation of its introduction, it is a fresh development, therefore no one will have had sufficient time to scrutinise it thoroughly.

The Chairperson: That would be helpful. You said that security on trains could be maintained by either a dedicated unit of the PSNI or a transport police. What would be your preference, and would such provision be necessary?

Mr Hesketh: The question of security provision refers to both buses and trains, and it is not unique to Greater Belfast. We must do something. Translink is having difficulty in coping with the increasing number of incidents and their growing seriousness. Great Britain has a transport police service. Translink has no strong view on how the resource should be provided, but it is certain that an additional resource is needed to "police" the transport network.

The Chairperson: If a transport police service were introduced, would they be under the authority of Translink, or an independent body?

Mr Hesketh: That is for others to decide. A consultation paper on the issue was published in Great Britain recently. It seems to favour the introduction of a separate arrangement, similar to that of the Police Authority. I would be happy to forward copies of that paper to the Committee Clerk.

The Chairperson: You have adverted to this problem in the context of your consideration of the Railway Safety Bill. Should the Committee examine the matter now, or are you merely signposting it?

Mr Hesketh: We are signalling that a problem exists. If it were decided that transport police were needed, legislation would be required to regulate that provision. However, that could be introduced much later.

The Chairperson: Are you happy that the Bill would cover cases where subcontractors are working on the railway service, and that those subcontractors would be obliged to adhere to the safety standards that the railway operator will establish?

Mr Hesketh: The safety critical work Regulations cover those matters; they will be dealt with in the secondary legislation. In our original submission, we identified that as the most urgent piece of legislation to be introduced.

The Chairperson: Are you content that that will be dealt with under the safety critical work Regulations?

Mr Hesketh: It will be subject to a study of the details. The advantage of doing that as the Department has chosen is that we will have more time to look at the details. There are swings and roundabouts in the approach that has been taken.

The Chairperson: I would like to tease that out a little further. There was a tragic incident recently in which a contract worker was killed. I will not go into the detail of that incident, as it is still under investigation. One would assume that under the safety critical work Regulations, a subcontractor carrying out work on a railway track, which involves the operation of the railway track, would be responsible. Would the subcontractor be obliged to provide a safety case before he carries out that work?

Mr Mercer: The safety case Regulations would oblige subcontractors carrying out significant work to provide a safety case. All work would have to go through a safety assessment whereby safe working practices would be agreed.

In future such an incident would come under different Regulations. At present it is dealt with under the Health and Safety at Work (Northern Ireland) Order 1978.

The Chairperson: There would be separate, discrete, secondary legislation to deal with such situations.

Thank you for attending today's Committee meeting.

**NORTHERN IRELAND
ASSEMBLY**

**COMMITTEE FOR
REGIONAL DEVELOPMENT**

Wednesday 20 March 2002

**RAILWAY SAFETY BILL
(NIA 3/01)**

Members present:

Mr A Maginness (Chairperson)
Mr McFarland (Deputy Chairperson)
Mr R Hutchinson
Mr Hay
Mr Hussey
Mr McNamee
Mr M Robinson
Mr Savage

Witness:

Mr P Rayner) Consultant

The Chairperson: I welcome Mr Peter Rayner, who provided Transport 2000 with his views on the Railway Safety Bill consultation paper, as Transport 2000 does not have sufficient expertise on railway safety. Mr Rayner is not a member of Transport 2000; however, it was agreed to call him as a witness to give his comments and share his expertise. His curriculum vitae is included in your papers.

Mr Rayner has just got off a plane. We look forward to listening to what he has to say. Mr Rayner, you have already advised Transport 2000, and we have received their documentation, and we also have the letter you sent to our Assistant Committee Clerk. Perhaps you would like to make some opening comments, after which we can ask questions.

Mr Rayner: I am sorry I was late — I was delayed at Heathrow. In my second letter to the Committee staff, I stated that I would not need to add to what I had said to the Railway Development Society. However, when I read Mr McKenna's opposing opinion, I thought it would be helpful to the Committee to pick up on Mr McKenna's views and put my thoughts against them.

I worked for British Railways, and I know it very well. It was fragmented by hasty legislation at the end of the then Government's life, and a system was introduced that relied heavily on safety cases. In that situation one was obliged to obey the rules that were laid down and to ensure that a good system was in place. Once the responsibility for the safety case was yours, there was always a danger, as has happened in Britain, that people would

not carry out what they promised to do in the safety case. This is the way that British Railways was privatised — and that is not an anti-privatisation remark. Had it been done in a geographically logical way, with a vertical chain of command and retention of the fat controller — in a 'Thomas the Tank Engine' sense — it would have been perfectly safe. However, the Government relied on safety case arrangements and fragmented the system. The vertical chain of command was replaced with approximately 1,000 legal contracts. With respect to the lawyers in this room, the only people who really benefited from the privatisation of British Railways were the lawyers, because we have had a succession of litigation following accidents.

After reading the initial Bill, I was worried that Northern Ireland was moving towards safety case regulations, purely because that system existed in Britain. However, it only exists there because we have made such a muddle of our railway system. It does not exist anywhere else in Europe. So you really are finding a remedy for something that is not flawed, unless you suddenly do to Northern Ireland Railways (NIR) what has been done to British Railways — put your maintenance into contractors' hands, who then get subcontractors and sub-subcontractors, and the result is this business of a joint inquiry. When I spoke about the Paddington accident, 10 QCs cross-examined those who gave professional evidence, and that went on for nearly six months.

Northern Ireland has a small railway system, which I know quite well — I worked here a long time ago, but I was here for some time — and my real point to Dr Fawcett was that if it is not absolutely necessary, do not change it. If it is necessary, do not introduce a fragmented system that relies on lawyers each time there is any difference of opinion. I have also said in my letter to you that I do not agree fully with Mr McKenna's view.

Córas Iompair Éireann (CIÉ) is not introducing this system — yet there is a border crossing much the same as the Eurostar, which goes from Waterloo to Brussels and Paris. The Eurostar travels between two EU member states four or five times a day — so does the Enterprise. Therefore, I do not accept Mr McKenna's point that this is necessary to be in tune with European law. I believe that theory to be wrong. CIÉ will not do it, and neither will anybody else in Europe, because they do not have to.

The Chairperson: I want to clarify what you are saying. We can clearly see the fragmentation of the railway system in Great Britain. The one good thing here is that, although our system is very small, it is not fragmented. We have a unitary transportation company in public ownership, which is an advantage. Given those advantages, how would you approach legislative change to bring about railway safety?

Mr Rayner: Provided you have organisations in place, you can bring in the instructions. One good thing about privatisation — which has come about through accidents — is that it has forced people to adopt proper

group standards, which people have to work to. There were group standards in the old railway system, but they were there merely because most of its employees were time-servers. Even when I worked for NIR, most workers were time-servers. Railway people tend to work a lifetime. Therefore, some of the things that are now written in tablets of stone were often unnecessary.

If there is a need to change there should be carefully written group standards, as one organisation does not necessarily need safety cases between each department. For example, safety cases are there because Balfour Beattie Construction Ltd may wish to negotiate with Railtrack. I shall take the Paddington accident as an example. Railtrack owned the infrastructure; the signalling was maintained by another company; one train was owned by another company; the stock was owned by a third company. At the time of the accident, there was no vertical chain of command. Each company had group standards, but they all then retrenched behind lawyers, and Railtrack often retrenched behind its share price. It became a muddle, and is not necessary unless there is fragmentation.

If you change, you will need correctly documented safety group standards, which existed previously. The rule book here is similar to the rule book in Britain but is now encapsulated in a group standard. However, it is still the rule book. Provided those standards are put in, I would merely alter the documentation. Mr McKenna quite correctly refers to Her Majesty's Railway Inspectorate (HMRI), which is part of the Health and Safety Executive (HSE). They are the means by which your safety can be monitored. In Britain safety failed after privatisation because people were not doing the job properly, so HMRI had to start issuing instructions. That is rather like the referee kicking the ball — once he does that he is no longer the referee. HMRI got into trouble over Paddington because it had issued instructions — it had become involved in the game rather than standing off. I have doubts about the resourcing of HMRI, but if it were properly resourced, there is no reason why HMRI could not monitor the way in which the railwaymen run the railway here. I shall choose my words carefully, but when I came to Northern Ireland in 1981 the railway inspectors were Lt Col Townsend-Rose, Major Olver and others, and the inspectorate was "army-organised". It was decided that that was inappropriate, and I came here to monitor as a railway officer rather than as a military officer. Essentially, I was not here as part of HMRI, but in that role.

Provided an inspectorate can monitor it, and your rules are right, what I found worrying about your legislation was that you believed it necessary to introduce the safety case to cover the cracks of fragmentation. If you are careful you will not fragment, and a safety case will not be necessary. If I may quote from my letter to the Committee:

"Reference to contractors is made in Mr McKenna's 6th paragraph on page 2. This to me seems the one real reason for the NI DRD wanting to adopt a GB safety case regime. Do they want to privatise

infrastructure maintenance? Here lies, in my view the nub, for a lot of money can be made by contractors, in property alone. May I suggest consideration is given to what has happened in Great Britain."

There is no doubt that the Hatfield crash was caused by a mismatch between the track owners and the contractors. Mr McKenna implies — and I may have misunderstood him — that you are considering putting your maintenance out to contractors. If you do that, you will need safety cases, and you will be in a situation where that contractor may subcontract and subcontract again.

Mr R Hutchinson: I understand the difficulties. We have all travelled on the railway in England and have seen the mess it is in. With our system being so small, would we necessarily experience the same difficulties if we went along the road taken by the UK? I do not want to use the wrong word, but with the system being so small are you not being over-alarmist?

Mr Rayner: I hope not. It is true that the rail system is small — I know it well and have great affection for it. It may be sufficiently local for the contractors. However, there must be clear-cut legal boundaries for work that goes out to contract, otherwise a contractor could put somebody on the track who is not capable of looking after his or her own safety. If that person is knocked over, many things ensue. It is a possible point of view. As the network is small and compact, it may well survive without the shambles there has been in Britain. As I said in my letter to the Committee, there is no point in changing the system — if the bicycle is not broken, it does not need to be fixed. The safety case approach is only used if the work is to be fragmented.

The Chairperson: Returning to my original point, if the safety case approach is not used, what other approach do you suggest? We have a fairly centralised management structure, with quite transparent management control and so forth. What alternative is there to the safety case approach? I thought that the safety case approach was simply a model where certain criteria were applied to ensure that train travel was safe.

Mr Rayner: The safety case approach does not ensure that. It ensures that everything is properly documented when something goes wrong. The problem is that auditing is required. If you and I were operating together, I may decide to operate a safety case between us. Unless a third party actually monitors that we are doing that, the safety case is valueless. The safety case is no better than a good vertical chain of command with sensibly documented rules. Somebody is still needed — whether it is HMRI or somebody else — for auditing purposes.

One of the difficulties that resulted from Paddington — and this comes from CIÉ as well — is that there is a danger, because of the shortage of drivers, that drivers have not gone through exactly the same rigorous apprenticeship that train drivers the world over traditionally went through. The young driver who died at Paddington was not to blame because the signalling was not good, but he

was woefully lacking in experience. The safety cases all said that the drivers would be adequately trained. It is easy to write the safety case, but machinery needs to be in place to monitor the way that role is performed. Audit and inspectorate organisations are needed whether safety cases are applied or whether you rely, as I do, on the vertical chain of command.

The Chairperson: I want to follow up on that point, and then I will let other members ask questions. Are you saying that irrespective of the safety case, an audit body is required?

Mr Rayner: Yes.

The Chairperson: My understanding is that HMRI carries out auditing under this system. Is that correct?

Mr Rayner: The inspectorate is one stage away from the auditor. We used to audit in-house at British Rail, but that cannot be sustained in today's society. Auditing must be independent. Railtrack Rail Safety, an auditing body that was part of Railtrack, has been brought back. However, HMRI stands above that. The Health and Safety at Work etc. Act 1974 now places enormous responsibilities on employers, which the Health and Safety Executive implements.

The Chairperson: Under the system proposed in the Bill, who would carry out the auditing?

Mr Rayner: That was my initial question to Dr Fawcett. It does not mention that in the Bill.

The Chairperson: Are you worried that there does not appear to be an independent body for auditing safety?

Mr Rayner: If there is an independent body, it is not mentioned.

The Chairperson: That is useful to know. We can ask the departmental officials about that aspect of the Bill.

Mr Rayner: I believe that the Committee will want to know who will award the safety certificates, but it does not state who will perform those roles. The roles spoken about are admirable, but it does not state anywhere who will perform them. That brings me back to the point about whether the roles have to be performed in the first place, because you do not need to break up the network.

Mr McFarland: With your experience of Northern Ireland Railways, presumably the maintenance work is currently carried out in-house. As this is a small railway network, and given the way that maintenance is going generally, part of the logic is that it will be an expensive luxury to have a fully trained, fully operational team of people sitting about when we get our railway system improved. If the network is bad, there will be a lot of maintenance, but if we have all our lines relaid, which is the plan, that level of activity may be questionable. This is looking ahead to a time when it may be cheaper to contract-out rail maintenance rather than keeping an in-house team, which seems to be the Department's reason for

keeping that option open — presumably not tomorrow, but sometime in the future.

Mr Rayner: That may be the case. There is not much doubt that the Treasury certainly welcomes the privatisation of maintenance or the whole job, as there are always savings to be made by hiving it off. In theory, the Treasury saved money when maintenance was given out to large organisations such as Balfour Beattie and others— reputable engineering firms. Many things went with that including properties. I do not know the position in Belfast, but you will probably not be short of people wanting to be contractors for the same reason that money can be made from it. I do not know whether that saves the state money, but the Treasury — and I keep coming back to British Rail because it is the same Government and the same thing happened — undoubtedly saved a lot of money to start with. It now costs the taxpayer much more, because more subsidies go into the railway now than when it was nationalised. I shrink from making a political statement because I do not belong to a political party, but there is no doubt that it appeals to the Treasury to privatise and to hive things off. However, I would say that you only have to start killing people in minimal amounts and your savings have gone.

If the network is sufficiently small, and well monitored, you may get away with having a contractor whom you have your finger on. The Bill does not tell you how you will get your finger on the contractor — you must find that out — but you need an audit mechanism and a strong and efficient HMRI. One of the problems in the Paddington accident was that HMRI was inefficient — it had not inspected the signalling. I do not know how you will get HMRI to Northern Ireland when it cannot even inspect the signalling in England.

Mr McFarland: In England the track was sold off to Railtrack; it subcontracted the maintenance, which was then subcontracted again and again. If we were to keep the ownership of our system, and decided to use contracted maintenance for a particular length of rail, for example the Belfast to Bangor line presumably, as part of a contract — without legislation — we could write in safeguards or agreements for that particular job, for the length of the contract.

Mr Rayner: It is a safety case.

Mr McFarland: That is so. However, it does not need to be law. It could be part of the contract that is organised with the contractor. The deal would be that we want the contractor to carry out maintenance for five years on a rail line. We would write in the standards and rules of the game as part of the contract for that period, rather than putting a catch-all into legislation. However, if you wanted a mass maintenance, or wanted to sell the track off, you would have to have rail safety cases. Can you have a rail safety case for individual contracts, rather than having to have it in legislation?

Mr Rayner: I have never thought of it like that, and I probably will not give you an adequate answer because it is not something that I have applied myself to. If you retain the ownership of the infrastructure, one legal part is taken out because you own it, and it would be simpler. One of the problems that Railtrack faced was that it only owned a part, and that is a difficulty you could draw into this. You can be the owner of the infrastructure and hive off your maintenance to someone else after you have set out what you want him to do. You can do that, but unfortunately this is not what Railtrack did. Would you still retain the right to in-house engineering expertise to make sure that the contractor was doing it properly? In Hatfield the contractor was given a portion of line and told to maintain it to the specified standards. However, Railtrack did not retain in-house engineering skills. Therefore, when the Hatfield rail accident happened, we had 20 mph speed restrictions placed on the entire railway network, which were, for the most part, unnecessary. It was not because the railway was unsafe, it was because they did not know, and they did not have records. Therefore, as owner of the infrastructure, you have to be sure that you are not violating your ownership by not having records of what the contractor was doing.

Mr McFarland: If we contract out to a contractor, we need to have some form of inspection. However, it would not necessarily have to be in-house, as long there was an independent contract with an inspector to check what the contractor is doing. I appreciate that this is all hypothetical. However, it helps us to understand the rules of the game and what the possibilities are, and to understand why the Department has constructed the legislation in this way.

Mr Rayner: If it is properly documented, with sufficient detail and in-house expertise, there is no reason that you cannot do it in the way you suggest. My view is that you are going down a road that you need not go down if you are not fragmenting your railway. These contracts exist nowhere else in Europe. The Republic of Ireland, France and Germany do not have them, and they are supposed to be part of EU legislation. There is a little misunderstanding on what we are obliged to do under European law, on which I am not an expert. However, I tentatively disagree with Mr McKenna's remarks, and I think that that ought to be checked.

Germany has split up its system more than you propose to do, and it has a larger system, with inter-regional and intercity trains, and the U-Bahn subway. They have different parts, but they do not have anything like this safety case because Deutsche Bundesbahn still retains the vertical chain of command. The fat controller from 'Thomas the Tank Engine' is the best example: he is not always right, but he is always the fat controller. I do not wish to be frivolous, Mr Chairperson, but it is a description that we can all understand.

Mr Hay: What you have said has been useful and has given the Committee food for thought about policing whatever safety regulations will be introduced now and

in the future. You mentioned Her Majesty's Railway Inspectorate and some type of independent audit. What would be the Department's role in that?

Mr Rayner: I do not know, and it is something I questioned in the original document. Who would the Department for Regional Development approach for expertise? The Department could take on the role; however, it would be most unlike the Civil Service to take on that type of responsibility — and I do not mean that as a criticism. An independent audit could be undertaken, and there are firms in Great Britain — and there may well be firms here — with sufficient expertise to carry out such an audit.

I do not know what the Department's role will be. I was a little tongue-in-cheek originally, and in my follow-up, because I do not think they have thought through the "how" in this. There has always been a tendency to slavishly follow the mainland example. When I was in Northern Ireland in 1981 there was talk about restructuring Northern Ireland Railways, based on what was then called "sector management". We had difficulty in preventing people doing something merely because it had been done on the mainland. That is not necessarily right — in fact, in this case it is manifestly wrong.

Mr Hay: The Committee needs to tease out what is best for Northern Ireland, what works, and ultimately what role the Department for Regional Development should play.

Mr Rayner: If the Department is brave and honourable, it should have sufficient expertise to set standards and play a role. One problem we faced in England was that the mandarins in the Department of Transport, Local Government and the Regions are the same people who are now taking everything to bits and starting over again. They are supposed to be non-political. The Civil Service has a lot to answer for in these reorganisations, and it must take some responsibility. I do not know how it could be achieved in the Bill, as I am not a legislative expert — I am a simple railwayman and I have worked for the railway all my life.

Mr Hussey: Is it correct to say that you do not have a problem with contracting out provided it is properly policed?

Mr Rayner: I do not have an ideological objection to state or private ownership.

Mr Hussey: Given the critical mass of our system, contracting out may be a necessity. The Royal College of Surgeons, for example, would say that there has to be a minimum number of operations to retain expertise. With a small railway system such as ours it is very hard to have the rollover of casework needed for a contractor to retain expertise. Contracting out can be a logical and safe option, provided the policing of the system is correct.

Mr Rayner: I agree, provided the policing of the system is impartial and some of the loose ends in the initial legislation are tied up. The Bill does not specify who will

set the standards; it is imprecise. If we go down the road of private maintenance, rigorous standards must be set and the system must be policed to ensure that the owner of the infrastructure is held responsible. Accidents will happen, so a system must be put in place. If it is done properly, nothing will go wrong.

Mr Hussey: Mr Hay tried to tease out the departmental position. In your response, you said that railwaymen understand railways and departmental officials do not.

Mr Rayner: That is true.

Mr Hussey: I can understand the logic of the statement. Those who work with the system understand it. Strabane was a railwayman's town, where sons would follow their fathers into the trade, but that does not happen so much now.

Mr Rayner: My criticism of legislators was tongue-in-cheek because I am not a legislator. They may have ways of including certain things in the Act that I do not know about.

Mr Hussey: In your response, do you agree with Mr McKenna about the lack of expertise in HMRI?

Mr Rayner: There are not enough resources in HMRI.

Mr Hussey: So, do you agree with Mr McKenna?

Mr Rayner: Yes, but he says that he will provide HMRI with adequate resources. However, even Mrs Dunwoody, for whom I have the greatest respect, rebuked HMRI for its lack of resources. Civil servants who appeared before Mrs Dunwoody's committee received fairly short shrift for that reason. HMRI has become muddled, and the old-fashioned inspectorate has been destroyed. It was removed from the Department's remit and became the responsibility of the Health and Safety Executive (HSE). I suspect that that was done to reduce ministerial responsibility for railways. The expertise became diluted because there were fewer railwaymen and more HSE safety inspectors involved. I agree with Mr McKenna if he is saying that there are not enough HMRI staff and a lack of knowledge in the Department, and that must be put right if the situation is to change.

Mr McNamee: This is a difficult subject, and I want to tease something out for my own understanding. You are saying that a contractor or subcontractor presents their own safety case system for approval by the owner/operator. Following approval, the contractor self-regulates the implementation of the safety case system, which leads to a breakdown in the vertical chain of command. You also said that we do not need the safety case system unless the network is to become fragmented. In the initial presentation of the Bill, mention was made of legislation to allow more public-private partnership (PPP) arrangements for transportation systems in the future. Could a safety case system be satisfactorily adapted, if the Bill identified a mechanism to make provision for an independent audit

system, identifying the body responsible for monitoring the implementation of safety cases?

Mr Rayner: Safety case systems have been proven to work. The safety case regime was introduced following the inquiry into the Piper Alpha disaster, chaired by Lord Cullen. The regime works very well, but it works best for infrastructures that are centrally regulated rather than fragmented. One of the problems with the safety case system on the railways is that railways always move about. There is a safety case, but a driver books on in Belfast, is in Connolly Station at lunchtime, and back in Belfast in the middle of the afternoon, so his safety case is much more elastic. Safety cases tend to work extremely well on oil rigs, for example.

The answer to your question is yes, provided they are properly put in, monitored and documented, and with systems that could report back — statistical systems that would satisfy the politicians that the railways were safer. Anything is possible, but I am not sure that money would be saved. Most things start because people want to save money; they do not start because people want to make the railways better. To some extent the Committee is not conducting this exercise to make the railway better; it is being done because someone said that it must be done, and it will probably eventually be a less expensive way of running the railways. It depends on what lies behind it all. There is no doubt that John Major's Government privatised the railways very quickly at the end of their term. It was done hurriedly, and there were gaps in the legislation. If it can be done in a better way in Northern Ireland, all things are possible.

Mr Savage: You state in your letter that the safest and most efficient railway is a geographically logical railway with a vertical chain of command running right through it. That is all very well, but we are living in the real world. What changes should be made to our railway system to bring it into line?

Mr Rayner: Money must be spent on modernising the equipment. It is a small and important system, with the Enterprise as an important link with Dublin. I do not think that much needs to be done with the structure, but money needs to be put in. There should be enough professionally trained staff to operate it, and an inspectorate above that. There is not much wrong with Northern Ireland Railways — it is not big enough to fragment.

I say "geographically logical" because I believe that John Major thought he was bringing back the old Great Western Railway when he privatised the railways. He said that many times when he was Prime Minister, but he did not bring it back. Instead, he gave the fast trains to one company, the slow trains to another, and the freight to yet another. He gave the track to Railtrack, the signalling to somebody else to maintain, and someone else owned the coaches. Now the Government are talking about putting back geographical logic, and I confess to being part of that

debate. There is nothing wrong with a private railway provided it is geographically logical, and we all know who the governor is. Northern Ireland has a system that knows who the governor is because it is a small railway. When I was here Sir Myles Humphreys was chairman of Northern Ireland Railways Co Ltd, and Roy Beattie was the chief executive. It was a very understood vertical chain of command. Do not throw that away unless you have to.

Mr R Hutchinson: You have thrown light onto areas that have been very dark, and where people did not know what they were talking about. You have helped with that. If the British Government had had their way, they would have closed our system down completely. The Department for Regional Development is 100% behind the railway system and maintaining it.

By way of clarification, if I am correct in interpreting you, you are actually saying that within our structure — our small network of management and drivers — we have an expertise that could maintain a safe and profitable railway network? Are you saying that if it is not broken, do not try to mend it?

Mr Rayner: That is what I am saying, and the railway here has a depth of expertise. This NIR tie I am wearing was given to me 20 years ago in this city, and I wear it with pride.

Profit was mentioned, and I am unsure whether there is much profit in any area of the railways. A good thing about a state-owned railway is that the profitable parts can help to subsidise the non-profitable ones. If there were conurbation flow into Belfast, the railways would not be profitable because it would essentially be a peak time service. However, if the Enterprise service is made to work profitably, it will turn over money. Therefore, the profit from that service could go towards local services. When railway services were fragmented in Britain, some people made a lot of profit, and others made losses. Therefore, a railway may not make profit quickly, but it is environmentally sensible.

The Chairperson: Thank you, Mr Rayner. Your presentation has been helpful and worthwhile. I wish you a safe journey.

**NORTHERN IRELAND
ASSEMBLY**

**COMMITTEE FOR
REGIONAL DEVELOPMENT**

Wednesday 20 March 2002

**RAILWAY SAFETY BILL
(NIA 3/01)**

Members present:

Mr A Maginness (Chairperson)
Mr McFarland (Deputy Chairperson)
Mr Hay
Mr Hussey
Mr R Hutchinson
Mr McNamee
Mr Savage
Mr M Robinson

Witnesses:

Mr R Aiken) Department for
) Regional Development
Mr G McKenna)

The Chairperson: Good morning and thank you for coming. The Committee looks forward to hearing from you. Mr Rayner has given us an interesting presentation, and it is good that you heard it. Mr McKenna, I know that you responded in writing, but it would be helpful if you were to make further comment. How would you like to proceed?

Mr Aiken: I can see that you have a packed agenda. I do not have any remarks to add to those made by the Minister during the debate on the Second Stage of the Railway Safety Bill, so I am happy to begin the question-and-answer session.

The Chairperson: Mr Rayner gave his views on the situation. His opinion is that the safety case approach is inappropriate, given the situation with Northern Ireland Railways (NIR), and he made that point forcibly. He thinks that the safety case approach is more suited to a fragmented system and was introduced to deal with cases in which there are several different owners and systems of control. We should ignore the fact that the system has been privatised.

Mr Aiken: If I understood Mr Rayner correctly, his main concern was that we might create a fragmented railway system as opposed to the integrated system that we have. Therefore, we would be introducing legislation to cope with a fragmented system. Given that, I refer members to Peter Robinson's comments during the debate on the Second Stage of the Bill. He was specific and said that he had

no intention of breaking up our integrated railway system, so it is our intention to continue with an integrated system.

However, if we continue with an integrated railway, do we need the safety case legislation? I disagree with Mr Rayner in that I think it is needed because the genesis for the legislation arose from the AD Little Report on railway safety, which recommended that modern railway safety legislation should be introduced in Northern Ireland, and that is what the Bill is about. The safety case legislation is sensible even if there is an integrated railway because it involves a systematic and rigorous assessment of risk in the operation of the railway, it sets out how those risks will be managed and it provides for the independent enforcement of the system. That is a sensible approach that will provide a strong assurance of safety. However, this is an area where one can never be 100% sure. It should be borne in mind that the safety case approach is generally used in risky industries throughout the UK, such as offshore oil, nuclear power and the chemical industry, and it is generally regarded as a good system.

Contrary to what Mr Rayner said, the Department of Public Enterprise in Dublin is in the process of introducing legislation. It is taking a slightly different approach but the objective will be exactly the same. It will have safety documents or safety regulations rather than safety cases, but it is basically the same approach as ours.

The Chairperson: So, there would be no substantive difference between the Republic and Northern Ireland if the Bill were to be passed.

I want to ask a couple of questions about auditing. Mr McFarland has asked a good question: who carries out the audit? He suggested that there should be an independent audit. I made the point that Her Majesty's Railway Inspectorate would deal with an audit, but I may be wrong. Can you enlighten us on that? Who will carry out the audit, and will it be independent or in-house?

Mr Aiken: There are two stages: the independent audit — which I will ask Mr McKenna to talk about in a moment — and the independent inspection. Responsibility for railways was devolved to the Northern Ireland Assembly, and the Assembly has placed that responsibility on the Department for Regional Development. The Department will issue certificates to enable railways to operate legally in the future; therefore, it is responsible in that sense. However, as was pointed out earlier, as departmental officials, we are not railwaymen, and we have no technical expertise. To overcome that difficulty we have come to an agreement with Her Majesty's Railway Inspectorate. It will act as our agents and advise us on safety matters. However, it will be up to the Department to issue certificates based on the inspectorate's advice.

Mr McKenna: It might be helpful if I outlined how the safety case regime is intended to work through the legislation. These will be secondary regulations made under the powers taken by the Railway Safety Bill. It will be the

responsibility of the duty holder — in this case, primarily Northern Ireland Railways — to produce a safety case of the operations that it carries out. As part of that, it is required to obtain an independent assessment of that safety case. Who carries out that independent assessment is a matter for Northern Ireland Railways, but clearly the assessor must be properly qualified. That assessment, along with the safety case, will be submitted to the Department for approval and, as Mr Aiken has said, the Department will seek the advice of Her Majesty's Railway Inspectorate under its contractual arrangements.

Her Majesty's Railway Inspectorate will advise the Department whether or not the safety case is acceptable as it stands, needs certain amendments or, in the worst possible scenario, needs to be completely reworked. The Department would ask Northern Ireland Railways to carry out that work. On the assumption that it is acceptable, the Department would issue a certificate. Northern Ireland Railways would then operate that safety case and would be required to obtain annual audits. Independent bodies carry out those audits. The Department would not name those bodies (that is a matter for Northern Ireland Railways), but they must be assessed as competent to carry out that level of work.

The Chairperson: Who would conduct the audit? Who would these independent bodies be?

Mr McKenna: There is a range of people. AD Little was mentioned.

The Chairperson: There are agencies.

Mr McKenna: They would be described as consultancy bodies.

Mr R Hutchinson: I am somewhat worried, but perhaps I have misunderstood. There have been many problems in Great Britain. Will the same people who have audited stretches of the line in Great Britain audit the line in Northern Ireland?

Mr McKenna: Potentially, yes.

Mr R Hutchinson: That does not give us much confidence, does it?

Mr McKenna: It may be that the duty holders in Great Britain did not carry out the full requirements of their safety case properly, rather than that the people carrying out the assessment of that safety case were incompetent.

Mr R Hutchinson: I am not trying to be awkward, and you may or may not agree with me that since the British system was privatised and has been split up here, there and yonder and assessed by such people, there have been many accidents. At some time those railway lines must have had a certificate that stated they were safe, issued by the very same people that the Department for Regional Development will employ to pass our system as safe.

Mr Aiken: The independent auditors audit the systems; they do not necessarily recheck the lines.

Mr R Hutchinson: Is that not irrelevant?

Mr Aiken: It will be the responsibility of Northern Ireland Railways to check that the lines are safe. The auditor will assess whether their systems for checking the lines are adequate.

Mr R Hutchinson: You will have to help me here. The systems that you would put in place here would probably be the same systems that have been put in place across the water.

Mr McKenna: Not necessarily. Mr Aiken has said that the important thing is that it is all risk-assessment based. The nature of the operation in Northern Ireland is not the same as a mainline operation in Great Britain because of the volume of traffic. The safety case and the risk assessment would reflect that.

The Chairperson: I shall ask a straightforward question. Is the safety case applicable regardless of whether or not there is fragmentation?

Mr Aiken: Yes. However, fragmentation leads to more complications because of the greater number of interfaces.

The Chairperson: In the concept of the safety case, the application of safety is the same in any system. Therefore, the argument about fragmentation or a unitary system is irrelevant. Is that what you are saying?

Mr McKenna: It is not. The Department does not accept that fragmentation is the only reason for a safety case. The point you are making is quite right. When a single body offers the service, the interfaces and the risks are reduced, and that has a bearing on the safety case. It does not remove the need for a safety case, but it makes that safety case easier to develop, audit and implement.

The Chairperson: Fragmentation leads to complications in control, command, management and other intermeshed matters. There is a greater argument for a safety case in those circumstances.

Mr McKenna: The safety case would be more complicated. It would require more supervision with everyone concerned examining that safety case. It is important that a safety case is in place.

Mr McFarland: Our legislation needs to be updated. If I were drafting it, I would like to understand the logic behind it. Great Britain has brought in the legislation, but that is not a reason for other regions having it, given the problems that GB has experienced.

In Northern Ireland there is a unitary system. The logic of putting legislation in place is that Northern Ireland Railways might wish to do away with in-house maintenance and to contract out. From what we have heard it appears that if one wishes to contract out it is logical to have safety cases in place. Is the Department for Regional Development hedging its bets that at some stage in the future it might wish to do away with in-house maintenance and contract out?

As you know, I asked the same question when you last appeared before the Committee. Why is a safety case required if, in fact, the intention is to go out to contract? That situation is not unusual; the Water Service contracts out, as do other agencies. A contract is entered into with a company to maintain a length of track for a specific period of time, at a particular standard, with the relevant safety caveats. Why should we not have that system, given that we have ownership? The issue of fragmentation would not arise. Discussions could be held on how best to monitor the contracts.

If legislation were put in place, technically contracting out would be open to all the problems mentioned, whereas if it were to be done within the system I have described, there would be no need for it to be enshrined in law. It could be put into a contract, which could then be monitored by inspectors and be subject to all the normal contract conditions. I am trying to understand the motivation and the imperative behind this.

Mr Aiken: You stated that this legislation would update our railway safety legislation. There is very little railway safety legislation in Northern Ireland. The Bill introduces several pieces of legislation for the first time. You describe a system in which the railway is in public ownership and maintenance can be done by contract. Basically, that is the system that currently exists. AD Little and others have advised us that it would be better to have safety case legislation in place because that would allow for independent scrutiny and independent assessment of the safety case. Her Majesty's Railway Inspectorate would advise the Department whether or not the risks were being managed effectively.

Mr McFarland: That advice is being provided, and it is tied up with other issues. If the Belfast to Bangor line were to be maintained, it could be let out to a company for five years and rules could be laid down in whatever detail was considered necessary — various safety issues; who is allowed on the line; standards of drive; and so forth. All that could be laid out in the contract, which at the moment is in-house. Is it correct that Northern Ireland Railway's own people do the maintenance?

Mr Aiken: By and large, Northern Ireland Railways does the maintenance.

Mr McFarland: Let us suppose that Northern Ireland Railways wants to do away with your in-house team and go out to contract. A detailed contract could be drawn up with a firm, which could be examined by inspectors every three weeks or so, or whenever you wished them to examine it. Why are we being advised by AD Little to go for a safety case system? There is a much simpler and more controllable system in which the length of the contract can be determined. If the company is unsuitable, it can be sacked. One knows exactly what it is supposed to do and what the rules of the game are. An inspector can monitor the situation regularly.

Mr Aiken: The problem arises when something goes wrong. Does the work simply stop and nothing further happens? It is misleading to concentrate on the safety aspects of a track relay. Safety cases deal with all aspects of railway operation, some of which are more important than maintenance work. I do not see how they can be properly —

Mr McFarland: Like what?

Mr Aiken: How trains are operated, or how drivers are trained.

Mr McFarland: That is what Translink does. There is an entire company whose purpose it is to run railways and hire drivers and so on. That is not new. I am trying to understand why we are rushing into railway safety case systems, when there is a perfectly acceptable system in place.

There are questions about whether it is being managed properly. That is a different discussion. Why are we hurrying off into this new system that has been tried in Britain and has been proved problematical because of the system of lawyers that we heard about? It strikes me that if we get this wrong, the Department for Regional Development will spend all its time running back to the Assembly for money to pay for legal cases.

If there were to be a management system and a company that can find its way around the issue of maintenance contracts, why are we rushing headlong into this? What is the impetus behind the rush into this legislation? I am not having a go at you. I am desperately trying to understand.

Mr Aiken: In this day and age, we think that self-regulation by the railway company is not sufficient on its own. There has to be independent scrutiny. That is why we wish to proceed with the legislation.

Mr McFarland: Why can there not be an inspector who is independent of the railway company? That would not cost very much. An inspection could be carried out every month. However, a raft of new legislation would have a host of implications, with the potential of leading to enormous legal fees, all because someone is needed to monitor the competence of Translink and Northern Ireland Railways to run the railways.

Mr Aiken: The question of legal fees does not arise if we continue with an integrated system. That issue arises only with a fragmented system. Northern Ireland Railways will be responsible for all aspects of the operation. Translink is in favour of the legislation and is happy that it should be controlled independently.

Mr McFarland: All that the Department for Regional Development has to do is to say: "Here is Mr Jones. He will now inspect Translink." The only logic for doing what you propose is that if you wish to keep your options open down the line for contracting your in-house services —

Mr McKenna: We appear to be accepting the line here, as Mr Rayner outlined earlier, that the only reasons to have

a safety case are fragmentation and focusing on external personnel who carry out operations. That is a mistaken belief. The reason for having a safety case is to codify precisely what happens in the operations of an organisation. You also suggested that much of this was new. The concept of a safety case as a piece of legislation is, indeed, new. The content of that safety case will most certainly not be new. It will be based on the aspects that you referred to, such as procedures, management and operational systems that Northern Ireland Railways already has in place.

It will ask Northern Ireland Railways to codify all this for the first time. When inspectors come in, as they do, they will then have something to examine. They can make a judgement based on the now-established systems that Northern Ireland Railways are working toward and whether those systems are being maintained correctly.

Mr McFarland: As a Department, why can you not simply tell Translink to do that now? You own Translink. Translink, albeit at a slight distance, is a public company owned by you. Why can you not simply tell it to do this? A raft of legislation and safety cases are not required to tell it to get on with managing the company.

Mr Aiken: Unfortunately, the Department cannot tell it to do that. It does not have those powers.

Mr McFarland: You have powers to hire and sack its chiefs, for goodness' sake.

Mr Aiken: Actually, we do not. The Department has powers to withhold money, but that is not a good solution.

Mr McFarland: So, you are saying that we must reorganise the relationship between the Department and Translink to make it accountable? Are you saying that Translink is not accountable to the Department? We thought that it was.

Mr Aiken: The Department is not responsible for the day-to-day operations.

Mr McFarland: That is running trade, but if there are enormous mess-ups or if the management is not working, are you saying that the Department does not have the power to tell Translink what to do?

Mr Aiken: The Department has powers to direct the Northern Ireland Transport Holding Company, but not to direct Translink.

Mr McFarland: Does the Northern Ireland Transport Holding Company, which technically owns Translink, not have powers to direct it?

Mr Aiken: Yes, but our powers of direction are limited.

Mr McFarland: Do we need to look at the Department's powers to organise our public transport system?

Mr Aiken: That is slightly off the subject.

Mr McFarland: It is inherent on this. If you do not have a grip —

Mr Aiken: The Minister has already said that he wants to look at the structure of public transport provision in Northern Ireland.

Mr McFarland: But should that be where the effort is going rather than on finding solutions for railway safety cases?

Mr Aiken: It is not a substitute for proper railway safety legislation.

Mr Hussey: I agree with Mr McFarland and not simply because we are party Colleagues. I agree with the logic of his argument about why the whole scenario cannot be included in contracts, even in-house contracts. I am trying to understand the role of Her Majesty's Railway Inspectorate, which has a responsibility to ensure that the system is safe. Mr McKenna, you would have heard me question Mr Rayner, and you were reported to have said that "it is assumed that they will resource accordingly". Is there a concern there? Has it been resourced accordingly, given the scenario with Her Majesty's Railway Inspectorate?

Mr McKenna: There was a resourcing difficulty with Her Majesty's Railway Inspectorate. The inspectorate has recently significantly increased the resources available to it, with a new intake of inspectors. As part of the contractual arrangements that the Department has entered into, each year it will inform the inspectorate in advance of the amount of support that the Department requires in a given year. That will cover not only railway safety casework but also a range of other works that the Department has contracted with it to deliver. As part of that contract, it has undertaken to make that resource available to the Department.

Mr Hussey: Perhaps I am being simplistic, but if we go into a situation of having contracts, even in-house contracts, and there is an inspectorate in place with responsibility for, I assume, ensuring operations and maintenance in the railway system, why do we need to go beyond that?

Mr Aiken: The inspectorate does not now have any responsibility, and it will not have responsibility unless legislation is introduced. Inspectors can act as advisers, but there is no legislative force without this legislative back-up power.

Mr Hussey: Does the legislative back-up power state that Her Majesty's Railway Inspectorate now has a statutory responsibility?

Mr Aiken: No, the Department for Regional Development has that responsibility.

Mr Hussey: Does the Department for Regional Development have the power to delegate that responsibility to Her Majesty's Railway Inspectorate?

Mr Aiken: No.

Mr Hussey: What is the point in having Her Majesty's Railway Inspectorate?

The Chairperson: As I understand it, Her Majesty's Railway Inspectorate acts as the Department's agents in that situation. That is different. A principal appoints an agent. The principal in this circumstance is the Department, and that legal responsibility still rests with the principal. The agent is simply carrying out the instruction. That must be made clear in law or the whole thing will not work properly.

Mr McKenna: The other point which Mr Hussey may find useful, and Mr Rayner mentioned it in his evidence when he referred to the need for the Department to have the levels of expertise required, is that Her Majesty's Railway Inspectorate has 150 field inspectors who specialise in different areas such as signalling, infrastructure, rolling stock and so forth, and the Department requires access to all those levels of expertise. If we tried to create our own organisation, we would have to employ between 10 and 15 people to look after a railway network of our size, and that is simply impractical.

The Chairperson: Having said that, Mr Rayner said that Her Majesty's Railway Inspectorate's resources were limited.

Mr McKenna: They are limited, but they are less limited than they previously were, because in the past year Her Majesty's Railway Inspectorate has made a significant attempt to obtain additional resources. The inspectorate will always argue that it needs more resources.

Mr Hussey: Even if the resources are limited, if the Department for Regional Development has a contract with Her Majesty's Railway Inspectorate, it has a legal obligation to fulfil that.

Mr McKenna: We have taken the necessary steps to ensure that we will have the resources that we require.

Mr Hussey: If Her Majesty's Railway Inspectorate does not have the resources, it is not fulfilling the contract.

Mr Aiken: If Her Majesty's Railway Inspectorate told us one year that it could not meet all our demands in time, we would have to contract with a private firm of consulting engineers to fill the gap.

Mr McNamee: I was going to ask for clarification on the role of Her Majesty's Railway Inspectorate and the consultancy bodies, but you have addressed that in your last answer. There will be an independent assessment of the safety case prior to its approval. The safety case will be audited annually, but in the interim who is responsible for monitoring the implementation of the safety case? I assume that initially the safety case presentation and assessment would be a paper exercise. People would outline how they will identify, measure and assess the risks. However, in the 12 months before the annual audit to find out whether that body has carried out and implemented its safety case, should it be Her Majesty's Railway Inspectorate's role to assess and monitor the implementation of safety cases?

Mr McKenna: If the Department was concerned that there were difficulties, as an option it would could call in Her Majesty's Railway Inspectorate at any stage to carry out a further inspection. The responsibility for operating the railways remains with Northern Ireland Railways. Under the safety case regime the system that it would put in place requires it to maintain records of its implementation of that system. Part of the audit would not be simply to turn up on a given day, have a look at two or three areas and say that everything looks OK. It would also involve checking the records to find out what had happened in the 11½ months, or whatever the time might be, to satisfy themselves that Northern Ireland Railways was operating the system that it is meant to operate. The Department could ask Her Majesty's Railway Inspectorate, as its independent advisers, to carry out, at an early stage, a review or to incorporate it as part and parcel of the audit reports that it receives.

Mr Savage: Does the Department for Regional Development have the expertise to bring our rail network up to an acceptable standard?

Mr Aiken: We do not have the expertise, but we can employ it.

With regard to the physical work, much of the expertise necessary to bring the railways up to standard lies in Northern Ireland Railways itself.

Mr Savage: That expertise is in Northern Ireland Railways and is within your grasp.

Mr Aiken: Yes.

Mr Savage: How long will it take?

Mr Aiken: It is out of our control, but we hope that the legislation would be made before the summer recess. In that case, it would probably come into operation in October 2002. Subordinate legislation can then be introduced. That is currently being drafted, so it is hoped that there will not be a long delay between the Act coming into force and the first subordinate legislation being made. The only exception, and probably the most important part, is the safety case regulations. We must ensure that Northern Ireland Railways is in a position to produce its safety case and to have it audited and inspected before the introduction of safety case regulations. Once those are introduced, it will be an offence for Northern Ireland Railways and heritage railway operators to operate without a certificate.

Mr McFarland: How many former railwaymen are in the Department for Regional Development?

Mr Aiken: None.

Mr McFarland: With regard to full appreciation and understanding, is that not strange? I am curious to know why no one has any experience in the transport policy support division, which deals with railways.

Mr Aiken: Were the Department to employ one person, that person would have expertise in a particular field. As

Mr McKenna said earlier, it would be necessary to employ a dozen people to have the full range of expertise. In those circumstances, therefore, it is probably best to buy in the expertise from consultants.

Mr Hay: The important point is that legislation is necessary. There is no doubt that the meetings have been useful.

The Chairperson: Thank you very much. Your evidence has been very helpful.

At the meeting on 27 February the Committee agreed to take evidence from the following groups: Translink, the Railway Preservation Society of Ireland, Transport 2000 (Mr Rayner) and the Department for Regional Development and its officials. Now that we have heard from all those groups, the Committee is content and will take no further evidence. The Committee needs to debate and assess the evidence it has heard.

Mr McNamee: With regard to the taking of evidence, Mr Rayner initially gave evidence on behalf of Transport

2000 and is the only person to provide independent information on railway safety. Should the Committee hear evidence from other agencies with expertise in railway safety?

The Chairperson: Perhaps the Committee should consider that. If there is no one else, we will have to conclude that we have taken sufficient evidence in relation to this matter. Perhaps the Committee Clerk could investigate that point further.

Mr McNamee: In the evidence we have heard from Mr Rayner, on behalf of Transport 2000, and from the Department, there is a difference of opinion about safety case legislation as the best means of ensuring safety here or not. That is my reason for requesting further evidence.

Mr Chairperson: The point is well made. We can explore this further, but if we cannot get any further assistance in this matter, we may have to conclude our evidence session.

**NORTHERN IRELAND
ASSEMBLY**

**COMMITTEE FOR
SOCIAL DEVELOPMENT**

Thursday 21 March 2002

**HOUSING SUPPORT SERVICES
BILL (NIA 23/01)**

Members present:

Mr Cobain (Chairperson)
Mr Hamilton
Mr B Hutchinson
Mr G Kelly
Mr O'Neill
Mr M Robinson
Mr Tierney
Mr S Wilson

Witnesses:

Mr Dodds) The Minister for Social Development
Mr Hunter) Department for Social Development
Mr Burns)
Ms Ferran) Northern Ireland Housing Executive

The Minister for Social Development (Mr Dodds): I thank the Committee for inviting me here today. The Housing Support Bill was debated in the Chamber on Tuesday, so it will be fresh in everybody's minds. It will create the framework that will enable us to introduce the Supporting People policy. Officials made a presentation to the Committee at the end of January, and the additional information that was requested has been provided. The Committee said that a further meeting would be useful, and I am happy to oblige. The Bill was also discussed at the seminar in March. I hope to introduce it in the Assembly in April and have the Committee Stage in May. I do not intend to seek accelerated passage, but that depends on the timetable — we are bringing forward a lot of legislation.

I will do everything I can to ensure that appropriate and adequate funding is available for the Supporting People fund. We covered this matter in detail in the debate, but I am happy to answer the Committee's questions, as are the officials who can comment on the more detailed issues.

Mr G Kelly: You said that you do not intend to apply for accelerated passage. However, if we make insufficient progress, might it yet be applied for?

Mr Dodds: Mr Chairperson, I intend to introduce the Bill in April, and the Committee Stage is planned for May. As things stand, we should be able to complete all the stages

under normal procedures. It is not our intention to seek accelerated passage at this stage. However, I would be interested to know if Committee members felt that that was worth exploring. If the Bill is introduced in April, and it goes through the various stages, it should be in effect by April 2003.

Mr S Wilson: The reason the Committee is keen to know whether there will be accelerated passage is that that happened before, and when the Bill was landed on the Committee, it caused some friction. That was not the fault of the Department; it was mainly due to timing. It would be useful, given the concerns with the Housing Support Bill, if we were able to go through all the necessary stages. In what circumstances would accelerated passage be needed, especially since it is expected that it will be laid in April? Is there any indication that that will not happen?

Mr Dodds: No. We are neither urging nor suggesting accelerated passage. I am keen to hear members' views. The Department is introducing weighty legislation, and that is why I raised this. I agree that there will be time to get the Bill to Final Stage by Christmas, or early 2003, so that it comes into effect in April 2003. I do not intend to seek accelerated passage at the last minute.

Mr S Wilson: Even though there will be a Housing Bill, a Welfare Reform Bill and a Housing Support Bill, you do not foresee any difficulty that might prevent our using the normal process?

Mr Dodds: The Department has no difficulty with that.

Mr B Hutchinson: Even though we have exactly one year left before the Assembly is dissolved — 21 March 2003?

Mr Dodds: You are counting the days. Yes, that has been taken into account. It is a very tight timetable, and, for reasons that I will not go into, a lot of legislation will be coming through towards the end of this session. However, I am confident that it will all go through before the Assembly is dissolved.

Mr Tierney: If there should be a problem, will you let us know? We would not want to find out from the Business Committee that there is to be accelerated passage. That is not likely, but we would be opposed to it. If there is a problem we want you and your officials to discuss it with us.

Mr Dodds: I certainly would come back to the Committee. However, I do not envisage any problems, and I give you a commitment that the Bill will proceed in the normal way. I raised the matter to emphasise the point and to hear the Committee's views. I had no other agenda.

The Chairperson: The three Bills are quite complex for the Committee Stage. The Housing Support Bill, the Welfare Reform Bill and the Housing Bill will involve a lot of work for the Committee. How will they come to the Committee, and will they have any priority or order?

Mr Dodds: I wrote to the Committee about that and noted that it attracted some comment. Because two of the Bills are parity provisions and the housing support provisions must be in effect by April 2003, there is a time limit. The parity provisions will be urgent. The Housing Bill is an extremely important piece of legislation and a high priority for us. It does not have a time limit attached. That is the point that we were making about that piece of legislation.

The Housing Support Bill will be coming to the Assembly in April. As soon as the other two pieces of legislation go through the House of Commons and the House of Lords at Westminster, they will come to the Assembly. The Committee has already had meetings with officials and been briefed on the memorandum on them. It has also had discussions, which I was keen to see happen, in advance of the legislation's coming out of Westminster. The draft Northern Ireland Bill on at least one of those pieces of legislation should be available soon, and we will be happy for you to have that in advance of its coming out of Westminster.

The Chairperson: We will deal with housing support and then deal with whatever is the next preference. It would be unprecedented for the Committee to deal with two Bills at the same time.

Mr Dodds: How you regulate your work is a matter for the Committee.

The Chairperson: But you will prioritise for the Committee. The Bills will come from the Department to us.

Mr Dodds: Yes, the legislation will be introduced in the Assembly. The Housing Support Bill will be introduced in April, and the Committee Stage will be in May. As soon as the other two pieces of parity legislation complete their passage through Parliament, they will come to the Assembly. As you know, there is also a timetable set out for the Housing Bill; the two-month consultation period is under way. As soon as that is complete, it will be introduced in the Assembly.

The Chairperson: We have to go through the Committee Stage for each Bill separately. We cannot do two together.

Mr S Wilson: That depends on the spacing of the legislation. The Housing Support Bill will be introduced immediately after Easter. The Minister has said that the parity legislation has still to go through Westminster, so it is unlikely to come here before the summer recess. The Housing Bill will probably be placed before the Assembly in the autumn. There should not be an overlap.

The Chairperson: Yes, but we will never get through the legislation in this period.

Mr Dodds: How you deal with the Committee Stages of each of these Bills is a matter for the Committee. However, with the two pieces of parity legislation, the normal procedure is that accelerated passage avoids the need for the Committee Stage. That must be considered.

Whether the Committee deals with the Committee Stages of two Bills simultaneously is entirely a matter of how it regulates its work. I cannot comment on that.

The Chairperson: No, but we do not want to be black-mailed into accelerated passage to get the Bills through. We want to go through the Committee Stages of all Bills. The difficulty is that all this work is coming at the one time. The Housing Bill is a complicated piece of legislation, and we do not know how long it is going to take us to go through it or through the Committee Stage of the Housing Support Bill, because many issues in it may suddenly emerge. The timescale may be so tight that we cannot get through three Committee Stages. I just want to flag that up.

Mr Dodds: Standing Orders govern the time allowed for Committee Stage. It is not an open-ended process.

The Chairperson: Minister, can you clarify a point in the Housing Support Bill about the split between the bricks and mortar and the support issues? Many people, including me, are confused. The support package should be explained in more detail. What funding goes into it other than housing benefit?

Mr Dodds: That was explored in some detail during the Assembly debate. However, Mr Burns will elaborate.

Mr Burns: The amount of housing benefit to meet housing support costs is one of the major elements that will transfer into the Supporting People fund. There are also other funds within the Department for Social Development's bailiwick, such as Special Needs Management Allowance, which the Department pays to housing associations providing housing schemes that include support to help those associations meet the additional management costs involved in running such schemes.

Some smaller funds are operated by the Housing Executive, such as Staying Put funding, to help people, with advice from the Housing Executive, to make the changes to their homes that will enable them to stay there and prevent their having to move into sheltered accommodation.

Providers have significant difficulty identifying the split between their costs, and the aim of the Housing Executive's project team is to advise providers on how best to make that split. That is most important. The Special Needs Management Allowance and other funds already exist. Identifying the amount that should be transferred to the Supporting People fund is a major task.

The Chairperson: When the criteria are drawn up, will the providers who are supporting people be paid accordingly? Will those individuals or organisations, such as Shelter, apply to the Housing Executive? How is the Supporting People element assessed? Does it matter if there are 10 people or 20 people? Does the Department adapt the formula depending on the number of people?

Mr Burns: Yes. In many respects the formula will put the funding arrangements on a more secure footing. Con-

tracts will be drawn up with each provider based on a formula that takes into account the number of beds in the accommodation, voids, and so on, throughout the year. At the start of a year a provider will have a good indication of the level of funding it will get. I do not know how housing benefit operates now. However, there will be no uncertainty about this. Contracts will be drawn up, and providers will know how much they will get from the Supporting People fund.

The Chairperson: Are the criteria already agreed? Will the Housing Executive scrutinise them again?

Mr Burns: The criteria have been determined by the social security side and are based on what housing benefit will cover after 2003. The Supporting People fund is intended to take account of the rest. There are some grey and difficult areas. Because housing benefit is a trusted source of income for many providers, they are reluctant if they have doubts about certain costs and whether the money is for support or bricks and mortar. In some cases, they tend to try to put it through as rent.

Our housing benefit section explains to providers that that is a dangerous thing to do. No matter what the Housing Executive wants to do, if the rules say that a claim for housing benefit for a particular cost is not eligible, the provider will not get the money. It will be too late then to ask for money from the Supporting People fund. Perhaps there is a misapprehension that we are applying the rules with a rod of iron and saying that we will not cover certain costs like a parent giving advice to an errant teenager and saying, "This is the situation."

The Chairperson: That depends on what sort of parent you are.

Can providers identify the support element quickly and see what they will be entitled to for bricks and mortar and what they will be able to claim for as support? Are there grey areas? We are getting mixed messages about this, and the more it is discussed, the less clear it seems.

Mr Dodds: As Mr Burns said, this is being discussed. It is understandable that some people want keep the bricks and mortar issue under the rent side, because that seems to be clear. However, difficulties may arise if people go along with that and it is found to be unclear. At that stage it will be too late to transfer a claim to the supported side and draw money from the initial round of funding.

That process is underway. Some people might think that the Housing Executive is being harsh. As Mr Burns said, it is for people's good to try to ensure that the various regulations are clear and that the Housing Executive will stand over them. We are also putting the maximum amount of money into the fund from day one. The point was made during the Assembly debate that we must not underestimate the pot at this stage; we must put the maximum amount into it now.

The Chairperson: Some people told us that what is classified as bricks and mortar and what is classified as support is not clear. I agree that it is important to be very clear about those classifications. There is no sense in having grey areas with people thinking that they will get money, if they will not. However, people have told us that the classifications are not as clear as they should be. The Minister says that the criteria are clear, but some of the providers have said that they are not.

Mr Dodds: The interpretation of any regulations or policy will always involve people arguing over what falls under certain rules or what can be challenged. Discussion are held, and a judgement is reached. However, if there is a court challenge, we want to be able to stand over it. I hope that we will be able to sort it out. My Department will check the state of play with the Housing Executive to ensure that everything is being done to see that the process operates correctly and efficiently.

The Chairperson: Thank you, Minister.

**NORTHERN IRELAND
ASSEMBLY**

**COMMITTEE FOR HEALTH, SOCIAL
SERVICES AND PUBLIC SAFETY**

Wednesday 10 April 2002

**HEALTH AND PERSONAL
SOCIAL SERVICES BILL
(NIA 6/01)**

Members present:

Mr Gallagher (Deputy Chairperson)
Mr Berry
Mrs Courtney
Mr Hamilton
Mr J Kelly
Ms McWilliams
Ms Ramsey

Witnesses:

Mr P Deazley)
Mr M Hendra) Departmental Officials
Ms J Hill)
Ms J Thompson)

The Deputy Chairperson: I welcome Mr Peter Deazley, Mr Mike Hendra, Ms Judith Hill and Ms Jennifer Thompson from the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety who will give us their perspective on the Bill.

Mr Deazley: Article 1 of the Health and Personal Social Services Bill removes trusts' ability to charge for nursing care as part of the cost of care in a nursing home. This removes an anomaly that people in nursing homes are the only people who are expected to make a contribution to health services. The article is quite short and amends article 36 of the Health and Personal Social Services (Northern Ireland) Order 1972.

The Deputy Chairperson: What is the background to the Bill?

Mr Deazley: I should have said that article 1 also includes a new paragraph (4A) in article 36 of the 1972 Order, which defines nursing care for this purpose.

The introduction of free nursing care is a response to the recommendations of the Royal Commission, which produced its report in March 1999. The Royal Commission recommended free personal care, but the Government of the time felt that they could not meet the resource requirement to introduce personal care. The Government intro-

duced free nursing care, partly as a response to the Royal Commission's recommendations but also to remove the anomaly that only those in nursing homes are expected to pay for their own care or to make a contribution towards what is considered to be a health service that is free in all other settings.

The Deputy Chairperson: What is the position in England, Scotland and Wales?

Mr Deazley: England introduced free nursing care, using the same nursing care definition, from October 2001. Wales introduced free nursing care from December 2001, and Scotland plans to introduce free nursing and personal care in all settings from July 2002.

The Deputy Chairperson: They are obviously taking different approaches to the issue.

Mr Deazley: Originally, we intended to introduce free nursing care here in October 2001, but the resources were not available. The Budget of September 2001 made available resources to allow us to introduce this from October 2002, at a cost of £4.5 million for this year and just over £9 million for a full year.

The Deputy Chairperson: How many people in residential care would benefit?

Mr Deazley: We estimate that there are about 2,000 people who fund their own care in nursing homes in Northern Ireland. A detailed survey by the personal care group will be carried out in the next few weeks to establish in detail how many people fund their own care and the level of that funding.

Ms Ramsey: I do not wish to detract from the importance of free nursing care: it will benefit about 2,000 residents. However, there is concern about the definition of "nursing care" and "personal care". Clause 1(1) of the Health and Personal Social Services Bill, which inserts a new article 36(4) into the 1972 Order, speaks of

"nursing care by a registered nurse".

The Committee assumes that trusts will inform people of their entitlements. When the Committee discussed the Carers and Direct Payments Bill it asked that that should be the duty of trusts, but I have concerns about people falling through the net. Some nursing home residents may need more help, and that could be defined as "nursing care"; therefore they do not fall into that category.

Homes in England are raising their charges, but not for the benefit of patients and residents. The Northern Ireland Registered Homes Confederation is concerned that the money it gets from the Department is less than that given to statutory homes, and, although I do not suggest that it would not pass on the benefits from increased charges, it is a concern that must be considered.

However, my main concern is the definition of "nursing care" and "personal care". Will the board or trust consider

individuals' needs? After all, one person's "nursing care" could be seen as another person's "personal care".

Mr Deazley: Ms Hill is chairing the group that designed the assessment tool, and it has already been piloted. It will be applied on an individual level — there is no other way of doing it. The assessment will be carried out on the circumstances of each individual.

Ms Ramsey: Will the individual be informed that he or she is entitled to an assessment?

Mr Deazley: Yes, and it will be an individual assessment. We are aware of the situation in England, and we are also aware of the publicity surrounding homes increasing their charges, now that nursing care is free. We will consider ways to avoid that, but it is an extremely difficult issue. Individuals are already self-funding care and are in personal contracts with nursing homes. It is difficult to differentiate between them; however, we will consider every possibility to prevent that.

It is our intention that, with departmental direction, trusts would be told that they must make all nursing home residents aware of their rights under the legislation.

Mr Berry: What arrangements will be put in place to monitor the assessments once they have been carried out? Will they be monitored closely over time?

Ms Hill: We have been piloting the tool, and we are developing a training programme to roll out its use. It is used on restricted sites in the statutory and independent sectors. Trusts and homes have been participating in that.

As the procedures, linked with the wider community care assessments under the assessment process, are set up we will put in place appropriate supervision arrangements to ensure feedback and monitoring of the effectiveness of the tool. That will happen at the University of Ulster, which is working with us in evaluating the use of the tool. We will make a judgement about whether we need to continue that evaluation through the first year.

Ms McWilliams: Why, once again, does the Bill have a generic title? It is one of many Bills that will come under the term "health and personal social services". Has the Department a view on how a Bill that concerns free nursing care should be titled? The second part is probably the more difficult part. Increasingly, Bills are being added to and being given generic titles. For example, the title of the previous Bill on payments for carers of the disabled — the Carers and Direct Payments Bill — was changed to reflect its provisions. I hope that we can change the title of the Bill. Having started it, I would hate it if the Bill's title did not change.

What has been the experience of residential nursing homes in England since the introduction of free nursing care? There is now an obvious financial incentive for nursing homes; are people being admitted to a particular type of home as a consequence? What lessons have been learnt?

I met the confederation, and some of its members have welcomed those tools because they had nothing to go on for so long. We welcome the introduction of free nursing care, but we are enormously concerned about its practice. Evidence from Arthritis Care and the Alzheimer's Society in particular suggests that it would be especially difficult to distinguish between people with long-term illnesses on which aspects of their care are nursing and which are personal.

We have no experience of free nursing care in Northern Ireland, but it has been available in England since October 2001. We have only that experience to go on. Are people being shifted around the system?

Mr Deazley: There is very little evidence on the experience in England. However, Help the Aged and Age Concern have told us of an increase in costs. I have not seen evidence of people being shifted around the system or a tendency to use nursing homes more than residential homes.

There is a difference in the use of residential care between England and Northern Ireland. In England, the tendency has been away from residential care to concentrate on supported accommodation and housing with extra care. Statutory residential care is used much less in England than in Northern Ireland. The use of nursing homes in Northern Ireland is higher pro rata than anywhere else in the United Kingdom. We will certainly monitor the evidence and will consider what can be done to prevent a similar situation arising here.

Ms McWilliams: Evidence shows that there is a higher use here of nursing homes than in England, Scotland and Wales. Can you provide the Committee with figures? It is obviously read-across, and there may be budgetary implications. Why is there a higher use of nursing homes here? What implications will that have for future Budget resources? Will this eat up a substantial part of our Budget in comparison with those of Scotland, England and Wales? Is the difference significant? Will it affect our Budget or is there simply a variation? Is it a historical legacy or do more ill people here require nursing care rather than residential care?

Mr Deazley: There are many reasons, but I can send the figures to the Committee.

Mr Hendra: In England, the distinction between nursing homes and residential homes has been removed. The term "care homes" is being considered instead. People will be placed in those homes and will receive the appropriate care, whether that be nursing care or residential care.

Ms McWilliams: Is that an appropriate direction?

Mr Hendra: England has moved in that direction. I think that time will show that that is the preferred direction.

Ms McWilliams: That is interesting, given that we are discussing legislation that will separate nursing care and personal care.

Mr Hendra: There has been a move to dual-registered homes, and this action would recognise that.

Ms McWilliams: It is a pity that the legislation does not do that too.

Mr Deazley: Our legislation does not do anything to increase the divide between residential care and home care. A person in a residential home who requires nursing care will receive nursing care free of charge.

Ms McWilliams: I know that. However, we are trying to define the term “care” and to establish a cut-off point. The term “care home” suggests that the service is more mixed than it is.

I am concerned about how this has been presented and its late introduction. I now have the opportunity to tell you what I have said on the Floor of the House. Resources were set aside for free nursing care in the Budget, but they were surrendered. You are on record today as saying that the resources were surrendered because the total funding was not in place. However, I think that the resources were surrendered because the legislation was not in place. I want to put that on record.

Mr Deazley: That is accurate. We could not meet the legislation timetable in the first round.

Ms McWilliams: I hope that this does not reoccur. I must choose my words carefully. I am on record as saying that we must not lead the public into thinking that there was no money for free nursing care. In fact, having asked questions, I discovered that, at that stage, there was an initial funding package to introduce it. That package later had to be surrendered. We could have been more transparent about why free nursing care was not introduced. Lobby groups felt that their voices had been heard, whereas the Executive had not agreed the legislation and the dilatoriness of the legislation is one of the reasons why we are dealing with this at such a late stage compared with England, Wales and Scotland.

Mr Deazley: You are absolutely right. It simply slipped my mind when I detailed the chronology of the process that £3.3 million had been allocated for October 2001.

Ms Hill: The Alzheimer’s Society wrote to us on the matter. The assessment tool takes into account the physical, mental and social needs of people in care as well as those of their carers — it covers everything. The assessment tool will be submitted for consultation soon so that the Alzheimer’s Society can examine it and give us its advice. It has been designed to consider all needs, including those of people with Alzheimer’s disease or dementia, and it has been tested by these clients.

Ms McWilliams: May the Committee have a copy of the assessment tool when it is published?

Ms Hill: Absolutely.

Mr J Kelly: Funding arrangements and the cost of free nursing care must be balanced against the likely cost of

personal care, if the Committee were to support the introduction of free personal care. According to the explanatory and financial memorandum, the cost of free nursing care would require an extra £4.5 million between October 2002 and March 2003.

It has been assessed that the rates of funding set in England and Wales make only a contribution towards the cost and do not reflect the true cost of nursing care. What will the cost a year be over the next three years? How confident is the Department that the full year cost will be confined to the identified estimate? For example, £9 million has been estimated for 2002 and 2003. How far does the Department’s estimated cost reflect the true cost of nursing care? Is there a danger that, once the process has been implemented, the cost will grow?

Mr Deazley: Our cost estimates were based on the most recent estimates from the work that was done in England, which estimated £85 per week per person towards the cost of nursing care. That was multiplied by the number of people who were funding their own care in nursing homes in Northern Ireland. The calculation of the total cost is based on 2,000 people multiplied by 52 weeks multiplied by £85.

Any of the factors in that calculation can change the cost. For example, if the number of self-funding patients increases or decreases, the cost will change. The Department does not think that it will vary significantly. A decision by the Minister to raise or lower the contribution would affect the cost.

Mr J Kelly: Is there a danger that the cost will increase once the process has been implemented?

Mr Deazley: Only if the number of people who fund their own care increased disproportionately. The number of self-funding patients in Northern Ireland is substantially lower than the average for the rest of the United Kingdom.

Mrs Courtney: How does one differentiate between the care given by a registered nurse as opposed to that given by a nursing assistant? In most nursing homes there may be only one registered nurse in charge — especially at night — and the rest of the staff may be nursing assistants.

What guidance will the Department provide? Will it involve further administration costs, as changes will cost the providers money? How strong a distinction will be made between the definitions of nursing and personal care?

Mr Deazley: Professionals have designed a detailed assessment tool with the assistance of the University of Ulster. The process has been designed to ensure that we minimise bureaucracy and the costs associated with it. Work has begun on guidance, which will be extremely detailed and will be issued for consultation with the assessment tool. There will be an intensive training programme for those who will use the assessment tool, and the owners of the private sector nursing homes will continue to be involved in that.

Mrs Courtney: When will the consultation start?

Mr Deazley: The consultation document is being drafted, and we hope to provide the Minister with it by the end of this month.

Ms Ramsey: You mentioned a figure of £85, which concerned me. I accept that the private sector is involved, and that the Department depends heavily on its accommodating a lot of people who require nursing care. However, if statutory homes are paid more per head than those in the private sector, are homes in the private sector likely in time to approach the Committee with news of imminent closure because the Department does not provide them with adequate finance to maintain the provision of free nursing care?

Mr Deazley: There are two issues. The key issue is not the level at which nursing care will be paid; it is a total fee structure that will be paid to the independent sector. As regards self-funders, who now pay the full amount for their own nursing care, the amount of money that the nursing home receives would not change. It would receive part of the weekly payment from the resident and the remaining contribution from the health trust. Therefore, the new arrangements should not impact on the level of income received by private sector nursing homes.

Ms Ramsey: That does not take away from the fact that the Department relies heavily on homes in the private sector, which, at the minute, are being forced to close due to the level of funding that they are receiving.

Mr Deazley: That issue should be addressed by measures other than this legislation. For example, the Minister has made a further £3.6 million available to increase fee structures in the coming year.

Ms McWilliams: Could you clarify the process that nursing homes in all sectors will go through? Ms Hill mentioned measures such as training, assessment and, at a later stage, monitoring. Will fees be in place? Nursing home owners told the Committee that they feel that they are paying a range of fees to different bodies for statutory reasons such as inspections and fire safety. Now, they must begin another process. I hope that the training necessary for the new arrangements will not be seen as a means by which many more homes will be forced to close. To adhere with the new arrangements, homes in the independent sector will incur costs.

Mr Deazley: They should not.

Ms McWilliams: Ms Hill mentioned that all staff in those homes must be trained in the use of the new assessment tool.

Ms Hill: The only cost will be for staff release, and it is dependent on whether homes have sufficient staff to allow them to release a number of them for training. Legions of assessors are not required; only a small number of personnel — to be determined through our discussions with representatives of the trusts and the nursing homes — will be trained. As the Department is

providing resources for education and training, the main issue will be the costs involved in the release of staff. Most homes should already have a training and development programme for staff, and the Department will aim to fit in with that.

Ms McWilliams: I agree with you that they should have, but even in the public sector, training and development is first to be cut when there are cutbacks, giving rise to concern that variation may occur in the implementation of assessment across the sector. Who monitors that? Will it form part of the inspection?

Ms Hill: I am sure that it will be part of wider care-management activity. Self-funders do not come into that, but the process of assessment for nursing comes under the arrangements that trusts operate for care management. The relationship with the nursing home sector will be discussed with them, as representatives of the nursing home sector are on our steering group.

Ms McWilliams: They have raised that point with me.

Ms Hill: We will ensure that it is on the agenda of the next meeting of the steering group.

The Deputy Chairperson: How does one appeal against an assessment of nursing care?

Mr Hendra: The health and social services have a procedure that deals with complaints ranging from the informal through to those that must come before a panel or board. That is the normal process. If people are unhappy with their assessment they can discuss the nursing care level at which they have been assessed. Once a decision has been taken, it will go through the informal and formal complaints procedure.

The Deputy Chairperson: Is that adequate for elderly people who may become anxious going through such a process?

Mr Deazley: One important requirement of the assessment tool is the involvement of the nursing home resident and the carer, advocate or other individual who represents the resident at every stage of the assessment.

Ms Hill: One hopes that if there were an appeal the necessary support would be available.

The Deputy Chairperson: Let us now consider clause 2 and the schedule of the Bill.

Ms Hill: It is proposed that a Northern Ireland practice and education council for nursing and midwifery be established. A major review of nursing and midwifery regulations was undertaken across the United Kingdom, resulting in the disestablishment of the United Kingdom Central Council for Nursing, Midwifery and Health Visiting and the four national boards for England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland that had been responsible for setting standards for education and quality assurance. The new Nursing and Midwifery Council came into being on 1 April 2002.

The Conservative Government started the review before devolution. As we moved forward into devolution, we felt the need for a local organisation that would provide a focus for the development of professions here and link with the UK Central Council, replaced this month by the UK-wide Nursing and Midwifery Council, which is responsible for the registration of nurses and midwives. It gives them their licence to practise.

The changing nature of health and social services means that we need to continually develop both the roles and practice that our nurses and midwives undertake, and their education — beyond the point of registration. The purpose of this new local council is to support that development, so that we have a workforce that is shaped to deliver health and social care services in Northern Ireland, within the wider regulatory framework of the Nursing and Midwifery Council arrangements and registration. That registration gives protection to the public. The focus of the NI Practice and Education Council (NIPEC) is on the ongoing development of the professions in Northern Ireland.

We expect the new council to focus on practice development; on new things that nurses and midwives need to do; on the establishment of new knowledge and technologies; on developing the educational process for continuing professional development; on undertaking work on behalf of the Nursing and Midwifery Council in relation to pre-registration education; and on enhancing the performance of the professions. The third part involves attending specifically to the performance of nursing and midwifery services within our wider quality framework for the whole performance of the service.

Ms Thompson: We envisage a close and responsive relationship between the body and the service on the ground, which will shape the body's work. In that way, the body is alive and proactive in supporting the workforce and contributing to service developments.

Ms McWilliams: As I said earlier, I struggled to find a short title that would accommodate this subject. The only one that I can come up with is "Nursing and Midwifery Council Arrangements Bill", which would be the second part of the Bill. We will revisit that, because it is important to name the new agency.

I find the description of the chief officer in the explanatory document amusing. This legislative language continues to insist that all of these people will be men. It states that the chief officer will "assist his Chairman". Given that we are talking about midwifery, nursing and health visiting, that type of language never ceases to amuse me. However, we must live with this language until such times as the drafters elsewhere decide —

Ms Hill: That is why the men do not like the word "matron".

Ms McWilliams: Ms Hill, has this difficulty been resolved? I remember receiving some material on it much

earlier when health visiting was being debated elsewhere. The health visitors in particular raised the issue that they somehow have got lost in here. How have you resolved that as you have taken this consultation forward?

Ms Hill: We have resolved it in matching it with the title of the Nursing and Midwifery Council. There was considerable debate about this as that passed through Westminster. The Community Practitioners' and Health Visitors' Association recognises that the role within community practice and public health is developing fast. Therefore, the need to support that, through recognition in an additional part of the register, was seen as important.

That was seen as something that includes not only nurses and health visitors, but other community nursing disciplines. I was not present during the discussions, but I hope that I am reporting accurately that health visitors, through that association, recognised that the additional part of the register allowed further development in public health — to which nurses, midwives and health visitors contributed. They felt that that was the trade-off to keeping the title succinct at nursing and midwifery.

However, there is a separate part of the register for health visitors, and an additional part enables the development of new roles in public health and community nursing. The multi-professional team that we want to develop in primary care will have different elements that can and cannot be registered. That was the difficulty in community nursing; it created team difficulties.

It was a difficult discussion, but in the end it was agreed that, with additional changes to the register, health visiting was secured. The opportunity to develop new roles was also secured and was seen as important for other community practitioners. We have maintained that approach and kept nursing and midwifery as a succinct title. However, we recognise that we are dealing with all registrants to the Nursing and Midwifery Council.

Ms McWilliams: Are health visitors consulted with in Northern Ireland? Are they satisfied now that this is the way forward?

Ms Hill: The information has been sent out, and we have provided regular updates.

We have received feedback on the consultation process, and people have been informed that this is the title. We have not had any further challenge.

Ms Thompson: We have not had any comeback or opposition.

Mrs Courtney: When the title was initially discussed, health visitors felt that they were being sidelined, as they were not to be included in the title. Members were asked to lobby MPs and write to Westminster prior to the debate, and I lobbied on their behalf. I heard nothing from Westminster to say whether it had been accepted. The view of many health visitors is that they may have received the information locally, but it is not what they

originally set out to achieve, which was to ensure that health visiting was still included in the title and that they were entitled by right to a place on the board. That was not clarified at that stage. It is stated somewhere that 60% of health visitors will be registered. Does that ensure a place for health visitors on the board?

Ms Hill: We have not designated any places for the registration titles, because we were keen to have as wide a membership as possible and for the membership to be based on the merit of individuals and on their ability to contribute to a corporate council as opposed to giving seats. There are relatively few seats for the professionals, and we need to have a broad spectrum of input. We expect people from primary care and community nursing across the disciplines to be members of the new council, but there is no designated seat for a midwife or health visitor. To that extent there is no designated seat for a nurse, but we expect to have the full range of registrants as members. The shadow chairperson of the council is a health visitor.

Mrs Courtney: I am confused. Would it be possible to get clarification on the point that health visitors in

Northern Ireland are satisfied with the debate? I have my doubts about some of them getting that feedback and being allowed to put forward their views again.

Ms Hill: We will look into that.

The Deputy Chairperson: What are the costs?

Ms Thompson: We have an estimated budget of about £1 million for the new body. Funding will come from the money that was available for the national board, which is being stood down from 31 March, but it is less than the funding that the national board received. The body will have a core staff of professionals, but it will bring people in and out from the service on secondment as part-time associate members or members of expert panels to develop the initial work of the body. As the body develops its own role, agenda and profile in the service, it will be able to bid for more moneys to build up its budget.

The Deputy Chairperson: I would like to thank you for your presentation and for getting the Consideration Stage of the Bill off to a start.

**NORTHERN IRELAND
ASSEMBLY**

**COMMITTEE FOR HEALTH, SOCIAL
SERVICES AND PUBLIC SAFETY**

Wednesday 17 April 2002

**HEALTH AND PERSONAL
SOCIAL SERVICES BILL
(NIA 6/01)**

Members present:

Mr Gallagher (Deputy Chairperson)
Ms Armitage
Mr Berry
Rev Robert Coulter
Mrs Courtney
Mr J Kelly
Ms McWilliams
Ms Ramsey

Witnesses:

Mr Tom Cairns)
Dr David McConnell) Age Concern
Ms Caryl Williamson)

The Deputy Chairperson: You are very welcome.

Mr Cairns: Thank you. Age Concern is delighted to meet with the Committee. I hope that our submission will be as clear as Prof Stout's. Age Concern agrees wholeheartedly with all the points that Prof Stout made and was delighted to speak to him earlier.

Age Concern welcomes the revised draft Budget and the provision of free nursing care from 7 October 2002. It was devastated that the first Budget did not even mention nursing care. However, on 27 February 2001 the following motion was passed:

"That this Assembly notes the decision of the Scottish Parliament to provide the elderly with free nursing and personal care and calls on the Executive Committee to make similar provision for the elderly in Northern Ireland and to promote the greater well-being of the elderly in this part of the United Kingdom."

Age Concern agrees wholeheartedly with that motion and the implementation of the recommendations of the Royal Commission on Long Term Care for the Elderly that nursing and personal care should be free, based on an assessment of need. A distinction between nursing and personal care is artificial, unworkable and unfair. The charges for those services will cause confusion, anxiety and bitterness. I will repeat some of Prof Stout's

points, because the people with whom we deal feel strongly about the matter.

If the Scottish Parliament goes ahead with its proposals, a two-tier system will be created. The divide between nursing and personal care is false. The Scottish proposals would also create a divide across borders that would disadvantage Northern Ireland citizens.

Personal care should be paid for by the state, as people have already paid tax and National Insurance. Even with the introduction of free nursing care, many will still be forced to use up their savings and sell their homes. All the organisations with which we are involved are united on the issue. The system discriminates against people with chronic illnesses, such as Alzheimer's disease or arthritis. It penalises people for their ill health. We must think again about means testing, and deliver on the promise of equity in healthcare. As Prof Stout said, the system creates diagnostic inequity. Patients in hospital have access to free personal care, but those receiving residential and nursing care must pay. That is humiliating for older people and turns them into third-class citizens. It is contrary to the spirit of section 75 of the Northern Ireland Act 1998 because it seems that older people are the only group that must pay for treatment as determined by a medical practitioner.

We are running away from older people's issues, and that is the most central issue. The longer we run away, the bigger the mess there will be. I believe that the Northern Ireland Assembly will not abdicate its responsibilities for the most vulnerable citizens. Again, as Prof Stout said, the debate never took place in the community. There is great resentment and anger about that, because people thought that the Health Service would look after them when they needed it to. There are glaring anomalies and inconsistencies in the system. What is the definition of nursing care? Must people sell their homes in order to receive care? People simply cannot understand that situation.

The case for free nursing and personal care was made most powerfully by the Royal Commission on Long Term Care for the Elderly. Universal free personal and nursing care are hallmarks of a society that understands the limits of individual responsibility. Prof Stout outlined what that means as regards how we prepare for what may happen to us as we age. We are asking the Assembly to deal with only one of the many health and social care issues that older people face.

Age Concern raised all those points with the Minister, and when we met her, we outlined the enormous confusion among MLAs and the public. She agreed to write to MLAs and to clear up some of the public's confusion. People do not understand the system. As Age Concern lobbied the Assembly, it became clear that many MLAs do not understand the distinction between nursing care and personal care.

Many people are not aware that an interdepartmental working group is investigating the financial and other implications of introducing free personal care in Northern Ireland. The group will report in June 2002. The latest figure for the cost of introducing free personal care is £24 million. The group is not taking any submissions from groups such as Age Concern, although it has now formed a working group that includes NGOs (non-governmental organisations). That approach does not represent open government on a central issue that affects older people.

Some questions related to our information from England. Our colleagues there say that nursing assessments are complex and difficult to administer. There are extensive waiting lists for assessment, and nursing homes are increasing fees. Those who were supposed to benefit from nursing assessments are not doing so. That is, therefore, not a good way to legislate. I refer back to Prof Stout's answer to Ms Ramsey: we want the legislation, but it must be appropriate.

I will hand over to my colleague Caryl Williamson, Age Concern's regional co-ordinator for advice and information. Through the service that she provides, the organisation receives thousands of calls from old people and their families. She will present some of the information that we are gleaning from England.

Ms Williamson: I run Age Concern's busy advice line, which receives about 5,000 queries a year. More than one in 10 queries relate to residential nursing care. When we try to explain the situation to people, they become concerned about the current and projected charging procedures. People at all levels display fundamental and worrying ignorance about what is happening. Many believe that Northern Ireland has adopted either the Scottish or the English model. They imagine that nursing care is free, and they do not distinguish it from personal care. People are astonished to hear that Alzheimer's disease and dementia may not be covered in the current provisions, because they imagine that those conditions have specific nursing care needs.

The feedback from Age Concern England about the English scheme has been interesting. The scheme there has been running for only six months, but Age Concern England raised concerns about the problems as early as January. One unexpected bonus of the assessment procedure in England is that it exposed poor practice and inappropriate or inadequate equipment for individuals, which might not have come to light otherwise. Unfortunately, the process is incredibly slow. Even in January there were severe concerns that care homes were using the situation as an excuse to raise prices. Another problem was that if people had difficulties with the assessment — even if they were capable of complaining — they did not know who to complain to, or where the buck stopped.

In February, Age Concern England said that the system was an "absolute shambles." It called for an inquiry by

the Health Select Committee. The document says that only those

"lucky enough to live in a home which is making sure that it passes the relevant NHS supplement ... likely to see the benefits of 'free' nursing care."

In March 2002, Paul Burstow, the Liberal Democrat Shadow Minister for Older People, conducted a survey and condemned the English system as "a cruel hoax". I have listed some of the relevant findings: three out of five health authorities and primary care trusts have definite evidence of homes not passing on payments — some of that evidence is widespread; one in five people are still waiting for a decision on their assessment, even though all assessments should have been completed by December 2001. We must not forget that the system has been in operation for only six months, and already the backlogs are building up. Those who have been assessed are owed £11.9 million in outstanding payments. Thirteen per cent of people did not have the face-to-face assessment that they were promised but were assessed by telephone. Glaring anomalies are still emerging despite the fact that twice the original number of nurses were employed to carry out the assessments. It is clear that the system is just not working.

Although there is only one banding in Wales, compared to the three that operate in England, officials experience the same problems. Nursing homes increase their charges so that, fortuitously, they match the amount that people have been awarded. The award is nominal; often, it has no effect on people's income.

The Deputy Chairperson: I apologise, Mr McConnell, but could you keep your comments brief? We must leave time to hear the submission and to ask questions.

Mr McConnell: Mr Cairns mentioned that an estimated £24 million would be needed to pay for personal care. We do not know the costs of administering the nursing assessment tool, for example. Two thousand people pay for personal care, and more may become caught in the net because of the policy of selling homes to sitting tenants. People who in the past would not have owned their own home will do so now. As those people age, they may be affected by that situation.

The interdepartmental committee to consider personal care is not accepting any submissions or evidence. There may be consultation on the outcomes of the committee's inquiries, but that contradicts the thrust of open government and consultation. Consultation should take place at a formative stage. Therefore, in response to Ms Ramsey's point, Age Concern is concerned about the focus of that interdepartmental committee, its considerations and the potential outcomes. Although a working group with some NGO representation, which is attached to the interdepartmental committee, has been formed, there is no formal NGO representation on it.

Today I attended a meeting of the age sector reference group, an umbrella organisation of 17 old people's organisations, including Help the Aged, the Northern Ireland Pensioners Convention and all the local forums and consortia. Those organisations speak with one voice. They do not ask for free personal care — they demand it as a right.

Rev Robert Coulter: I have received letters from people who are concerned because nursing homes have increased their prices. Such a price increase left one old lady with only 10p per week with which to buy personal items such as soap. What should the Department do to ensure that that does not occur?

Mr Cairns: Such situations are exceptionally difficult to avoid, and officials in England are trying to deal with that. A major nursing home provider in England stated that providers are “driving a coach and horse” through the attempt to legislate for that. In England, officials are trying to insist that nursing home providers give a detailed breakdown of their costings; for example, hotel costs and nursing care. It would be a desperate situation if people did not have what is laughingly described as “pocket money” to cover the expenses of daily living. I can only suggest that the Department consider the attempts being made in England to legislate for that. However, those steps appear to be unsuccessful.

Mr Berry: What steps is Age Concern taking to inform the elderly and their families about the Bill and its implications? Age Concern receives 5,000 queries a year, which is tremendous. What proportion of callers raised concerns about the Bill? There is a perception that the Bill provides for both free nursing care and personal care. Do many of those who make queries believe that the Bill covers both? How many calls have you received about the Bill?

Mr Cairns: I will answer the first part of your question. The issue is so important that Age Concern does not deal with it alone. It is involved with the Right to Care group, which includes UNISON and the organisations of the age sector reference group. Through those bodies we attempt to get a better public understanding of the Bill. Age Concern has its own network of organisations throughout Northern Ireland, through which it provides information on the issue, but it is such an important matter that we need to operate as a strong sector in order to lobby.

Ms Williamson will deal with the types of queries that Age Concern has received.

Ms Williamson: One in ten queries concern residential and nursing care. However, many people receive too little information too late. First-time homeowners often feel especially at risk in Northern Ireland. Many people still feel that their home is safe because they have made a will to bequeath their property to their family. That perception exists across the board; there is widespread ignorance. Many people have no idea that this Bill is coming through.

Many believe that “nursing care” includes personal care; therefore they assume that they are entitled to free

provision. They do not query why they must pay for their care until a bill arrives. If people knew what was really happening, there would be blood on the streets, for different reasons, because they would be extremely disappointed and unhappy.

Mr McConnell: The Assembly has a cross-party group on ageing, of which Rev Robert Coulter is a member. In tandem with the debate, we are preparing a briefing on the issue for all Members. We are also preparing material for the media to diminish people's confusion about the matter.

Ms McWilliams: The word “free” is very cosy. The care will not be free; there are bands. Your study said that in 13% of cases people did not receive a face-to-face assessment; therefore, the outcome might have been inappropriate. The lack of assessors is an enormous concern. To date, £11.9 million is still outstanding in relation to that 13%. Your survey suggested that as a result of those assessments some people might have been put in the wrong band. If those people want a second opinion, is there a right of appeal whereby they can be reassessed?

Ms Williamson: The real confusion is deciding to whom someone should appeal. Should an appeal be made to the nurse, the home, the trust or the board? There does not seem to be a clear procedure. A person may not even realise that his or her assessment was done improperly. Someone in a home who is in very poor health will not even realise that the assessment has been made. There are questions about advocacy and buried costs. In England, there seem to be fantastic amounts of buried costs in an inept scheme that is being poorly applied. Officials are now trying to put the brakes on too late.

Ms McWilliams: Prof Stout spoke about rationing by diagnosis and rationing in the system. Here we have rationing within the bands, with no right of appeal. That leads to enormous concerns, given that a right to appeal exists in respect of other legislation. Prof Stout said that Age Concern might answer my question about the English experience, which you outlined. One of the concerns that the Committee expressed earlier was that the English authorities, instead of responding to concerns that nursing homes are retaining money, decided to change the care homes regulations so that homes cannot deduct money from the residents' fees. Similar care homes regulations exist in Northern Ireland. I anticipate that, if the Bill were passed, the same problems would arise here. The Committee is concerned that there would be an attempt to change our care homes regulations, rather than address the core of the problem in the first place.

Mr Cairns: Absolutely.

Ms McWilliams: Is that happening in England?

Mr Cairns: Yes. As I said in my response to Rev Coulter, the care homes are confident that you could “drive a coach and horses” through any attempt to legislate on the matter.

Ms McWilliams: I want it on the record that those regulations exist in Northern Ireland, and that we would have to do something similar.

Mr Cairns: I am not sure about that.

Ms Williamson: Part of the problem in England is that the money is not paid to the individual. Sometimes people are pre-assessed, and after that there is a holding brief until the assessment is carried out. It could be down to the framing of that in Northern Ireland.

Ms McWilliams: I appreciate your concern that Assembly Members are confused. For the record, Members were further confused when they thought that the legislation had not come forward due to insufficient funds. However, the legislation was not in place, and the public was not made aware of that. That is why we are discussing the matter so late. Because the legislation is late, Northern Ireland might be able to benefit from the experiences of others and improve on the other systems. What would you say to that?

Mr Cairns: I could not agree more. You raised that issue in the press recently. Northern Ireland is legislating on the matter a year late. Legislation was introduced on 1 October 2001 in England and Wales. Surely there is an opportunity to examine those matters.

Mr McConnell: Given the timescales, is it possible that evidence from the pilot schemes in Northern Ireland would come forward too late for their consideration in the debate on the Bill?

The Deputy Chairperson: We are not sure. It is likely that it will come too late. That is a good point, Mr McConnell.

Ms Ramsey: I want to clarify that I was not suggesting earlier that personal care should not be introduced — I wanted to introduce the reality that the Health Service has been underfunded by £190 million over the past 10 years. There are competing issues, and I was asking whether we should build upon that point. I am concerned that the interdepartmental working group has not taken submissions. It should take submissions from people who are interested and knowledgeable about the matter.

I wish to return to a question that Ms McWilliams asked. During our inquiry into the last Bill, we pointed out to the Department that trusts do not always make people aware of their rights. Officials were asked about that last week. During last week's Committee discussion, officials said:

"It is our intention that, with departmental direction, trusts would be told that they must make all nursing home residents aware of their rights under the legislation."

On the effectiveness of the tool they said:

"we will put in place appropriate supervision arrangements to ensure feedback and monitoring of the effectiveness of this tool."

We questioned the officials about the matter, and Ms Mc Williams asked for a copy of the details, to ensure that the tool is effective. I support the provision of free care, and I am not convinced that the definition of "nursing care" is appropriate. I agree that the separation of the two types of care is discriminatory. If the Committee rejected the Bill, it would not be passed by the Assembly. However, we would be disenfranchising 2,000 people, who would continue to suffer because they would have to sell their homes to pay for their care. Is it not right to build on the present Bill?

Mr Cairns: I could not agree more, and I discussed the matter with MLAs earlier. I thought that the Assembly would be responsible for examining the possibility of providing both types of care much earlier. Age Concern would be delighted to see a fully costed proposal for the measure, the options within the existing Budget, and an examination of the proposals for obtaining additional resources.

I am not familiar with the process whereby politicians go to Westminster and agree an adequate level of funding for this reasonable request. As this devolved Administration has no tax-raising powers, we need to examine the options within existing budgets. As Prof Stout pointed out, the Royal Commission on Long Term Care for the Elderly believe that that is eminently affordable.

Only the care element should be covered, with a means test remaining for the hotel costs. Therefore, what we are proposing is not totally free. The Scottish Parliament took that on board, much to the extreme dismay of politicians in Westminster. The Scottish Parliament flexed its muscles effectively on the issue.

Ms Armitage: We have been told that nursing homes are closing because they are no longer viable, and that accounts for the increase in their fees.

There seems to be a difference in the provision for those with Alzheimer's disease. Some are accepted into a nursing home, but others have to go into a specialised unit, which normally provides free care. You said that many people believe that their house is safe because it has been bequeathed in a will. Is a house safe if it has been given to the family as a gift? There are many homes for the elderly in my area, so that information would be useful.

Ms Williamson: Many people who have bequeathed property to their family do not realise that they have to die first for the will to take effect. That demonstrates many older people's basic lack of knowledge about how the world works. A person's house is not safe simply because he or she has signed a will.

Ms Armitage: What is the situation if a person has given their house as a gift to his or her family?

Ms Williamson: That is tricky territory, because it involves the intentional deprivation of assets. There is an excellent fact sheet on that subject. The house would still be regarded as an asset.

Ms Armitage: People with Alzheimer's disease appear to be treated differently.

Ms Williamson: That depends on how progressed the disease is. Those who suffer from Alzheimer's disease and dementia need a good deal of care and attention, which is not being defined as a nursing need — that is the problem. The disease can progress to the extent that a sufferer develops additional health conditions that require nursing attention, perhaps in a secure environment. That illustrates the real problems. People who are patently unwell, who are not themselves, and who need care and attention, possibly nursing care, may still fall outside the ambit of this scheme for a long time.

Ms Armitage: Is it not correct that a person with Alzheimer's disease who is admitted to a special unit receives free care? It seems a bit unfair.

Ms Williamson: There is a crossover. Someone with the early stages of dementia who needs only to be watched over so that he or she does not wander will not qualify

for nursing. He or she may qualify later, but that could take years. It could take 20 years for someone with an early onset of dementia to reach that stage.

Mr J Kelly: Further to Ms Armitage's point, yesterday I was involved in a case where someone with Alzheimer's disease was refused re-entry into a nursing home. What is the situation regarding that?

Ms Williamson: It would depend on the grounds on which they were refused readmission. It would also depend on the type of home. Many people do not realise that there is a difference.

Mr J Kelly: It was a nursing home.

Mr Cairns: A private nursing home has a private contract with an individual; it is different from a residential home. The state has never provided nursing homes.

The Deputy Chairperson: Thank you for your submission and for giving a perspective of the sector that would be most affected by the changes.

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Mr Gallagher (Deputy Chairperson)
Ms Armitage
Mr Berry
Mrs Courtney
Mr J Kelly
Ms McWilliams
Ms Ramsey

Witness:

Mr R Devlin) Belfast Carers Centre

The Deputy Chairperson: I welcome Mr Ricky Devlin from the Belfast Carers Centre.

Mr Devlin: Thank you for your invitation. I will try to keep my presentation as short as possible, because I run the risk of sounding like a cracked record. I am about to repeat much of what has already been said.

Generally speaking, the Belfast Carers Centre welcomes the introduction of the legislation. However, there are several short points that I would like to make. My chief concern is the definition of what constitutes nursing care. I see little distinction between personal care and nursing care. That could be an invitation for endless arguments and discord in relation to the legislation. I see it is deemed as being nursing care by a registered nurse, or nursing care carried out under the direction of a registered nurse. There is much ambiguity in that definition. Other staff routinely carry out many duties that were once the preserve of a qualified nurse. The boundaries in the legislation are somewhat hazy. Therefore, I would be fearful of potential disruptive debates as parties seek to challenge or present existing or potential interpretations of the Bill's wording.

Would I be presumptive in saying that if a cost has been formulated for this, should some thought not have been given to what actually constitutes nursing and personal care? I have possibly more questions than answers. Would it not be appropriate to include some such detail in the Bill?

There is also a question of infrastructure in relation to free nursing care. This issue has already been touched upon, especially in an appeals process. Whom do I appeal to if I am the carer of my wife or my father in a nursing home, and I am unhappy with what has been presented to me? Do I appeal to the nursing manager, the officer in charge or to this Committee? Whom do I appeal to? Such a question is one reason that the issue should be considered carefully.

A patient may be in a nursing home but may still be cared for by a wife, husband, daughter or son. I would be fearful of endless distress and argument over what constitutes what. If there is a review, the argument may arise that one person may feel that the case requires nursing care, whereas in someone else's opinion it is not nursing care. That would create much difficulty and distress. There is too much room for interpretation. Those who are the strongest advocates will win the argument; therefore, it is the most vulnerable and the least able to represent their views who will suffer the most. There is a danger that residents in one home may have different levies charged. The situation is a hornet's nest. There are too many grey areas and not enough black-and-white areas. The nettle should be grasped. There is a false distinction between personal care and nursing care: I cannot unpick that problem and have yet to see any other interpretation that would not leave room for argument.

Ms McWilliams: You may not be in a position to answer this query, but given that you are from the Belfast Carers Centre, there is some evidence to suggest that with the transfer of reserved rights from the social security budget to the health budget that the problem is not only current funding. One of the trusts makes the point that in future these people may not be found places in homes, but may have to find places elsewhere because that funding runs over the years and those places start to decrease. Do you anticipate that carers in homes will take on that responsibility, because the Bill will have implications for those who are being nursed in their own homes?

Mr Devlin: Yes, that would be the case. The situation with regard to nursing or residential home care and support for the cared-for in their own homes is a time bomb. There is concern that more pressure will be put on carers to continue to care within the marital or family home, because provision will not be available, or the quality of that provision will be questionable. I do not know if it is anecdotal evidence, but the quality of the care currently provided in nursing and residential homes is a regular concern of carers coming to the centre. Unless that situation is addressed fully, the concerns I have heard expressed, and from my own experience with my family, are that carers will be taking on a greater burden. That could be the case for carers even if the cared-for person is in a nursing home. That could add to, rather than alleviate, their distress. Some of the carers' financial concerns and burdens may be addressed, but frequently it is the families and the carers of the cared-for — as we would arbitrarily describe them — who pick up the tab.

Ms McWilliams: Ms Armitage and John Kelly raised the point that there seems to be variation in the rates. The situation where people are transferred out was also raised. John Kelly mentioned the case where someone had not been readmitted to a home.

We may all be aware of cases where people have not been accepted. That seems to make an even stronger case that rates should be agreed regionally, and that variation is avoided.

Mr Devlin: That is very important.

Ms McWilliams: Does the group that you represent see that? Are you getting phone calls about people being shifted here, there and everywhere?

Mr Devlin: Less so. However, I am aware of the variations. The problem of readmittance is quite common. One has to ask why that is happening, and sometimes the answer is that a person's care or nursing needs change. We may not be qualified or equipped to maintain that person safely within the unit. Personal development is another matter. What sort of provision of care is there for that individual? Those variations do exist.

Ms McWilliams: We could probably understand that, based on assessment of need, but our concern, if the Bill is passed, is that there might be assessment based on bands.

Mr Devlin: That could happen, but I would not be —

Ms McWilliams: We would increase the disorientation of many older people by shifting them around the system.

Mr Devlin: That is a valid point, which applies to both patients and their carers. There is evidence of that happening already between one nursing home and another. I take

people round nursing homes to show them the type of provision available, tell them what each home is charging and what they will be expected to pay. That causes much confusion and upset at a time when people are looking for suitable nursing care for their loved ones. All that does is pour fuel on the fire, causing more confusion, upset and disorientation. A false distinction is being made between personal care and nursing care.

Mr J Kelly: The centre has highlighted that an infrastructure needs to be in place. Is the infrastructure there? If not, what changes must be made?

Mr Devlin: The basic problem is the argument about what constitutes nursing care. I do not think that the infrastructure is there at the moment, because nobody has a ready answer. People ask me to define nursing care and personal care, and I cannot give an answer. I reply that it is in the legislation, and I am told that it is not. Is it anywhere else? I cannot see it. I am simply an outside agent and an advocate for carers. If I have a statutory responsibility, whom do I go to? That is not clear. If I go to body A and it does not know, that indicates a lack of infrastructure and a lack of clarity. That will create more difficulties than it will resolve.

Mr J Kelly: Are you saying that the provision of that infrastructure will reconcile the differences?

Mr Devlin: The way to reconcile the difference is to acknowledge that there is no difference. If a difference were to be made, then make it, because I cannot see it. We need a structure that allows a quick and clean method of reviewing the matter. Private day nursing care needs to change.

The Deputy Chairperson: Thank you, Mr Devlin.

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Witness:

Prof R Stout) Department of Geriatric Medicine,
) Queen's University Belfast

The Deputy Chairperson: I welcome Prof Robert Stout from the Department of Geriatric Medicine at Queen's University Belfast.

Prof Stout: Thank you for your invitation. I will talk specifically on free nursing care for the elderly and not on the other parts of the Bill.

I am Professor of Geriatric Medicine at Queen's University, and my clinical and academic interests concern the healthcare of elderly people. I was a member of the Royal Commission on Long Term Care for the Elderly, and some of my proposals come from its recommendations.

The Labour Government set up the commission after coming into office in 1997, honouring a manifesto pledge. There was much resentment in the community among elderly people and their relatives about the system that existed then, and still exists in Northern Ireland. There was a great sense of a betrayal of elderly people. The current generation of elderly people has lived through the history of the National Health Service, and they paid their taxes in the belief that they would receive free health care from the cradle to the grave. However, they found that when they became elderly and needed extra help, they were asked to pay for it. They were even asked to sell their homes to pay for care, and that caused resentment.

To some extent that sense of betrayal was a misunderstanding of the difference between healthcare and social care. Healthcare has been free since the onset of the National Health Service, apart from some charges. Social care has never been free; social care is paid for unless the person is unable to afford it, and that is demonstrated by a means test.

However, there was some justification for the sense of betrayal. In the 1980s there was a change in policy that moved some of the care of the elderly from healthcare to social care. A change in social security regulations allowed nursing homes to charge social security for the care element of looking after people in nursing homes. That was introduced as a change in regulations without any debate in Parliament or electoral manifestos. It was almost introduced by sleight of hand.

At the same time money was becoming scarce in the Health Service. It saw an opportunity for removing large numbers of elderly people from the health budget — people who had previously received free long-term care in hospital. Those people went to nursing homes, and unless they fell below the lower limits of the means test, they had to pay for their care according to their means, and some people had to sell their homes. Resentment built up against that.

The Royal Commission was set up to examine that issue, and its main remit was to recommend a new system of funding long-term care that would be seen to be fair. The commission spent a year taking evidence from different groups. It asked for written evidence and received 1,600 letters — many of them handwritten — from older people or their relatives, expressing a sense of resentment and betrayal from the current system. The report was published in 1999 and the Government took a long time to respond to it.

There were two main elements to the funding recommendations. First, after considering various types of funding, including private insurance and social insurance, the commission recommended that long-term care should continue to be paid for out of general taxation. The reasons were that taxation is progressive, pensioners pay tax if they earn enough, and as it comes out of general Government income, flexibility is built in. For example, if a drug became available that was effective against Alzheimer's disease, money could be moved to increase the drug budget and reduce the long-term-care budget.

The other question was: what should be paid for? The Royal Commission examined long-term care and decided that it could be divided into three elements. The first element was accommodation — the roof over your head: everyone has to pay for that. There is no reason why those receiving long-term care should not continue to pay for accommodation, and if that meant that they had to sell their homes to pay for it, that was the same as anyone moving home, where they sell their previous home and they put the money into the new one.

The second element was ordinary living costs, such as food and clothing — the items that everyone has to pay for. The Royal Commission recommended that people requiring long-term care should continue to pay for those items.

The third element was the additional care that people who are dependent or disabled need to look after themselves — in other words, the requirement for long-term care as opposed to continuing to live independently at home. The Royal Commission recommended that that should be paid for out of taxation. The accommodation and the living costs should be paid for by the individuals, with a means test being applied as before, and the personal care costs ought to be paid for by the state.

The commission felt that the state ought to pay for personal care because when one considers the need for long-term care, it is not an inevitable consequence of growing old. Long-term care is required because of the effects of a disease or a combination of diseases. Those diseases attack people at random. About 20% to 25% of people aged 65 and over require long-term care, but it is totally by chance whether any individual is within that 25%, or in the 75% who do not need it. It is a considerable risk, but one that should be insured against. The commission felt that it was the type of risk that the community as a whole ought to take on board. The main recommendation of the Royal Commission was, therefore, that the personal care element of long-term care should be funded, after assessment, to ensure that the person needed that type of care, and that accommodation and living expenses should continue to be paid for by the individual.

The total cost for that arrangement for the UK as a whole at that time was around £1.1 billion, which is a considerable sum of money. However, it is clearly affordable. At the last Budget, the Chancellor of the Exchequer had £10 billion to give away. He was supposed to have had a war chest of £17 billion at the last election. Therefore, it is purely a political question as to whether it should be spent on this issue or on something else.

I am not opposed to the provision of free nursing care, which is being advocated in the Bill. However, I believe that that system is both unworkable and unfair. It is unworkable because someone has to come up with a definition of nursing care and a definition of what is non-nursing personal care. That is a difficult thing to do. There are many types of personal care that nurses provide that can also be provided by care assistants. The definition that has been offered is that nursing care is care that is given by a registered nurse, or under the supervision of, or delegated by, a registered nurse. In the case of a care assistant who provides care in a nursing home where a registered nurse is employed, that care would be free of charge; but the same type of care provided by a care assistant in a residential home or in the person's own home would have to be paid for. That seems to be a totally unworkable definition.

The second reason for my opposition to the funding of nursing care rather than personal care is its unfairness. It depends on the disability whether or not one receives free care. An old person who has cancer or a serious heart disease will usually need treatment from the Health Service and will often need hospital treatment, which will be free. An old person with Alzheimer's disease will not usually need hospital treatment, and only in the most advanced stages will he or she need a registered nurse. However, people who have Alzheimer's disease require a considerable amount of care and help with dressing, feeding, bathing, mobility and orientation. Yet Alzheimer's sufferers have to pay for that care. Cancer patients do not. That type of diagnosis-related rationale is unfair.

I also believe that free nursing care would introduce a perverse incentive into the system, in that nursing homes may be subsidised. Nursing homes by definition must have registered nurses on their staff, whereas residential homes do not. That may mean that nursing homes will be cheaper than residential homes and, inevitably, that will lead to a tendency for those who are paying the bills to ask people to go into nursing homes. The principle of long-term care is that people are cared for in the least-dependent environment — at home if possible. If care cannot be provided at home, it should be provided in the least-dependent institution. We are trying to promote as much independence as possible. If the nursing home sector — the most-dependent sector — becomes cheaper, that situation has the potential to reverse the whole policy.

I ask the Assembly and the Executive to re-examine the matter, and to consider the possibility of introducing free personal care for elderly people, as was recommended in the Royal Commission report and as is being introduced in Scotland. The strange situation has arisen that Scotland is a more favourable and fairer place than England for those elderly people who are unfortunate enough to need long-term care. It is to be hoped that Scotland does not end up being a fairer place than Northern Ireland.

The Deputy Chairperson: Thank you for your clear submission, Prof Stout. Members may now ask questions.

Rev Robert Coulter In relation to personal care being funded, what would be the estimated cost to the public purse? Would that cost rise steeply as the elderly population continues to grow? Are there better ways of using resources to help the elderly?

Prof Stout: I do not know the cost for Northern Ireland. The figure for the UK in 1995 was £1 billion. That is the total cost, not the net cost. There are savings to be made from existing systems that will affect that figure.

The Royal Commission on Long Term Care for the Elderly considered carefully the question of a rise in the cost of personal care as the number of elderly people is predicted to increase. The commission was asked to predict what was likely to happen over the next 50 years, which is a long time during which all sorts of things can happen.

The number of elderly people is set to increase, because everybody who is alive today will be elderly in 50 years' time. Two factors are unknown, one of which is the future health of elderly people. Will the need for long-term care decrease as the health of elderly people improves over that period of time? The trend so far suggests that that would be the case. There will not be more elderly disabled people. What seems to be happening as the population grows older is that the onset of disability is postponed, although that trend is not quite confirmed.

The other unknown factor is the extent of informal care given by unpaid relatives and friends who have no professional training. A huge amount of that informal care is currently given. There are changes in society that will militate against that situation, such as both partners in a marriage being out at work, marriages breaking down and factors of mobility and so on. All these factors seem to be putting pressure on the provision of informal care. However, we do not know what will happen in the future. The effect of these pressures has been felt over the past few decades, yet informal care is a strong element in the care of elderly people. The Royal Commission estimated that if the Government had to take over the cost of informal care, it would amount to £30 billion. Those are unknown factors. However, if we assume that present trends will continue, the cost of providing long-term care as a proportion of gross domestic product will not change over the next 50 years. The Chancellor estimates that the economy will grow at a rate of 2.25% each year — about the same rate as the increase in the number of elderly people. Although it is said that £1.5 billion will increase to £6 billion in so many years' time, that is purely inflationary, and as a proportion of the economy of the country does not seem to be changing.

The third question concerned how money could be put to better use. It is a matter of opinion as to what is best use. There is no doubt that many other areas require money, but it is a question of where priorities are placed.

Alan Milburn's explanation for funding only nursing care and not personal care is that additional money was used for other services, which are known as "intermediate" care in England. Intermediate care is a requirement in England, because in the past couple of decades rehabilitation services for elderly people have been virtually removed from hospitals. Fortunately, that has not happened in Northern Ireland, so there is less need for intermediate care here.

One argument is that much money would be spent for the same care that exists at present. My answer to that is that correcting an injustice is a good use of money.

Ms McWilliams: Thank you for your excellent analysis, with which I agree. Could you elaborate on the experience in England, which I am sure you are familiar with, and on the point that this scheme might prove

unworkable? It will help us to anticipate problems, should this legislation proceed.

How can nursing care be tested separately from personal care? The Committee received evidence last week from departmental officials, who informed us that they have a tool that does the testing, and which is being piloted at the moment. It will be put out for consultation at a later stage. Have you been involved in the development of this tool to test nursing care, and what is your analysis of it?

Prof Stout: I have not been involved. I was invited by the chief nursing officer to be part of a working group that was planning to develop a tool, but I informed her that, in principle, I was not enthusiastic about that plan. So I have not been involved and I am not familiar with the tool. However, I would be interested to see the results of the pilot studies. If the tool works, I would be delighted, but I believe — and that belief is shared by the Royal College of Nursing — that it would be extremely difficult to decide what is nursing care and what is not nursing care.

There used to be an old debate — you may be familiar with it — about what a social bath is and what a health bath is. We might be asking the same type of question when trying to work out what is nursing care and what is not nursing care. Hospital nurses, for example, give total care. It is a highly technical type of care, but it is also personal care. The Royal Commission defined personal care as care that involves touching people — intimate care. However, much of that can be done by staff who are not registered nurses. It would also depend on whether a nurse is available.

I believe that we should try to keep elderly people in their own homes as much as possible, which would involve domiciliary care packages, most of which could be given by care assistants. Currently a charge is made only in certain local authorities in England, so charges can be made.

There are certain tasks that are clearly defined as nursing care — for example, management of intravenous fluids and naso-gastric tubes, administering injections and so forth. However, there are some tasks that any caring person could do, which are clearly not nursing tasks. There is a large group in the middle that would be difficult to define, and I can see appeals and complaints arising out of attempts to differentiate between them.

I have heard only indirectly what is happening in England. I am aware through the general press and the medical press that when free nursing care became available, nursing homes simply increased their fees, taking the original fees plus the free nursing care.

The Government are trying to come up with legislation to stop that. Perhaps the delegation appearing after me from Age Concern might have more information on what is happening in England, but the general message that I receive from colleagues in England is that the system is proving difficult to work.

Mr J Kelly: Thank you for your lucid presentation. I agree that people born in the welfare state expected that that would last from the cradle to the grave. The sense of betrayal arising from that is potent. Why were you opposed to becoming involved in the pilot scheme?

Prof Stout: Having spent an intensive year with the Royal Commission and having discussed all these matters in great detail, I feel strongly that the introduction of a partial system that funds only nursing care and not personal care is not the correct path to take. I wanted to be free to speak openly about that issue.

Mr J Kelly: What is your response to the argument that free personal care for all, regardless of means, would transfer income to the better-off at the expense of the more needy? Is the approach socially equitable?

Prof Stout: I have several answers to that question. First, any universal benefit will benefit the well-off and the needy. That applies to healthcare, education and other areas.

Secondly, the current upper limit of the means test is £18,000, which recently increased from £16,000. That covers total assets, including the value of a home. Many people have assets of £18,000 and more. The Royal Commission report contains a table that indicates the levels of income of elderly people who could not be described by any stretch of the imagination as being wealthy. People go over a cliff at £18,000. If they have £17,999, they pay a relatively small amount; however, if they have £18,001, they pay the whole lot — about £400 a week. Although there may be some wealthy people among those, many people who are by no means wealthy will also be included.

Thirdly, the payment of benefits is only one part of the equation, the other part of which is tax. Wealthier people pay more tax. The tax system could be altered in ways that would claw back that amount of money if necessary, so one would not have to rely on a means test with all its inherent problems. Although there is some truth in that assertion, it is not a powerful argument.

Mrs Courtney: Prof Stout has already answered my question in reply to Monica McWilliams's question, when he said that medical evidence from England had given him the impression that nursing homes might inflate their fees and that consequently a resident would be no better off. I was going to ask if that would be a possibility — whether what is happening in England could also happen here?

Prof Stout: I suspect that it could. There is no question that the nursing home sector is currently under considerable financial pressure. A serious concern is that nursing homes are closing at a time when the need for them is increasing. We cannot be critical of nursing homes for looking for extra incomes; some of them are in serious financial difficulties. However, that is not what the system was intended to do.

Ms Ramsey: Your presentation has made the Bill easier to understand. As members of the Committee, we carry

out inquiries into legislation, and we take evidence from people with an interest so that the Committee can come to a decision whether it supports, rejects or possibly would like to amend the legislation through the Assembly.

I have several concerns, some of which you have outlined. Last week I asked the Department for its definition of nursing and personal care. In my own mind, I could argue that what is seen as personal care is actually nursing care.

The Committee is being told that the Bill is intended to introduce free nursing care, while the working group that you have mentioned is considering the issue of personal care. It is due to report on that in June 2002. In the light of your concerns, would it be right to go ahead with the Bill while waiting for the recommendations of that report? Last week the Department told the Committee that at present 2,000 people pay for their nursing care. Although that appears to be unfair to some, it is also unfair to others.

Although the Bill does not go far enough, would it not be easier to implement it and then build on it? Parties are represented on the Executive. The Assembly can, therefore, build a campaign to ensure that the Executive provide money to introduce free personal care as well as free nursing care. I am concerned that what will be seen as an injustice to some will also affect others. What should the Committee do — cut off its nose to spite its face?

Prof Stout: The working group that you have just mentioned, which is examining personal care, is not the one that I referred to earlier. I was referring to the working group that was set up by the chief nursing officer to consider the definition of nursing care. I am aware of the other working group, but I am not a member of it and have no knowledge of its activities.

You have made a valid point. There is no question that the introduction of free nursing care will improve the present situation. At present there is an anomaly: nursing care provided in a hospital is free; nursing care provided in people's homes by community nurses is free; but nursing care provided in nursing homes must be paid for. The Bill will correct that anomaly, and that will be an improvement. To some extent, it is a matter of tactics.

However, I am concerned that if the Bill were passed, pressure might be taken off the Department. It might think that because it has dealt with the problem of long-term care it does not, therefore, have to address it again. It takes some time for legislation to be developed and progressed. There might be higher priorities in legislation. At present, many consultation documents are being circulated within health and social services that will require action. Passing the Bill, and hoping that personal care will be dealt with later, could mean that it is never dealt with. However, the Committee is better able to judge that matter than I am.

The Deputy Chairperson: That concludes the questions. Thank you for your helpful submission.

**NORTHERN IRELAND
ASSEMBLY**

**COMMITTEE FOR
REGIONAL DEVELOPMENT**

Thursday 18 April 2002

**RAILWAY SAFETY BILL
(NIA 3/01)**

Members present:

Mr A Maginness (Chairperson)
Mr McFarland (Deputy Chairperson)
Mr Byrne
Mr R Hutchinson
Mr Hay
Mr M Robinson
Mr Savage

Witnesses:

Mr Rick Eagar) Department for Regional Development
) / Arthur D Little Consultants

The Chairperson: I am pleased to welcome Mr Rick Eagar, a director at Arthur D Little Consultants. Mr Eagar was involved in compiling Arthur D Little's report on railway safety in Northern Ireland in 2000.

Mr Eagar: It is a pleasure to give evidence on an important piece of legislation governing rail safety in Northern Ireland. It may be useful to say a few words about my background. I have 22 years' industrial experience, 12 of them being spent in safety and risk-management work with Arthur D Little, an international technology and management consultancy. Well over half of my work is in the railway industry, but I also work on safety in such areas as the oil, gas, nuclear and chemical industries.

I also represent the expertise of my company. About half of its work is on rail safety and risk in the rail sector — not just in the UK but abroad, particularly in Italy, Switzerland and Hong Kong. The company worked on the prototype safety case in Great Britain in the early 1990s.

Since 1999 the company has advised Northern Ireland Railways (NIR) and the Northern Ireland Railways Transport Holding Company on safety issues. That began with the strategic safety review of NIR in 1999, which examined railway safety from top to bottom and resulted in the improvement programme now being implemented.

One of the 120 recommendations in that report was that, in the light of what we felt was a sparse regulatory framework for rail safety in Northern Ireland, NIR should lobby

for more rail-specific safety legislation. The recommendation also suggested that, in the meantime, NIR should comply with principles of rail safety legislation developed in Great Britain in so far as those are applicable, given the scale and complexity of Northern Ireland's railway network. We believed that it was important, since it would provide the necessary backbone to underpin the safety improvement efforts of the railway. That is where legislation was mentioned in the report.

Assuming that implementation is timely and appropriate, we consider that the draft Bill, together with its secondary legislation, will have a beneficial and positive effect on safety. We feel that it will address the concern raised in the original report.

The safety-case approach was highlighted in the minutes of the previous evidence session. Fundamentally, it requires the duty-holder to conduct a systematic identification and assessment of safety risks and develop suitable control measures to address them. That assessment is documented, and that document is used as a means to provide acceptance or certification from the regulator. It is also used as a basis against which compliance can be audited.

I have four points to make about the safety-case approach's appropriateness for Northern Ireland Railways. Firstly, as has been said, safety cases are used across all the high-hazard industries, such as the railways, offshore oil and gas facilities, the chemicals industry and nuclear installations. That is part of a coherent "permissioning" regime operated for health and safety reasons in the UK. It is important to realise that that is based on the fundamental philosophy that safety is managed best through proactive measures. For example, safety is best managed if companies anticipate possible risks instead of merely complying with rules and legislation. In that sense, we can conclude that, if railways are considered a high-hazard industry — which I feel is a reasonable assumption — it is consistent to use a safety-case approach for them based on that used in other industries.

The second point relates to the direction in which legislation is moving in the European Union. While my understanding is that the interoperability Directives will not apply to Northern Ireland, it would be worthwhile considering the draft European railway safety Directive and its implications for the countries to which it will apply. The legislation will require countries to have a national railway safety authority. It will require railways to submit annual safety reports, and the authority will provide certification to those companies on that basis. In addition, the legislation is considering common safety methodologies and providing guidance on what those should include. The current guidance specifically includes risk management and the use of a risk-based system. It also includes risk-based targets that will require railway companies to conduct risk assessments. For the companies to secure certification, they will be required to demonstrate that they have assessed risks adequately and have the nece-

ssary controls in place. Although those measures may not be called a safety case, they are the fundamentals of one.

I shall give some examples. In Italy, there is already a system whereby long-term certification is provided on the basis of a satisfactory demonstration that risks have been assessed and that controls are in place. Again, that is analogous to the safety-case approach. As you know, the proposals in the Republic of Ireland are also to adopt a safety-case approach, although in that case with a railway safety authority. That would be more appropriate considering the scale of its railways. My point is that the safety-case approach is not unique to Great Britain; it is increasingly being used abroad.

Thirdly, the point was made that the safety-case approach is only relevant if you have a fragmented railway, which is fortunately not the case in Northern Ireland. That is not true. To some extent the railway safety-case regulations became associated with fragmentation, since they were introduced at the time of privatisation and were prompted by it. However — and this is completely hypothetical — even if that fragmentation had not taken place, we should have seen something similar to it in the railways anyway, for it is consistent with “permissioning” regimes in other industries.

My fourth point is that, like everything else, a safety-case approach is not a panacea. It has drawbacks as well as advantages. As with any new piece of legislation, there have been problems over the years with safety cases. In particular, there was much over-quantification of risk in the early stages, which led to a spurious complexity without any real meaning. To a degree there was a problem with the safety case becoming a paper exercise and not really representing what happened in the railways.

The two advantages we now have in Northern Ireland are that we can learn from those lessons and that Northern Ireland Railways is already doing virtually everything which would be required by a safety case. In that respect we are not imposing anything completely new on it. Those were the main points I wished to make by way of introduction.

Mr R Hutchinson: Thank you for coming. My basic question is a little tongue-in-cheek — does it work? When I look at railways in the rest of the United Kingdom, I need proof that their system is working. I cannot see that happening, for at the moment it is horrendous there.

Mr Eagar: The evidence we have seen is that it works. There is a — probably incorrect — perception that railway safety has deteriorated significantly in Great Britain over the years. While I am the first person to agree that you can prove anything with statistics, the figures do not bear that out. Let us compare the most basic measure — fatalities per year. In the early 1990s, we were having 80 to 90 fatalities on Britain’s railways each year. Even with the recent tragic accidents, that figure is lower than it was. It is currently around 40, and it was 65 in 1999-2000.

Even with a 50% increase in traffic and the additional complications caused by the fragmentation of the railways, the figure is lower. Most people would accept that fragmentation has made railway safety more complicated to manage.

Mr R Hutchinson: Are you saying that some train companies are more compliant with safety standards than others?

Mr Eagar: Inevitably some companies perform better than others.

Mr McFarland: Your points were in reply to Mr Rayner’s evidence. He focused on the fact that the safety-case system was not used in mainland Europe or the Republic, but you have said that it would be introduced in both.

The railway here is small, and the logic for introducing this legislation is that at some stage in the future you might wish to sell it. If that happens, systems will have to be in place to ensure that the contractors do what they are told to do. At present, if in-house contractors are employed, the legislation, in theory, is not required because the contractors belong to you. If it is decided not to sell the railways but to contract out work, what would be wrong with having a contract that states that the contractor must maintain the railway for the next five years? That would set out the parameters within which they had to operate and keep some control over the subcontracting. Control of subcontracting, or lack of it, seems to have caused the problems in England.

Mr Rayner said that this has become a beanfeast for lawyers. The evidence of safety cases is that, if it does go wrong, lots of lawyers make lots of money. Why should we go in this direction, given that the rail system is small and that, at the moment, I think, there are no plans to sell it?

Mr Eagar: We must distinguish between a contractor safety case and a railway safety case. The proposed legislation is concerned with the requirement on the duty holder, Northern Ireland Railways (NIR), to prepare and submit a safety case for all its operations. The GB railway safety-case regulations do not say anything specifically about the way in which contractors must be managed. They are concerned only with the duty holder. NIR will have its own safety management system that will include appropriate measures for managing contractor safety, and there are many different approaches to that. If, like NIR, a company is running a risk-based safety management system, the most logical approach to take to managing contractor safety is to ask the contractor to identify the risks associated with his activities and to satisfy you, as the client and the contract holder, that it has the right controls in place, such as safe systems of work, method statements and so on. However, that has nothing to do with the railway safety-case regulations.

It is fair to say that the GB situation is a beanfeast for lawyers. That would not be the case here because there

is not the same split of responsibilities, at least with the infrastructure controller and the operating and rolling stock companies et cetera. Clearly there is an interface if you contract out, but it is a matter of having suitable and appropriate measures to control safety across it.

Mr McFarland: A holding company in two parts runs this, and the job of Translink and NIR is to manage it, which is what we are talking about here. Why can they not just manage it without having an entire Bill? Parts of the Safety Bill are important, but why can the company not just get on and manage — which is what it is paid to do — without all these regulations? I could understand it if the railway was large and split up, but what is the imperative behind pushing this legislation rather than saying to this small railway company: “Get on and manage it”?

Mr Eagar: One imperative is to bring Northern Ireland’s railway legislation into line with current legislation elsewhere, or legislation that will soon exist if it does not already. It is a matter of harmonisation. Also, by introducing any legislation, essentially you are saying that you want a higher degree of assurance that things are going to be done correctly — that is why there is any legislation, and safety-case legislation is just part of that. It is not going to impose a huge complex burden. Indeed, the secret of ensuring that it works and is effective is that it should not be overly complex but fit for the purpose. To reflect the scale of the railway, it should also be relatively simple.

Mr Hay: Policing this arose at our earlier meetings. We know that we can have a good piece of legislation in place, but, as in England, there can be a problem with policing it. What do you feel about that?

Mr Eagar: By policing do you mean the role of an authority such as HMRI (Her Majesty’s Railway Inspectorate) ?

Mr Hay: Yes, and the role of the Department. Where does all that fit in with what we are trying to do?

Mr Eagar: There is an additional role here, which is an implication of wanting more assurance. The set-up envisaged is to use HMRI to provide the specialist expertise to do that and the manpower to police it. I know that there are, and have been, problems with resources for HMRI, but I have also seen in the minutes of the previous evidence some of the measures that the Department is trying to introduce through contract with HMRI to make sure that this does not adversely affect the system altogether. Given the scale of the railway here, a new authority would be inappropriate — that would be overkill, and so I have some sympathy for the proposed solution.

Mr Byrne: With our small railway system there has been a consistent pattern to the fatalities over the last 10

or 15 years. Most seem to result from people crossing or trespassing on the lines at level crossings. Will the Bill only address the resource-management system for ensuring better safety, or will it address the resource implications also?

Mr Eagar: The safety case part of the Bill could have an impact on resources, because part of the safety case will include details on the resources that have been provided by NIR. However, that would be an indirect impact. Level-crossing safety is a key problem, and lots of work is being done on it. Although it will include level-crossing safety, the safety case will be general, covering all aspects. I am not sure whether that answers the question. The Bill will not impose resource requirements on NIR directly.

Mr Byrne: Will the Bill specify safety standards which will mean that resources will have to be put into signalling or modern level crossing barriers, for example?

Mr Eagar: The safety case will include a description of the safety standards that the railway complies with, and by accepting that safety case, one accepts that those standards are correct. In that sense, the Bill will cover standards.

Mr Savage: What is the lifespan of a locomotive, and is that gauged it by the hours it has operated or its age?

Mr Eagar: I am not an expert on rolling stock, but the lifespan of a piece of rolling stock is approximately 30 years. However, that is flexible and can be extended considerably by refurbishment, for example. It is judged to be obsolete when its structural integrity or crashworthiness begins to fail or when it no longer complies with accepted international standards.

Mr Savage: In other words, the better a locomotive is looked after, the longer it will last.

Mr Eagar: Yes. That is true of anything.

The Chairperson: It has been said that the Bill is piece of enabling, rather than prescriptive, legislation. Will you comment on that?

Mr Eagar: I cannot comment on that, because I am not qualified to give opinions on legal matters. As a safety adviser to the railway, my only concern is that any process that is adopted should not cause undue delay. If the process can introduce secondary legislation rapidly, it will be satisfactory.

The Chairperson: There are two separate approaches. However, you are happy if the safety matters are expedited?

Mr Eagar: Yes.

The Chairperson: There are no more questions. Thank you, Mr Eagar.

**NORTHERN IRELAND
ASSEMBLY**

**COMMITTEE FOR
REGIONAL DEVELOPMENT**

Wednesday 24 April 2002

**RAILWAY SAFETY BILL
(NIA 3/01)**

Members present:

Mr A Maginness (Chairperson)
Mr Byrne
Mr Bradley
Mr Ervine
Mr R Hutchinson
Mr Hay
Mr McNamee
Mr Savage

Witness:

Mr G McKenna) Department for Regional
) Development

The Chairperson: I welcome Mr McKenna from the Department for Regional Development.

The Railway Safety Bill was introduced to the Assembly on 18 February 2002, and the Committee Stage commenced on 27 February 2002. The Committee first received briefing from departmental officials on the proposed Bill on 9 May 2001. Further discussion took place on 5 December 2001, following completion of the public consultation process. During the Committee Stage, evidence was taken from the main interested parties: Translink; Peter Rayner; the Railway Preservation Society of Ireland; and the Department for Regional Development. Evidence was also taken from an independent railway safety expert, Mr Rick Eager, from AD Little Consultants.

The Committee's approach has been thorough, and the key issues have been discussed at length. I do not wish to revisit those issues; however, a key point was whether the Bill should be prescriptive and set out the main provisions, or take the form of enabling legislation, with the main provisions being introduced through secondary legislation. Clearly there are arguments for and against both approaches. Whatever approach is used, the overriding consideration is the swift introduction of effective railway safety guidelines and standards. During the debate on the Second Stage of the Bill on 26 February 2002 the Minister stated:

"Most subordinate legislation will follow almost immediately, subject to public consultation and consultation with the Assembly Committee". [*Official Report, Vol 14, No 10, p430*].

In the same paragraph of the Official Report he stated:

"The railway (safety case) Regulations will follow as soon as possible, allowing Northern Ireland Railways time to finalise its safety case and have it thoroughly examined". [*Official Report, Vol 14, No 10, p430*].

We will now move to a formal clause-by-clause consideration of the Railway Safety Bill. Officials from the Department for Regional Development are present, and may be called to answer Members' questions.

Clause 1 (Safety of railways)

The Chairperson: This clause provides for the Department for Regional Development to make Regulations in respect of railway safety. The Department intends to introduce such Regulations as soon as possible. However, this will depend on Northern Ireland Railways giving priority to the preparation of a safety case priority. Translink, in its evidence, stated that it wished to see the speedy introduction of the provision.

Question, That the Committee is content with the clause, put and agreed to.

Clause 2 (Approval of railway works, plant and equipment)

The Chairperson: Clause 2 provides the Department with power to make Regulations, giving it a veto over certain types of railway development. Prior departmental approval will be required before Northern Ireland Railways brings works, plant or equipment, including rolling stock, into use.

Mr Savage: When railway tracks are being repaired it is important that the rolling stock being used does not come into contact with moving trains on main lines. Does the Bill cover such a situation?

The Chairperson: Would you advise the Committee, Mr McKenna?

Mr McKenna: Yes. Mr Savage's point is covered in several ways. He is possibly referring to the fatal accident that took place on the railway recently. Railway (safety case) Regulations will require Northern Ireland Railways to satisfy itself that any contractor carrying out work on the railway has made proper arrangements for safe operations and systems of work.

I will not comment on the accident at Bangor as it is under investigation by the Health and Safety Executive because of non-compliance with safe systems of work. However, where rolling stock is on the track, the contractor's safety arrangements must clearly prevent such incidents from happening.

Question, That the Committee is content with the clause, put and agreed to.

Clause 3 (Accidents, etc)

The Chairperson: This clause gives the Department power to make regulations requiring and governing the reporting to it of certain accidents or situations involving risk of accident. Northern Ireland Railways will be required to report accidents formally to the Department.

Question, That the Committee is content with the clause, *put and agreed to.*

Clause 4 (Directions limiting speeds and loads)

The Chairperson: This clause empowers the Department to give direction to a railway operator imposing maximum speeds and weights. There is currently no power to give directions limiting speed and loads.

Mr Byrne: Are there limits or controls on voluntary societies trying to get steam trains reactivated, given that they charge money and provide tourist expeditions? There is a question about liability and insurance.

Mr McKenna: The provision is primarily aimed at heritage railways. An operating condition of such railways would be that they operate within constraints on the weight of the train and the speed at which it can travel. A railway line opened recently under licence at Bushmills is limited to carrying trains that weigh less than six tonnes and travel no faster than 25 mph. That takes into account their level of operation.

Until now there have been no Regulations allowing the Department to make similar provisions for Northern Ireland Railways. However, for the most part, we would expect Northern Ireland Railways to deal with this aspect under its operating requirements for speed limits on lines where work is being carried out or where they require reduced speed. We expect these restrictions to be carried out operationally, but the Department will have the power, if necessary, to give similar directions to Northern Ireland Railways.

Question, That the Committee is content with the clause, *put and agreed to.*

Clause 5 (Signs and barriers at private crossings)

The Chairperson: This clause, together with schedule 1, makes provision for the placing of signs and barriers on or near private roads or paths that cross a railway. Translink was keen to see this provision included as there is evidence that most railway accidents are connected with railway crossings. There is obviously some concern about having to place a sign on an individual's private property, but the appropriate siting of signs may be of greater importance in the circumstances.

Mr Bradley: Where a sign instructs a person driving a long vehicle or agricultural machinery to telephone ahead when crossing a railway line, will that requirement apply in all cases? Will those who do not do so be liable to prosecution?

Mr McKenna: Secondary Regulations will be made to prescribe the sign to be used and the wording on the sign. Much of the work will be done in consultation with Northern Ireland Railways. Local by-laws already require people using many of the crossings referred to by Mr Bradley to phone ahead when using them. It is a technical requirement, and if it were not complied with, even though the individual were to cross successfully, he or she would technically be liable to prosecution. Northern Ireland Railways would not wish to take such action unless it were apparent that, by not phoning ahead, the individual had posed a risk to himself or to train passengers who would otherwise be using the crossing. Theoretically, prosecutions could be considered, because the individuals would not have complied with the requirement.

The Chairperson: Are you referring to schedule 1, paragraph 4(1)?

Mr McKenna: Yes. If the requirement to phone ahead were necessary, the sign may state: "People wishing to use the crossing should use the telephone to ensure that it is clear to do so". By not complying with that sign, people would be effectively committing an offence under the Bill.

Mr Byrne: There has been concern about this aspect in the past. I am not technically competent to proof-read or qualitatively assess the paragraph. Has the point been duly considered?

Mr McKenna: Yes. The powers will not apply until secondary Regulations are made: a draft already exists and is being considered by the departmental solicitors and will be forwarded to the Committee for examination before it becomes law.

The Chairperson: The Committee will be able to consider the issue in more detail then.

Mr Savage: Mr Bradley has raised a very important point. An accident occurred in my constituency where a farmer, who was spreading slurry, crossed a railway line. It was a very serious accident and pieces of the tractor were never found. I do not know whether the tractor stalled or the driver panicked when he saw the train coming as he was crossing. Clear indications are needed on crossings so that such accidents do not happen again. Prevention is always better than cure. I hope that this point is well covered in schedule 1, paragraph 4.

The Chairperson: The paragraph relates to signs and barriers at private crossings, not necessarily the public highway. Are there similar provisions for public crossings?

Mr McKenna: Yes. Regulations already govern public crossings. Each level crossing has its own set of Regulations, which make detailed provision about how the railway is to be operated, including how the barriers are to be operated and the action to be taken by people approaching the crossing. Normally, level crossings are open or closed, depending on whether a train is passing.

The difficulty with private crossings is that they are operated by individuals wishing to cross the lines. Normally, such crossings are closed and are only opened as people need to use them; there are no set times. It is imperative that individuals wishing to use these crossings ensure that it is safe to do so. The signs will require them to do exactly that.

Northern Ireland Railways operates the publicly operated crossings, so when a train is coming, protective mechanisms will always be in place.

Mr Bradley: Modern technology has enabled there to be a facility in every train station to tell people when the next train is due. Is that technology too expensive to install at crossings?

Mr McKenna: Regulations governing a level crossing do not currently require that provision. The requirement is that certain protection systems are in place at level crossings.

Mr Bradley: The technology would not be too expensive to install.

The Chairperson: Perhaps the Department would take the suggestion on board?

Mr McKenna: The Department will contact Northern Ireland Railways and advise them that the Committee considers the matter to be significant.

Mr Ervine: How many private crossings are there?

Mr McKenna: There are well over 400 crossings. I do not have an exact figure, but I can arrange to have it provided to the Committee. The crossings are primarily rural and used for agriculture-related activity. However, several crossings are on land close to private dwellings, which may have been farmhouses once, but because of agricultural practice are no longer operated as such. However, people who live and work on such premises regularly use the crossings.

Mr Savage: The problem arises when people get into the habit of using crossings routinely. They often forget about safety.

Mr Ervine: Are there any statistics on accidents or near misses at private crossings?

Mr McKenna: We have figures for the railway in general. We could easily disaggregate those figures to find out which accidents were at private crossings.

Such accidents tend to be serious and high profile. Recently, a contractor was seriously injured on the Antrim to Knockmore line because he was not expecting a

train to be running on the track. Services were technically reduced; however, the contractor was hit by a ballast train as he drove a slurry tanker across the line. He had not checked with Northern Ireland Railways because he understood that there would not be a train on the line. However, although there was no scheduled service, a Northern Ireland Railways operational train hit him. It is imperative that people check what is happening on the line when they use the crossings. Accidents do not happen often, but they are serious when they do.

Mr Savage: That happened in Aghagallon.

Mr McKenna: That is correct.

Question, That the Committee is content with the clause, put and agreed to.

Clause 6 (Interpretation)

The Chairperson: This clause provides for definitions of words used in the in the Bill, such as Department, operator and railway. It is a necessary part of any Bill.

Question, That the Committee is content with the clause, put and agreed to.

Clause 7 (Consequential amendments and repeals)

The Chairperson: This clause provides for amendments to the Regulation of Railways Act 1871 and the repeal of legislation listed under schedule 2.

Question, That the Committee is content with the clause, put and agreed to.

Clause 8 (Commencement)

The Chairperson: This clause provides for most of the Bill to come into operation two months after the Bill receives Royal Assent. As mentioned earlier, safety case Regulations may take slightly longer. However, in the debate on the Second Stage of the Bill the Minister stated that the Department will continue to urge Northern Ireland Railways to complete that work as quickly as possible.

Question, That the Committee is content with the clause, put and agreed to.

Clause 9 agreed to.

Schedules 1 and 2 agreed to.

Long title agreed to.

The Chairperson: I thank the Committee and Mr McKenna for their contributions.

**NORTHERN IRELAND
ASSEMBLY**

**COMMITTEE FOR HEALTH,
SOCIAL SERVICES
AND PUBLIC SAFETY**

Wednesday 24 April 2002

**HEALTH AND PERSONAL SOCIAL
SERVICES BILL
(NIA BILL 6/01)**

Members present:

Mr Gallagher (Deputy Chairperson)
Ms Armitage
Mr Berry
Ms Ramsey
Mr Hamilton

Witnesses:

Ms P Blaney) Northern Ireland Practice and
Ms M Griffiths) Education Council (NIPEC)

The Deputy Chairperson: I should like to welcome Ms Paddie Blaney and Ms Maureen Griffiths from the Northern Ireland Practice and Education Council (NIPEC). Perhaps you will start with a short presentation, after which we shall proceed to questions.

Ms Griffiths: The main role and function of the NIPEC is to support nurses, midwives and health visitors in their education and practice. Its ultimate aim is to provide better patient care. Through supporting the profession it provides better care for patients, families and communities. Appointments to the council were made through an open selection process. I applied and was appointed as chairperson. Afterwards there was an open selection process to appoint members of the council. Although we did not state in our advertisements that we wished to have a midwife or health visitor, we took care to satisfy ourselves that each sector of practice was represented in some way. We were looking for a mix — 60% professional and 40% lay people — and we have been able to achieve that balance in the applications which we have received. We are happy to have a strong council. Our approach has been to retain one or two places so that we can identify any gaps which need filling in NIPEC's early months.

Ms Blaney: Thank you for the opportunity to speak to the Committee. I have a foot in both camps, as I am still a nursing officer in the Department, and next week I

become chief executive designate of the shadow NIPEC, which has the status of an advisory body.

The role and aim of the NIPEC have come together through three main factors. The first factor was that, about four and a half years ago, we reviewed legislation regulating nurses, midwives and health visitors across the UK. I know about it because it was largely part of my remit; it achieved final fruition on 1 April 2002. We have established a UK-wide regulatory body for nurses and midwives which registers them and ensures that good conduct is maintained. The legislation meant that we lost the national board for Northern Ireland — which was largely an education quality-assurance body — and it was replaced by the Nursing and Midwifery Council (NMC).

The second main factor was devolution. It was happening in Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland, and all those countries were examining their devolved health and education systems to find out what they required to support the professions. Each country has gone for a similar body, though ours is slightly broader functionally.

The third area of dynamism at the time was clinical and social care governance, concerned with quality, better partnerships, more accountability and the importance of professionals remaining up to date and safe to practise. Along with the development of the An Bord Altranais, our sister regulatory body and national council in the Republic, that gave us an opportunity to examine what we need in Northern Ireland to support the development of nursing and midwifery. We must support that because of the huge changes in roles.

Nurses work in criminal courts, schools and industry. They also work with clients in clinics and on the streets. It was recognised that a body could be established to support the development of nurses and midwives in a more local fashion. That is the historical background and rationale to the establishment of the NIPEC. I am delighted to have been given the role of chief executive designate, but I have yet to take it up full time. When I take up that role, the focus of our work will be on education, practice development and performance.

The difference in our body lies in its broader functions. It is not simply concerned with education; there is much more lay involvement. As Ms Griffiths said, 40% of the council's representatives are lay people, and that will bring a wonderful dynamic to the NIPEC. That is a broad interpretation of our role, and I am happy to take more detailed questions.

Mr Hamilton: Thank you for your presentation. Ms Griffiths said that each sector should be represented in some way. How are midwives represented?

Ms Griffiths: We have appointed a midwife as an educationalist. I am also a midwife, albeit non-practising. Ms Blaney made a point about practising midwives. There is a midwifery focus, and the opportunity existed for

practising midwives to apply in open competition. Although that did not happen on this occasion, I stress that there is no bar to such applications. The same applied to health visitors, among whose number I count myself. There are ways of bringing those perspectives to the work of the council.

Mr Hamilton: Since you wish to see each sector represented, would automatic places for practising midwives and others, rather than nominations from the Department, not be the best way to achieve that?

Ms Griffiths: A great deal of thought went into the matter. What do you mean by nominations from the Department?

Mr Hamilton: The midwives said:

“We are concerned, however, that it is proposed that all nominations to the board should be made by the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety.”

Would you not feel more content that everyone was properly represented if midwives had a right to a place?

Ms Griffiths: As I have explained, appointments were not made through a nomination process but through open competition. The Nolan principles were applied. Since we wished a balance of 60% professionals and 40% lay people on a council of between 10 and 16 members, we could have representatives from mental health, learning disability and all the different specialisations.

On reflection, we did not consider it the best route to take; we felt it would be better to have an open competition and get the best candidates. Thereafter there would be other ways of working through expert panels, so that, if the council had to discuss a midwifery issue, I could have midwifery input. The remit of my other position also covers midwifery. I commission midwifery services, so there will be no ignorance of such issues. The council will have an educationalist with a strong midwifery background, and we shall also be able to draw on experts from the sector. The same will apply to health visiting and learning disability if they are not represented.

Mr Hamilton: Are you saying that the Royal College of Midwives (RCM) was incorrect when it said:

“We are concerned, however, that it is proposed that all nominations to the board should be made by the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety.”?

Ms Blaney: That is expressed incorrectly. There were no direct appointments; an open competition and interviews decided the composition.

Mr Hamilton: That would suggest that we are talking not about what has happened, but about what is proposed.

Ms Blaney: They are incorrect, as I shall try to explain. I believe that the RCM is concerned about nominations at this stage. It is incorrect, since we did not nominate, and neither did the Department. The Department advertised

under the Nolan principles and conducted interviews to determine the body's composition.

Mr Hamilton: You are telling us what happened to put you and the rest there.

Ms Griffiths: No, it was to put the council in place.

Mr Hamilton: Put the council in place?

Ms Blaney: Council members have been interviewed and have only just received letters of appointment. A press release will be made later this week or next. There is a hiatus there to explain this properly. The Minister has already given her approval for the composition of the panel drawn from the nominations. That is probably where the misunderstanding arose.

Mr Hamilton: So there is no proposal that future nominations be made by the Department?

Ms Blaney: Not to the best of my knowledge. Any future council would be recruited under the normal procedures for appointing non-departmental public bodies — open advertisement under the Nolan principles and competition decided on that basis.

Mr Hamilton: The document appears to discuss what will happen in future.

Ms Blaney: We are not aware of that.

Mr Hamilton: I merely wish to be clear about the matter.

The Deputy Chairperson: We can return to it when we go into detail on the clauses with the Department.

Ms Blaney: I am certainly sympathetic to any sector of nursing which feels that the NIPEC should represent it. As chief executive, I am conscious that it is equally important that women with children feel that the NIPEC has something to offer them. It has been a delicate balance, and we shall “suck it and see”. We shall have some latitude on numbers when the NIPEC is established and sets to work. If we see any gap, we can certainly work to fill it.

Ms Armitage: If we are concerned, should this be removed?

Ms Blaney: I am not sure of the status of the paper to which you refer.

The Deputy Chairperson: It is merely a submission on behalf of the Royal College of Midwives. At this stage it is a submission, and we shall go back to the departmental officials. At present we are taking submissions from other interested parties in preparation for the final stages of the Bill.

Ms Blaney: We can correct that and give you a fuller picture.

Ms Ramsey: I am not claiming to speak for the RCM, but, although the advertisement is to be open, the college's concern is with the criteria put in place by the Department, which appoints people to the board. It might be open, and

100,000 people might apply for it, but criteria are in place, and it is a departmental appointment. My concern is to clarify that. Although it is open and accountable, it is still the Department's selection.

Ms Blaney: I cannot talk about the specific process, as I was not involved. However, I can assure you that the criteria were set to find those who would contribute the most personally, as opposed to narrower criteria which would have disadvantaged midwives.

Ms Ramsey: I understand that, but my concern is whether the proper criteria are in place. I take on board the point you made that 40% of the council are lay members; that is commendable. We do not want to set up another quango made up of the great and good. I should like to see a copy of the criteria in place by the time the Minister makes appointments. It is not a question of whether people are applying, but of whether they get the job.

Ms Griffiths:

[Inaudible owing to mobile phone interference.]

Ms Ramsey: I mean in general. As a layperson I can –

[Inaudible owing to mobile phone interference.]

– anybody who is appointed to the council.

Ms Blaney: The application criteria in the advertisement were very open.

The Deputy Chairperson: We can find out more about the matter from the Department.

Ms Ramsey: Few people have any problem with the Bill generally. In your presentation you said that, given the council's work, there may be a need to co-opt others who do not currently sit on it. I sit on several groups which allow the co-opting of those working in the mental health field. Can your organisation solve that problem? Can free places be set aside to co-opt a nominated representative?

Ms Blaney: Places on the council can be set aside. We also propose allowing secondments for particular pieces of work. There will be project work which midwives could, where relevant, feed into. We hope to establish expert panels for education and practice development which will offer different levels of opportunity for active involvement by any practitioner, nurse, midwife or health visitor.

Ms Griffiths: The arrangements are flexible and should be dynamic rather than static.

Mr Berry: Will the Bill's provisions meet all the council's needs? Do you feel that there might be a time when you have to revisit it?

I asked Breedagh Hughes of the Royal College of Nursing (RCN) about the database, and you will be aware of my concerns on the question. We have been told that it is proposed that the NIPEC retain a database on qualifications and training.

Ms Blaney: As a nursing officer, my remit covers areas related to the Bill. The project director whom the Department appointed is here today. We hope that the structure will enable the NIPEC to support the development of nurses proactively to improve care. I cannot see any major loopholes in the Bill; it is enabling legislation, and I am sufficiently comfortable that we shall be able to deal with it.

There are two issues to be clarified about the database. The NMC, which is now the UK-wide regulatory body, will continue to maintain a register. A person's name must appear on that register to allow him/her to practise as a nurse and midwife. That will continue and will be simplified. Nothing will change. The name of every nurse, midwife, health visitor, mental health nurse, learning disability nurse and children's nurse in Northern Ireland must be on that register to allow him/her to practise. It is a public safety and regulatory issue.

There is some confusion about the NIPEC database. Previously, the national board held an indexing database, whereby any student entering training was indexed and tracked through it. At the end of three years' training, the national board told the United Kingdom Central Council for Nursing, Midwifery and Health Visiting (UKCC) that the student could be entered on the register. The NMC has put new arrangements in place to do that electronically together with all the universities in England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland, so an indexing database is no longer required here to register people.

The NIPEC will need to develop databases which support its work; for example, databases of practice development work. There has been the old syndrome of brilliant work being done in one area without the sister in the next ward or trust knowing about it. There will certainly be information needs and database developments. They will not be at an individual level but will be maintained by the NMC. That is also a public safety issue.

Ms Griffiths: The NIPEC's database is functional.

The Deputy Chairperson: Thank you very much for your submission. It has been very helpful.

Written Answers

NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

Friday 8 March 2002

Written Answers to Questions

OFFICE OF THE FIRST MINISTER AND DEPUTY FIRST MINISTER

Stability of Devolved Government

Mr K Robinson asked the Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister how the Executive can contribute towards improving the stability of devolved government.
(AQO 932/01)

Reply: The Executive continues to work to provide a stable Government for the people of Northern Ireland. It addresses a range of strategic and cross-cutting issues such as developing the Programme for Government, the Review of Public Administration, and agreeing the annual Budget. In particular the Programme for Government represents our commitment, as an Executive, to effective and accountable government which makes a real difference to the lives of the people in Northern Ireland.

This is evident in decisions which have been taken on key infrastructure projects relating to gas and roads. The Executive also has decided to fund free travel and nursing care for the elderly. The strength of the Programme for Government is that the choices are being made, on a cross-party basis, by an administration which understands and wants to respond to the difficulties and challenges which Northern Ireland faces.

Review of Public Administration

Dr Birnie asked the Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister what steps are being taken to ensure that the Review of Public Administration will be rigorous and that there will be a full public consultation.
(AQO 920/01)

Reply: As was stated during last week's very constructive debate, the Executive is determined that this will be an open, transparent and inclusive process in which everyone has ample opportunity to participate and make their views known.

The initial consultation with the Assembly and others on the proposed terms of reference for the review is a clear indication of the way in which we intend to proceed.

Once the Review is launched and underway there will be many more opportunities for people to become involved and contribute their ideas. Everyone will have access to the review team via the website, which is currently up and running, as well as through more formal consultation exercises.

Consultation Documents: Cost

Mr Close asked the Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister to detail the cost of producing documents for consultation over the last three years, including preparation, printing, distribution and all ancillary costs.
(AQO 915/01)

Reply: At 22nd February 2002 the cost of producing documents for consultation in our department over the last three years, including preparation, printing, distribution and all ancillary costs was £217,719.65.

Interdepartmental Working Group

Mr McCarthy asked the Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister, pursuant to AQO 730/01, why the Interdepartmental Working Group on the removal of flags, emblems and graffiti has not been set up.
(AQO 914/01)

Reply: This is a subject on which we appreciate and share the concern of Members and are determined that appropriate steps should be taken to address it as soon as possible. However, in our view the problem is not one that can be addressed in isolation from other community relations issues. Nor do we consider that it would be inappropriate to seek to deal with such a potentially sensitive issue in advance of the review of community relations policy, which is nearing completion, and the public consultation which will follow.

Therefore, we will bring forward proposals 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.

President of the United States: Meeting

Mr McClarty asked the Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister if a meeting is to take place in the near future with the President of the United States.
(AQO 931/01)

Reply: We have plans to visit Washington next week as part of the events surrounding St Patrick's Day. We hope to meet with President Bush during that visit.

Programme for Government: Race Strategy

Mr Maskey asked the Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister to detail the organisations that have been consulted in the development of a race strategy as promised in the Programme for Government.

(AQO 941/01)

Reply: In fulfilling our Programme for Government commitment we are developing a policy to tackle racial inequality with the assistance of departments, statutory agencies, including the Equality Commission and voluntary bodies through our PSI Working Group on Ethnic Minorities with a view to bringing it forward this year. The voluntary agencies represented on the Group are NI Council for Ethnic Minorities, Chinese Welfare Association, Indian Community Centre and Multi Cultural Resource Centre.

We intend to have a full and open consultation on the document, before it is finally agreed by the Executive Committee. This will include consultation with minority ethnic voluntary organisations.

Children's Unit

Mr Gallagher asked the Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister to make a statement on the establishment of a Children's Unit. (AQO 940/01)

Reply: Our Department established a Children's and Young People's Unit on 1st January 2002, to ensure that the rights and needs of children and young people are given a high priority within the Executive.

The branch's main objectives are to take forward legislation to establish a Commissioner for Children for Northern Ireland, ensuring a Commissioner is appointed by the Autumn 2002 and also to develop a long-term over-arching strategy for children and young people in Northern Ireland. This is an important development that will help to ensure a joined up approach across the Executive to matters affecting children.

Review of Public Administration

Dr Hendron asked the Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister if the Review of Public Administration will engage expertise and best practice on public administration from other parts of Europe.

(AQO 938/01)

Reply: Obviously we want to learn from best practice elsewhere and also to avoid making mistakes from which others have suffered. Therefore the Review will look internationally at how best to organise public administration. We also intend to appoint independent external experts who can bring a different dimension to the Review drawing on innovative examples and ideas for the organisation and delivery of services.

The European Commission has been undergoing a major programme of reform which could also yield valuable lessons. During our recent visit to Brussels, Neil Kinnock encouraged us to look at their experience of significant culture change. The Review team will be asked to look at the European Commission experience as well as looking at other countries in the European Union and beyond.

EU Strategy

Mr McElduff asked the Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister if it is liaising with the Irish Government to ensure that the North-South dimension is addressed in the development of EU strategy.

(AQO 909/01)

Reply: The Executive is currently considering a paper providing a framework for an EU strategy. Much of the early focus is on ensuring that Departments are alert to EU developments relevant to their responsibilities and have the procedures in place to ensure they progress Northern Ireland's interests appropriately. As the strategy develops, we will be identifying key policy priorities at a detailed level and the best means of taking these forward. It is at this point that the North South aspect will become important as issues are identified where there are distinct and common interests which would benefit from harmonised arrangements or co-operative working.

Paragraph 17 of Strand Two of the Agreement provides for the North South Ministerial Council to consider the European Union dimension of relevant matters, including the implementation of EU policies and programmes and proposals under consideration in the EU framework. At its meeting in institutional format on 17 December 2001, the Council agreed that further work, building on preliminary discussions between Ministers, should be undertaken to consider the most effective way of pursuing this role. A Working Group has been established for this purpose, and will report back to the next meeting of the Council in institutional format.

Forthcoming Legislative Programme

Mr Ford asked the Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister to make a statement on the forthcoming legislative programme.

(AQO 919/01)

Reply: On 27 September last year, Sir Reg Empey and Seamus Mallon wrote to Members to inform them of the legislative programme for the 2001/2002 session comprising 23 Bills, including 4 carried over from the previous session. To date, 3 Bills have been enacted, a further 3 have completed their Assembly passage, and the Personal Social Services (Amendment) Bill has reached Consideration Stage. In addition, the Railway Safety Bill was introduced on 18th February, while the

Health and Personal Social Services and Children Leaving Care Bills are at Introduction stage.

It had been expected that a higher proportion of Bills in the Programme would have been introduced to the Assembly by this stage in the session. However, a great deal of pre-introduction work on legislative proposals has been carried out, particularly with Committees. A substantial amount of public consultation has also been undertaken. All of this should help to ensure that our legislation truly reflects our needs and circumstances.

District Council Community Relations Programme

Mr Kennedy asked the Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister what community relations initiatives are being considered to promote St Patrick as a symbol which all communities in Northern Ireland can embrace. (AQO 951/01)

Reply: There is no specific initiative aimed at promoting St Patrick as a symbol which all communities in Northern Ireland can embrace. However, a number of District Councils (including Newry & Mourne) are organising cross-community events in association with St Patrick's Day which are part-funded by our department under the District Council Community Relations Programme.

Northern Ireland Office: Brussels Office

Mr Bradley asked the Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister to outline (a) who the First Minister and Deputy First Minister met during their recent trip to Brussels; (b) if invitations were extended to European leaders to visit Northern Ireland; and (c) if any response was given. (AQO 937/01)

Reply: During the reception to launch the Brussels Office we met many of the 140 guests who attended, including Vice-President Kinnock, Commissioners Barnier, Schreyer, Byrne and Bolkestein, the British and Irish Permanent Representatives to the European Union, the British and Irish Ambassadors to Belgium, the Minister-President of the Brussels Region and many Members of the European Parliament.

We also took the opportunity of the visit to Brussels to hold additional meetings with President Romano Prodi, Vice-President Kinnock, Commissioner Fischler, Secretary-General O'Sullivan of the European Commission, and with President Pat Cox of the European Parliament and a number of other Members of the European Parliament.

Invitations to visit Northern Ireland were extended to President Prodi of the Commission and to President Cox of the European Parliament, and we are pleased to confirm that both Presidents willingly accepted.

AGRICULTURE AND RURAL DEVELOPMENT

Injuries Recorded at Lairages

Mr Shannon asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development how many injuries have been recorded at lairages in abattoirs and markets. (AQW 2169/01)

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development (Ms Rodgers): Under the Reporting of Injuries, Diseases and Dangerous Occurrences Regulations (NI) 1997 it falls to individual employers and the self-employed to report accidents, which result in either major injuries or more than three days away from work, to the Health and Safety Executive (NI). My Department's responsibility in this area thus relates only to its employees. During the last three years six accidents were recorded at lairages, all of these in abattoirs.

Land Lost to Tidal Erosion: Compensation

Mr Shannon asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to outline (a) if funding is available to assist those who have lost land due to tidal erosion; and (b) if she would consider co-operating with other Departments to address this matter. (AQW 2187/01)

Ms Rodgers: I am conscious of concerns regarding coastal erosion and flooding resulting from recent high tides.

There is no statutory provision in Northern Ireland for funding of compensation to those who have lost land through coastal erosion.

I am advised however that there were long-established inter-Departmental arrangements agreed in 1967 for undertaking essential coastal protection works arising as a consequence of erosion. Under this agreement Departmental responsibility was based on the material asset at risk. I have recently written to the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Development, Sir Reg Empey and the Minister of Regional Development, Mr Peter Robinson whose Departments share that responsibility with my Department to re-affirm the understanding and continued operation of that agreement under Devolution.

I would add that my Department's Rivers Agency is responsible for the provision and maintenance of sea defences designated by the Drainage Council for Northern Ireland, which protect low-lying coastal areas from tide-related flooding.

Non-Departmental Public Bodies

Mr Maskey asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to detail expenditure figures for those

non-Departmental Public Bodies under her responsibility in each year since 1995. (AQW 2209/01)

Ms Rodgers: The annual Cabinet Office Publication, "Public Bodies" provides a range of information including expenditure for Northern Ireland Non Departmental Public Bodies. Copies of these publications have been placed in the Assembly Library and are also available on the Cabinet Office website. (www.cabinet-office.gov.uk/quango)

CULTURE, ARTS AND LEISURE

Non-Departmental Public Bodies

Mr Maskey asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to detail expenditure figures for those non-Departmental Public Bodies under his responsibility in each year since 1995. (AQW 2210/01)

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure (Mr McGimpsey): The annual Cabinet Office Publication, "Public Bodies" provides a range of information including expenditure for Northern Ireland non-Departmental Public Bodies. Copies of these publications have been placed in the Assembly Library and are also available on the Cabinet Office website (www.cabinet-office.gov.uk/quango).

European City of Culture

Mr Weir asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to detail how much money has already been spent in promoting Belfast's application for European City of Culture. (AQW 2263/01)

Mr McGimpsey: The total amount spent on promoting the bid as of 1 March 2002 is £574,551.14 with £302,431.90 spent on marketing, detailed below. The difference of £272,119.21 was spent on Administration and equipment.

European City of Culture

Mr Weir asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure how much money has been allocated for the future promotion of Belfast's application for European City of Culture. (AQW 2264/01)

Mr McGimpsey: I am unable to supply figures relating to future spending on promotion of the bid. This will be determined when the Board of Imagine Belfast have agreed their Business Plan for 2002/03.

Curling

Mr Shannon asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure what steps he will be taking to renew the

interest in the sport of curling, following the gold medal success of the GBR team at the Winter Olympics in Salt Lake City, USA. (AQW 2271/01)

Mr McGimpsey: The Sports Council for Northern Ireland has responsibility for the development of sport within the province. I understand curling is not practised in Northern Ireland on a regular basis but if this position were to change and a Governing Body was formed, the Sports Council would be happy to discuss with the Governing Body how the sport could be developed.

EDUCATION

Ministerial Visits Outside Northern Ireland: Cost

Mr Weir asked the Minister of Education to detail the total amount spent on Ministerial visits outside Northern Ireland in each of the last 3 years. (AQW 2098/01)

The Minister of Education (Mr M McGuinness): The total amount spent on such visits is as follows:

Financial Year	Expenditure £
1999/00 (from 2 December 1999)	4,774
2000/01	14,948
2001/02 (to date)	5,768
Total	£25,490

These costs include all supporting officials who accompanied me on the visits and cover the period since of devolution, excluding periods of suspension.

Principal and Vice-Principal Grades

Ms McWilliams asked the Minister of Education to detail the number of full-time male and female teachers, differentiating by age groups, currently in the position of principal and deputy principal at (a) primary school level; and (b) secondary school level. (AQW 2151/01)

Mr M McGuinness: The numbers of male and female teachers in Principal and Vice-Principal grades at (a) primary school and (b) secondary school level are as follows:

Age group	(a) Primary		(b) Secondary	
	Male	Female	Male	Female
26-30	5	9	1	0
31-35	42	75	2	2
36-40	100	89	5	5

Age group	(a) Primary		(b) Secondary	
41-45	104	118	21	13
46-50	160	241	85	48
51-55	180	186	118	54
56-60	76	77	49	24
61-65	12	14	13	3

Imbalance of Female to Male Teachers in Primary Schools

Mr Shannon asked the Minister of Education what steps are being taken to address the imbalance of female to male teachers in primary schools in each Board area.
(AQW 2164/01)

Mr M McGuinness: Although the number of males entering primary teacher training is still low relative to the number of women, their number has increased by 36.8% between 1998/1999 and the 2001/02 academic year, which is an encouraging trend. When the General Teaching Council is established later this year, it will have a role in promoting male primary teaching as a career, alongside the ongoing work of Stranmillis and St Mary's University Colleges, the employers and school careers advisors in challenging gender stereotyping.

Educational Attainment of Children in Care: Research

Mr Hilditch asked the Minister of Education what research he has carried out into the educational attainment of children in care.
(AQW 2172/01)

Mr M McGuinness: My Department, together with DHSS&PS, is funding research into the educational experiences of looked after children. The research is being undertaken by Save the Children and the report is expected in the summer.

Links Between Schools and Further Education

Mr Hilditch asked the Minister of Education what plans he has to encourage further links between schools and further education.
(AQW 2174/01)

Mr M McGuinness: I recently announced plans for a third phase of a pilot initiative which is designed to allow schools flexibility to provide a work-related learning programme for selected pupils at Key Stage 4 by permitting the disapplication of aspects of the statutory curriculum. Pupils may spend up to 2 days per week on vocational activities, which may include study at a further education college or training organisation, together with work-related experience.

Special Schools: Building Guidelines

Mr Beggs asked the Minister of Education to outline (a) if there is a Building Handbook for Special Schools; and (b) any assessment he has made of the existing guidance procedures.
(AQW 2181/01)

Mr M McGuinness: My Department uses the guidance in the DfEE Building Bulletin 77 'Designing for Pupils with Special Educational Needs - Special Schools'. This is adapted to suit local circumstances after consultation with individual schools, Boards officers and the Education and Training Inspectorate.

Effects of the Selective System of Secondary Education

Mr Kennedy asked the Minister of Education to list and publish all academic research papers produced and referred to in The Effects of the Selective System of Secondary Education in Northern Ireland Report.
(AQW 2203/01)

Mr M McGuinness: The Report 'The Effects of the Selective System of Secondary Education in Northern Ireland' includes two volumes of research papers. In addition, the body of the main report includes references to other relevant published research; these are clearly denoted and copies are obtainable from the sources quoted.

Non-Departmental Public Bodies

Mr Maskey asked the Minister of Education to detail expenditure figures for those non-Departmental Public Bodies under his responsibility in each year since 1995.
(AQW 2211/01)

Mr M McGuinness: The expenditure figures for non-Departmental Public Bodies under my responsibility in each year since 1995 are as follows:

N I COUNCIL FOR THE CURRICULUM, EXAMINATIONS AND ASSESSMENT

Year	Expenditure Figures	Recurrent	Capital
1995/96	£10,864,113	£10,523,987	£340,126
1996/97	£12,814,908	£12,289,796	£525,112
1997/98	£12,933,338	£12,710,847	£222,491
1998/99	£13,602,033	£13,350,695	£251,338
1999/00	£14,453,630	£14,233,096	£220,534
2000/01	£14,879,205*	14,499,339	£379,866

* The 2000/01 accounts are currently under audit.

Expenditure figures are made up of Department of Education grant, examination fees, and other income generated by the Council.

EDUCATION AND LIBRARY BOARDS

The Audited Accounts for the Education and Library Boards are published each year as Command Papers and are available in the Assembly Library. The net expenditure for each Board for the periods 1995/96 to 1998/99 are as follows, together with unaudited figures for 99/00 and 00/01:

	Belfast £000's	N.East £000's	S.East £000's	Southern £000's	Western £000's
1995/96 Recurrent	171,749	203,686	177,083	207,085	182,622
1995/96 Capital	4,814	12,358	9,582	14,961	6,361
Total	176,563	216,044	186,665	222,046	188,983
1996/97 Recurrent	175,632	208,334	185,678	212,031	188,007
1996/97 Capital	4,924	12,084	8,389	12,032	6,807
Total	180,556	220,418	194,067	224,063	194,814
1997/98 Recurrent	177,353	209,681	181,273	214,836	192,580
1997/98 Capital	5,649	10,502	6,944	8,471	8,536
Total	183,002	220,183	188,217	223,307	201,116
1998/99 Recurrent	160,684	199,374	172,286	205,872	174,757
1998/99 Capital	7,428	8,679	6,783	6,478	9,125
Total	168,112	208,053	179,069	212,350	183,882
1999/00 Recurrent	199,171	241,656	216,311	241,572	208,569
1999/00 Capital	3,574	6,283	8,660	5,086	5,293
Total	202,745	247,939	224,971	246,658	213,862
2000/01 Recurrent	210,547	250,373	228,439	254,267	229,572
2000/01 Capital	4,675	9,682	14,092	11,041	7,819
Total	215,222	260,055	242,531	265,308	237,391

Note 1.

With effect from 1 April 1998 and the introduction of FE Incorporation the Boards do not have responsibility for expenditure in this area and as such is not reflected in Boards' expenditure figures from 1998/99 onwards. Figures prior to 1 April 1998 also include expenditure relating to the Youth Training Programme.

Note 2.

With effect from 1 December 1999 and the onset of devolution, Boards' expenditure is mainly funded by DE, DCAL and DEL and therefore the expenditure specified above reflects expenditure incurred by the Boards from funding provided by all funding Departments.

Note 3.

The accounts for 1999/00 and 2000/01 were completed on an accruals basis and the expenditure includes depreciation and notional costs. To date they are unaudited and should be treated as provisional.

THE STAFF COMMISSION FOR EDUCATION AND LIBRARY BOARDS

	Recurrent £s	Capital £s	Total £s
1995/96	185,646	3,984	189,630
1996/97	194,226	2,402	196,628
1997/98	190,916	7,645	198,561
1998/99	200,506	18,445	218,951
1999/00	202,014	910	202,924
2000/01	249,328	998	250,326

Note

The Accounts for the Staff Commission are prepared on a cash basis, therefore the expenditure above is cash.

COUNCIL FOR CATHOLIC MAINTAINED SCHOOLS

All grant-aid from the Department of Education to the Council for Catholic Maintained Schools is payable under paragraph 15 of the Education Reform Order (NI) Order 1989.

	Recurrent	Capital	Total
1995/96	£1,257,975	£114,959	£1,372,934
1996/97	£1,465,000	£147,927	£1,612,927
1997/98	£1,617,000	£92,984	£1,709,984
1998/99	£1,638,000	£97,802	£1,735,802
1999/2000	£1,946,760	£57,970	£2,004,730
2000/01	£2,020,000	£97,987	£2,117,987

YOUTH COUNCIL FOR NORTHERN IRELAND

1995/96	£2,492,886
1996/97	£2,466,272
1997/98	£2,411,576
1998/99	£2,351,296
1999/00	£2,524,918
2000/01	£2,802,362

Administration of Medicines in Schools

Mr M Robinson asked the Minister of Education how he ensures good practice guidance is uniformly implemented on the administration of medicines in schools.

(AQW 2216/01)

Mr M McGuinness: My Department is currently reviewing the administrative arrangements relating to the medical needs of pupils in schools. After consultation with the teachers' unions, the Department intends to issue appropriate guidance to employing authorities and schools, similar to that produced by the Department for Education and Skills for use in England and Wales.

Assessment of Special Educational Needs

Mr Shannon asked the Minister of Education to detail funding set aside to facilitate blind and sight-impaired children's education in each year for the past 5 years.
(AQW 2248/01)

Mr M McGuinness: Money is not set aside as such for the education of blind and sight-impaired, or deaf and hearing-impaired children. Instead Education and Library Boards assess and respond to need on an individual basis in line with the Code of Practice on the Assessment of Special Educational Needs.

The Education and Library Boards were unable to detail the exact amounts of funding over the last five years within the timescale of the answer.

Details of approximate funding for sensory-impaired pupils are as follows;

1) DEAF AND HEARING IMPAIRED

Education and Library Board	1999 – 00	2000 – 01	2001 – 02
Southern	Not available	Not available	267505
South Eastern	541000	632000	680000
North Eastern	1874862*	1925594*	1980586*
Western	953000*	911000*	824000*
Belfast	542000	547000	Not available

2) BLIND AND VISUALLY IMPAIRED

Education and Library Board	1999 – 00	2000 – 01	2001 – 02
Southern	Not available	Not available	197269
South Eastern	272000	294000	329000
North Eastern	1874862*	1925594*	1980586*
Western	953000*	911000*	824000*
Belfast	129000	94000	Not available

* represents a figure for Sensory Impaired pupils ie a combined figure for both Deaf and Hearing-impaired and Blind and Visually-impaired pupils.

Note: i) The above figures may not include all the costs of equipment used in mainstream schools.

ii) The N.E.E.L.B. figures include costs for Jordanstown School excluding travel costs, which are included in the other E.L.B.'s figures.

Assessment of Special Needs

Mr Shannon asked the Minister of Education to detail funding set aside to facilitate deaf and hearing-impaired children's education in each year for the past 5 years.
(AQW 2249/01)

Mr M McGuinness: Money is not set aside as such for the education of blind and sight-impaired, or deaf and hearing-impaired children. Instead Education and Library Boards assess and respond to need on an individual

basis in line with the Code of Practice on the Assessment of Special Educational Needs.

The Education and Library Boards were unable to detail the exact amounts of funding over the last five years within the timescale of the answer.

Details of approximate funding for sensory-impaired pupils are as follows;

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Western	953000*	911000*	824000*
Belfast	542000	547000	Not available

2) BLIND AND VISUALLY IMPAIRED

Education and Library Board	1999 – 00	2000 – 01	2001 – 02
Southern	Not available	Not available	197269
South Eastern	272000	294000	329000
North Eastern	1874862*	1925594*	1980586*
Western	953000*	911000*	824000*
Belfast	129000	94000	Not available

* represents a figure for Sensory Impaired pupils ie a combined figure for both Deaf and Hearing-impaired and Blind and Visually-impaired pupils.

Note: i) The above figures may not include all the costs of equipment used in mainstream schools.

ii) The N.E.E.L.B. figures include costs for Jordanstown School excluding travel costs, which are included in the other E.L.B.'s figures.

Effects of the Selective System of Secondary Education

Mr Kennedy asked the Minister of Education if all academic research from local universities referred to in the Effects of the Selective System of Secondary Education in NI report is available for scrutiny.

(AQW 2250/01)

Mr M McGuinness: The Report 'The Effects of the Selective System of Secondary Education in Northern Ireland' includes two volumes of research papers. In addition, the body of the main report includes references to other relevant published research; these are clearly denoted and copies are obtainable from the sources quoted.

GCSE Qualification

Mrs Carson asked the Minister of Education to detail (a) the percentage of boys and girls receiving fewer than 5 GCSEs in the last 5 years; and (b) how this

percentage compares with other areas of similar socio-economic conditions. (AQW 2272/01)

Mr M McGuinness: The percentages of boys and girls receiving fewer than 5 GCSEs A*-C or equivalent qualifications for regions with an ILO unemployment rate greater than 6.0% at Spring 2000 are as follows:

Boys					
	95/96	96/97	97/98	98/99	99/00
North East	66.4	66.1	65.5	64.5	61.3
Yorkshire and the Humber	65.3	64.6	64.5	63.2	61.2
West Midlands	62.8	62.7	61.8	60.1	59.1
London	61.8	60.7	59.8	58.7	57.5
Wales	63.2	61.4	59.7	57.9	56.6
Scotland	52.4	51.1	49.5	47.9	46.9
N. Ireland	55.5	53.2	52.1	51.1	51.3
Girls					
North East	57.3	48.7	56.8	53.9	52.3
Yorkshire and the Humber	56.6	56.0	54.4	52.7	51.4
West Midlands	53.7	52.7	51.6	49.4	47.7
London	52.6	51.2	49.3	47.8	46.3
Wales	53.3	51.1	48.2	46.9	45.1
Scotland	40.3	39.2	38.6	36.4	36.4
N. Ireland	41.2	39.7	38.3	36.6	34.6

Modern Language Qualifications

Mr S Wilson asked the Minister of Education to detail (a) the number of pupils leaving secondary/ grammar school with no qualifications in a foreign language since 1995; and (b) any action being taken to encourage pupils to study a foreign language. (AQW 2292/01)

Mr M McGuinness: The number of pupils leaving school without a GCSE Grade G or above in a modern language is as follows:

1995/96	9,836
1996/97	9,516
1997/98	9,124
1998/99	8,562
1999/00	8,132
2000/01	8,148

A proportion of these pupils may, however, have achieved certification through Graded Objectives in Modern Languages (GOML), which is offered by CCEA in five languages at either three or four levels. Figures for pupils qualified through GOML are not available, however; it

is therefore not possible to provide the number of pupils leaving secondary/grammar school with no qualifications in a modern language

It is important that we should do all we can to encourage people of all ages to become familiar with at least one language other than their own. The statutory curriculum here requires all secondary-level schools to offer pupils the opportunity to study one of the main European languages in order to prepare them for living and working in an increasingly global and European-based economy.

The Council for the Curriculum, Examinations and Assessment will be specifically addressing the issue of language provision as part of the current Curriculum Review.

Pupils Leaving School at the Minimum Age

Mr S Wilson asked the Minister of Education to detail the number of pupils leaving school at the minimum age in each of the last 5 years. (AQW 2293/01)

Mr M McGuinness: The number of pupils who left school at the minimum age in each of the last 5 years is as follows:

1995/96	14,218
1996/97	13,674
1997/98	13,414
1998/99	13,323
1999/2000	13,078

These figures do not include pupils at special or independent schools.

Private Finance Initiative Pathfinder Projects

Mr Hussey asked the Minister of Education to detail the allocation of funds to Private Finance Initiative Pathfinder Projects in this financial year. (AQW 2309/01)

Mr M McGuinness: Allocation of funds to projects procured under the Private Finance Initiative only commences from the date the school becomes operational. The allocation for unitary payments in the 2001/02 financial year is £1,492,451.

Board of Governor Appointments: Andrews Memorial Primary School

Mr Shannon asked the Minister of Education to detail the grounds on which Mr George Forster was removed as a member of the Board of Governors of Andrews Memorial Primary School. (AQW 2346/01)

Mr M McGuinness: The South-Eastern Education and Library Board has confirmed Mr Forster was appointed to the Board of Governors of Andrews Memorial Primary School in 1997 to serve for a term of 4 years, which ended in 2001.

When reconstituting boards of governors the Board's Committee for the Management of Schools takes into account several factors including, the need to appoint new representatives, the retention of a proportion of existing representatives, the attendance record of governors and the requirement to achieve a reasonable gender balance. As a result of these considerations it is inevitable that some governors will not be re-appointed. This was the case at Andrews Memorial Primary School when it was decided not to re-appoint Mr Forester.

In view of representations made regarding the appointment process, the Board have confirmed that it will be re-examining their procedures for appointment of board representatives in the future.

Specialist Engineering Schools

Mr Savage asked the Minister of Education if he has any plans to create specialist engineering schools similar to those HM Government are creating in England.

(AQW 2377/01)

Mr M McGuinness: I am consulting about future post-primary arrangements and I have invited comments on the Burns proposals, suggestions for modifications to those proposals or for alternative arrangements. The consultation end on 28 June 2002 and I will not be making any decisions about future arrangements until I have considered the comments received.

EMPLOYMENT AND LEARNING

Student Loans

Mr J Kelly asked the Minister for Employment and Learning to detail the total funds surrendered from the Student Loans budget for each of the last 3 financial years.

(AQW 1841/01)

The Minister for Employment and Learning (Ms Hanna): The following table shows the total funds surrendered from the Student Loans budget for each of the last 2 financial years. Figures for 1998/99 (pre-devolution) are held by the Department of Education.

Financial Year	Total funds surrendered from Student Loans budget
1999/2000	£7.5m
2000/2001	£1.19m

Proposed Merger: Hotel and Catering College/University of Ulster

Mr K Robinson asked the Minister for Employment and Learning to give her assessment of the consultation process regarding the proposed merger of the Northern Ireland Hotel and Catering College, Portrush with the Ulster University; and to make a statement./R/

(AQW 1977/01)

Ms Hanna: My Department issued the consultation paper on 25th January 2002 and the closing date for responses is 22nd March 2002. There was an extensive list of consultees, including major organisations and interested parties involved in the hotel and catering industry. It is important that all those with an interest respond to the consultation process. The consultation will inform the final outcome as to whether or not the proposed merger will proceed.

Non-Departmental Public Bodies

Mr Beggs asked the Minister for Employment and Learning to list all Non-Departmental Public Bodies under her control, and to advise if they follow guidance on reporting fraud to the Comptroller and Auditor General, as required under Government Accounting procedures.

(AQW 2055/01)

Ms Hanna: All formal guidance issued by DFP relating to financial operations, including fraud, is issued to NDPB's by the Department. Each of the Departments NDPB's has confirmed that they follow procedures laid down in Government Accounting in relation to fraud.

Townland Names

Mrs Carson asked the Minister for Employment and Learning how she is encouraging the use of townland names in written communications.

(AQW 2059/01)

Ms Hanna: It is usual practice in my Department for officials to reply to correspondence using the address supplied by correspondents.

Levels of Student Debt

Dr Birnie asked the Minister for Employment and Learning to give her assessment of levels of student debt.

(AQW 2083/01)

Ms Hanna: Latest figures available from the Student Loans Company show that the average amount a Northern Ireland student borrows through student loans in an academic year is £3,033. To reduce the levels of student debt, non-repayable bursaries of up to £1,500, with a commensurate reduction in the student loan, will be introduced from September this year for students from low-income families.

New Deal

Mr M Robinson asked the Minister for Employment and Learning what measures are being taken to reduce long-term unemployment in (a) males aged 50-64; and (b) females aged 50-59. (AQW 2123/01)

Ms Hanna: My Department provides a range of programmes to help long-term unemployed people (male and female) aged 50 and over to gain employment. These programmes include New Deal 50plus, Focus for Work (incorporating New Deal 25+, Bridge to Employment, Worktrack, Training for Work and Jobclubs). The Task Force on Employability and Long-Term Unemployment, which I chair, is currently examining the issue of long term unemployment.

North West Institute of Further and Higher Education

Mr Hussey asked the Minister for Employment and Learning what assessment can she make of the present disability access provision at the Strabane Campus of the North-West Institute of Higher and Further Education. (AQW 2136/01)

Ms Hanna: My Department has allocated £467k to the North West Institute of Further and Higher Education in the last two financial years to enhance access for people with disabilities. Of this funding, £39k has been spent at the Strabane campus and the Institute has plans for further minor upgrades from its 2002/03 budget allocation.

North West Institute of Further and Higher Education

Mr Hussey asked the Minister for Employment and Learning what steps have been taken to date to ensure that the Strabane Campus of the North-West Institute of Higher and Further Education remains a fully functional educational facility for the citizens of that District Council area. (AQW 2137/01)

Ms Hanna: My Department has provided the North West Institute of Further and Higher Education with funding of £14.9m in the 2000/2001 financial year to support its activities. How these funds are used, within the broad purpose for which they were allocated, is a matter for the Governing Board having regard for the educational needs of its community.

Professional Qualifications

Mr Hilditch asked the Minister for Employment and Learning to outline any plans she has for schemes to support low paid employees in the Health and Education sectors to access professional qualifications to help further their careers. (AQW 2188/01)

Ms Hanna: I have no plans to introduce a scheme of the nature described. The professional development of employees is a matter for the employer. However all employees, especially low paid, have access to the range of learning opportunities offered through Further Education Colleges and Learndirect, each of which carry a public subsidy. In the future when Individual Learning Accounts are reintroduced a further source of learning support will become available.

Tertiary Education in the Republic of Ireland: Funding

Mr Shannon asked the Minister for Employment and Learning what funding is available for students who wish to pursue tertiary education in the Republic of Ireland. (AQW 2193/01)

Ms Hanna: Northern Ireland students attending courses at publicly funded colleges in the Republic of Ireland have their tuition fees paid by the Irish Government. The Education and Library Boards pay an additional charge for registration, examination fees and student services. Students also have access to income contingent loans and supplementary grants.

Student Loan System: Review

Mr Hilditch asked the Minister for Employment and Learning to detail any plans she has to review the operation of the student loan system. (AQW 2194/01)

Ms Hanna: Currently I have no plans to undertake a further review of the student loan system. However, I will consider the implications of any outcomes emerging from the current DfES review into student finance.

High Quality Technology

Mr Hilditch asked the Minister for Employment and Learning to detail any plans she has to initiate the development of high quality technology to facilitate research in university institutions. (AQW 2220/01)

Ms Hanna: The development of high quality technology is an integral part of much of the research being undertaken in the universities and, in addition to its mainstream grant, my Department is providing a number of special funding streams designed to assist the universities with this aspect of their work.

New Deal

Mrs E Bell asked the Minister for Employment and Learning to detail the number of (a) MLAs; (b) NI

Ministers; and (c) Members of the House of Lords who have employed staff under the New Deal scheme.

(AQW 2260/01)

Ms Hanna: There have been two New Deal clients who have been employed by MLAs under the New Deal Programme. No NI Minister or Member of the House of Lords has employed a New Deal client.

Graduates Who Secured Employment

Mr M Robinson asked the Minister for Employment and Learning to detail the number of students who graduated from university and secured employment within an industry directly associated with their specific area of study for each of the last 5 years.(AQW 2297/01)

Ms Hanna: This department collects information on subjects studied by students graduating from NI Higher Education institutions and their subsequent employment. The area of study is categorised into subject groups and employment is categorised by industrial classification. These categories apply across the UK. While it is possible to produce both, there is no agreed method by which industrial classification can be directly associated with a specific area of study.

I have placed this information in the Assembly library. The tables provide details of the subject of study against the industry classification in which the graduate is employed for 1995/96 to 1999/00. It should be noted that the subject groups were revised in 1998/99.

Springvale Educational Village

Mr B Hutchinson asked the Minister for Employment and Learning to outline (a) if grant conditions have been met by the relevant institutions involved in the Springvale Educational Village; and (b) if a Departmental letter of grant has been issued. (AQW 2437/01)

Ms Hanna: An Outline Business Case (OBC), is currently underway and will be presented, in due course, to the Department. The issue of a letter of offer relating to the Private Finance Initiative Project for the campus, is dependent on approval of the OBC and is due to be presented to my Department in April 2002. The OBC will address the issues you raise and the Letter of Grant will issue when the OBC has been approved.

Quinquennial Review of the Labour Relations Agency

Mr Tierney asked the Minister for Employment and Learning to make a statement on the Quinquennial Review of the Labour Relations Agency. (AQW 2524/01)

Ms Hanna: Part I of the Review has been completed. A copy of the report has been placed in the Library. The

Report has been made available to the members of the Assembly Committee for Employment and Learning.

The purpose of Part 1 was to establish whether there was a continuing need for the services provided by the Labour Relations Agency and, if so, to consider a range of options for delivering those services.

The views of a wide range of stakeholders and interest groups, including among others trade unions, employers' organisations, voluntary bodies and district councils, were sought. Other options for delivering the services – through privatisation, contracting out/market testing, merger with another public body or reallocation of services to another public body – were examined. The Review concluded that there was a continuing need for the services and that an NDPB remained the best vehicle for delivering them. The main ground for the latter conclusion was that NDPB status offered the best guarantee of the independence and impartiality that a conciliation/mediation body must have, and be seen to have, if it is to have the full confidence of all its users.

Part II of the Review will begin shortly. It will examine how the Agency operates and make recommendations for how delivery of its services might be improved. I will inform the Assembly of the outcome.

ENTERPRISE, TRADE AND INVESTMENT

Ministerial Visits Outside Northern Ireland: Cost

Mr Weir asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to detail the total amount spent on Ministerial visits outside Northern Ireland in each of the last 3 years. (AQW 2129/01)

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment (Sir Reg Empey): The total amount spent on Ministerial visits outside Northern Ireland in each of the last 3 years is as follows:

1999/00	£ 1,700
2000/01	£42,000
2001/02	£50,000 (ending January 2002)

The information provided has been calculated during periods of devolution and has been based on financial year returns. It includes all Ministerial travel outside Northern Ireland ie Overseas and GB/ROI. Costs for attendance at BIC and NSMC have been taken into account.

The amounts also include costs incurred to the Department by the Private Secretary, Press Officer, Special Advisor and Departmental Officials and represent air

fares, rail, taxi, subsistence, hotel accommodation but excludes salary costs.

Northern Ireland Economy: Global Downturn

Mr Gibson asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment what assessment he has made of the impact of the global downturn on the future performance of Northern Ireland business economy.

(AQW 2185/01)

Sir Reg Empey: The areas of the Northern Ireland economy that are most vulnerable to the current global downturn are foreign direct investment (particularly aerospace and Information and Communication Technologies), exports and tourism. Future employment prospects, in these areas, will be largely dependent upon a global economic recovery and the restoration of confidence in the airline industry. The view expressed in HM Treasury's Pre-Budget Report (November, 2001) is that the global recovery will gather pace in mid-2002.

On the positive side, the Northern Ireland economy is better placed than most economies to withstand the current global slowdown given its reliance on the Great Britain economy and the significance of the Republic of Ireland as both a key-trading partner and source of foreign direct investment. These two economies are forecast to outperform most of their global competitors in 2002. The International Monetary Fund and Organisation for Economic Co-Operation and Development expect the UK to be the fastest growing Group of seven (G7) economy in 2002, while economic growth in the Republic of Ireland, although slowing, remains above most of its international competitors. Two notable exceptions are China and India, markets that my Department and its Agencies are actively encouraging NI exporters to develop. Public expenditure will also help to sustain jobs and incomes during the next few years.

Non-Departmental Public Bodies

Mr Maskey asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to detail the expenditure figures for those non-Departmental Public Bodies under his responsibility in each year since 1995.

(AQW 2213/01)

Sir Reg Empey: My Department has responsibility for four Executive Non-Departmental Public Bodies.

	95/96 £'000	96/97 £'000	97/98 £'000	98/99 £'000	99/00 £'000	00/01 £'000
Local Enterprise Development Board	31,615	31,244	29,286	27,090	25,802	29,996
Northern Ireland Tourist Board	13,068	15,280	13,730	13,583	13,230	13,844

	95/96 £'000	96/97 £'000	97/98 £'000	98/99 £'000	99/00 £'000	00/01 £'000
Health & Safety Executive (NI)	-	-	-	357	2,542	2,796
General Consumer Council	439	462	440	472	472	472

The Health and Safety Executive (NI) was set up as a Crown Status Non-Departmental Body on 1 April 1999.

The Minister also has the responsibility for two Advisory Non-Departmental Public Bodies namely Industrial Development Board for Northern Ireland (Advisory Board) and Industrial Research and Technology Unit (Advisory Board) neither of which are funded directly by this Department.

Further detailed information on Non-Departmental Public Bodies can be found in the annual Cabinet Office Publication, "Public Bodies". Copies have been placed in the Assembly Library and are also available on the Cabinet Office website (www.cabinet-office.gov.uk/quango).

Promoting Tourism

Dr Birnie asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to outline if a recent British Tourist Authority campaign to promote the United Kingdom as a holiday destination for the people of the Republic of Ireland also included the promotion of Northern Ireland.

(AQW 2233/01)

Sir Reg Empey: The Republic of Ireland is one of the most important tourism markets for Britain. It is one of seven markets currently being targeted by BTA as part of its UK-OK campaign, which aims to recover the inbound tourism industry from the losses sustained as a result of the Foot and Mouth Disease and the events of September 11th in 2001. The BTA's brochure *Hidden Britain* (which is part of the enquiry fulfilment pack for the campaign) includes a number of Northern Ireland destinations as part of this campaign.

The British Tourist Authority (BTA) exists to build the value of inbound tourism to Britain, generating additional tourism revenue throughout Britain, throughout the year. Promoting Northern Ireland is an important part of BTA's efforts to promote Britain as an attractive destination. BTA enjoys a close and continuing relationship with Northern Ireland Tourist Board.

Contracts Awarded to W&G Baird

Mr Dallat asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to detail the total contracts awarded to W&G Baird in the 12 months subsequent to Mr Roy Bailie being appointed Chairman of the NI Tourist Board.

(AQW 2359/01)

Sir Reg Empey: In the 12 months period subsequent to Mr Roy Bailie's appointment as Chairman of the Northern Ireland Tourist Board on 1 July 1996, the firm of W&G Baird was awarded contracts to the value of £160,000. The total value of contracts in the 24 months subsequent to his appointment was £392,000. Details are as noted in the table below

Date	Contract	£'000
July 1996	Main Guides	144
June 1997	Winter Breakaway	16
July 1997	Main Guides	122
October 1997	1998 Holiday Breakaway	87
November 1997	Events Guide	4
March 1998	English Guide	15
June 1998	English Guide (Pre-Press)	4
Total		392

Contracts Awarded to W&G Baird

Mr Dallat asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to detail the total contracts awarded to W&G Baird in the 12 months prior to Mr Roy Bailie being appointed Chairman of the NI Tourist Board.
(AQW 2370/01)

Sir Reg Empey: In the 12 months period prior to Mr Roy Bailie's appointment as Chairman of the Northern Ireland Tourist Board on 1 July 1996, the firm of W&G Baird was awarded contracts to the value of £208,000. The total value of contracts in the 24 months prior to his appointment was £728,000. Details are as noted in the table below

Date	Contract	£'000
July 1994	1995 Holiday Breakaway	89
July 1994	Main Guide	145
May 1995	1996 Holiday Breakaway	100
May 1995	Main Guides	186
January 1996	Reprint of US Main Guide	27
March 1996	18 Great Golf Courses	23
June 1996	1997 Holiday Breakaway	158
Total		728

ENVIRONMENT

Effluent Disposal Offenders: Revenue from Fines

Mr Shannon asked the Minister of the Environment to detail (a) the costs associated with prosecuting

effluent disposal offenders; (b) the fines imposed; and (c) where does this revenue go to. (AQW 2007/01)

The Minister of the Environment (Mr Nesbitt): When a pollution incident occurs, Environment and Heritage Service seeks to locate the pollution source, identify the polluter, and if appropriate, collect sufficient evidence to secure a prosecution.

Since 1998, EHS has collected details of the costs associated with bringing a prosecution to Court and advises the DPP's office of that cost in relation to each case.

In addition, where a case is submitted to the DPP's office recommending prosecution, EHS records the following details about each case.

- the Court costs awarded to cover the cost of serving the summons;
- the fine imposed by the Court;
- the amount of the analysis costs incurred by the Department; and

The most recent year for which all prosecution cases have been dealt with by the Courts is 1999. Of a total of 67 prosecutions taken by the Department in relation to incidents which occurred during 1999, the average:

- cost of bringing each case to Court was £770,
- fine imposed was £470, and
- analysis costs awarded were £133.

The Court costs – the cost of serving the summons and issuing documentation – are recovered by the DPP's office. The analysis costs are paid to my Department. The fines imposed by the Magistrates Court are credited by the NI Courts Service to the UK Consolidated Fund and paid to the Treasury.

Residential and Marina Development: Larne

Mr K Robinson asked the Minister of the Environment to outline (a) the date the planning application for Residential and Marina Development at Larne was received by the Planning Service; (b) the date Larne Borough Council was consulted; (c) Larne Borough Council's decision on the application; and (d) when will a planning determination be made; and to make a statement. (AQW 2101/01)

Mr Nesbitt: [holding answer 4 March 2002]:

- The application, accompanied by an Environmental Statement, was received in the Ballymena Divisional Planning Office on 23 December 1999, and validated on 19 January 2000.
- Larne Borough Council was consulted on 25 January 2000 with regard to the Environmental Statement submitted and the application details. On 17 April

2000 the Council was asked for its views on the proposal when being advised that the application had been given major status under Article 31 of the Planning (NI) Order 1991. The Council was further consulted on the two addenda to the Environmental Statement received on 30 October 2000 and 13 September 2001.

- (c) Correspondence from the Chief Executive and the Chief Environmental Health Officer of Larne Borough Council, received on 12 and 14 April 2000 respectively, informed the Planning Service that the Council had no objection in principle to the provision of a marina at the proposed site, and that it had resolved in principle to make an area of land available at Larne Promenade to facilitate the development. The Chief Executive's letter stated that the Council resolved to review its decision when it had considered reports on the economic impact of the development, and on legal issues involved in diverting a public right of way. The latter issue has been impeding the Council progressing its support in principle for the proposed development.

In a letter of 5 June 2001, responding to an addendum to the Environmental Statement, the Council's Director of Corporate Services advised that the Development and Consultative Committee, at a meeting on 9 March 2001, resolved that the Council should continue to have no objection in principle to the development of a marina at the proposed site, subject to a number of provisions. The 5 June 2001 letter also stated that the Council resolved that legal advice on the transfer of land in Council ownership to facilitate the development be accepted. The advice is to the effect that there are serious legal implications for the Council in releasing the land, and that the developer should be advised accordingly. It was also resolved that the Council should continue to be guided by legal advice on the issue.

- (d) As well as the right of way issue, the Planning Service is currently considering a small number of other technical and environmental matters. A former Minister, Lord Dubbs, has already given a commitment that the application will proceed by way of a Public Inquiry.

Ministerial Visits Outside Northern Ireland

Mr Weir asked the Minister of the Environment to detail the total amount spent on Ministerial visits outside Northern Ireland in each of the last 3 years.

(AQW 2102/01)

Mr Nesbitt: [*holding answer 4 March 2002*]: Totals spent by DOE on Ministerial visits outside Northern Ireland in each of the last 3 years are as follows:

Financial Year	Cost
1999/00 (from 2 Dec)	£ 341
2000/01	£ 2,353
2001/02 (to date)	£ 8,653
Total	£11,347

Telecommunications Masts: Corgary/Sheepbridge

Mr Bradley asked the Minister of the Environment if he will undertake to meet with the residents of the Corgary/Sheepbridge area to discuss their concerns regarding the increasing number of telecommunication masts, and the further proposals for additional masts.

(AQW 2189/01)

Mr Nesbitt: I would, of course, be happy to meet with the residents of the Corgary/Sheepbridge area to discuss their concerns about telecommunications masts. My Diary Secretary, will be in touch with you shortly to make the necessary arrangements.

Funding for Land Lost Due to Tidal Erosion

Mr Shannon asked the Minister of the Environment to outline (a) if funding is available to assist those who have lost land due to tidal erosion; and (b) if he would consider co-operating with other Departments to address this matter.

(AQW 2190/01)

Mr Nesbitt:

- (a) My Department's Environment and Heritage Service can provide grants under the provisions of Article 29 of the Nature Conservation and Amenity Lands (Northern Ireland) Order 1985 for schemes that are conducive to attaining the purposes of the Order. This can include, in exceptional circumstances, measures to protect a site or habitat which is of very important nature conservation value and which was under threat from the sea. There is no funding for other coastal sites or properties available from my Department.
- (b) Issues which may arise from coastal erosion are the responsibility of several Departments, including the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development and the Department for Regional Development, as well as DOE.

It would not be for my Department to address the issue of funding to assist those who have lost land due to tidal erosion, other than in the circumstances set out in (a). My Department has had no approaches from other Departments on this issue.

Non-Departmental Public Bodies

Mr Maskey asked the Minister of the Environment to detail expenditure figures for those non-Departmental Public Bodies under his responsibility in each year since 1995. (AQW 2221/01)

Mr Nesbitt: My predecessor took over responsibility from NIO Ministers on devolution. The annual Cabinet Office publication "Public Bodies" includes details of expenditure for Northern Ireland Non-Departmental Public Bodies. Copies of these publications have been placed in the Assembly Library and are also available on the Cabinet Office website (www.cabinet-office.gov.uk/quango).

The executive NDPBs sponsored by the Department are -

- Local Government Staff Commission (LGSC); and
- NI Local Government Officers' Superannuation Committee (NILGOSC).

The Department's advisory bodies are:

- Northern Ireland Review Body;
- Council for Nature Conservation and the Countryside (CNCC);
- Historic Buildings Council (HBC);
- Historic Monuments Council (HMC)

Dargan Road Landfill Site

Mr Ford asked the Minister of the Environment what monitoring and protection measures are in place with regard to leachate pollution of Belfast Lough from the Dargan Road landfill site. (AQW 2257/01)

Mr Nesbitt: The Dargan Road landfill site is operated by Belfast City Council.

A Site Monitoring Plan, which sets out the water monitoring requirements for the site, has been agreed with my Department's Environment and Heritage Service. The plan sets out the sampling frequencies and test parameters for the collection and analysis of samples.

The submission of the Plan, and its agreement by my Department, was one of the conditions attached to the planning permission for the site, which was granted on 14 May 2001. The application for planning permission was made by Belfast City Council to provide essential interim capacity for disposal of controlled (including special) waste at the site, by the revision and elevation of the top surface profile, to complete the planned final closure of the site.

The monitoring plan includes a requirement to carry out sampling on the seaward side of the site of the leachate drainage discharges from it; of the seawater in the vicinity of the leachate discharges; and of sediment samples on the foreshore, in the vicinity of the dis-

charges. Environment and Heritage Service, as part of its marine monitoring programme, routinely collects water samples at six locations within Belfast Lough to assess general water quality. Shellfish samples are also collected at five locations within the Lough.

Impermeable vertical barriers have been installed around the north-western, north-eastern, northern and southern boundaries of the site, to prevent the lateral migration of leachate. As part of the closure plan for the site, the site is to be progressively capped; this will reduce the generation of leachate by limiting the amount rainfall entering the site.

Excess Nutrients: Eutrophication of Waterways

Mr Armstrong asked the Minister of the Environment to detail his plans to reduce excess nitrogen, phosphate and potash from animal waste from reaching the waterways. (AQO 948/01)

Mr Nesbitt: I acknowledge the undesirable environmental impact of excess nutrients causing eutrophication of waterways. This often manifests itself by the presence of excessive growths of green weed and algae in rivers and lakes. These can seriously damage the natural ecological balance in our waters, with a particular impact on fish habitat. The problem can also affect coastal waters.

Nutrient enrichment has been identified as the greatest single threat to good water quality in Northern Ireland. In 1999 my Department's Environment and Heritage Service published, for public consultation, a document entitled 'Proposals for a Strategy to Control Nutrient Enrichment' in Northern Ireland Waters. Taking account of the responses, and in consultation with other Departments, particularly the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development, a draft Eutrophication Strategy is now being finalised by officials. I will wish to seek the views of the Assembly's Environment Committee before reaching final conclusions on the Strategy. The Strategy will outline many current nutrient control initiatives and will detail the new measures, targets and controls necessary to combat the effects of nutrient enrichment in our waterways.

Height of Buildings in Central Belfast

Dr Birnie asked the Minister of the Environment to outline his planning policy for the maximum permissible height for tall buildings in central Belfast. (AQO 922/01)

Mr Nesbitt: My Department applies Policy CC12 of the Belfast Urban Area Plan 2001 to all major city centre developments. This states that high buildings must be sympathetic in scale to the traditional height of buildings in the city centre.

Regular discussions take place between Planning Service officials and developers to ensure that the city centre is protected from inappropriate development. This may result in amended proposals being brought forward to reduce the height of proposed buildings.

The Member may be aware that the Belfast Urban Area plan will be replaced by the Belfast Metropolitan Area Plan, which is now being prepared. An urban design study is being carried out as part of the Plan preparation process, which, amongst other things, will make recommendations in relation to policies for the control of High Buildings.

Apartment Developments

Ms Armitage asked the Minister of the Environment if he has ever considered, or is likely to consider, putting a 'ceiling' on the number of planning approvals granted for apartment developments. (AQO 907/01)

Mr Nesbitt: All planning applications must be considered against prevailing planning policies and guidelines. These do not include a 'ceiling' on approvals for apartment developments. Current policy for housing development is set out in Planning Policy Statement 7, entitled Quality Residential Environments. This requires developers to provide high quality housing proposals which are sympathetic to the existing character of an area. Particular emphasis is placed on ensuring that proposals are sympathetic to their context, and this is an important consideration when applications for apartment developments are being assessed. My Department has also issued in draft Supplementary Planning Guidance in the form of Development Control Advice Note 8 – Small Unit Housing – and intends to publish this in final form in the near future. This provides more detailed specific guidance on proposals for small unit housing within existing urban areas.

The planning framework for considering the scale of future housing growth in NI changed with the finalising by the Department for Regional Development of the Regional Development Strategy. This sets out housing growth indicators for District Council areas for the year 2015.

Development plans prepared by my Department allocate this growth to specific locations, through the identification of development limits for settlements and the zoning of specific sites.

In addition, I understand that the Department for Regional Development is preparing a Planning Policy Statement on 'Housing in Settlements'. The preparation process includes provision for public consideration and for issues relating to apartment development to be raised.

Third Party Appeals

Mr McGrady asked the Minister of the Environment what provision will be made in forthcoming planning

legislation for the introduction of Third Party Appeals; and to make a statement. (AQO 912/01)

Mr Nesbitt: I have no plans to introduce provisions for third party rights of appeals in the forthcoming Planning (Amendment) Bill, which is scheduled for introduction to the Assembly before the summer recess.

My Department has examined the case for introducing third party appeals on a number of occasions, and has considered carefully the possible benefits and costs of such a change in planning policy.

This analysis indicated that the introduction of third party appeals would add delay and uncertainty to the planning system and would have significant resource implications. On each occasion, my Department was not persuaded that the likely benefits of third party appeals were significant enough to justify a case for a third party right of appeal system.

However, my Department has commissioned further detailed research on how third party appeals systems are operated in other jurisdictions, how widely available those systems of appeals are, and the circumstances under which such appeals are allowed. In addition, the recently published Consultation Paper entitled "Modernising Planning Processes" indicates that the Department will continue to review the need for third party appeals and seek views.

When responses have been received to the Consultation Paper and, when the new research findings are available, I will again look at the case for introducing a third party appeal system in the context of future changes to planning legislation.

Consultation Documents: Cost

Mr Close asked the Minister of the Environment to detail the cost of producing documents for consultation over the last three years, including preparation, printing, distribution and all ancillary costs. (AQO 918/01)

Mr Nesbitt: It is important that those who will be most affected by government policies and proposals have the opportunity to comment on them, and proper and informed consultation plays a vital part in allowing Ministers to hear the voice of the citizen.

My Department takes its responsibilities for consultation very seriously and devotes significant resources to ensuring that every consultation exercise is carried out in as comprehensive a manner as possible as well as being fair and transparent. Obviously ensuring that the process is carried out efficiently is equally important and my Department strives to obtain maximum value for money in relation to every consultation exercise carried out.

The cost of producing documents for consultation in the financial year to March 2000 was £75,931; in the

year to March 2001 it was £73,382 and in this year to date it has been £75,527.

These figures do not include staff costs which obviously constitute a large proportion of the total costs of producing consultation documents.

Special Areas of Conservation

Ms Lewsley asked the Minister of the Environment what steps he intends to take to designate Special Areas of Conservation (SACs) for Atlantic salmon.

(AQO 926/01)

Mr Nesbitt: No Special Areas of Conservation have yet been designated under the Habitats Directive by any Member State in the European Union. Formal designation can not take place until after a Member State's national list of candidate Special Areas of Conservation has been accepted by the European Commission. The process of accepting the UK list is not yet complete.

The current UK list of candidate Special Areas of Conservation includes 43 sites in Northern Ireland, including the site at Lough Melvin which has Atlantic Salmon listed as a qualifying feature. My predecessor, Sam Foster, acknowledged that there may be grounds for additional sites for Atlantic Salmon in Northern Ireland. Work was planned to begin in 2001 to survey the River Foyle and its principal tributaries with a view to bringing forward one or more sites for consideration as candidate Special Areas of Conservation for Atlantic Salmon.

Unfortunately the field work was delayed by the restrictions on movement associated with the outbreak of foot-and-mouth disease. However, this work has now begun and I expect it to be completed by March 2003.

Anti Litter Awareness Programme

Mr M Murphy asked the Minister of the Environment what plans he has to provide an anti litter awareness programme, in particular, a spring clean campaign.

(AQO 947/01)

Mr Nesbitt: Under the Litter (Northern Ireland) Order 1994, District Councils are responsible for clearing litter and cleaning all roads, except motorways.

However, I acknowledge that the presence of litter can often determine first impressions of the quality of the local environment. My Department's Environment and Heritage Service therefore helps to promote litter awareness by funding the Environmental Campaigns charity, ENCAMS, which operates here under the title of 'Tidy Northern Ireland'. Tidy Northern Ireland works with a range of organisations including local authorities, other environmental groups, schools, private and public sector businesses, as well as those working from within the community, to promote litter awareness.

Tidy Northern Ireland's 'Just Bin It' campaign has now superseded its successful 'National Spring Clean' campaign. This campaign is targeted at the youth sector and includes the development of clean-up packs to promote community involvement in the environment.

Combating litter is, of course, an aspect of sustainable waste management. My Department launched a major public awareness campaign on waste management early last month to coincide with public consultation on the draft Waste Management Plans of the three District Council Partnership Groups. I hope that this campaign will help to promote, not only the reduction and recycling of waste, but also a more responsible attitude to its management in order to prevent environmental degradation, whether from litter or other sources.

FINANCE AND PERSONNEL

Promotion Applications: Absentee Levels

Mr Beggs asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel how are absentee levels taken into consideration when considering promotion applications within the Northern Ireland Civil Service.

(AQW 2067/01)

The Minister of Finance and Personnel (Dr Farren): Candidates with unacceptably high absence records are not allowed to apply for promotion competitions.

Ministerial Visits Outside Northern Ireland: Cost

Mr Weir asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel to detail the total amount spent on Ministerial visits outside Northern Ireland in each of the last 3 years.

(AQW 2128/01)

Dr Farren: The total amount spent in Ministerial visits by the Minister of Finance and Personnel outside Northern Ireland in each of the last 3 years is set out below:

1999/2000 (from 2 Dec 1999)	£1,028.00
2000/2001 (excluding suspension)	£7,620.36
2001/2002 (to date)	£4,918.93

These figures include travel, accommodation and subsistence for both Minister and officials.

Rates: Vacant Property, Carrickfergus

Mr Beggs asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel to detail, in respect of Carrickfergus town centre (Killycrot Ward), the value of lost rates due to vacant

property in the (a) commercial and retail sector; and (b) residential sector. (AQW 2133/01)

Dr Farren: The Rate Collection Agency is responsible for the collection of rates in Northern Ireland.

Under rating legislation vacant unoccupied properties do not normally attract liability for the payment of rates. Rates on vacant unoccupied properties are classed as rates foregone.

The Agency's records at 25 February 2002 show that the potential rate revenue which could have been raised from:

- (a) vacant commercial and retail property in the Killicrot Ward for year ending 31 March 2002 would have been £173,060.15; and
- (b) vacant residential property in the Killicrot Ward for year ending 31 March 2002 would have been £21,981.13.

The number of vacant properties for rating purposes fluctuates on a daily basis to reflect property going into and out of occupation. The Rate Collection Agency has a continuous programme of vacancy inspections to ensure that property that becomes occupied is identified and that a rate bill is issued.

Appointments to the Northern Ireland Civil Service

Mr Hilditch asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel to detail his role in establishing criteria in making appointments to the Northern Ireland Civil Service. (AQW 2170/01)

Dr Farren: As part of its responsibility for the general management and control of the civil service, my Department prescribes the general requirements for appointment to situations in the Civil Service. The Recruitment Service of the Department undertakes most Civil Service recruitment in accordance with the provisions of the Civil Service Commissioners Recruitment Code, which sets out the requirements for selection on merit in fair and open competition. Criteria for recruitment at Administrative Assistant and Administrative Officer level is agreed on a corporate basis with Departments. Staff employed on a casual or temporary basis are eligible to apply if they meet the criteria.

Non-Departmental Public Bodies

Mr Maskey asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel to detail expenditure figures for those non-Departmental Public Bodies under his responsibility in each year since 1995. (AQW 2223/01)

Dr Farren: The annual Cabinet Office Publication, 'Public Bodies' provides a range of information including

expenditure for Northern Ireland Non-Departmental Public Bodies. Copies of these publications have been placed in the Assembly library and are also available on the Cabinet Office website (www.cabinet-office.gov.uk/quango).

NISRA's Analysis of Sickness Absence

Mr Beggs asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel, pursuant to AQW 3658/01, what assessment can he make in relation to (a) the absentee levels in DSD and DEL; and (b) whether work conditions, work practices and management structures in DSD and DEL have contributed to absentee levels. (AQW 2224/01)

Dr Farren: I would refer to my response to your question in the Assembly on 11 February 2002 when I highlighted NISRA's analysis of sickness absence in NI Departments during 2000/2001 (the report of which is available in the Assembly Library). This corporate analysis shows that high levels of absenteeism in certain departments are related to the different age, gender and grade profiles of those departments. NISRA is working directly with individual departments in helping them to identify underlying trends and causes specific to that department.

It would not be appropriate for me to comment about the internal management/ operation of other departments but I can assure that my department will continue to provide corporate assistance to departments in helping them tackle sickness absence.

Single Status of Conditions of Service

Dr O'Hagan asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel what assessment he has made in relation to the policy of single status of conditions of service between industrial and non-industrial civil servants. (AQW 2341/01)

Dr Farren: Over recent months officials from DFP and departments with industrial staff, have been engaged in discussions with the trade unions about a major programme of work that will be undertaken to harmonise terms and conditions across all industrial staff in the first instance, and then across industrial and non-industrial staff.

Work is also underway to establish a central consultation body that will provide a forum to discuss and deal with terms and conditions that are not currently delegated to departments.

Single Status of Conditions of Service

Dr O'Hagan asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel to make available to the Assembly a copy of the minute of 20 August 1999 which sets out his Department's position on Single Status of Conditions of Service. (AQW 2350/01)

Dr Farren: I refer to your AQW 2350/01 which requested access to a minute of 20 August 1999 which set out my Department's position on single status of conditions of service.

I assume that you are referring to harmonisation of the terms and conditions of industrial and non-industrial employees in the NICS. Anything written in August 1999 would represent the views of the previous administration and would, not necessarily set out my Department's position.

There has been considerable recent consideration of this issue and my Department's position, as notified to trade unions, is that harmonisation of terms and conditions will first be addressed between groups of industrial staff employed by NI Departments and subsequently between industrial and non-industrial staff. Work has commenced on this and will be taken forward in the light of cost and other considerations.

HEALTH, SOCIAL SERVICES AND PUBLIC SAFETY

Waiting Times: Orthopaedic Surgery

Mrs Carson asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the average waiting time for orthopaedic surgery in Northern Ireland in comparison with (a) the national average; (b) the England average; (c) the Scottish average; and (d) the Welsh average, over the past 3 years. (AQW 2068/01)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety (Ms de Brún): The average waiting time in days for operations in the Trauma and Orthopaedic Surgery speciality in hospitals here for the past 3 years is 88, 101, 199 respectively. Comparable figures for England and Scotland are detailed in the table below. This information is not available for Wales and it is therefore not possible to compute an average for Great Britain and here.

Year	Average waiting time in days		
	NI	England	Scotland
1998/99	199	169	96
1999/00	101	159	91
2000/01	88	161	108 ⁽¹⁾

⁽¹⁾ Provisional.

Ar an mheán, le trí bliana anuas sna hospidél anseo, is í an tréimhse feithimh i laethanta le haghaidh obráidí sa speisialtóireacht Máinliacht Tráma agus Ortaipéideach 88, 101 agus 199 faoi seach.. Tá na figiúirí comparáideacha do Shasana agus d'Albain ar fáil sa tábla thíos. Níl an t-eolas sin ar fáil don Bhreatain Bheag agus ar an ábhar

sin ní féidir meánfhigiúr a ríomh don Bhreatain Mhór agus don áit seo.

Bliain	Meánam feithimh i laethanta		
	TÉ	Sasana	Albain
1998/99	199	169	96
1999/00	101	159	91
2000/01	88	161	108 ⁽¹⁾

⁽¹⁾ Sealadach.

Scoliosis

Mrs Carson asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail (a) the number of operations relating to Scoliosis in each of the past 5 years; (b) the number of patients with Scoliosis who are on a waiting list for surgery; (c) the length of time a patient is expected to wait before receiving surgery; and (d) the number of surgeons capable of performing operations on Scoliosis sufferers. (AQW 2091/01)

Ms de Brún: (a) This information is detailed in the table below.

OPERATIONS FOR CORRECTION OF SCOLIOSIS, 1997/8 -2001/02

1997/98	34
1998/99	33
1999/00	35
2000/01	42
2001/02 ⁽¹⁾	24

⁽¹⁾ From 1 April 2001 to 31 January 2002

- (b) Currently there are 52 patients waiting for surgery for Scoliosis.
- (c) This information is not readily available in the form requested and could only be obtained at disproportionate cost.
- (d) There are currently 2 surgeons in local hospitals who undertake Scoliosis surgery.

(a) Tá an t-eolas seo léirithe sa tábla thíos.

OBRAÍDÍ CHUN SCOLÓIS A CHÓIRIÚ, 1997/8 -2001/02

1997/98	34
1998/99	33
1999/00	35
2000/01	42
2001/02 ⁽¹⁾	24

⁽¹⁾ Ó 1 Aibreán 2001 go dtí 31 Eanáir 2002

- (b) Faoi láthair tá 52 othar ag fanacht le máinliacht Scolóise.

- (c) Níl an t-eolas seo ar fáil go héasca agus ní féidir é a fháil ach ar chostas díreireach.
- (d) Faoi láthair tá 2 máinlia in otharlanna áitiúla a dhéanann máinliacht Scolóise.

Waiting Times: Orthopaedic Surgery

Mr Dalton asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail (a) the current waiting times for orthopaedic surgery; and (b) any plans she has to reduce the list. (AQW 2093/01)

Ms de Brún: Information is available on numbers of persons waiting for inpatient admission or first outpatient appointments in the Trauma & Orthopaedics specialty, and is detailed in the table below.

NUMBER OF PATIENTS AWAITING ADMISSION TO HOSPITAL OR FIRST OUTPATIENT APPOINTMENT IN THE TRAUMA & ORTHOPAEDIC SPECIALTY, QUARTER ENDING SEPTEMBER 2001

	Time Waiting (months)					Total
	0-2	3-11	12-17	18-23	24+	
Inpatients	1,238	2,492	752	493	627	5,602
Outpatients	3,722	5,996	2,295	1,412	1,508	14,933

Orthopaedic services here have been under sustained pressure for some time. There has been a general increase in demand for orthopaedic services and waiting lists have grown as a result of this and the shortage of orthopaedic surgeons.

A number of measures have been taken to deal with this increase in demand including an increase of fifty percent in the number of orthopaedic surgeons in training and the purchase of operations in Scotland.

Tá eolas ar fáil ar líon na ndaoine ag fanacht le dul isteach san otharlann mar othair chónaitheacha nó lena gcéad choinní éisothair sa speisialtacht Tráma agus Ortaipéideach, agus miondealaítear sa tábla thíos é.

LÍON NA N-OTHAR AG FANACHT LE DUL ISTEACH SAN OTHARLANN NÓ LENA GCÉAD CHOINNE ÉISOTHAIR SA SPEISIALTACHT TRÁMA AGUS ORTAIPÉIDEACH, DON RÁITHE AG CRÍOCHNÚ MEÁN FÓMHAIR 2001.

	Am ag Fanacht (míonna)					Iomlán
	0-2	3-11	12-17	18-23	24+	
Othair Chónaitheacha	1,238	2,492	752	493	627	5,602
Éisothair	3,722	5,996	2,295	1,412	1,508	14,933

Bhí seirbhísí ortaipéideacha anseo faoi bhrú leanúnach le tamall fada anuas. Bhí méadú ginearálta ann sa ráchairt ar sheirbhísí ortaipéideacha agus de thoradh air seo agus ar an ghanntanas máinlianna ortaipéideacha, tháinig méadú ar liostaí feithimh.

Rinneadh roinnt beart le déileáil leis an mhéadú seo sa ráchairt mar aon le méadú caoga faoin gcéad i líon na máinlianna ortaipéideacha in oiliúint agus le ceannach obráidí in Albain.

Banbridge Hospital Site

Mr S Wilson asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail (a) any plans she has for the site of the former Banbridge Hospital; (b) the cost of these plans; (c) the timescale for completion; (d) how it will be financed; and (e) the finance she proposes to commit from her budget. (AQW 2107/01)

Ms de Brún: The bulk of the Banbridge Hospital site consisting of the former hospital buildings and associated lands was sold to Banbridge District Council on 14 January 2002.

The remainder of the site consists of:

- (a) Banbridge Polyclinic, which is owned by Craigavon Area Hospital Trust and provides Outpatient, Diagnostic and Treatment support services. The Trust has no plans for the further development of this site.
- (b) Donard Special School, which is owned by the Department. The school is due to move to a replacement facility in late March/early April 2002. The school site will then be surplus to requirements. A sale of the site to a group of Banbridge General Practitioners, to facilitate the building of a new Group Surgery, has been provisionally agreed.

Díoladh an mhórchuid de shuíomh Otharlann Dhroichead na Banna ina bhfuil foirgnimh na seanotharlainne agus a tailte, le Comhairle Ceantair Dhroichead na Banna é ar an 14 Eanáir 2002.

Ar an chuid eile den suíomh tá:

- (a) Polaichlinic Dhroichead na Banna ar le hÍontaobhas Otharlann Cheantar Chreag na hAbhann é a sholáthraíonn seirbhísí tacaíochta Éisothair, Diagnóiseacha, agus Cóireála. Níl sé beartaithe ag an Iontaobhas an suíomh seo a chóiriú a thuilleadh.
- (b) Scoil Speisialta Donard ar leis an Roinn í. Tá an scoil le bogadh go háis úrnua go déanach i mí an Mhárta/go luath i mí Aibreáin 2002. Ansin, beidh suíomh na scoile gan feidhm. Comhaontaíodh go sealadach go ndíolfáil an suíomh le dream Dochtúirí Ginearálta as Droichead na Banna, chun tógáil Clinic nua Ghrúpa a éascú.

Education in Dental Health

Mr M Robinson asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what plans she has to improve education in dental health for parents and children. (AQW 2116/01)

Ms de Brún: Boards and Trusts are taking forward the recommendations in the Mid Term Evaluation of the Oral Health Strategy, several of which include a component of oral health education.

Mothers and young children are regarded as a priority group and many of the oral health education programmes delivered by Trusts are targeted at this group.

Tá Boird agus Iontaobhais ag tabhairt chun tosaigh na moltaí sa Mheastóireacht Lárthearma ar an Straitéis Um Shláinte Bhéil, a bhfuil oideachas sláinte bhéil mar chuid de roinnt acu.

Meastar máithreacha agus páistí óga bheith ina ngrúpa tosaíochta agus tá cuid mhór de na cláir oideachais sláinte bhéil a sholáthraíonn na hIontaobhais dírithe ar an ghrúpa seo.

Fluoridation Schemes

Mr M Robinson asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to give her assessment of the effectiveness of fluoridation schemes. (AQW 2117/01)

Ms de Brún: Studies carried out in different parts of the world show that fluoridation of water supplies is highly effective in prevention of dental caries.

There are no fluoridation schemes here. About 70% of the water supply in the South of Ireland is fluoridated. Surveys carried out there in fluoridated and non-fluoridated areas show a significant difference in rates of dental decay.

Léiríonn staidéir déanta in áiteanna éagsúla ar an domhan go bhfuil fluairiniú soláthairtí uisce iontach éifeachtach i gcosc cáiréas déadach.

Níl scéim fhluairínithe ar bith anseo. Tá thart faoi 70% den soláthar uisce i ndeisceart na hÉireann fluairínithe. Léiríonn suirbhéanna déanta i gceantair fhluairínithe agus neamhfluairínithe go bhfuil difear mór ann i rátaí meath na bhfiacra.

Ambulance Crew Members

Mr M Robinson asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety how many ambulance crew members (a) are on sick leave as a result of being assaulted while on duty; and (b) were assaulted while on duty in each of the last 10 years. (AQW 2118/01)

Ms de Brún: There are currently no ambulance crew members on sick leave as a result of being assaulted while on duty.

Information on the numbers of ambulance staff assaulted while on duty is only available from 2000. There were 33 attacks in 2000, 68 attacks in 2001 and 21 attacks up to and including 19th February 2002.

Níl ball ar bith den fhoireann otharcharr ar shaoire tinnis faoi láthair de dheasca ionsaí déanta orthu agus iad ar dualgas.

Níl eolas ar líon na mball den fhoireann otharcharr ionsaithe agus iad ar dualgas ach ar fáil ón bhliain 2000. Rinneadh 33 ionsaí i 2000, 68 ionsaí i 2001 agus 21 ionsaí suas go dtí 19 Feabhra 2002, an dáta sin san áireamh.

Townland Names

Mrs Carson asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety how she has encouraged the use of townland names in written communications.

(AQW 2119/01)

Ms de Brún: Civil Servants in my Department are encouraged to reply to written communications using the address supplied to them by correspondents.

Spreagtar Státseirbhísigh i mo Roinnse freagra a thabhairt ar chumarsáid scríofa ag úsáid an tseolta tugtha dóibh ag comhfhreagaithe.

Elective Orthopaedic Treatment

Mrs Carson asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the procedure used to prioritise waiting lists for elective orthopaedic treatment.

(AQW 2120/01)

Ms de Brún: The prioritisation of waiting lists for elective orthopaedic treatment is undertaken by consultant orthopaedic surgeons, who assess the clinical priority of patients for surgery. Orthopaedic waiting lists are validated on a regular basis.

Tugann máinlianna ortaipéideacha comhairleacha, a dhéanann measúnú ar thosaíocht chliniciúil othar le haghaidh máinliachta, tosaíocht do liostaí feithimh le haghaidh cóireála ortaipéidí roghnaí. Daingnítear liostaí ortaipéideacha feithimh ar bhonn rialta.

Single Vaccines: Measles, Mumps or Rubella

Mr B Hutchinson asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety in the event that she has no plans concerning the introduction of single vaccines for measles, mumps or rubella, to make a statement in support of MMR clearly stating that babies are not at risk from the vaccine. (AQW 2144/01)

Ms de Brún: I have no plans to introduce single vaccines for measles, mumps or rubella. To do so would be to risk a return of these diseases and would be contrary to the advice of the overwhelming majority of experts who have considered the matter. I fully support the recent statement by my Department's Chief Medical Officer, Dr Henrietta Campbell, that the MMR vaccine

is the safest and best option to protect children against measles, mumps and rubella.

Níl sé ar intinn agam vacsaíní singile a thabhairt isteach don bhrúitíneach, don phlucamas nó don brúitíneach dhearg. Dá ndéanfaí sin, bheadh an baol ann go dtiocfadh na galair seo amach arís agus bheadh sin in éadan na comhairle ó bhunús mór na saineolaithe a rinne machnamh ar an cheist seo. Tacaím go hiomlán le ráiteas déanach Phríomh-Oifigeach Míochaine mo Roinne, an Dr. Henrietta Campbell a dúirt gurbh í an vacsaín MMR an dóigh is sábháilte agus is fearr le páistí a chosaint ar an bhrúitíneach, an phlucamas agus ar an bhrúitíneach dhearg.

Solvent Abuse Treatment

Mr M Robinson asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety how many people, broken down by age group, were treated by the Health Service as a result of solvent abuse in each year since 1997.

(AQW 2154/01)

Ms de Brún: This information is not available.

Níl an t-eolas seo ar fáil.

Rehabilitating Solvent Abusers

Mr M Robinson asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what specific measures are in place in respect of rehabilitating solvent abusers.

(AQW 2156/01)

Ms de Brún: All treatment services provide help for solvent abuse as they do for any other addiction. There are no measures in place specifically for solvent abusers. Re-Solv, based at Knockbracken Healthcare Park, is a charity solely concerned with the prevention of solvent and volatile substance abuse.

Cuireann na seirbhísí cóireála go léir cuidiú ar fáil do mhí-úsáid tuaslagóirí mar a dhéanann siad d'andúil ar bith eile. Níl aon bhearta ar leith i bhfeidhm faoi choinne mí-úsáideoirí tuaslagóirí. Is carthanacht Re-Solv, lonnaithe i bPáirc Cúram Sláinte Knockbracken arb é cosc mí-úsáid tuaslagóirí agus ábhar so-ghalaithe an t-aon chúram amháin atá aige.

Toxic Waste

Mr Bradley asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety, pursuant to AQO 769/01, what steps have been taken to ensure that the disposal of toxic waste poses no threat to public health or public safety.

(AQW 2165/01)

Ms de Brún: The Department of the Environment revised the controls on toxic waste under the Special

Waste Regulations (Northern Ireland) 1998, to help ensure that toxic and other special wastes are handled properly, protecting the environment and preventing harm to human health. The methods used to dispose of toxic healthcare waste have advanced to ensure that only trained staff handle toxic waste and that it is dispatched to licensed waste management contractors for disposal or recycling, in accordance with the requirements of the Regulations.

In March 1999 my Department issued a training package to all Health and Social Services Trusts. In addition, the Regional Supplies Service of the Central Services Agency made arrangements for the training of healthcare staff on all aspects of clinical waste disposal including legislation, health and safety, segregation, packaging and safe disposal of toxic clinical waste. To date more than 15,000 healthcare staff have been trained.

Rinne an Roinn Comhshaoil athbhreithniú ar stiúradh dramhaíola tocsainí de réir na Rialachán Speisialta Dramhaíola (Tuaisceart Éireann) 1998, chun cinntiú go láimhseáiltear dramhaíl thocsaineach agus dramhaíl speisialta eile mar is ceart, ag cosaint na timpeallachta agus ag cur coisc ar an dochar do shláinte dhaoine. Cinntíonn an feabhas mór atá déanta ar na modhanna úsáidte le dramhaíl thocsaineach chúraim shláinte a dhiúscairt nach láimhseálann ach an fhoireann oile dramhaíl thocsaineach agus go seoltar chuig conraitheoirí ceadúnaithe láimhseála dramhaíola í le haghaidh diúscartha nó athchúrsála, de réir choinníollacha na Rialachán.

I Márta 1999, chuir mo Roinn amach pacáiste oiliúna chuig na hÍontaobhais Shláinte agus Sheirbhísí Sóisialta go léir. Ina theannta sin, rinne Seirbhís Soláthairtí Réigiúnacha na Lár-Ghníomhaireachta Seirbhísí socrúithe d'oiliúint na foirne cúraim shláinte ar gach uile gné de dhiúscairt dramhaíola cliniciúla, ar reachtaíocht, ar shláinte agus ar shábháilteacht, ar dheighilt, ar phacáil agus ar dhiúscairt shlán dramhaíola cliniciúla tocsainí chomh maith. Go dtí seo, bhí breis agus 15,000 oibrí cúraim shláinte oile.

Multi-Disciplinary Adolescent Unit: Royal Group of Hospitals

Mr Shannon asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what provisions will be made available for teenagers who are receiving treatment for cancer at the Royal Victoria Hospital. (AQW 2166/01)

Ms de Brún: My Department is at present considering an initial proposal from the Royal Group of Hospitals for the development of services at the Royal Belfast Hospital for Sick Children. This includes a plan to establish a dedicated multi-disciplinary adolescent unit, which would include provision for teenagers with cancer.

Faoi láthair, tá mo Roinn ag déanamh machnaimh ar an chéad mholadh ó Ghrúpa Ríoga na nOtharlann faoi

fhorbairt na seirbhísí in Otharlann Ríoga Bhéal Feirste do Pháistí Tinne. Cuimsíonn sé seo plean le hionad ildhisciplíneach cuspóireach d'ógánaigh a chur ar bun ina mbeadh áiseanna ann do dhéagóirí a bhfuil ailse orthu.

MMR Vaccination

Mr Shannon asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what plans she has to undertake an advertising campaign to promote the MMR vaccination.

(AQW 2167/01)

Ms de Brún: I have no plans at present to undertake any new advertising campaign to promote the MMR vaccination. My Department issued last year a new leaflet for parents and sent a new information pack "The Facts about MMR Vaccine" to all health professionals involved in immunisation. Most recently, detailed information sheets for health professionals and parents about single vaccines have been prepared and issued; the information about MMR on the Department's website has been expanded; a new poster has been produced for GP surgeries and my Department has begun working with Health Action Zones to inform local communities about the facts on MMR.

Níl sé ar intinn agam tús a chur le feachtas nua fógraíochta leis an vacsaín MMR a chur chun cinn. Chuir mo Roinn amach bileog nua do thuismitheoirí anuraidh agus sheol siad pacáiste nua eolais "The Facts about MMR Vaccine" chuig na gairmithe sláinte go léir a bhí páirteach sa scéim imdhíonta. Ar na mallaibh, ullmhaíodh agus eisíodh bileoga mioneoilais do ghairmithe sláinte agus do thuismitheoirí faoi vacsaíní singile, cuireadh leis an eolas ar an vacsaín MMR ar líonláithreán na Roinne, rinneadh postaer nua do chlinicí Gnáthdhochtúirí agus thosaigh mo Roinn ag obair le Criosanna Gnámh ar Shláinte leis an fhírinne a chur ar dhaoine faoin vacsaín MMR.

Mental Health Problems: School Age Children

Mr M Robinson asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to outline (a) the estimated prevalence of mental health problems in school-age children; and (b) any research currently being undertaken on this matter.

(AQW 2184/01)

Ms de Brún:

- (a) There were 510 mentally ill persons aged 5 – 15 with whom Community Trusts had contact during the year ending 31 March 2001. However this data is of limited use in determining prevalence or incidence of mental health problems in school age children, as it relates only to persons who have contact with Community Trusts. There may be others in the general population who suffer from

some form of mental health problem but who do not have contact with Community Trusts and for whom no information is available.

- (b) No research is currently being undertaken on this matter.

- (a) Bhí 510 duine a raibh tinneas meabhrach orthu idir 5 – 15 bliain d'aois lena raibh teagmháil ag Iontaobhais Phobail leo le linn na bliana ag críochnú ar 31 Márta 2001. Bíodh sin mar atá, tá úsáid na sonraí seo teoranta ó thaobh forleithne nó minicíocht fadhbanna sláinte meabhrach ag pháistí atá ar aois scoile a chinntiú, mar ní bhaineann sé ach le daoine a mbíonn teagmháil acu le hIontaobhais Phobail. Is féidir go bhfuil roinnt daoine eile sa phobal a fhulaíngíonn ag tinneas meabhrach de chineál éigin nach mbíonn teagmháil acu le hIontaobhais Phobail agus nach bhfuil eolas ar bith ar fáil dóibh.

- (b) Níl taighde á dhéanamh ar an ábhar seo faoi láthair.

Health Inequalities

Mr Gibson asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what steps are being taken to tackle health inequalities; and to make a statement.

(AQW 2186/01)

Ms de Brún: My Department and its associated organisations are taking a number of steps to tackle health inequalities.

Through the Investing for Health Strategy, due to be published shortly, we aim to reduce the inequalities in health which exist here particularly by targeting action in the most deprived areas. The strategy will establish Investing for Health partnerships which will work to identify the health and well-being issues affecting their communities and develop integrated health improvement plans for local action.

Through the New Targeting Social Need (TSN) policy, we aim to tackle social need and social exclusion by targeting efforts and available resources towards those in greatest social need. My Department and all Health and Social Services Boards have Action Plans in place and all Health and Social Services Trusts have drawn up draft Action Plans on which they are now publicly consulting. My Department and its associated bodies will work closely to ensure that goals we have set ourselves are progressed and achieved, including a more equitable funding allocation according to health and social care need.

Through implementation of our equality obligations under Section 75 of the Northern Ireland Act 1998, we have begun a programme of region-wide equality impact assessments on the impact of our policies on the nine categories of people specified in the Act. Where appro-

priate, we will take mitigating action to address any inequalities identified.

Tá mo Roinn agus a comheagrais ag déanamh roinnt beart le tabhairt faoi éagothromaíochtaí sláinte.

Tríd an Straitéis Infheistíocht sa tSláinte, atá le foilsiú ar ball, tá sé de chuspóir againn na héagothromaíochtaí i sláinte atá anseo a laghdú go háirithe trí ghníomh a dhéanamh sna ceantair is mó ánaís. Cuirfidh an straitéis páirtíochtaí Infheistíocht sa tSláinte ar bun a fheidhmeoidh leis na ceisteanna sláinte agus dea-bhaile a bhfuil tionchar acu ar a bpobail a aithint agus le pleananna imeasctha feabhsú sláinte a fhorbairt le haghaidh gnímh áitiúil.

Tríd an pholasáí Nua Dírithe ar Riachtanas Sóisialta (DRS), tá sé d'aidhm againn tabhairt faoi ánas sóisialta agus faoi eisiacht shóisialta trinár n-iarrachtaí agus tríd na hacmhainní atá ar fáil a dhíriú orthu siúd a bhfuil níos mó ánaís shóisialta orthu. Tá Pleananna Gnímh i bhfeidhm ag mo Roinn agus ag na Boird Shláinte agus Sheirbhísí Sóisialta go léir agus dhréachtaigh na hIontaobhais Shláinte agus Sheirbhísí Sóisialta go léir Dréacht-Phleananna Gníomhaíochta ar a bhfuil siad ag déanamh comhairlithe anois go poiblí. Comhoibreoidh mo Roinn agus a comhfhórais go dlúth le cinntiú go ndéanfar dul chun cinn ar na sprioc-chuspóirí a leag muid síos dúinn féin agus go mbainfear amach iad, mar aon le dáileadh níos cothroime maoinithe de réir riachtanais shláinte agus chúraim shóisialta.

Trí chur i bhfeidhm ár ndualgas comhionannais de réir Mír 75 d'Acht Thuaisceart Éireann 1998, chuir muid tús le clár de mheasúnuithe tionchair chomhionannais ar fud an réigiúin ar thionchar ár bpolasaithe ar na naoi n-aicme de dhaoine luaite san Acht. Más cuí é, déanfaidh muid gníomh maolaithe le tabhairt faoi éagothromaíocht ar bith aitheanta.

Delays in Discharges: West Tyrone

Mr Gibson asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what steps she is taking to reduce unnecessary delays in discharges from the acute service sector in West Tyrone. (AQW 2197/01)

Ms de Brún: I am advised that the Sperrin Lakeland Health and Social Services Trust, which covers West Tyrone, currently has no patients that are deemed medically fit, remaining in hospital from the West Tyrone area.

I am aware that Sperrin Lakeland HSS Trust are making use of step down beds and the employment of a discharge co-ordinator in order to deal with any unnecessary delays in discharge.

Cuireadh in iúl dom nach bhfuil othar ar bith ó cheantar Iarthar Thír Eoghain atá fáthmheasta mar folláin ag Iontaobhas Sláinte agus Seirbhísí Sóisialta Speirín/Thír na Lochanna, a chlúdaíonn Iarthar Thír Eoghain, san otharlann faoi láthair.

Tá a fhios agam go bhfuil Iontaobhas SSS Speirín/Thír na Lochanna ag baint úsáide as leapacha le dréimírí agus gur fhostaigh siad comhordaitheoir scaoilte amach le déileáil le moill neamhriachtanach ar bith i scaoiladh amach othar.

Mental Health Patients: West Tyrone

Mr Gibson asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what recent progress has she made in improving the treatment of mental health patients in West Tyrone. (AQW 2198/01)

Ms de Brún: The Western Health and Social Services Board has commissioned the following progress in improving mental health services in the greater Tyrone area, including West Tyrone:

Child and Family Mental Health Work

Additional staff within the Child and Family Mental Health Team based at Rivendell House, Omagh - a psychology attachment to GP practices in Strabane and a primary care based counselling service for young people in Strabane.

Discharges from Hospital

The discharge of 16 long stay patients from the Tyrone and Fermanagh Hospital to new purpose built and fully staffed accommodation at Cranney Close in Omagh.

Drugs Treatment

Additional staffing has been recruited within the Sperrin Lakeland Trust area to deal specifically with drug related problems.

Primary Care

A successful primary care initiative has been permanently funded in Omagh.

Street Drinking

An innovative street drinkers project for chronic drinkers has been successfully piloted in Omagh in conjunction with the voluntary sector.

Help Line

A 24 hour help line is now available to service users, carers and GPs throughout the Sperrin Lakeland Trust area.

Seriously Challenging Behaviour

The Tyrone and Fermanagh Hospital has increased the range of treatment and rehabilitation options for individuals with seriously challenging behaviour. This has entailed the appointment of a range of professional staff and capital development to facilitate day activity.

Users Advocacy

The Sperrin Lakeland Trust has supported the "Heads Together" user group with the use of premises and

assistance with running costs. A website for users has been established and the group plans to provide an advocacy service to in-patients.

Day Care

The Foyle Trust, in partnership with the Open Door Housing Association, has provided new day care provision in Strabane, for up to twenty people with mental health problems.

Housing

The Foyle Trust has developed a group housing scheme for up to 10 clients in Strabane in partnership with Open Door Housing Association.

In addition, both Sperrin Lakeland and Foyle Trusts have established multi-disciplinary community based mental health teams in Omagh and Strabane, embracing Psychiatry, Social Work and Psychology.

Choimisiúnaigh Bord Sláinte agus Seirbhísí Sóisialta an Iarthair na tuairiscí seo a leanas ar an dul chun cinn déanta i seirbhísí sláinte meabhrach i gceantar iomlán Thír Eoghain, Iarthar Thír Eoghain san áireamh.

Obair Shláinte Meabhrach Páistí agus Teaghlaigh

Oibrithe breise laistigh den Fhoireann Sláinte Meabhrach Páistí agus Teaghlaigh lonnaithe i dTeach Rivendell, An Ómaigh – ionad síceolaíochta curtha le clinici Dochtúirí Ginearálta ar an Srath Bán agus seirbhís chomhairle bunaithe ar phríomhchúram do dhaoine óga ar an Srath Bán.

Scaoileadh amach Othar ón Otharlann

Scaoileadh amach 16 othar cónaitheach fadtéarmach ó Otharlann Thír Eoghain agus Fhear Manach go cóiríocht chuspóireach nuathógtha le foireann iomlán i gClós Cranny ar an Ómaigh.

Cóireáil Drugaí

Earcaíodh oibrithe breise ó laistigh de cheantar Iontaobhas Thír Lochanna Speirín le déileáil go díreach le fadhbanna bainteach le drugaí.

Príomhchúram

Tá scéim rathúil príomhchúraim ar an Ómaigh maoinithe go buan.

Ólachán Sráide

D'éirigh go maith le scéim nua phíolóta óltóirí sráide d'óltóirí ainsealacha ar an Ómaigh i gcomhar leis an earnáil dheonach.

Líne Chabhrach

Tá líne chabhrach 24 uair ar fáil anois d'úsáideoirí seirbhísí, d'fheighlithe agus do Dochtúirí Ginearálta ar fud cheantar Iontaobhas Thír Lochanna Speirín.

Iompar Fiordhúshlánach

Mhéadaigh Otharlann Thír Eoghain agus Fhear Manach réimse na roghanna cóireála agus athshlánaithe do dhaoine aonair a bhfuil iompar fiordhúshlánach acu. Tá ceapachán roinnt oibrithe gairmiúla agus forbairt chaipitil le gníomhaíocht lae a éascú i gceist leis seo.

Tacaíocht d'Úsáideoirí

Thacaigh Iontaobhas Thír Lochanna Speirín leis an ghrúpa d'úsáideoirí 'Heads Together' trína n-áitreabh a chur ar fáil dóibh le húsáid agus trí chuidiú a thabhairt le costais reáchtála. Cuireadh líonláithreán ar bun d'úsáideoirí agus tá sé ar intinn ag an ghrúpa seirbhís thacaíochta a sholáthar d'othair chónaitheacha.

Cúram Lae

Chuir Iontaobhas an Fheabhail, i gcomhar leis an Chumann Tithíochta Doras Ar Oscailt, áis nua chúraim lae ar fáil ar an Srath Bán faoi choinne suas go dtí fiche duine le fadhbanna sláinte meabhrach.

Tithíocht

D'fhorbair Iontaobhas an Fheabhail scéim thithíochta ghrúpa faoi choinne suas go 10 cliant ar an Srath Bán i gcomhar leis an Chumann Tithíochta Doras Ar Oscailt.

Ina theannta sin, chuir Iontaobhas Thír Lochanna Speirín agus Iontaobhas an Fheabhail araon foirne ildhisciplíneacha pobalbhunaithe sláinte meabhrach le chéile ar an Ómaigh, agus ar an Srath Bán le déileáil le Síciatracht, le hObair Shóisialta agus le Síceolaíocht.

Investment in Accident and Emergency Facilities: West Tyrone

Mr Gibson asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what investment has been made in the last 5 years on accident and emergency facilities in West Tyrone. (AQW 2199/01)

Ms de Brún: The figures below represent the additional investment on Accident and Emergency Facilities in West Tyrone for the 1998/99, 1999/00, 2000/01 and 2001/2002 financial years.

Financial Year	Investment	Value £
1998/1999	ECG Machine-Tyrone County Hospital	5,495
1999/2000	Additional Staff Grade Support	8,000
2000/2001	Additional Consultancy	31,000
2001/2002	Additional Staff Grade Support HPM3 Monitors - Tyrone County Hospital	20,000 9,000

Source: Sperrin Lakeland HSS Trust

Seasann na figiúirí thíos don infheistíocht bhreise Áiseanna Timpistí agus Éigeandála i dTír Eoghain Thiar do na blianta airgeadais 1998/99, 1999/00, 2000/01 agus 2001/2002.

Bliain airgeadais	Infheistíocht	Luach £
1998/1999	Gléas ECG – Otharlann Chontae Thír Eoghain	5,495
1999/2000	Tacaíocht Bhreise Foirne Grádaithe	8,000
2000/2001	Comhairleach Bhreise	31,000
2001/2002	Tacaíocht Bhreise Foirne Grádaithe Monatóirí HPM3 - Otharlann Chontae Thír Eoghain	20,000
		9,000

Foinse: Iontaobhas SSS Thír Lochanna Speirín

Residential Homes: West Tyrone

Mr Gibson asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety how many beds for elderly people have been lost in residential homes in West Tyrone between May 1997 and the latest available date.

(AQW 2200/01)

Ms de Brún: The average number of available places in residential homes for elderly people in Sperrin Lakeland Trust increased by 85 from 204 to 289 between 31 March 1997 and 31 March 2001.

AVERAGE AVAILABLE PLACES IN RESIDENTIAL HOMES FOR ELDERLY PEOPLE

Trust	31 Mar. 1997	31 Mar. 2001	Change	% Change
Sperrin Lakeland	204	289	85	+ 41.7%

Mhéadaigh meánuimhir na n-áiteanna ar fáil i dtithe cónaithe do sheandaoine in Iontaobhas SSS Speirín Tír na Lochanna le 85 ó 204 idir 31 Márta 1997 agus 31 Márta 2001.

MEÁNUIMHIR NA N-ÁITEANNA AR FÁIL I DTITHE CÓNAITHE DO SHEANDAOINE

Iontaobhas	31 Márta 1997	31 Márta 2001	Athrú	% Athrú
Speirín Tír na Lochanna	204	289	85	+ 41.7%

Drugs: Education and Awareness

Mr Hilditch asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail (a) support available to parents whose children are addicted to drugs, and (b) initiatives being taken to promote drug awareness.

(AQW 2201/01)

Ms de Brún: Considerable resources have been invested to tackle drug and alcohol related harm. Over

£4.5 million has been allocated to a range of projects to help deliver on the objectives of the Drug Strategy. These projects offer drugs education and support for parents; education and awareness raising in schools and community groups; improved and expanded treatment, rehabilitation and counselling services for drug users; and action to reduce drug use in prisons and among offenders. A public information campaign aimed at children, young people and parents has been ongoing.

Drugs education is also a statutory obligation, which requires schools to have in place a drugs education policy and to teach drugs education as part of the Health Education cross-curricular theme.

Rinneadh infheistíocht shuntasach acmhainní le dul i ngleic le dochar bainteach le drugaí agus le halcól. Dáileadh breis agus £4.5 milliún ar réimse tionscnamh chun cuspóirí na Straitéise Drugaí a bhaint amach. Cuireann na tionscnaimh seo oideachas drugaí agus tacaíocht ar fáil do thuismitheoirí: oideachas agus spreagadh feasachta i scoileanna agus le grúpaí pobail; cóireál forbartha agus feabhsaithe, seirbhísí athshlánaithe d'úsáideoirí drugaí; agus gníomh chun úsáid drugaí i bpríosún i measc ciontóirí a laghdú. Tá feachtas poiblí dírithe ar pháistí, ógánaigh agus ar thuismitheoirí ar leanúint.

Is oibleagáid réachtúil chomh maith é oideachas drugaí, a thugann ar scoileanna polasaí oideachas drugaí a bheith curtha i bhfeidhm agus oideachas drugaí a theagasc mar pháirt den téama traschuraclaim ar Oideachas Sláinte.

Macmillan Nurses

Mr Shannon asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the number of Macmillan nurses that are currently working in each Trust.

(AQW 2202/01)

Ms de Brún: The information requested is set out in the table below:

Trust Name	No of Macmillan nurses
Belfast City Hospital	7
Mater Infirmorum	1
Royal Hospitals	6
Ulster Community & Hospitals	5
Down Lisburn	1
United Hospital	4
Craigavon & Banbridge	4
Craigavon Area Hospital	4
Armagh & Dungannon	2
Newry & Mourne	2

Trust Name	No of Macmillan nurses
Sperrin Lakeland	2
Causeway	1
Altnagelvin	2
Total	41

Tá an t-eolas a iarradh leagtha amach sa tábla thíos:

Ainm Iontaobhais	Líon Altraí Macmillan
Otharlann Chathair Bhéal Feirste	7
Otharlann an Mater	1
Otharlanna Ríoga	6
Otharlanna Pobail & Uladh	5
An Dún / Lios na gCearrbhach	1
Otharlann Aontaithe	4
Craigavon & Droichead na Banna	4
Otharlann Cheantar Craigavon	4
Ard Mhacha & Dún Geanainn	2
An tIúr & Múm	2
Speirín Tír na Lochanna	2
An Clochán	1
Alt na nGealbhan	2
Iomlán	41

Free Toothbrushes

Mr M Robinson asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety how many free toothbrushes have been provided to children since January 2001.

(AQW 2214/01)

Ms de Brún: This information is not available.

Níl an t-eolas seo ar fáil.

Awareness of Depression: 16-25 Year Olds

Mr M Robinson asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what plans she has to raise the awareness of depression amongst 16-25 year olds.

(AQW 2217/01)

Ms de Brún: Awareness of depression is included within mental health promotion. My Department will be issuing a mental health promotion strategy and action plan within the next few months which will include specific initiatives aimed at young people. In the meantime Boards and Trusts are addressing the issue of depression among adolescents and young people through health promotion initiatives at community, youth and

educational levels. My Department also provides funding to Aware Defeat Depression for an awareness programme in secondary schools.

Cuimsítear eolas ar líonn dubh i gcur chun cinn sláinte meabhrach. Beidh mo Roinn ag tionscnamh straitéise um chur chun cinn sláinte meabhrach agus plean gníomhaíochta i gceann cúpla mí ina mbeidh scéimeanna ar leith dírithe ar dhaoine óga. Idir an dá linn, tá Boird agus Iontaobhais ag tabhairt faoin líonn dubh ar ógánaigh agus ar dhaoine óga trí scéimeanna le sláinte a chur chun cinn i measc an phobail, na hóige agus in oideachas. Tugann mo Roinn maoiniú do 'Eolas ar Líonn Dubh agus a Chliseadh' le haghaidh cláir eolais i meánscoileanna.

Chronic Fatigue Syndrome

Mr M Robinson asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what action she plans to take to increase awareness and understanding of chronic fatigue syndrome.

(AQW 2218/01)

Ms de Brún: I recognise that chronic fatigue syndrome is a debilitating condition. I am aware that work is currently being undertaken by the Department of Health in England into all aspects of chronic fatigue syndrome and I look forward with interest to the outcome.

I can also inform you that my Department provides yearly funding to the ME Association here to assist them with raising awareness and understanding of the disease.

Aithníom gur riocht éineartaitheach é siondróm tuirse ainsealaí. Tá a fhios agam go bhfuil obair thaighde á déanamh ag an Roinn Sláinte i Sasana ar gach gné den siondróm tuirse ainsealaí agus tá mé ag súil go mór lena torthaí.

Tig liom cur in iúl duit fosta go dtugann mo Roinn maoiniú go bliantúil don Chumann ME anseo chun cuidiú leo feachtas agus tuiscint a spreagadh faoin ghalar.

Nurses Currently Employed

Mr Hussey asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the number of nurses (a) currently employed by each Health Trust; and (b) currently employed on a temporary contract by each Health Trust.

(AQW 2225/01)

Ms de Brún: The information requested is given in the tables below. The information is split over two tables. Table 1 covers qualified non-bank nursing staff and Table 2 covers qualified bank nursing staff. Bank staff cover for staffing shortfalls and fluctuating workloads in order to maintain service delivery.

TABLE 1: QUALIFIED NON-BANK NURSES BY TRUST – 31 DECEMBER 2001*

	Total currently employed [#]		Temporary ¹	
	Head-count	WTE ²	Head-count	WTE ²
Belfast City Hospital HSS Trust	1246	1043.43	20	17.54
Green Park Healthcare HSS Trust	470	393.51	10	8.63
S & E Belfast HSS Trust	467	380.4	21	0.21
Ulster Community & Hospitals Trust	1295	1038.69	53	24.35
Royal Group of Hospitals HSS Trust	1690	1423.17	46	40.24
Mater Infirmorum Hospital HSS Trust	265	235.54	18	17.11
N & W Belfast HSS Trust	413	364	16	12.53
Down Lisburn HSS Trust	672	579.71	50	44.85
Causeway HSS Trust	503	415.11	96	68.15
Homefirst Community HSS Trust	604	506.98	60	42.53
United Hospitals Group HSS Trust	1033	851.71	16	11.76
Armagh and Dungannon HSS Trust ³	411	366.12	27	23.97
Craigavon Area Hospital Group HSS Trust ³	789	637.31	4	3.51
Newry & Mourne HSS Trust	343	287.46	43	30.59
Craigavon & Banbridge Community HSS Trust	207	169.28	14	10.51
Altnagelvin Group HSS Trust ³	606	541.99	76	66.54
Foyle Community HSS Trust	481	435.02	58	46.45
Sperrin Lakeland HSS Trust	767	696.44	74	63.29

*January 2002 for Ulster Community and Hospital Trust, February 2002 for South and East Belfast, United Hospitals Group, Armagh and Dungannon, Craigavon and Banbridge Community, Altnagelvin and Foyle Community

[#] Total currently employed includes temporary

¹ Includes all who do not have permanent as their employment status.

² Whole Time Equivalent

³ Those on a career break or secondment are not counted as temporary.

All figures exclude unqualified staff, Midwives and Health Visitors

TABLE 2: QUALIFIED BANK NURSES BY TRUST – 31 DECEMBER 2001*

	Total currently employed [#]	Temporary ¹
	Headcount	Headcount
Belfast City Hospital HSS Trust	126	0
Green Park Healthcare HSS Trust	54	0
S & E Belfast HSS Trust	9	0
Ulster Community & Hospitals Trust	228	20
Royal Group of Hospitals HSS Trust	209	1
Mater Infirmorum Hospital HSS Trust	24	2
N & W Belfast HSS Trust	59	0
Down Lisburn HSS Trust	161	1
Causeway HSS Trust	84	41
Homefirst Community HSS Trust	40	0
United Hospitals Group HSS Trust	80	0
Armagh and Dungannon HSS Trust ²	41	41
Craigavon Area Hospital Group HSS Trust ²	60	0
Newry & Mourne HSS Trust	6	6
Craigavon & Banbridge Community HSS Trust	35	35
Altnagelvin Group HSS Trust ²	88	86
Foyle Community HSS Trust	194	194
Sperrin Lakeland HSS Trust	194	194

*January 2002 for Ulster Community and Hospital Trust, February 2002 for South and East Belfast, United Hospitals Group, Armagh and Dungannon, Craigavon and Banbridge Community, Altnagelvin and Foyle Community

[#] Total currently employed includes temporary; Whole Time Equivalent is not available for bank staff; some staff may be counted twice as they may hold a permanent contract and a bank contract with a Trust.

¹ Includes all who do not have permanent as their employment status.

² Those on a career break or secondment are not counted as temporary.

All figures exclude unqualified staff, Midwives and Health Visitors

Tugtar an t-eolas iarrtha sna táblaí thíos. Tá an t-eolas roinnte i ndá thábla. Clúdaíonn Tábla 1 an fhoireann altranaís cháilithe nach bhfuil liostaithe ag gníomhaireacht agus clúdaíonn Tábla 2 an fhoireann altranaís cháilithe atá liostaithe ag gníomhaireacht. Clúdaíonn an fhoireann liostaithe an ganntanas foirne agus ualaí athraitheacha oibre chun an soláthar seirbhísí a choinneáil.

TÁBLA 1: ALTRAÍ CÁILITHE NACH BHFUIL LIOSTAITHE AG GNÍOMHAIREACHT DE RÉIR IONTAObHAIS – 31 Nollaig 2001*

	Iomlán Fostaithe faoi Láthair [#]		Sealadach ¹	
	Líon	CL ²	Líon	CL ²
Iontaobhas SSS Otharlann Chathair Bhéal Feirste	1246	1043.43	20	17.54

	Iomlán Fostaithe faoi Láthair [#]		Sealadach ¹	
	Líon	CL ²	Líon	CL ²
Iontaobhas Cúram Sláinte SSS na Páirce Glaise	470	393.51	10	8.63
Iontaobhas SSS Bhéal Feirste Theas & Thoir	467	380.4	21	0.21
Iontaobhas Otharlanna Pobail & Uladh	1295	1038.69	53	24.35
Iontaobhas SSS Grúpa Ríoga Otharlann	1690	1423.17	46	40.24
Iontaobhas SSS Otharlann an Mater	265	235.54	18	17.11
Iontaobhas SSS Bhéal Feirste Thuaidh & Thiar	413	364	16	12.53
Iontaobhas SSS an Dúin/Lios na gCearrbhach	672	579.71	50	44.85
Iontaobhas SSS an Chlocháin	503	415.11	96	68.15
Iontaobhas SSS Phobal Homefirst	604	506.98	60	42.53
Iontaobhas SSS Grúpa Otharlann Aontaithe	1033	851.71	16	11.76
Iontaobhas SSS Ard Mhacha agus Dún Geanainn ³	411	366.12	27	23.97
Iontaobhas SSS Ghrúpa Otharlann Cheantar Craigavon ³	789	637.31	4	3.51
Iontaobhas SSS an Iúir & Mhúrn	343	287.46	43	30.59
Iontaobhas SSS Phobal Craigavon & Dhroichead na Banna	207	169.28	14	10.51
Iontaobhas SSS Grúpa Otharlann Alt na nGealbhan ³	606	541.99	76	66.54
Iontaobhas SSS Phobal an Fheabhail	481	435.02	58	46.45
Iontaobhas SSS Thír Lochanna Speirín	767	696.44	74	63.29

*Mí Eanáir d'Iontaobhas Otharlanna Pobail & Uladh, Feabhra 2002 do Bhéal Feirste Theas agus Thoir, Grúpa Otharlann Aontaithe, Ard Mhacha agus Dún Geanainn, Craigavon agus Pobal Dhroichead na Banna, Alt na nGealbhan agus Pobal an Fheabhail

Iomlán fostaithe, iad fostaithe go sealadach san áireamh

¹ Clúdaíonn seo gach duine nach bhfuil 'buan' mar stádas fostaíochta acu.

² Coibhéis Lánaimseartha

³ Ní chuirtear san áireamh iad siúd ar sos gairmiúil nó ar iasacht mar oibrí sealadach

Ní chuireann gach figiúr foireann neamhcháilithe, Mná Cabhrach agus Cuairteoirí Sláinte san áireamh

TÁBLA 2: ALTRAÍ CÁILITHE LIOSTAITHE AG GNÍOMHAIREACHT DE RÉIR IONTAOBHAIS – 31 NOLLAIG 2001*

	Iomlán Fostaithe faoi láthair [#]	Sealadach ¹
	Líon	Líon
Iontaobhas SSS Otharlann Chathair Bhéal Feirste	126	0
Iontaobhas Cúram Sláinte SSS na Páirce Glaise	54	0
Iontaobhas SSS Bhéal Feirste Theas & Thoir	9	0
Iontaobhas Otharlanna Pobail & Uladh	228	20
Iontaobhas SSS Grúpa Ríoga Otharlann	209	1
Iontaobhas SSS Otharlann an Mater	24	2
Iontaobhas SSS Bhéal Feirste Thuaidh & Thiar	59	0
Iontaobhas SSS an Dúin/Lios na gCearrbhach	161	1
Iontaobhas SSS an Chlocháin	84	41
Iontaobhas SSS Phobal Homefirst	40	0
Iontaobhas SSS Grúpa Otharlanna Aontaithe	80	0
Iontaobhas SSS Ard Mhacha agus Dún Geanainn ³	41	41
Iontaobhas SSS Ghrúpa Otharlann Cheantar Craigavon ³	60	0
Iontaobhas SSS an Iúir & Mhúrn	6	6
Iontaobhas SSS Phobal Craigavon & Dhroichead na Banna	35	35
Iontaobhas SSS Grúpa Otharlanna Alt na nGealbhan ³	88	86
Iontaobhas SSS Phobal an Fheabhail	194	194
Iontaobhas SSS Thír Lochanna Speirín	194	194

* Mí Eanáir d'Iontaobhas Otharlanna Pobail & Uladh, Feabhra 2002 do Bhéal Feirste Theas agus Thoir, Grúpa Otharlann Aontaithe, Ard Mhacha agus Dún Geanainn, Craigavon agus Pobal Dhroichead na Banna, Alt na nGealbhan agus Pobal an Fheabhail

Iomlán fostaithe, iad fostaithe go sealadach san áireamh, níl Coibhéis Lánaimseartha ar fáil d'fhoireann liostaithe ag gníomhaireacht, is féidir go bhfuil cuntas déanta faoi dhó ar roinnt foirne mar is féidir conradh buan agus conradh liostaithe bheith acu le hIontaobhas.

¹ Clúdaíonn seo gach duine nach bhfuil 'buan' mar stádas fostaíochta acu.

² Coibhéis Lánaimseartha

³ Ní chuirtear san áireamh iad siúd ar sós gairmiúil nó ar iasacht mar oibrí sealadach.

Ní chuireann gach figiúr foireann neamhcháilithe, Mná Cabhrach agus Cuairteoirí Sláinte san áireamh

Counselling Services

Mr M Robinson asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what steps are being taken to improve counselling services. (AQW 2226/01)

Ms de Brún: The Department commissioned a Review of Counselling in response to a recommendation in the Social Services Inspectorate (SSI) report *Living with the Trauma of the Troubles* (1998). The report will shortly be issued for public consultation.

Choimisiúnaigh an Roinn Athbheithniú ar Chomhairle mar fhreagairt ar mholadh i dtuairisc Fhoireann Chigireachta na Seirbhísí Sóisialta (FCSS) *Living with the Trauma of the Troubles* (1998). Eiseofar an tuairisc ar ball le haghaidh comhairlithe phoiblí.

Residential and Nursing Homes

Mr S Wilson asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the number of (a) residential homes; and (b) nursing homes which were (i) opened; and (ii) closed in each of the last 5 years. (AQW 2232/01)

Ms de Brún: This information is detailed in Tables 1 and 2 below.

TABLE 1. RESIDENTIAL HOMES OPENED AND CLOSED, 1996/97 - 2000/01

	Opened	Closed
1996/97	22	13
1997/98	22	13
1998/99	14	19
1999/00	34	20
2000/01	17	13

TABLE 2. NURSING HOMES OPENED AND CLOSED, 1996/97 - 2000/01

	Opened	Closed
1996/97	3	2
1997/98	4	8
1998/99	1	2
1999/00	2	8
2000/01	10	10

Tá an t-eolas seo léirithe i dTáblaí 1 agus 2 thíos.

TÁBLA 1. TITHE CÓNAITHE OSCAILTE AGUS DRUIDTE, 1996/97 - 2000/01

	Oscailte	Druidte
1996/97	22	13
1997/98	22	13
1998/99	14	19
1999/00	34	20
2000/01	17	13

TÁBLA 2. TITHE ALTRANAIS OSCAILTE AGUS DRUIDTE, 1996/97 - 2000/01

	Oscailte	Druidte
1996/97	3	2
1997/98	4	8
1998/99	1	2
1999/00	2	8
2000/01	10	10

Orthopaedic Surgeons

Mr Weir asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail (a) the number of orthopaedic surgeons based in each Health Board area; and (b) the average waiting time for patients waiting to be treated by an orthopaedic surgeon in each Health Board area. (AQW 2266/01)

Ms de Brún:

- (a) At December 2001, there were 28.05 whole-time equivalent consultant orthopaedic surgeons employed at the EHSSB and 4.91 whole-time equivalents at the WHSSB
- (b) I refer the Member to the answer given to AQW 2074/01.
- (a) Ag an Nollaig 2001, bhí 28.05 máinlia ortaipéideach comhairleach coibhéiseach lánaimseartha fostaithe ag an BSSSO agus 4.91 coibhéiseach lánaimseartha ag an BSSSI
- (b) Treoraím an Ball don fhreagra tugtha ar AQW 2074/01.

Recruitment of Nurses

Mr Gibson asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what steps she is taking to increase the number of nurses recruited into the Health Service. (AQW 2289/01)

Ms de Brún: I refer the Member to my answer to AQW 514/01, AQW 1247/01 and AQW 1351/01.

Treoraím an Ball do mo fhreagra a thug mé ar AQW 514/01, AQW 1247/01 agus AQW 1351/01.

REGIONAL DEVELOPMENT

Castlebawn Limited Development, Newtownards

Mrs I Robinson asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail any progress made in resolving

the outstanding issues relating to the Castlebawn development in Newtownards. (AQW 1943/01)

The Minister for Regional Development (Mr P Robinson): I am pleased to report that progress is being made towards bringing about a satisfactory conclusion to the outline planning applications by Castlebawn Limited for its proposed development in Newtownards. Work on the Article 122 agreement and the negative condition to be included in the outline planning approvals regarding the provision of the necessary road works is now well advanced by my Department's Roads Service. Progress has also been made on the Environmental Statement necessary for the portion of road to be constructed by Roads Service.

In addition Mr Nesbitt, Minister of the Environment, has advised me that his Department is also in discussion with the developer and his agents, with regard to the proposed development. Subject to resolution of the negative condition required for this proposal, his Department hopes to conclude its consideration of the applications, and to issue a notice of opinion on how it considers the applications should be determined, in the near future.

Non-Departmental Public Bodies

Mr Beggs asked the Minister for Regional Development to list all Non-Departmental Public Bodies under his control, and to advise if they follow guidance on reporting fraud to the Comptroller and Auditor General, as required under Government Accounting procedures. (AQW 2017/01)

Mr P Robinson: I can confirm that the Northern Ireland Water Council is the only Non-Departmental Public Body sponsored by the Department for Regional Development.

The Government Accounting procedures for dealing with fraud are followed by the Northern Ireland Water Council.

Road Signage

Mr Hussey asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail the Roads Service inspection policy of road signage to ensure cleanliness and visibility in the interests of road safety. (AQW 2019/01)

Mr P Robinson: My Department's Roads Service carries out regular inspections of all public roads and footways to ensure that essential response maintenance is identified and completed as necessary. During these inspections all defects are noted, including for example defective signs and road markings and signs requiring cleaning to improve their visibility. The frequency of these inspections depends on the type of road and the volume of vehicular and pedestrian traffic. Town centres

and major traffic routes are inspected monthly, while all other roads and footways are inspected at either two or four-monthly intervals.

Derg Treatment Works

Mr Hussey asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail the timescale for the commissioning of the Derg Water Treatment Works and if this scheme is within the agreed financial costings. (AQW 2021/01)

Mr P Robinson: Construction of the Derg Treatment Works is being carried out under a design and build contract and the initial tender total was £9.8 million. As a result of additional works, which have had to be specified by Water Service, the final contract price will be £10.3 million.

Construction is at an advanced stage. The treatment processes are currently being tested and work is due to be completed by the end of next month.

Knockmore Railway Line

Mr Dalton asked the Minister for Regional Development to give his assessment of the future of the Knockmore railway line. (AQW 2076/01)

Mr P Robinson: I made a detailed presentation to the Regional Development Committee on 20th February 2002 outlining my assessment of the future of the Antrim-Knockmore railway line. Copies of that presentation are available in the library.

Wastewater Treatment Facilities

Mr Hussey asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail progress on the rationalisation, within procurement policy, of a common design element for new waste water treatment facilities. (AQW 2108/01)

Mr P Robinson: Water Service's Capital Investment Programme includes a large number of schemes to upgrade wastewater treatment facilities at existing works. A substantial proportion of these are small works serving populations less than 2,000.

In order to enhance the efficiency of the procurement process, Water Service proposes to group these schemes into a small number of multi-site contracts. This should ensure value for money is achieved through reduced tendering and evaluation costs, bulk purchasing, reduced construction and installation time and standardisation of equipment and spares. In order to standardise the treatment process to be specified in each of these multi-site contracts, Water Service is developing a wastewater treatment process matrix. This will take account of a range of key factors including site locations, populations

served, required effluent standards and nature of receiving water.

The draft treatment process matrix is currently being tested against a sample of schemes and should be finalised within the next few months.

Killyman Road, Dungannon

Mrs Carson asked the Minister for Regional Development, in respect of the Killyman Road, Dungannon, to detail, in each of the last 5 years, (a) the number of structural defects affecting the road; (b) the number of accidents reported due to structural defects affecting the road; (c) the number of claims lodged with the Department due to accidents caused by structural defects affecting the road; and (d) the number of successful claims.

(AQW 2177/01)

Mr P Robinson: My Department's Roads Service has advised me that, in the course of its routine maintenance inspection programme, the following numbers of structural defects were identified on the B34 Killyman Road, Dungannon during the last 5 years:

Year	1997	1998	1999	2000	2001
No of defects	64	104	119	83	75

As I explained in my answer to your earlier Written Assembly Question (AQW 1556/01), detailed information about personal injury road accidents is maintained by the police and officials in both Roads Service and the Department's Central Claims Unit monitor available information to identify roads or locations with patterns of accidents.

The table below details the number of claims lodged with my Department and the number of offers of compensation made in respect of accidents involving damage to vehicles on Killyman Road, Dungannon in each of the last 5 years:

Year	1996/97	1997/98	1998/99	1999/00	2000/01
No of claims	0	0	4	3	1
Compensation Offered	0	0	2	0	1

Since answering your earlier Written Assembly Question (AQW 1556/01), officials have advised me that 8 claims for damage to vehicles lodged in 2000/01, originally identified by claimants as being in respect of Killyman Road or Circular Road, Dungannon, have now been rightly attributed to Far Circular Road. All 8 claims were rejected by my Department.

Non-Departmental Public Bodies

Mr Maskey asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail expenditure figures for those non-

Departmental Public Bodies under his responsibility in each year since 1995. (AQW 2236/01)

Mr P Robinson: The annual Cabinet Office publication 'Public Bodies' provides a range of information including expenditure for NI Non-Departmental Public Bodies (NDPBs). Copies of these publications have been placed in the Assembly Library and are also available on the Cabinet Office website (www.cabinet-office.gov.uk/quango/index/qorg.htm).

The Department for Regional Development has responsibility for one Advisory NDPB – the Northern Ireland Water Council. Its expenditure since 1995 is set out in the following table.

Year	Expenditure £000s
1995/96	3
1996/97	2
1997/98	2
1998/99	3
1999/00	7
2000/01	4
2001/02 (to date)	1

Train Sets: Northern Ireland Railways

Mr Hussey asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail the current number of "train sets" held by Northern Ireland Railways. (AQW 2238/01)

Mr P Robinson: Translink has advised that Northern Ireland Railways currently has 31 train sets in its fleet comprising 9 three car Class 450 sets, 19 three car Class 80 sets, 1 eight car ex Gatwick Express Mark II plus the 2 seven car Enterprises used between Belfast and Dublin.

Bus Purchases

Mr Hussey asked the Minister for Regional Development, pursuant to his announcement on 19 February 2002 of new "train sets" for Northern Ireland Railways, to outline his intentions in regard to the upgrading of the Ulsterbus fleet. (AQW 2239/01)

Mr P Robinson: It is one of my Department's stated aims that Translink should replace vehicles as they reach their target replacement age, of 12 years for coaches and 18 years for buses. However, due to declining passenger numbers, Ulsterbus has been unable in recent years to generate sufficient income to enable Translink to buy new vehicles to replace those which have reached their target replacement age.

My Department provides Translink with grants of £1.7m per annum towards new bus purchases. This covers 50% of the cost of some 28 new buses per annum. However,

this is insufficient to enable Translink to replace all vehicles which have reached their target replacement age. I intend to seek additional resources for bus purchase grants in this year's Spending Review.

Regional Development Strategy

Mr Dalton asked the Minister for Regional Development to indicate the estimated costs to his Department and other Departments, for the implementation of the Regional Development Strategy for Northern Ireland 2025. (AQW 2240/01)

Mr P Robinson: It is difficult at this stage to put an accurate figure on the additional costs, if any, associated with the implementation of the Regional Development Strategy. I would hope that the monitoring and tracking of progress can be achieved at minimum cost, as far as practicable, by using the existing datasets that departments have in monitoring their own supporting strategies.

My Department is presently preparing a paper on implementation which I hope to present soon to the Regional Development Committee. That paper will highlight the need to assess fully the quantum of any additional costs that might fall to departments in fulfilling the strategic objectives contained in the Regional Development Strategy which was approved by the Assembly on 17 September 2001.

Regional Development Strategy: Legislation

Mr Dalton asked the Minister for Regional Development to outline the number and nature of Bills which will be necessary to begin the legislative implementation process of the Regional Strategy for Northern Ireland 2025. (AQW 2241/01)

Mr P Robinson: The Regional Development Strategy is a spatial framework which will influence the future distribution of activities throughout Northern Ireland. Of itself, it does not implicitly place specific obligations on a Department or Departments to introduce legislation as part of the implementation of the Strategy.

Of course, it is a matter for individual Departments to determine what additional legislation, if any, is necessary to meet the strategic objectives contained in the Regional Development Strategy which was agreed by the Assembly on 17 September 2001.

My Department is proposing to introduce a new Strategic Planning Bill. The purpose of the Bill is to amend the Strategic Planning (Northern Ireland) Order 1999 in order to assist the Department of the Environment and the Department for Social Development carry out their respective statutory functions in respect of the implementation of the Regional Development Strategy.

The consultation on the legislative proposals ended on 28 February. On current plans, I hope to introduce the draft Bill before the Summer recess.

Regional Development Strategy: Cost of Implementation

Mr Dalton asked the Minister for Regional Development to outline his estimate of the financial requirements and legislative programme necessary for the successful implementation of the Regional Strategy for Northern Ireland 2025. (AQW 2242/01)

Mr P Robinson: First, in terms of the financial requirements necessary for the successful implementation of the Regional Development Strategy, I would refer the Member to my answer given in AQW 2240.

On the second part of the question about the legislative programme needed to successfully implement the strategy, I would refer the Member to my answer given in AQW 2241.

Outer Ring Road, Bangor

Mr McFarland asked the Minister for Regional Development what plans he has to improve traffic flow on the "Outer" Ring Road around Bangor. (AQO 925/01)

Mr P Robinson: By "Outer" Ring Road, I assume you are referring to the Rathgael and Balloo Roads. These roads, together with the established dual carriageway Bangor Ring Road, have been the subject of a recent extensive traffic study by my Department's Roads Service.

Arising from this study the following traffic measures have been identified for the Rathgael Road and are scheduled to be carried out during 2002-03:

- the provision of traffic signals at the junction of the Rathgael Road, the A2 Belfast Road and the Old Belfast Road at a cost of £100,000;
- the provision of traffic signals at the junction of Rathgael Road and Clandeboyne Road at a cost of £60,000; and
- the provision of central hatching and refuge islands along the Rathgael Road where road width permits.

In addressing traffic management measures in this area, care must be taken to ensure that improvements to the Rathgael Road do not significantly increase the traffic flow using it; this would not be welcomed by local people. The strategy therefore, provides for improvements to the established Bangor Ring Road to make that route more attractive for through traffic.

Maintenance Programme: Newry/Armagh

Mr McNamee asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail the roads maintenance programme for Newry/Armagh. (AQO 913/01)

Mr P Robinson: The maintenance programme for 2002/2003 has not yet been finalised but will be available early in the new financial year. However, I can advise that by the end of this financial year, Roads Service will have spent some £3.34 million on road maintenance in the Armagh and City District Council area and some £3.16 million in the Newry and Mourne District Council area.

A4 at Eglish and Cabragh, Dungannon

Mr Gallagher asked the Minister for Regional Development what funding has been made available for a road improvement scheme on the A4 at Eglish and Cabragh, Dungannon. (AQO 945/01)

Mr P Robinson: I am pleased to inform you that my Department has been successful in securing £2.2 million of Executive Programme Funds for the proposed improvements on the A4 at Eglish and Cabragh. These funds will enable the proposed improvement scheme to proceed as soon as the necessary statutory procedures are completed.

Rolling Stock for NI Railways

Mrs I Robinson asked the Minister for Regional Development, pursuant to AQO 712/01, has any further progress been made in acquiring new rolling stock for NI Railways; and to make a statement. (AQO 944/01)

Mr P Robinson: After an intensive and rigorous tendering process for the provision of 23 new three car trains to Northern Ireland Railways the contract has been awarded to CAF, a Spanish Company that has previous experience of building similar trains that are in operation in Great Britain, with Northern Spirit and the Heathrow Express. The first train should be delivered to Northern Ireland Railways by December 2003 and delivery of all 23 trains should be complete one year later in December 2004. Each new train should enter into scheduled passenger service 3 to 4 months after delivery, following a commissioning period by Northern Ireland Railways.

This new rolling stock should provide much greater passenger comfort and reliability as well as reducing journey times.

A7 Between Doran's Rock and Saintfield

Mr McGrady asked the Minister for Regional Development when will funding be provided for the improve-

ment of the section of the A7 road between Doran's Rock and Saintfield; and to make a statement.

(AQO 911/01)

Mr P Robinson: I can assure you that, subject to the availability of resources, my Department's Roads Service remains committed to improving the A7 Belfast to Downpatrick road. As you will know, however, a scheme to improve the stretch of road between Doran's Rock and Saintfield has been identified but is not included in the current Roads Service Major Works Preparation Pool. The proposed improvements could nevertheless be completed as minor works improvements over a period of time in the same way that other improvements on the A7 route have been undertaken in recent years. Regrettably, as the minor works programmes in the Down District Council area for the next 2 years are fully committed, the earliest possible start date for the proposed improvements would be 2004/2005.

Bus Lanes

Mr Paisley Jnr asked the Minister for Regional Development has he any plans to extend the use of bus lanes to other traffic. (AQO 906/01)

Mr P Robinson: My Department's Roads Service proposes to extend the use of nearside with-flow bus lanes in Belfast by:

- introducing Belfast public hire taxis and "black" taxis licensed to operate bus type services in bus lanes from April 2002;
- taking forward proposals to permit the introduction of motor-cycles to bus lanes; and
- reviewing the operation of the lanes and giving further consideration to the role of private hire taxis.

Decisions concerning which vehicle types are admitted to individual bus lanes are based on traffic and transportation needs, with road safety being a major contributing factor.

My Department is in consultation with the Assembly Committee on the issue and I would hope to be in a position to provide you with further information before too long.

Sewage Treatment: Larne Lough Area

Mr Beggs asked the Minister for Regional Development what progress has been made in modernising sewage treatment facilities in the Larne Lough area.

(AQO 924/01)

Mr P Robinson: Water Service is progressing two projects which will upgrade and rationalise wastewater treatment facilities in the Larne Lough area to meet modern standards.

The larger of two projects is the provision of a new treatment works to service Larne and communities in the surrounding area including Glynn and Magheramorne. A planning application for this works has been submitted to Planning Service and I understand that a decision is expected soon. Subject to planning approval, construction on site is programmed to start in the incoming financial year and take approximately 2 years to complete. The estimated cost involved is £10 million.

The second project has involved a strategic assessment of all the sewer catchments on the Islandmagee Peninsula, including those discharging to Larne Lough. Measures identified include transferring wastewater from Ballystrudder to Ballycarry for treatment and the provision of a sewer system and treatment works for Millbay. The project also includes for improvements to coastal discharges. Implementation of these proposals will commence on a phased basis this year at a total cost of almost £3 million.

Water Resource Strategy

Mr M Murphy asked the Minister for Regional Development, pursuant to AQW 1899/01, 1900/01 and 1901/01, to detail (a) the precise date when the Water Resource Strategy will be made available; and (b) those organisations who will be consulted in respect of this strategy. (AQO 950/01)

Mr P Robinson: The Water Service is carrying out a major review of its Water Resource Strategy for the period up to 2030. The review is now nearing completion. I expect the draft strategy to be published for public consultation before the Summer but I am unable to give a more precise date at this stage. Consultation will be wide ranging and all interested parties will be given the opportunity to comment on the proposed strategy.

Greyabbey and Kircubbin Wastewater Treatment Works

Mr McCarthy asked the Minister for Regional Development what is the commencement date for the new sewage treatment works in Kircubbin and Greyabbey. (AQO 917/01)

Mr P Robinson: I am pleased to confirm that a contract for the replacement of the Greyabbey and the Kircubbin wastewater treatment works has been awarded. Work on both schemes is programmed to commence immediately after the Easter holidays. It is expected that it will take 15 months to complete both schemes at an estimated cost of £4.9 million.

Concessionary Fares Scheme

Ms Lewsley asked the Minister for Regional Development what is the timescale for the introduction of concessionary fares for the disabled. (AQO 929/01)

Mr P Robinson: It is my intention, as resources permit, to extend the Concessionary Fares Scheme to more categories of people with disabilities. I will be seeking additional resources for this purpose in the forthcoming Spending Review.

In the interim, I am delighted to be able to earmark a small amount of money from within existing resources to extend free travel to holders of a War Disabled Pension under the age of 65. War Disabled Pensioners have always been regarded as particularly deserving within the Northern Ireland Concessionary Fares Scheme. My initiative will bring the benefits available to those of their number below the age of 65 into line with travel concessions for people who are registered blind and senior citizens generally.

Translink will make arrangements to issue War Disabled Pensioners with the new SmartPass, which will provide free travel from 1 May 2002.

TransEuropean Network

Mr Byrne asked the Minister for Regional Development what plans he has to secure the necessary funding to invest in capital upgrading of the TransEuropean Network in rural areas; and to make a statement. (AQO 943/01)

Mr P Robinson: It is widely accepted that significant improvement is needed to develop all of Northern Ireland's transportation infrastructure to meet our needs for the twenty-first century. As the Member will be aware, on Monday 4 February 2002, I laid before the Assembly, a Consultation Paper on my Department's proposed Regional Transportation Strategy. The Strategy aims to identify strategic transport investment priorities and consider new funding sources.

The proposed transportation strategy builds on the foundation of the Regional Development Strategy 2025 which introduced the concept of a Regional Strategic Transport Network based on Key Transport Corridors, Link Corridors and other Trunk roads. It indicates that the main strategic improvements to the road network will be concentrated on the Key Transport Corridors which largely coincide with the Trans-European Road Network.

I will be returning to the Assembly later in the year to seek support for a finalised strategy and trust that I will be able to count on the backing of members to provide the significant boost in funding that our transport network requires. My Department's Roads Service will of course

continue to seek to draw down European Funds against roads schemes.

SOCIAL DEVELOPMENT

Ministerial Visits Outside Northern Ireland: Cost

Mr Weir asked the Minister for Social Development to detail the total amount spent on Ministerial visits outside Northern Ireland in each of the last 3 years.

(AQW 2130/01)

The Minister for Social Development (Mr Dodds): The information is as follows:

Financial Year	Cost
1999/00	Nil
2000/01	£2,205
2001/02	Nil

The information relates to a visit by the then Minister, Maurice Morrow MLA, on 7 February 2001, to the Minister of State in the Department of Social Security and to the Energy Savings Trust in London and attendance at an evening event organised by the Chartered Institute of Housing. The amount shown includes the expenses of officials who accompanied the Minister.

Townland Names

Mrs Carson asked the Minister for Social Development how he has encouraged the use of townland names in written communications.

(AQW 2142/01)

Mr Dodds: My officials are encouraged to reply to correspondence using the address supplied by correspondents together with the proper postcodes.

Jobseeker's Allowance

Mr Weir asked the Minister for Social Development how many people who are included in the unemployment figures are not claiming Jobseeker's Allowance.

(AQW 2158/01)

Mr Dodds: The customer based count of unemployment is derived from the number of people in receipt of Jobseeker's Allowance, meaning that only people in receipt of the benefit are included in the unemployment figures.

Supporting Women's Aid

Ms McWilliams asked the Minister for Social Development to ensure that resources will be made available to

the Housing Executive through the "Supporting People" policy to enable women's aid groups to continue vital projects for the support of abused women and children.

(AQW 2159/01)

Mr Dodds: "Supporting People" is being introduced to provide a replacement method for funding the costs of housing support services for vulnerable persons in supported accommodation which will not qualify as an eligible charge for Housing Benefit when new GB wide changes are introduced in April 2003. I will endeavour to ensure that appropriate funding is made available so that these very worthwhile schemes will continue to receive the level of funding which they require to provide their vital housing support services.

Cost of Vandalism to the Housing Executive

Mr Weir asked the Minister for Social Development to detail the cost of vandalism to the Housing Executive in each of the last 5 years.

(AQW 2160/01)

Mr Dodds: The table below details costs incurred in the past 5 years under the heading of Vandalism, within the Housing Executive's repairs system.

However, the figures may not reflect the total cost of vandalism because it is not possible to separate such costs from work relating to Change of Tenancy repairs or Refurbishment of Vacant Dwellings.

Financial Year	Total Spend
1996/97	£794,969
1997/98	£884,310
1998/99	£684,973
1999/00	£628,458
2000/01	£518,289

Homelessness: Those With Mental Health Problems

Mr M Robinson asked the Minister for Social Development what plans he has to tackle the issue of homelessness for those with mental health problems.

(AQW 2183/01)

Mr Dodds: A number of supported housing schemes for persons with mental problems have been provided through the housing association movement. This reflects joint working on the "Housing and Health" agenda between the Housing Executive and the Health & Social Services Boards as well as joint planning exercises with individual Trusts.

The Housing Executive's Homelessness Strategy and Services Review has identified a number of general issues affecting people with mental health problems, and in particular, has recommended that the identified areas of best practice are evaluated with a view to extending

such initiatives across Northern Ireland. This will involve continued liaison with other key stakeholders including Health and Social Services. In addition, the Review has recommended that a needs assessment of all long-term hostel dwellers is undertaken and a programme of specific responses is identified to address those needs.

Pensioner Poverty

Mr Gibson asked the Minister for Social Development, pursuant to AQW 317/01, to make a statement on his policy for tackling pensioner poverty.

(AQW 2191/01)

Mr Dodds: A number of steps have already been taken to tackle pensioner poverty, such as the Minimum Income Guarantee Campaign and the Winter Fuel Payment Scheme. These initiatives have resulted in just over 7,500 additional Pensioners receiving the Minimum Income Guarantee and in the last financial year Winter Fuel payments totalling £43 million were paid to Pensioners. The new State Pension Credit, when introduced in April 2003, will also form a key part of the overall strategy for tackling pensioner poverty.

State Pension Credit

Mr S Wilson asked the Minister for Social Development to outline (a) the estimated number who will benefit from the State Pension Credit Bill; and (b) the resulting average weekly payment.

(AQW 2243/01)

Mr Dodds: A target has been set of half of all pensioner households to be eligible for State Pension Credit. This would result in 82,500 households (equating to about 120,000 people) benefiting from the credit. The estimated weekly payment is £29.

Condensing Boilers

Mr S Wilson asked the Minister for Social Development if the Housing Executive is installing condensing boilers within its Capital and Refurbishment Programmes.

(AQW 2244/01)

Mr Dodds: The financial and technical implications of introducing condensing boilers are prohibitive, as both radiators and hot water cylinders would require modification to achieve operational effectiveness. The Housing Executive has therefore no plans to install condensing boilers.

Warm Homes Schemes

Mr M Robinson asked the Minister for Social Development, in respect of the central heating installation programme, how many pensioners, in each parliamentary

constituency, have (a) taken up their entitlement; and (b) received free central heating.

(AQW 2246/01)

Mr Dodds: This information is not available in precisely the format requested, as work under the Warm Homes scheme is categorised by postal code areas. However, the table below is an indication to numbers of individuals aged over 60 that have availed of the central heating replacement programme.

Constituency	Applications received	Work Completed/ Work in Progress
East Belfast	83	72
North Belfast	91	84
South Belfast	27	23
West Belfast	123	112
East Antrim	32	25
East Derry	33	15
Fermanagh & S. Tyrone	172	138
Foyle	50	35
Lagan Valley	62	52
Mid Ulster	90	74
Newry & Armagh	75	66
North Antrim	69	39
North Down	62	40
South Antrim	74	58
South Down	71	63
Strangford	44	28
Upper Bann	68	63
West Tyrone	74	61
Total	1300	1048

Carrickfergus Town Centre Regeneration

Mr Beggs asked the Minister for Social Development, pursuant to AQW 1859/01, to outline (a) the action he proposes to take to address the 22.7% vacancy level of commercial and retail properties in Carrickfergus town centre; and (b) if Carrickfergus will be included in Urban Regeneration Programmes.

(AQW 2247/01)

Mr Dodds: An official from my Department is working closely with the Carrickfergus Town Centre Regeneration Committee who are preparing plans for the future regeneration of the town. My Department is also working, as agent for the International Fund for Ireland, to encourage owners of vacant premises in the town centre to avail of the financial assistance which is available through the Fund's Urban Development Programme. Two UDP schemes are currently in progress in the town and a further application for assistance is under consideration by the Fund.

Since the Department's future urban regeneration strategy, which is presently under review, has not yet been finalised I cannot say if Carrickfergus will be included in future urban regeneration programmes. A key element in the overall future strategy is the reinvigoration of our town centres. My Department has recently been consulting with other relevant Departments and I hope that we will be able to announce our policy on town centre reinvigoration within the next few months.

Under Peace II the Department is about to invite bids from Councils for assistance towards the costs of preparing plans for town centre reinvigoration. Carrickfergus Borough Council will be eligible to bid but it is likely that only about 8 town centres will benefit from this initiative.

Integrated Housing Research

Mr Hussey asked the Minister for Social Development if the Housing Executive's housing research programme is delivered totally 'in-house' by its research unit.

(AQW 2259/01)

Mr Dodds: Approximately 30% of the Housing Executive's comprehensive integrated housing research programme is delivered by its own research unit, the remainder is commissioned externally.

Replacement Grants Approved

Mr Byrne asked the Minister for Social Development to outline the number of replacement grants approved by the NIHE over the last 5 years in the Strabane and Omagh District Council areas.

(AQW 2291/01)

Mr Dodds: The information requested for the last 5 full financial years (April to March) is as follows:

Year	Strabane	Omagh
1996/97	7	23
1997/98	7	19
1998/99	15	24
1999/00	10	22
2000/01	19	23
Total	58	111

Gambling

Mr Gibson asked the Minister for Social Development what measures he is taking to reduce gambling.

(AQW 2342/01)

Mr Dodds: I have no plans for any significant changes in the existing statutory controls on gambling in Northern Ireland contained in the Betting, Gaming,

Lotteries and Amusements (Northern Ireland) Order 1985 and its associated subordinate legislation. These controls aim to discourage socially damaging excesses, protect the vulnerable and prevent the incursion of crime, while interfering as little as possible with personal freedoms.

ASSEMBLY COMMISSION

Postal Delivery Services

Mr Ford asked the Assembly Commission to give an assurance that the Northern Ireland Assembly, as a major user of the postal delivery service, will continue to use Consignia as its principal service provider from April 2002.

(AQW 2131/01)

The Representative of the Assembly Commission (Rev Robert Coulter): A key objective for the Northern Ireland Assembly Commission is to ensure that it achieves best value for money in relation to any of the services it requires. Whilst the Commission has no immediate plans to consider other providers of postal delivery services the newly appointed Head of Procurement will, in the medium term, be considering all of the Assembly's current service contracts with a view to ensuring continued best value for money.

Recruitment Procedures: NI Assembly

Mr J Kelly asked the Assembly Commission what criteria it applies for the recruitment of doorkeepers for the Assembly and whether these criteria have been tested against equality standards in respect of gender and religion.

(AQW 2343/01)

Rev Robert Coulter: The criteria used is entirely job related and is detailed as follows:

1. One or more years experience, gained within the last 5 years, in reception duties including receiving visitors to premises; and a knowledge of, or experience in, 3 or more of the following areas:
 - controlling access points to buildings;
 - checking or issuing personal security or access passes;
 - carrying out checks on personal baggage both by hand and by using electronic detection equipment;
 - screening visitors and goods on entering a building using electronic detection equipment;
 - sorting, delivery and collection of internal and external post.

2. the ability and confidence to interact with Assembly Members, other staff and visitors in a professional and polite manner;
- effective communication and interpersonal skills;
 - the ability to work with the minimum of supervision and as part of a team.

The recruitment of all Assembly staff including doorkeepers is based on the merit principle and carried out in accordance with equality standards stipulated by the Equality Commission for Northern Ireland. For all recruitment competitions the Assembly Commission has adopted the procedures of the Northern Ireland Civil Service (NICS) with all posts being publicly advertised and filled through a competence based selection process. The NICS recruitment procedures are regularly audited

by an independent body, most recently on 25 and 26 February 2002, which confirmed that the procedures meet equality standards in respect of gender and community background.

The job advertisement for the most recent doorkeeper competition stated that the Assembly Commission is :

“committed to equality of opportunity in employment and welcomes applications from all suitably qualified candidates irrespective of religious belief, gender, disability, race, political opinion, age, marital status, sexual orientation or whether or not they have dependants.”

The Commission will continue to monitor the makeup of its workforce to ensure that the principles of equality of opportunity and fair treatment are being achieved.

NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

Friday 15 March 2002

Written Answers to Questions

OFFICE OF THE FIRST MINISTER AND DEPUTY FIRST MINISTER

Postal Services

Mr Ford asked the Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister to give an assurance that all NI Government Departments, as a major user of the postal delivery service, will continue to use Consignia as its principal service provider from April 2002.

(AQW 2132/01)

Reply: The postal service is regulated by the Postal Services Commission who has published a set of detailed proposals aimed at opening the UK market to competition whilst ensuring the provision of the universal postal service. To effect an orderly transition towards an open market the Commission has proposed phasing in licensing arrangements for operators from April 2002 to March 2004. To ensure value for money Northern Ireland Government Departments may expose their postal services to competition during this time where such competition exists.

In the interests of efficiency the Department of Finance and Personnel has indicated that it will ask the Government Purchasing Agency to take the lead during this period in reviewing market conditions and the level of service required by Northern Ireland Government Departments with a view to establishing a service wide arrangement should this provide better value for money.

British-Irish Ministerial Meetings

Mr Campbell asked the Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister, in respect of British-Irish Ministerial meetings in their various formats, to detail the number of meetings that have been held and the subject matters under discussion over the past 3 years.

(AQW 2145/01)

Reply: The British-Irish Council and the British-Irish Intergovernmental Conference were established on the 2

December 1999. The British-Irish Council met in plenary format on 17 December 1999 and on 30 November 2001. The Council also met three times in sectoral format:

- Transport - 19 December 2000,
- Environment - 2 October 2000 and 25 February 2002.
- The British-Irish Intergovernmental Conference met on 17 December 1999.

The communiqués in respect of each of these meetings provide details of the subjects which discussed at each meeting. Copies of the communiqués have been placed in the Assembly Library.

Non-Departmental Public Bodies

Mr Maskey asked the Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister to detail expenditure figures for those non-Departmental Public Bodies under its responsibility in each year since 1995. (AQW 2219/01)

Reply: The Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister has responsibility for four non-departmental public bodies, these are: -

- Northern Ireland Economic Council
- Planning Appeals Commission
- Statute Law Committee for Northern Ireland
- Water Appeals Commission

The Equality Commission for Northern Ireland is an Executive non-departmental public body of the Northern Ireland Office, however the Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister has responsibility for its expenditure.

The annual Cabinet Office Publication "Public Bodies" provides a range of information including expenditure for Northern Ireland Non-Departmental Public Bodies. Copies of these publications have been placed in the Assembly Library and are also available on the Cabinet Office website: www.cabinet-office.gov.uk/quango

Charter Marks

Mr McHugh asked the Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister to detail the criteria used to award Charter Marks. (AQO 998/01)

Reply: Charter Mark is a UK award scheme for excellence in the delivery of public services. It is awarded to organisations when they have proved that they provide high quality services to their users.

Applicants are assessed against 10 specific criteria by experienced independent assessors and judged by a panel of Charter Mark judges.

Charter Mark applicants must put forward a written application and provide a box file of supporting evidence. The application and evidence are scored against the 10 criteria by an assessor.

The 10 criteria are:

- Set Standards
- Be open and provide full information
- Consult and involve
- Encourage access and the promotion of choice
- Treat all fairly
- Put things right when they go wrong
- Use resources effectively
- Innovate and improve
- Work with other providers
- Provide user satisfaction

An assessor seeks to verify the claims made in the application. The Charter Mark judging panel is responsible for deciding which applicants have reached the standard based on the recommendation of the assessors. Finally, the applicant is given detailed feedback on their performance and they learn whether they have reached the criteria.

AGRICULTURE AND RURAL DEVELOPMENT

Local Agricultural Shows

Mr Gibson asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to make a statement on the resumption of local agricultural shows. (AQW 2003/01)

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development (Ms Rodgers): On 30 January I announced changes to the movement standstill rules. Among the changes announced were special arrangements to facilitate animals attending consecutive shows in Northern Ireland within the standstill period.

Since then my officials have been in contact with a number of organisations wishing to include livestock demonstrations and competitions as part of agricultural shows. A protocol allowing these activities to go ahead has been prepared.

I am confident I can rely on those responsible for show activities to work within these rules so that agricultural shows may proceed safely.

Lairages in Abattoirs: Regulations

Mr Shannon asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development why she has introduced new regulations for lairages in abattoirs and markets. (AQW 2168/01)

Ms Rodgers: I have not introduced new Regulations in respect of lairages in abattoirs and markets nor have I any plans to do so.

Rural Development Programme: Budget Allocation

Mr Paisley Jnr asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development what percentage of her budget is allocated to the Rural Development Programme. (AQW 2391/01)

Ms Rodgers: DARD has a gross budget of £427.4 million for the financial year 2001/02. 1.9% or £8.2 million of this budget is allocated to the Rural Development Programme.

Rural Development Programme: Administrative Costs

Mr Paisley Jnr asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development what percentage of her budget is allocated to administrative costs. (AQW 2392/01)

Ms Rodgers: DARD has a gross budget of £427.4 million for the financial year 2001/02. 6.5% or £27.6 million of this budget is allocated to the corporate administrative costs of DARD. Corporate administration includes the Personnel, Finance, Co-ordination, Office Services etc functions and Policy Development but excludes staff providing direct services to customers (eg Vets, Agricultural Advisors/Inspectors, Scientists, Foresters, Drainage Engineers etc).

Budget Allocation

Mr Paisley Jnr asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to outline (a) the percentage of her budget which is allocated to departmental salaries; and (b) the total amount paid out on salaries by the department. (AQW 2393/01)

Ms Rodgers: DARD has a gross budget of £427.4 million for the financial year 2001/02. 19.3% or £82.6 million is allocated to staff salaries and current estimates are that actual expenditure this year will be close to the budget allocation.

Building Maintenance Budget

Mr Shannon asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development what is the building maintenance budget for her department in each of the last 3 years. (AQW 2406/01)

Ms Rodgers: My Department holds the Budget for its Specialised Buildings e.g. Colleges and Science Service

Laboratories. It does not hold any Budget for other office type accommodation occupied by DARD Staff.

DARD SPECIALISED BUILDINGS

1999–2000	2000–2001	2001–2002
£1,156,400	£2,475,700	£1,980,300
(12/99-3/00)		(Estimate)

Cattle: Restricted Movements

Mr C Murphy asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to indicate the percentage of herds in the Newry and Armagh District Veterinary Office areas who have had their movements restricted due to Brucellosis and TB outbreaks. (AQW 2452/01)

Ms Rodgers: The figures are as follows:

	Newry	Armagh
Tuberculosis	23.6%	24.8%
Brucellosis	2.4%	2.5%

Brucellosis Testing: Timeframe

Mr C Murphy asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to outline her guidelines on the timeframe for testing for Brucellosis and the removal of positive reactors from the farm. (AQW 2453/01)

Ms Rodgers: In Northern Ireland herds are tested every 2 years and in addition increased testing from biennial to annual is ongoing in the highest incidence areas of Enniskillen, Newry and Armagh.

The timescale for the removal of infected and in-contact animals from farms is 15 working days from the date of the sample being taken.

Disposal of Dead Animals

Mr Berry asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to outline her policy on the removal of dead animals that have been dumped in the countryside. (AQW 2483/01)

Ms Rodgers: The dumping of animals in the countryside is to be deplored as it is an offence under the Animal By-Products Regulations (Northern Ireland) 1993, as amended. It is also an offence under the Dogs (Northern Ireland) Order 1983.

It is the responsibility of farmers to dispose of fallen animals in line with applicable legislation and codes of good farming practice. It is in their own interests to do

so to prevent the spread of disease and avoid pollution of water.

My Department has issued a Code of Good Agricultural Practice which provides farmers and growers with practical advice and guidance for the prevention of pollution caused by fallen animals, particularly to water-courses. The Code provides options for the disposal of fallen animals and details how burial sites are to be chosen.

While on-farm burial has been a permitted method of disposal of fallen stock this option may be significantly constrained by the EU Animal By-Product Regulation which is expected to come into operation towards the end of 2002. This is a UK-wide issue and farming unions and other stakeholders are being invited to a meeting in London on 3 April to discuss this issue and the options for possible future arrangements. I will be considering the position in Northern Ireland with the relevant interests in the light of the outcome of that meeting.

Modulation of Direct Farm Subsidies

Mr Bradley asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development how funds raised through modulation of direct farm subsidies will be spent. (AQW 2486/01)

Ms Rodgers: As required under EU Council Regulation 1259/99, funds raised by the application of modulation can be deployed only for the purposes of agri-environment, afforestation of agricultural land, farmer early retirement or Less Favoured Area support measures. There is also a requirement that expenditure of these monies must be confined to new recipients or new schemes. Therefore, within the Northern Ireland Rural Development Regulation Plan, modulation funds so far committed have been devoted entirely to agri-environment measures and assistance for the afforestation of agricultural land. Approximately £8½ million of the projected modulation receipts up to 2006, plus £24 million of projected match funding, have yet to be allocated under the Plan.

Tuberculosis Testing: Private Sector Veterinary Surgeons

Mr Bradley asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development if she will engage private sector veterinary surgeons to help clear the backlog of herds being scrutinised for Bovine Tuberculosis. (AQW 2500/01)

Ms Rodgers: Over 95% of testing under the tuberculosis testing programme is already carried out by private veterinary practitioners on behalf of the Department. All overdue tests have already been allocated to private veterinary practices and they are endeavouring to have them completed as soon as possible. Our aim is to have the backlog reduced progressively over the coming months.

CULTURE, ARTS AND LEISURE

Lough Erne: Shoreline Erosion

Mr Morrow asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to detail (a) any plans he has to protect the shorelines of Lough Erne from erosion caused by the use of high-powered speed boats and other associated water activities; and (b) the impact to date these activities have had on bird life habitation and other wildlife species.

(AQW 2305/01)

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure (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 the Lough Erne (Navigation) Bye-laws (NI) 1978, as amended, for which they are now responsible are limited to prohibiting navigational behaviour likely to cause nuisance, injury or damage to persons or property or to other vessels or boats and in addition specify certain areas of Lough Erne where speed limits apply.

I am aware that Waterways Ireland will be undertaking a review of all existing Bye-laws within its remit in full consultation with all interested parties and will take account of nature conservation factors within that process.

Sporting Memorabilia in the Workplace

Mrs I Robinson asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to outline his policy on sporting memorabilia in the workplace.

(AQW 2307/01)

Mr McGimpsey: The Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure currently displays a range of materials including sporting memorabilia which reflects the Department's key responsibilities.

However the Department in common with all other Departments operates within the boundaries of the Northern Ireland Civil Service Equal Opportunities Policy.

This policy outlines the duty to provide a harmonious working environment and atmosphere in which no worker feels under threat or intimidated.

Moorlough, Strabane

Mr Hussey asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to outline any plans his Department may have for increased leisure activity at Moarlough, Strabane.

(AQW 2354/01)

Mr McGimpsey: Statutory responsibility for securing adequate facilities for social, physical and cultural activities, under Article 10 of the Recreation and Youth Service (Northern Ireland) Order 1986, lies with District Councils.

In addition, the Sports Council for Northern Ireland has responsibility for the promotion and development of sport, including disbursement of funding for sporting purposes. I can confirm that the Sports Council have not been approached about support for increasing the leisure, or sporting activity, which takes place at Moarlough.

Moorlough, however, forms part of the Department's Public Angling Estate and an action plan for the development of the estate has been drafted and funding is currently being sought to implement it. The Department aims to enhance the lough for angling and, in turn, encourage more anglers to make use of it.

Sports Institute for Northern Ireland: Employees

Mr McClarty asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to detail the current number of employees within the Sports Institute for Northern Ireland.

(AQW 2360/01)

Mr McGimpsey: The current number of employees within the Sports Institute for Northern Ireland is as follows:

Core Staff		Note
Strength & Conditioning Coach	1	
Athlete Career and Education Officer	1	
Admin Assistant	1	
High Performance Director	-	Pending
Associated Staff		
High Performance Managers	3	Appointed by GAA, Rugby and Athletics Gov Bodies
High Performance Manager	-	Pending for Hockey

Sports Institute for Northern Ireland

Mr McClarty asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure what is the current position with regard to the establishment of the Sports Institute for Northern Ireland; and to make a statement.

(AQW 2361/01)

Mr McGimpsey: The Sports Council and the University of Ulster are finalising the Memorandum of Understanding and Articles of Association in relation to the formation of the Sports Institute Northern Ireland Company. It is anticipated that this will be completed shortly and that an official launch will take place in April/May.

Meanwhile, an audit of sport has identified the needs of individual sports. In due course facilities will be built and managed by the University of Ulster and will be

subject to an annual usage agreement between the University and the Company. As an interim measure the use of existing facilities, both on and off site, will be negotiated.

Sports Institute for Northern Ireland: Funding

Mr McClarty asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure what is the current position in relation to the allocation of funding to the Sports Institute for Northern Ireland; and to make a statement. (AQW 2362/01)

Mr McGimpsey: Capital funding has been allocated as follows:

Sports Council for NI Lottery Fund	£6m
Sport England Lottery Fund	£3m
University of Ulster	£6m
Sport Scotland Lottery Fund	£1m

In addition, revenue funding of £400k per annum has been allocated by the Northern Ireland Sports Lottery Fund and a range of indirect funding is also available via Lottery programmes. The total revenue investment in the Sports Institute for Northern Ireland, both direct and indirect, is in excess of £1m per annum.

National Trust Properties: Free Access for Children

Mr Gibson asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure what recent meetings he has had with the National Trust with regard to securing free access for children to their properties. (AQW 2374/01)

Mr McGimpsey: I have had no meetings with the National Trust about securing free access for children to their properties, and no such meeting has been arranged for the future. The National Trust is a conservation charity and its policy on admission charges rests entirely with the organisation.

West Tyrone: Local Sports Clubs

Mr Gibson asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure what support he makes available for local sports clubs in West Tyrone. (AQW 2375/01)

Mr McGimpsey: The Sports Council for Northern Ireland, who have statutory responsibility for the development and promotion of sport within the province, including disbursement of funding for sporting purposes, administer a number of funding programmes through the Sports Lottery Fund. Funding opportunities from this source are available to all sports clubs in the province who engage in recognised sporting activity.

In addition, statutory responsibility for securing adequate facilities for social, physical and cultural activities, under Article 10 of the Recreation and Youth Service (Northern Ireland) Order 1986, lies with District Councils. Each District Council will have a Leisure Division manned by Sports Development Officers who can provide advice on funding for sport clubs at a local level.

Disability Related Groups: Funding

Mr Hussey asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to make a statement in regard to the funding of disability related groups by The Sports Council for Northern Ireland. (AQW 2491/01)

Mr McGimpsey: The Sports Council for Northern Ireland is responsible for the distribution of funding for sport. This includes funding for Talented Athletes with disabilities and a substantial capital investment for improving access for the disabled.

I understand that the Sports Council is in receipt of an application from Disability Sport under the Lottery 'Starting Well' programme which, if successful, would provide £84,000 over 4 years.

The Department is currently working with the Sports Council and Disability Sport to make a case for Executive Programme Funds which would include provision for people with disabilities.

EDUCATION

PricewaterhouseCoopers

Ms Lewsley asked the Minister of Education to detail (a) the number of staff from PricewaterhouseCoopers who worked on assignment or secondment to his Department or the Education and Library Boards during the last five years, (b) the cost of the total fees paid by his Department and/or the Boards to PricewaterhouseCoopers and (c) what percentage of total consultancy work allocated by his Department and the Boards went to PricewaterhouseCoopers over the past five years. (AQW 427/01)

The Minister of Education (Mr M McGuinness) [holding answer 1 November 2001]: PricewaterhouseCoopers (PWC) has only been in existence as a company since July 1998. This company was the result of a merger between Price Waterhouse and Coopers and Lybrand, both of which undertook consultancy assignments for the Department and the Education and Library Boards. Prior to the merger the two companies were in competition with one another for such consultancy work. Therefore, the following information relates only to the period since the merger.

In respect of the numbers of PWC staff engaged in consultancy assignments for the Department or the Boards this information is not readily available and thus it is not possible to provide figures without a detailed inspection of the records relating to each consultancy assignment undertaken by the company. This would require a major exercise at a significant cost in staff time. However, I can confirm that no PWC staff were seconded either to my Department or to the Boards.

In relation to the total consultancy fees paid to PWC the position is as follows:

- (a) the Department of Education paid just under £400,000 in consultancy fees to PricewaterhouseCoopers representing just over 14% of total consultancy fees over the period; and
- (b) the Education and Library Boards paid just over £3.8 million to PWC which was just under 89% of the total consultancy fees paid by the Boards over the same period.

Golden Jubilee Celebrations

Mr Weir asked the Minister of Education what plans he has to celebrate Her Majesty The Queen's Golden Jubilee in schools. (AQW 1808/01)

Mr M McGuinness: The Golden Jubilee celebrations are being co-ordinated by the Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure. I understand that the main event for schools will be a poetry competition for pupils aged 7 to 18 on the theme of the Golden Jubilee. Schools and parents' associations may, also if they choose, run their own events to celebrate the jubilee and can apply to the Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure for funding for that purpose. I have no plans to initiate any other programme of events or to provide additional funding to commemorate the occasion.

Male Teachers: Under-representation

Mr K Robinson asked the Minister of Education what action is he taking to address the under-representation of male teachers at primary level given that they act as role models for boys; and to make a statement. (AQW 2252/01)

Mr M McGuinness: I would refer to my previous answer to AQW 2164/01.

Temporary Teachers

Mr S Wilson asked the Minister of Education to detail (a) the number of temporary teachers in each sector; and (b) the reason for employing temporary teachers. (AQW 2308/01)

Mr M McGuinness: The most recent payroll for temporary teachers, for service during January 2002, shows that the number of teachers employed in each Education and Library Board area was as follows:

BELB	597
WELB	683
NEELB	832
SEELB	740
SELB	830

Temporary teachers may have service in more than one sector or school management category in a particular month.

Temporary teachers are employed for a variety of reasons, most often to provide cover for vacant posts; career breaks; maternity or sick leave; leave of absence or for other absences by teachers such as in service training or curriculum development activities.

Threshold Payments: Costs

Mr Hussey asked the Minister of Education to make it his policy that allocations to schools to cover the cost of threshold payments to teachers, post-2002/2003 financial year, will continue to be dealt with outside of the LMS funding formula. (AQW 2310/01)

Mr M McGuinness: It is expected that a common LMS funding formula for schools will be introduced from the 2003/04 financial year. A decision on how threshold payments are funded from 2003/04 will be taken in that wider context.

School Buses Security: Funding

Mr Hussey asked the Minister of Education if he will allocate funds to each Board in the next financial year to ensure the security of school buses. (AQW 2311/01)

Mr M McGuinness: Funding is allocated to Education and Library Boards on an annual accruals basis to meet the needs of their estate - including school bus depots - and it is a matter for each Board to determine its priorities within the resources available.

Public-Private Partnerships: Consultancy Costs

Mr Hussey asked the Minister of Education to detail expenditure on consultancy costs in respect of Public-Private Partnership projects in this financial year. (AQW 2312/01)

Mr M McGuinness: In the current financial year a total of £744,075 has been spent on consultancy costs in

respect of Public-Private Partnerships projects (including Classroom 2000).

Special Educational Needs

Mr Hussey asked the Minister of Education to give his assessment of special education needs across all Education and Library Board areas. (AQW 2313/01)

Mr M McGuinness: I am content that following a number of searching reports on provision, the Department has made improvements to its policy for children with Special Educational Needs. My Department and the Education and Library Boards are currently working together to promote better working practices.

DE has a Code of Practice and a process, which all Boards must follow. The Regional Strategy Group for Special Educational Needs is considering ways in which it can ensure uniformity of assessment and equality of provision for children and the efficient and effective use of resources.

School Closing Criteria

Mr Tierney asked the Minister of Education to outline the criteria adhered to by the Department of Education when closing a school. (AQW 2355/01)

Mr M McGuinness: Factors taken into account in the consideration of a proposal to close a school include enrolment patterns, educational factors, condition of the school premises, alternative provision in the area, social and community issues plus local objections and representations made about the proposal. The overriding consideration in any case is the educational interests of the pupils.

Golden Jubilee Celebration

Mr Hilditch asked the Minister of Education what representations he has received in respect of the Golden Jubilee celebrations; and to make a statement. (AQW 2358/01)

Mr M McGuinness: I have received two Assembly Questions and a small number of letters and have also responded in the Assembly to a Motion on the subject of the Golden Jubilee. I would refer you to the statement which I made during the debate on that Motion, which is included in the Assembly Official Report for 12 February 2002.

Burns Report

Mr Hamilton asked the Minister of Education to postpone the creation of official committees on the

Burns Report proposals until after the period of public consultation ends on 28 June 2002. (AQW 2376/01)

Mr M McGuinness: I refer the Member to my reply to his questions on 11 February. I have nothing further to add.

Early Years: Professional Qualifications

Mr Hussey asked the Minister of Education what professional qualifications exist, or are planned for those involved in, or seeking to be involved in, the management and/or operation of Early Years provision.

(AQW 2378/01)

Mr M McGuinness: Responsibility for the regulation of the community, private and voluntary early years sector falls within the remit of the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety and settings in that sector are subject to the requirements of the Children (NI) Order 1995 and relevant guidance. The Department of Education's involvement in the private and voluntary sector is limited to the allocation of funded places under the Pre-School Education Expansion Programme, an initiative for which my Department is responsible. Those centres participating in the Programme are required to have at least half of their staff holding a relevant qualification in education and childcare. Of the qualified staff, at least one member must be qualified to NVQ level 3 or equivalent and the remaining qualified staff must be qualified to NVQ level 2 or equivalent.

In grant-aided nursery schools and units, staff must comprise a qualified teacher and a qualified nursery assistant per class.

Secondary School Pupil: Expenditure

Mr Beggs asked the Minister of Education to detail the net expenditure per secondary school pupil by Education and Library Board area for (a) the Controlled Sector; and (b) the Maintained Sector in each of the last 5 years. (AQW 2389/01)

Mr M McGuinness: The figures below have been provided by the Education and Library Boards and set out the net expenditure per secondary school pupil over the last 5 years.

Board	Sector	1996/97	1997/98	1998/99	1999/00	2000/01
BELB	Controlled	£3,038	£2,916	£2,986	£3,334	£3,875
	Maintained	£2,766	£2,793	£2,853	£2,964	£3,270
NEELB	Controlled	£2,644	£2,708	£2,771	£2,963	£3,090
	Maintained	£2,694	£2,757	£2,860	£3,026	£3,389
SEELB	Controlled	£2,797	£2,585	£2,717	£2,918	£3,165
	Maintained	£2,558	£2,546	£2,621	£2,880	£3,130

Board	Sector	1996/97	1997/98	1998/99	1999/00	2000/01
SELB	Controlled	£2,468	£2,529	£2,638	£2,987	£3,188
	Maintained	£2,555	£2,582	£2,684	£2,962	£3,066
WELB	Controlled	£2,971	£3,009	£2,899	£3,157	£3,230
	Maintained	£2,627	£2,692	£2,723	£2,931	£3,254

The figures include –

- amounts made available under LMS Formulae.
- centre funds held by Boards distributed to schools in the course of the year to meet certain costs arising from items of expenditure such as teacher substitution, contingency funds and initiatives funded by both the ELBs and the Department.
- The figures exclude centrally held resources, such as Home to School Transport, CASS, School Meals and Central Administration, as these are not costed to individual schools.

Primary School Pupil: Expenditure

Mr Beggs asked the Minister of Education to detail the net expenditure per primary school pupil by Education and Library Board area for (a) the Controlled Sector; and (b) the Maintained Sector, in each of the last 5 years.

(AQW 2390/01)

Mr M McGuinness: The figures below have been provided by the Education and Library Boards and set out the net expenditure per primary school pupil over the last 5 years.

Board	Sector	1996/97	1997/98	1998/99	1999/00	2000/01
BELB	Controlled	£1,833	£1,899	£2,023	£2,226	£2,407
	Maintained	£1,700	£1,748	£1,841	£2,015	£2,177
NEELB	Controlled	£1,609	£1,613	£1,727	£1,865	£2,001
	Maintained	£1,687	£1,712	£1,823	£1,988	£2,121
SEELB	Controlled	£1,657	£1,583	£1,685	£1,859	£2,060
	Maintained	£1,694	£1,681	£1,788	£2,028	£2,230
SELB	Controlled	£1,728	£1,768	£1,835	£2,084	£2,166
	Maintained	£1,670	£1,697	£1,820	£1,980	£2,087
WELB	Controlled	£1,777	£1,812	£1,868	£2,093	£2,291
	Maintained	£1,689	£1,736	£1,776	£1,923	£2,058

The figures include –

- amounts made available under LMS Formulae.
- centre funds held by Boards distributed to schools in the course of the year to meet certain costs arising from items of expenditure such as teacher substitution, contingency funds and initiatives funded by both the ELBs and the Department.
- The figures exclude centrally held resources, such as Home to School Transport, CASS, School Meals and Central Administration, as these are not costed to individual schools.

Free School Meals and Low Achievement

Mr S Wilson asked the Minister of Education to outline (a) his assessment of the connection between children receiving free school meals and achieving educational targets; and (b) the research from which his assessment is based.

(AQW 2409/01)

Mr M McGuinness: In setting each educational target, account has been taken of trends over recent years in the indicator in question, taking all schools together irrespective of free school meal entitlement. So far as encouraging individual schools to set targets is concerned, my Department provides ‘benchmarking’ information on the attainment of schools with a similar percentage rate of free school meal entitlement.

Research evidence was summarised in Statistical Bulletin SB2/96 ‘Free school meals and low achievement’, June 1996 and more recently in ‘NTSN: Analysis of existing information on education participation, achievement and outcomes for disadvantaged individuals and groups’, May 2001, both published by my Department.

North/South Education Projects

Mrs Carson asked the Minister of Education, pursuant to AQW 2054/01, to detail (a) the number of North/South education projects, or parts thereof, involving his Department and the Department of Education and Science in the Republic of Ireland that have been solely funded by his Department; and (b) the cost to his Department.

(AQW 2420/01)

Mr M McGuinness: There have been no North/South education projects involving the Department of Education and the Department of Education and Science which were solely funded by my Department other than that referred to in my answer to AQW 2054/01.

Newport Primary School

Mr S Wilson asked the Minister of Education to detail (a) his decision regarding Newport Primary School; (b) the factors he considered in reaching his decision; and (c) is his decision compatible with his statement of 6 December 2000.

(AQW 2432/01)

Mr M McGuinness: It was considered that the educational needs of the children in the area would best be met through the amalgamation of Hillsborough and Newport Primary Schools in a new primary school in Hillsborough. This decision was based on a range of factors including enrolment patterns (where the current figure for Newport is 61 pupils), potential changes to enrolments, educational factors, alternative provision in the area, condition of the existing schools’ premises, social and community issues plus objections and representations made about the proposal to amalgamate the two schools. The decision fully reflects my statement of 6 December 2000 about the importance of consulting with local communities. In the present case there was full consultation with all relevant groups including staff and Governors at both schools, Newport Concerned Parents Group and a group of MLA’s representing Lagan Valley.

It should be emphasised that, subject to being included in a New Starts Programme, the amalgamation decision will provide modern facilities in new accommodation to deliver an improved learning experience for the pupils and staff of both schools.

Education and Library Boards: Funding and Administrative Expenditure

Mrs I Robinson asked the Minister of Education to detail (a) the amount of funding provided to each of the local Education and Library Boards for the year 2001-2002; and (b) the level of funding spent on administration at the headquarters of each respective Board.

(AQW 2436/01)

Mr M McGuinness: The information requested is not available. However, for the 2000/01 financial year the figures are as follows:

Board	Funding Provided £m	HQ Administrative Expenditure £m
Belfast	170.93	4.42
North Eastern	207.94	4.83
South Eastern	193.78	4.43
Southern	219.49	3.93
Western	190.52	4.05

Carrick Primary School, Warrenpoint

Mr Bradley asked the Minister of Education what plans he has to visit Carrick Primary School, Warrenpoint.

(AQW 2488/01)

Mr M McGuinness: I have accepted an invitation to visit Carrick Primary School but I regret that my schedule has so far not permitted me to fulfil this commitment. While I cannot at this time give a precise date, I will ensure that the invitation will be taken into account in planning any future visits to the Warrenpoint area.

Studying in Northern Ireland: Encouragement

Mr Weir asked the Minister of Education what efforts his Department has made to encourage A-Level students to continue their studies in Northern Ireland rather than leave the Province.

(AQW 2494/01)

Mr M McGuinness: The question of where young people should pursue their studies after they leave school is essentially one of careers guidance, which is provided by officers of the Careers Service, rather than careers education, which is provided by teachers; as such it falls within the responsibility of my colleague the Minister for Employment and Learning.

Tor Bank School

Mr R Hutchinson asked the Minister of Education when he intends to release funding for Tor Bank School.

(AQW 2502/01)

Mr M McGuinness: I cannot give any commitment about funding for Tor Bank School. Planning of a new school is being taken forward by the South-Eastern Board and the school is being considered for a place in the capital programme which I shall be announcing shortly.

Burns Report

Mr ONeill asked the Minister of Education to outline (a) any legislation he plans to put in place as a result of the Burns Report; and (b) when the Report will be implemented.

(AQW 2503/01)

Mr M McGuinness: I want a modern education system which is fair and will raise standards for all pupils. Decisions about new post-primary arrangements will not be made until I have considered the responses to the current consultation. The Assembly will be consulted about any new arrangements, including any legislation which is necessary.

Divisional Youth Office: Downpatrick

Mr McGrady asked the Minister of Education what assistance will he provide to the South-Eastern Education and Library Board in their search for new accommodation for the Divisional Youth Office in Downpatrick; and to make a statement.

(AQO 974/01)

Mr M McGuinness: If assistance in finding accommodation for the Down Youth Office is requested by the South-Eastern Education and Library Board, the Department will ask the Valuation and Lands Agency to carry out an initial property search to identify options which may be suitable and to recommend the terms under which they should be acquired. Alternatively the Board could approach the VLA directly.

I understand from the Board that, while it is essential to find alternative accommodation for the Down Youth Office, no decision has been made to relocate the office outside the town of Downpatrick.

Standards of Literacy and Numeracy

Mr Dallat asked the Minister of Education what assessment has he made of the wide variance in levels of attainments in literacy and numeracy between the different Education and Library Board areas; and to make a statement.

(AQO 988/01)

Mr M McGuinness: Standards of literacy and numeracy in the primary sector are improving steadily across all Board areas as measured by end-of Key Stage 2 assessment results; however, there is not yet clear evidence of a steady increase in the post-primary sector. Improving standards generally and, especially standards of literacy and numeracy, remain at the top of my agenda. My Department works closely with the Education and Library Boards and CCMS on the implementation of strategies for improving literacy and numeracy standards. A review of these strategies, which will examine how they can be strengthened and developed to the benefit of all schools, is currently underway.

Noble Indicators

Mr Gallagher asked the Minister of Education if the use of Noble indicators by Education and Library Boards is in line with his approach to dealing with social deprivation. (AQO 987/01)

Mr M McGuinness: In tackling the educational implications of social deprivation, my approach is to use the most appropriate means of identifying the extent of the problem to be addressed. For example, in the case of the common funding formula for schools, I consider that the use of a pupil-orientated indicator such as entitlement to free school meals is more appropriate than using the Noble indicators which are location-based and could not, therefore, be used to target resources at schools with socially deprived children in attendance, given that pupils do not always attend their nearest school.

The extent to which Noble indicators are used by Education and Library Boards in circumstances where they consider their use to be appropriate, is a matter for the Boards themselves. I would not see their use in such circumstances as being inconsistent with my approach to social deprivation.

Transfer Tests: Administration Costs

Mrs E Bell asked the Minister of Education to detail the amount spent by his Department each year in administering the 11-plus transfer tests. (AQO 993/01)

Mr M McGuinness: I should explain that the Council for the Curriculum, Examinations and Assessment is responsible for the setting, marking and administration of the Transfer Tests, while other administrative duties, including recruitment, training and payment of invigilators and posting of results are the responsibility of Education and Library Boards.

I am advised by CCEA and the Boards that cost of administering the transfer procedure tests in 2001/02 was £188,000.

Threshold Assessment: Young Teachers

Mr B Hutchinson asked the Minister of Education to outline any amendments he has made to ensure equity of treatment for young teachers in relation to the threshold assessment; and to make a statement. (AQO 960/01)

Mr M McGuinness: In many professions it is normal for those starting out on their careers to move up their salary scale incrementally each year. This does not mean that they are being treated inequitably compared to colleagues, who are at a higher point on the same salary scale because they started the job before them.

The same practice applies to the teaching profession, where it is a long-standing principle, negotiated between Management Side and Teachers' Side, to pay teachers according to their qualifications and experience. As such, teachers with a good honours degree start on the second point of the pay scale, which is currently £17,001 per annum, rising to £24,843 after 7 years' service. They can then apply for threshold assessment at the start of their 8th year of service and, if successful, move onto the first point of the upper pay scale, which is £26,919 per annum.

Teacher's Sick Absence

Mr Davis asked the Minister of Education what he intends to do to address the very high levels of teachers' sick absence which cost the education budget over £15 million in 2000-01. (AQO 991/01)

Mr M McGuinness: The employing authorities and my Department are very concerned to make sure that the right health support arrangements are in place and working for teachers. In particular, considerable emphasis is placed on the importance of a strong employer/employee relationship, which is why Management Side of the Teachers' Salaries and Conditions of Service Committee (Schools) has commissioned a report into teachers' health and well-being.

In addition, the employing authorities have drawn up a common policy and procedures on managing attendance at work. They provide schools with support and advice in promoting a culture which recognises that good attendance by school staff enhances the learning of children. The policy also raises awareness of the employing authorities' staff care services, which provide support for those suffering from stress, anxiety or who having difficulty coping with life experiences such as bereavement, relationships, family or financial difficulties and work related problems.

Consultation Documents: Cost

Mr Close asked the Minister of Education to detail the cost of producing documents for consultation over

the last 3 years, including preparation, printing, distribution and all ancillary costs. (AQO 992/01)

Mr M McGuinness: Expenditure incurred by the Department of Education in producing documents for consultation over the last 3 years is as follows:

1999/2000 *	2000/2001	2001/2002
Nil	£8664	£280,821

* period 2 December 1999 – 31 March 2000

Industrial Action: Impact

Mr Hussey asked the Minister of Education to outline the likely impact the recent votes for industrial action by the National Association of Head Teachers and the Ulster Teachers' Union will have on schools and the education system. (AQO 990/01)

Mr M McGuinness: Negotiations are taking place between my Department, Management Side and Teachers' Side in order to reach a mutually acceptable way forward. In the meantime, both Unions have made it clear that their action will not affect pupils' education. The position is being kept under close review, and so far there is no evidence of any adverse effect on the quality of teaching and learning.

Special Care Schools: Standard of Buildings

Mr Beggs asked the Minister of Education what assessment he has made in relation to the standard of school buildings provided for Special Care Schools. (AQO 989/01)

Mr M McGuinness: The majority of special schools are in reasonably good order but there are still serious accommodation problems in some of the former 'Special Care' schools which transferred to the Education sector in 1987. My Department has sought to give priority to the replacement of these schools as reflected by the inclusion of sixteen of them in capital programmes announced since 1990.

There remain 11 special schools requiring major capital development in the school capital priorities planning list.

Post-Primary Review: Video

Mr Molloy asked the Minister of Education to outline the progress on the commissioning of the video to access the post-primary review consultation; and to make a statement. (AQO 1013/01)

Mr M McGuinness: The video was made available to the Education Committee in draft form and a number of changes have been made to reflect their comments. The video is in the final stages of production and will be

issued with supporting materials to all schools, FE Colleges, community groups and public libraries at the end of March.

The aim is to provide information on the review, clarify the proposals made by the Review Body and to explain the arrangements for consultation. I hope that the video and supporting materials will stimulate discussion about the main issues and will encourage informed responses to the review.

Meeting with Vice-Chancellors: Queen's University and the University of Ulster

Mrs Nelis asked the Minister of Education to detail the outcome of his meeting with the Vice-Chancellors of Queen's University, Belfast and the University of Ulster. (AQO 968/01)

Mr M McGuinness: I met the Vice-Chancellors on 19 February to discuss the need for change in post-primary education.

Both Vice Chancellors said that a significant and increasing number of students are progressing to university from non-grammar and non A-level routes. This is an important point to be considered in the post-primary review.

Professor McKenna said that only about 50% of students at the University of Ulster have traditional A-levels and the university found no difference in academic outcome irrespective of the route taken by students to reach university. He stressed that academic and vocational study should be given parity of esteem.

Sir George Bain said that Queen's has many students who do not come via the traditional A-level route and they include some of the university's best students. Sir George indicated that Queen's wants the most able students regardless of their social or economic background, or the method of study they pursued.

Both Vice-Chancellors agreed that post-primary education should maximise the potential of children within society, and that there should be an open, transparent and equitable system which ensures that all who can benefit from higher education get the opportunity to do so.

Capital Spend: Backlog

Mr Gibson asked the Minister of Education to indicate what discussions he has initiated to utilise Public-Private Partnerships to reduce the backlog in necessary capital spend for schools in the primary and secondary sectors. (AQO 957/01)

Mr M McGuinness: My Department wrote to the Chief Executives of the five Education and Library Boards and to the Council for Catholic Maintained Schools on 22 November 2001 asking them to consider what priority schemes could be considered as PPP projects

for inclusion in future capital programmes. The replies are being considered and it is planned to hold a series of meetings with the Boards and CCMS later in the year to progress the PPP initiative.

I will be making an announcement later this month in relation to the New Starts Programme and will be considering the use of Public-Private Partnerships to reduce the current backlog.

ENTERPRISE, TRADE AND INVESTMENT

Electricity Generation: Wind Energy

Mr Byrne asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to outline his plans to increase the percentage of electricity generated through wind energy. (AQW 2273/01)

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment (Sir Reg Empey): On 16 October 2001 I issued a consultation paper on how to realise the potential of renewable energy to generate electricity in Northern Ireland. The responses received are currently being evaluated but it is already clear that wind generation will remain a key technology within the overall renewables mix in Northern Ireland.

I envisage that the mechanisms necessary to encourage the rapid development of all relevant renewable energy systems will be determined during the next 6-8 months. My Department has received outline assessments of the level of land based wind generation available and has also agreed with the Crown Estate the terms of a lease for a 150 megawatt offshore wind farm off the North Coast of Northern Ireland. A competition to award the lease is currently underway with the aim to select a developer by the end of April.

However, the intermittent nature of wind power raises a number of complex control and systems security issues which must be fully understood and dealt with if the maximum potential of wind to generate electricity in Northern Ireland is to be realised. My Department, together with NIE and a senior academic specialising in wind generation are currently engaged in a comprehensive study of the electricity network in Northern Ireland. The study will determine the maximum level of wind generation which can be safely and economically accommodated on the electricity network.

In addition the Regulator has brought forward proposals for alleviating trading disincentives for wind generation which aim to encourage greater investment in micro and small scale wind power projects. These are currently being considered.

Full details of the Regulator's proposals can be obtained from OFREG, Tel: 028 9031 1575 or by visiting their website .www.nics.gov.uk/ofreg.

West Tyrone: Non-Manufacturing Sector

Mr Gibson asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment what assessment can he make in relation to the state of the non-manufacturing sector in Northern Ireland and specifically in West Tyrone. (AQW 2314/01)

Sir Reg Empey: The non-manufacturing sector makes a significant contribution to the Northern Ireland economy accounting for 83.5% of GDP and for 84.5% of all employee jobs in NI. Over the last five years the number of employee jobs in non-manufacturing sectors has grown by 14.2% and this positive trend is expected to continue.

Limited data is available at Parliamentary Constituency level and it is not possible to provide an up-to-date assessment of the current state of the non-manufacturing sector in West Tyrone. However, employment data at Parliamentary Constituency level is available up to September 1999. At this date Census of Employment data indicated that non-manufacturing jobs accounted for 80% of total employee jobs for West Tyrone. This compares to an average for NI of almost 83% at the same date. Between 1997 and 1999 the number of non-manufacturing jobs in West Tyrone grew by 4.8% compared to NI growth of 6.7%.

Foot-and-Mouth Outbreak: Effect on Tourism

Mr Gibson asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to make a statement on the effect of the Foot-and-Mouth crisis on tourism in West Tyrone. (AQW 2315/01)

Sir Reg Empey: The adverse impact of the Foot and Mouth outbreak on the local tourism sector, particularly rural tourism, is widely acknowledged. Forecasts for the year 2001 indicate a 2% decline in visitor numbers to Northern Ireland but the arrangements for collecting tourism statistics do not enable definitive regional impacts to be attributed to the outbreak.

Business Parks: East and West Belfast

Mr S Wilson asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to detail (a) those Business Parks in East and West Belfast; and (b) the number of units in each park. (AQW 2336/01)

Sir Reg Empey: West Belfast

Within the West Belfast Parliamentary Constituency area IDB has units in the following Industrial/Business Parks:

	Units
Glen Road Industrial Estate	4
Whiterock Business Park	1
Springvale Business Park	5
Springbank Industrial Estate	5
Ballygomartin Industrial Park	3
Ex-Mackie site	6
Total	24 Units

Additionally, there are six further business parks in the West Belfast Parliamentary Constituency run by Local Enterprise Agencies:

	Units
Argyle Business Centre	37
Farset Enterprise Centre	43
Townsend Enterprise Park	67
Glenwood Enterprise Centre	60
West Belfast Development Trust	41
Ortus	60
Total	308 Units

East Belfast

There are three LEDU, DOE/DSD and Belfast City Council-supported sites in East Belfast Parliamentary Constituency:

	Units
East Belfast Enterprise Park	34
Bryson Street	17 – Community Economic Regeneration Scheme
Portview Trade Centre	63 – Has not received departmental funding
Total	114 Units

While IDB has no land or buildings in East Belfast the private sector offers significant industrial property in the area. There is c105 acres available (subject to planning) at Titanic Quarter, c8 acres at Titanic Technology Park, c6 acres at the former ESSO tanks site and c35 acres under development and c15 acres available from BHC at Sydenham Business Park in the Harbour Estate. At the Titanic Properties Channel Commercial Park there is 110,000 sq ft of business space available for occupation and a further 100,000 sq ft planned.

West Tyrone: Tourism

Mr Gibson asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to make a statement on the impact of the events of 11 September 2001 on tourism in West Tyrone. (AQW 2379/01)

Sir Reg Empey: The terrorist attacks of September 11th have had a serious adverse affect on international

tourism. While most of our long haul visitors in 2001 would have already visited prior to 11th September, the impact will continue to be felt for some time. The arrangements for collecting tourism statistics do not enable definitive regional impacts to be specifically attributed to the horrifying events.

ENVIRONMENT

Effluent Discharges: Prosecutions

Mr Shannon asked the Minister of the Environment how many prosecutions have there been for effluent disposal discharges whether intentional or accidental. (AQW 2008/01)

The Minister of the Environment (Mr Nesbitt) [holding answer 5 March 2002]: The number of prosecutions for pollution of watercourses by my Department's Environment and Heritage Service (EHS) and by the Fisheries Conservancy Board in each of the last 5 years is set out in the table below.

Rather than taking court action against a polluter, EHS may instead issue a warning letter. A warning letter can deal effectively with less severe incidents, giving advice to prevent further pollution and warning of the consequences of not doing so. There is no penalty attached to a warning letter, but it may be produced in court in the event of a further offence. The number of warning letters issued is also included in the table.

Year	Total No of Prosecutions	Water Act Prosecutions	Fisheries Legislation Prosecutions	Warning Letters
1996	117	109	8	52*
1997	85	85	0	49*
1998	94	91	3	304
1999	68	67	1	225
2000	73	66	7	243

* Only those cases of pollution where statutory samples were taken.

EHS may also serve a notice requiring action to prevent or remedy pollution, or to prohibit any activity causing or having potential to cause pollution. EHS may also seek a court order against a convicted offender requiring that person to remedy or nullify the pollution in question.

Building Work: Priority

Mr Shannon asked the Minister of the Environment if building work can begin prior to improvements to sewerage systems being agreed by the Environment and Heritage Service. (AQW 2089/01)

Mr Nesbitt [*holding answer 4 March 2002*]: Environment and Heritage Service (EHS) is responsible for the protection of water quality in Northern Ireland, in line with the requirements of the Water (NI) Order 1999, EC legislation, and other Departmental commitments. EHS is responsible, under the Urban Waste Water Treatment Regulations, which implement the Urban Waste Water Treatment Directive in NI, for setting standards and assessing compliance of treatment works and collection systems.

Water Service of DRD is responsible for the provision and improvement of sewerage and water facilities under the Water and Sewage Services Order 1973.

The Planning Service consults Water Service on all development proposals potentially impacting on water and sewerage infrastructure. Where Planning Service feels it necessary, it also consults with the Water Management Unit of EHS, which is responsible for monitoring effluent discharged from Waste Water Treatment Works and its impact on water quality.

Where properties are not connected to the public sewer, private operators or householders may, subject to conditions laid down by EHS, obtain prior consent to discharge to a waterway or the underground stratum under the terms of the Water Order. In such cases it is the responsibility of the discharger to ensure that appropriate treatment is provided to meet consent conditions. Proposals for treatment are considered by Planning Service during the process of planning applications.

Water Service, EHS and the Environment and Health Department of the District Council are consulted as appropriate. When consulted by Planning Service about development proposals, EHS seeks to identify the risk to the environment through assessment of the performance of the receiving sewage treatment works and the sewerage system and also compliance with current and potential EHS and Urban Waste Water Treatment Directive standards.

Where the advice from Water Service or EHS is that there is no infrastructure in place, that a proposed development will cause overloading of a sewerage system or treatment works, or cause or exacerbate non-compliance with any EC Directive, the Planning Service would seek further advice on alternative or interim arrangements. These might include phasing of development, use of negative conditions attached to a planning consent to prevent development commencing pending a solution being put in place, or requests to the developer to contribute funding to possible solutions. Where no alternative can be found, a refusal of planning permission would normally follow.

Where possible, EHS will seek to draw the attention of Planning Service to potential problems relating to sewerage infrastructure capacity at Area Plan stage.

In some cases, potential overloading of a works has been countered by the provision of enhanced treatment by the Water Service. This is, however, not always possible.

Wind Farms

Mrs Carson asked the Minister of the Environment what consideration has been given to (a) planning control regarding the siting of wind farms; (b) planning applications for wind farms in respect of their visual impact on Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty; and (c) planning applications for wind farms in respect of their visual impact in proposed Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty in Co Fermanagh. (AQW 2125/01)

Mr Nesbitt [*holding answer 5 March 2002*]: All applications for wind farm development are considered under existing planning regulations and against prevailing planning 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". This states that all proposals for wind farms will be assessed in respect of their implications for the visual, ecological and historic landscapes; the implications for agriculture; and the safety and amenity of local residents. It also makes it clear that permissions will not be granted within, or in any location, where they would have a seriously detrimental impact on the amenity of an Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty, (AONB) or any area designated for its conservation, scientific, archaeological or historic interest.

Consultation on wind farm proposals will normally include the Environmental Health Department of the relevant local Council, my own Department's Environment and Heritage Service, the Department for Regional Development's Roads and Water Services, the Ministry of Defence, and the Civil Aviation Authority.

In addition, under the Planning (Environmental Impact Assessment) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 1999, my Department may require an Environmental Statement where a proposal involves the installation of more than 2 turbines; or the hub height of any turbine or height of any other structure exceeds 15 metres. This Statement will provide my Department with detailed information about the impact that a proposal may have on the environment.

As regards the visual impact of planning applications for wind farms in proposed Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty in Co. Fermanagh, I can assure you that careful and detailed consideration will be given to any such proposals, against the policies and regulations outlined above.

DVTA Transfer List: Waiting Times

Mrs I Robinson asked the Minister of the Environment, pursuant to AQW 1887/01, to state how long each of the 29 members of the Driver and Vehicle Testing Agency have been on the waiting list. (AQW 2134/01)

Mr Nesbitt [*holding answer 5 March 2002*]: The number of Driver & Vehicle Testing Agency staff currently seeking a transfer to another Department has now reduced to 26. The length of time each of these has been waiting on the Central Transfer List is detailed below in ascending order.

2 months	2 years 3 months
3 months	2 years 4 months
5 months	2 years 5 months
7 months	2 years 7 months
7 months	3 years 5 months
9 months	3 years 9 months
1 year 1 month	3 years 10 months
1 year 8 months	3 years 11 months
2 years	4 years 8 months
2 years 1 month	6 years 11 months
2 years 1 month	7 years 11 months
2 years 2 months	8 years
2 years 3 months	8 years 4 months

Refrigerators and Freezers: Recycling Cost

Mr Hilditch asked the Minister of the Environment to detail the projected cost to (a) local District Councils; and (b) private individuals of implementing the EU Directive on Recycling of Refrigerators and Freezers.

(AQW 2195/01)

Mr Nesbitt [*holding answer 8 March 2002*]:

- (a) The cost to local councils of compliance with EC Regulation 2037 / 2000 is dependent upon a number of variable factors. These include the number of waste fridges to be dealt with, the time taken to establish an approved disposal route, the location of the recycling plant, and the cost of recycling. The exact cost to councils of recycling will not be known until more robust estimates of the numbers of domestic fridges and freezers are available and the unit costs of disposal have been established through tendering. My officials continue to work with District Councils to determine numbers and costs.
- (b) There should be limited impact from the Regulation on costs to private individuals. Several options are currently available for disposal of waste fridges and freezers. District Councils are statutorily obliged to accept, free of charge, waste domestic refrigeration equipment for disposal. Councils are also statutorily obliged to collect this equipment, if requested to do so, although Councils can, and some do, impose a charge for this service. Alternatively some charity shops or refurbishment shops will collect these items for reuse.

In liaison with Councils consideration is being given to the conditions under which partnership arrangements might be entered into with retailers and refurbishment

outlets to provide the most effective and environmentally friendly collection and recycling service.

High Hedges Bill

Mrs E Bell asked the Minister of the Environment what plans he has to introduce legislation similar to the High Hedges Bill in the House of Commons.

(AQW 2256/01)

Mr Nesbitt: The High Hedges Bill referred to, was a Government sponsored Private Member's Bill that failed to complete its necessary legislative stages. It no longer forms part of the legislative programme for England and Wales.

I have no plans, at present, to introduce similar legislation to the Assembly.

Sustainable Development: World Summit

Mr Ford asked the Minister of the Environment, pursuant to AQW 1388/01, to detail his plans for Northern Ireland representation in the cabinet sub committee dealing with the World Summit on Sustainable Development later this year.

(AQW 2316/01)

Mr Nesbitt: The Environment Ministers from the three devolved administrations have standing invitations to attend meetings of the Cabinet Committee on the World Summit on Sustainable Development (MISC 18). Unfortunately, it was not possible for my predecessor to attend any of the three meetings of the Committee to date, because of other commitments, in particular Executive and Assembly business.

I plan to attend meetings of MISC 18 when I can, subject as before to Executive and Assembly business taking priority. My officials will continue to receive papers for, and to attend where appropriate, meetings of the Steering Group of officials supporting MSC 18.

West Tyrone Area Plan

Mr Byrne asked the Minister of the Environment to outline the progress to date of devising and publishing the draft report of the West Tyrone Area Plan; and to make a statement.

(AQW 2347/01)

Mr Nesbitt: In accordance with my Department's Development Plan Programme, work is due to commence on the preparation of the West Tyrone Area Plan in the middle of 2002.

It is envisaged that the Draft Plan will be published within 18 months of the commencement date.

The purpose of the new Plan will be to set out the broad planning framework for the physical development of the entire area, including all the urban settlements and

the rural hinterland within the council areas of Omagh and Strabane, for the succeeding 15 year period. The Plan will also advise the public and potential land users on the policy framework which will be used to guide future development, and provide a basis for the control of this development.

South Belfast constituency: Planning Applications

Ms McWilliams asked the Minister of the Environment to detail (a) the total number of planning applications; and (b) the number of approvals granted in the South Belfast constituency in each of the last 3 years.

(AQW 2348/01)

Mr Nesbitt: The information requested is only available on a parliamentary constituency basis from January 2000.

- (a) Details of the total number of valid planning applications which have been lodged with the Planning Service in each of the last two years for the South Belfast constituency area are set out below:

Year	No. of Applications
2000	975
2001	1,279

- (b) Details of the number of decisions issued and planning applications approved for the South Belfast constituency in each of the last two years are set out below:

Year	Decisions	Approvals	% Approved
2000	1,058	842	79.6%
2001	1,079	964	89.3%

I should explain that it is not possible to make a direct comparison between the number of applications received during these two years and the number of approvals issued. This is because the number of decisions made during 2000 and 2001 will include approvals of applications received prior to each of these years, and also because some of the applications received during this period will not be determined until after 31 December 2001.

To obtain details for the 12 months prior to 1 January 2000 would entail manual checking of relevant application files in the Downpatrick and Belfast Divisional Planning Offices, and could only be obtained at disproportionate cost to the Department.

Refrigerators and Freezers: Recycling

Mr Hussey asked the Minister of the Environment to detail arrangements available for the recycling of refrigerators and freezers currently being collected and stored by District Councils and private individuals pursuant to the EU Directive on the recycling of refrigerators and freezers.

(AQW 2380/01)

Mr Nesbitt: EC Regulation 2037 / 2000 requires that with effect from 1 January 2002 all Ozone Depleting Substances (ODS) contained in domestic refrigeration equipment must be removed using approved technologies.

Such substances are present not only in the refrigerant but also in the insulating foam of older domestic fridges and freezers. There is currently no plant in the UK capable of removing ODS contained in the insulating foam and hence the short term requirement for storage.

My officials have been liaising with the councils, DEFRA and the waste management industry to quantify the impact of the Regulation, provide advice and develop standards relating to the storage and disposal of waste fridges and freezers.

Draft standards on the storage of waste units awaiting disposal along with advice to householders issued to all councils for consideration on 10 January 2002. Further guidance on standards for the removal of ODS from refrigerants, from insulating foam and on the destruction of ODS are currently being finalised. These will inform the waste management industry of the types of processes required for disposal and will assist councils in the compilation of contract documents.

Officials have been considering, along with the councils and the Government Procurement Agency the development of a collective contract to maximise the benefits of economies of scale and reduce the financial burden on the local authorities.

Further liaison is ongoing into the conditions under which partnership arrangements might be entered into with retailers and refurbishment outlets to provide the most effective and environmentally friendly collection and recycling service.

Planning Process: Prevention of Delays

Mr Hilditch asked the Minister of the Environment to detail any measures in place to prevent lengthy delays in the planning process.

(AQW 2381/01)

Mr Nesbitt: I refer the Member to my reply to AQO 908/01, which was answered in the Chamber on Monday 4 March 2002.

Drinks Industry: Non-Returnable Bottles

Mr Hussey asked the Minister of the Environment what steps he is taking to discourage the use of non-returnable bottles (NRBs) within the drinks industry.

(AQW 2382/01)

Mr Nesbitt: Action on this is taken within the context of the of the Packaging Waste Directive (94/62/EC). The Directive aims to minimise the amount of packaging generated and to decrease the tonnage going to landfill sites. The Directive is implemented here by the Producer

Responsibility Obligations (Packaging Waster) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 1999. The Regulations promote the introduction of reusable packaging systems, with a projected life of at least four years. A number of companies in the dairy and drinks sectors here have managed to reduce their costs considerably through the use of returnable glass bottles.

Packaging is closely linked to the product it contains and the requirements of the customer. Companies must also balance the composition of the packaging and the need to use the correct specification to ensure the safety and hygiene of the product.

My Department has published 'Guidelines for Company Reporting on Waste' to assist business. The Industrial Research and Technology Unit of DETI also provides advice and guidance to companies on the design of packaging. The message of reduction, reuse and recycling within this industrial sector is also being promoted within the Department's public awareness and information programme.

FINANCE AND PERSONNEL

Non-Domestic Rateable Values

Mr S Wilson asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel to detail the rateable values for non-domestic properties in each of the rateable bands for each local District Council area in respect of (a) numbers in each band; and (b) the total number of all bands.

(AQW 2295/01)

The Minister of Finance and Personnel (Dr Farren):

I am unable to supply the information in the precise form requested as 'rateable bands' do not formally exist in the Valuation List. I have, however, supplied for each District Council Area, the numbers and rateable values of the non-domestic properties, categorised by their distinguishment in the Valuation List.

SUMMARY OF NON-DOMESTIC RATEABLE VALUES BY DISTRICT COUNCIL

District	Sport And Recreation	Industrial	Freight Transport	Other Than Specified	Exempt
Antrim	£195,170 (20)	£4,508,474 (158)	£61,980 (1)	£24,591,198 (1,290)	£1,486,570 (175)
Ards	£265,305 (42)	£4,455,617 (269)	£12,600 (1)	£19,120,000 (2,112)	£2,374,007 (316)
Armagh	£233,755 (27)	£2,717,089 (184)	£45,640 (1)	£15,096,541 (1,943)	£3,015,466 (378)
Ballymena	£111,130 (16)	£5,767,484 (167)	£41,960 (1)	£24,210,540 (1,983)	£2,754,086 (321)
Ballymoney	£80,010 (7)	£1,669,336 (80)	£38,520 (1)	£5,385,674 (881)	£1,051,143 (124)
Banbridge	£122,398 (19)	£2,268,300 (133)	£2,230 (1)	£10,255,497 (1,371)	£1,290,048 (205)
Belfast	£788,135 (90)	£29,569,010 (820)	£2,678,136 (10)	£249,003,822 (13,831)	£24,386,854 (1,734)
Carrickfergus	£103,825 (14)	£1,425,528 (90)	£43,320 (1)	£12,134,058 (841)	£893,296 (136)
Castlereagh	£193,650 (7)	£5,774,885 (161)	£0 (0)	£24,203,707 (1,125)	£2,624,897 (157)
Coleraine	£281,960 (33)	£2,707,211 (150)	£62,590 (4)	£22,929,220 (2,139)	£2,406,059 (286)
Cookstown	£164,230 (19)	£3,810,026 (172)	£0 (0)	£10,112,175 (1,308)	£1,273,467 (201)
Craigavon	£240,323 (29)	£10,063,489 (322)	£68,660 (1)	£29,799,681 (2,793)	£3,001,868 (359)
Derry	£163,475 (24)	£6,202,208 (244)	£224,312 (2)	£47,289,626 (2,924)	£4,206,711 (397)
Down	£272,850 (36)	£2,117,443 (148)	£5,260 (1)	£17,549,847 (2,047)	£2,815,651 (350)
Dungannon	£210,290 (29)	£7,433,868 (282)	£0 (0)	£15,505,488 (2,012)	£2,494,867 (324)
Fermanagh	£176,002 (35)	£4,629,496 (203)	£0 (0)	£20,777,478 (2,469)	£3,022,753 (465)
Larne	£84,255 (15)	£1,987,609 (75)	£343,025 (2)	£12,991,113 (972)	£1,404,345 (176)
Limavady	£98,610 (11)	£545,312 (64)	£41,940 (1)	£9,595,061 (861)	£899,316 (114)
Lisburn	£275,120 (34)	£9,775,789 (332)	£93,120 (1)	£40,664,555 (2,707)	£3,083,559 (352)
Magherafelt	£153,760 (18)	£3,819,200 (194)	£0 (0)	£9,284,436 (1,338)	£1,562,210 (211)
Moyle	£53,610 (13)	£630,417 (26)	£0 (0)	£3,054,014 (616)	£556,055 (137)
Newry & Mourne	£299,117 (42)	£4,197,374 (295)	£402,441 (6)	£29,024,236 (3,143)	£4,503,846 (460)
Newtownabbey	£178,105 (21)	£7,221,132 (223)	£37,260 (1)	£32,320,540 (2,001)	£2,167,996 (239)
North Down	£386,015 (35)	£3,146,641 (173)	£53,360 (2)	£29,369,747 (1,983)	£3,637,788 (263)
Omagh	£161,100 (24)	£2,860,042 (145)	£0 (0)	£17,444,849 (1,881)	£2,369,775 (298)
Strabane	£87,950 (15)	£1,774,814 (86)	£0 (0)	£9,669,797 (1,228)	£1,304,954 (190)
Gross Total	£5,380,150 (675)	£131,077,814 (5,196)	£4,256,354 (38)	£741,382,900 (57,799)	£80,587,647 (8,368)

Note:

1. £ Figures Denote Total Rateable Values At 31st December 2001.
2. Bracketed Figures Denote Total Number Of Properties.
3. Exempt Includes Both Domestic And Non-Domestic Properties.

Larne: Vacant Properties

Mr Beggs asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel to detail the number and percentage of properties in Larne town centre that are vacant and not paying rates in the (a) commercial and retail sector; and (b) in the residential sector. (AQW 2296/01)

Dr Farren: The Rate Collection Agency is responsible for the collection of rates in Northern Ireland. The Agency records vacant properties by Ward within District Council areas.

The Town Centre of Larne falls largely into the Central Ward and the Agency's records at 1 March 2002 show that:

- (a) in the commercial and retail sector 103 properties were vacant representing 18.55% of the total properties in that sector; and
- (b) in the residential sector 46 properties were vacant representing 3.78% of the total properties in that sector.

The Agency regularly inspects vacant properties to check that they remain unoccupied. If properties are found to be occupied rate liability, including backdating where appropriate, is amended and a rate account issues. The most recent round of vacancy inspections for Larne Borough Council area took place during February 2002.

Building Regulations: Private Sector Housing

Mrs I Robinson asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel what assessment can be made in relation to the recent report by the Chartered Institute of Housing and the Joseph Rowntree Foundation into lifetime homes design, which had as one of its key recommendations that building regulations should be raised in private sector housing. (AQW 2333/01)

Dr Farren: Part R of the Building Regulations (Northern Ireland) Order 2000, which came into effect on 1 April 2001, contains revised requirements for disabled access and facilities in dwellings. At the time these regulations were being made, the concept of Lifetime Homes was given consideration. However, with the agreement of the Northern Ireland Building Regulations Advisory Committee, it was decided to amend the regulations to achieve technical harmony with Scotland, England and Wales, by requiring that all new dwellings be "visitabile" by disabled persons. The visitability standard addresses many of the issues covered by the Lifetime Homes study.

Government and its Agencies: Personnel Employed

Mr Gibson asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel to detail the number of personnel employed by Government and its agencies in each local District Council area. (AQO 959/01)

Dr Farren: I have placed a copy of the information requested in the Assembly Library.

Peace II Programme: Rural Community

Mr Dallat asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel how much money is available to the rural community especially through Peace II. (AQO 1008/01)

Dr Farren: Within the PEACE II Programme almost £46 million will be targeted specifically at the rural economy and rural population in Northern Ireland. This is in addition to allocations to Local Strategy Partnerships under Priority 3 of the Programme from which rural communities will also benefit. Beyond this under the Building Sustainable Prosperity Programme the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development will implement Measures worth over £250m targeted at agriculture, rural development, forestry and fisheries; while the LEADER+ Community Initiative will be worth around another £15m to the rural sector.

Rathgael House

Mrs E Bell asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel to detail any discussions he has had with the Department of Education regarding plans to move the headquarters of the Department from Rathgael House. (AQO 1004/01)

Dr Farren: I have not had any discussions with the Department of Education on this matter. However, my predecessor, Mark Durkan, did have a meeting in May of last year. He advised that future considerations of its and other Departments' accommodation needs would be addressed in the Accommodation Review.

Consultation Documents: Costs

Mr Close asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel to detail the cost of producing documents for consultation over the last 3 years, including preparation, printing and distribution and all ancillary costs. (AQO 1003/01)

Dr Farren: The cost for producing consultation documents for the past 3 years is:

1999/2000	£11,382
2000/2001	£15,438
2001/2002	£97,811

These figures do not include staff salary costs.

HEALTH, SOCIAL SERVICES AND PUBLIC SAFETY

Post-Operative Care

Mr M Robinson asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what steps are being taken to improve post-operative care. (AQW 2155/01)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety (Ms de Brún): Requirements of post-operative

care will depend on the surgical procedure involved and the specific clinical needs of the individual. Health service professionals continually assess individual post-operative needs and aim to provide the highest standard of care.

Steps have also been taken to improve post-operative care for more seriously ill patients through the provision of additional Intensive Care and High Dependency beds, in line with the recommendations of the Chief Medical Officer's Review of Intensive Care Services, published in February 2000.

Beidh riachtanais cúram iarobráide ag brath ar an nós imeachta máinliachta i gceist agus sainriachtanais chliniciúla an duine. Déanann gairmithe na seirbhíse sláinte measúnú reatha ar riachtanais iarobráide agus tá sé mar aidhm acu an caighdeán is airde cúram a sholáthar.

Bhí céimeanna tugtha leis, chun cúram iarobráide a fheabhsú d'othair atá a bhfuil tinneas níos géire orthu trí sholáthar leapacha breise Dianchúraim agus Ardspleáchríocha, ag cloí le moltaí an Athbheithniú an Phríomhoifigigh Míochaine ar Sheirbhísí Dianchúraim, a foilsíodh mí Feabhra 2000.

Patients:

Waiting Times for Orthopaedic Consultants

Mr Shannon asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the maximum length of time a patient should wait between referral from a GP to their initial appointment with an orthopaedic consultant. (AQW 2227/01)

Ms de Brún: The charter standard introduced in 1992 states that outpatient appointments will be made according to clinical priority but in normal circumstances patients should not have to wait more than three months for an outpatient assessment. Due to the increase in demand over recent years for orthopaedic services it has not been possible for every outpatient to be seen by an orthopaedic consultant within 3 months.

Maíonn caighdeán na cairte a tugadh isteach i 1992 go ndéanfar coinní éisothair de réir tosaíochta cliniciúla ach níor chóir d'othair fanacht níos mó ná trí mhí ar mheasúnú éisothair a fháil de ghnáth. De dheasca an mhéadaithe sa ráchairt ar sheirbhísí ortaipéideacha thar na blianta déanacha, níorbh fhéidir le gach éisothar dul chuig lia comhairleach ortaipéideach laistigh de 3 mí.

Non-Departmental Public Bodies

Mr Maskey asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail expenditure figures for those non-Departmental Public Bodies under her responsibility in each year since 1995. (AQW 2229/01)

Ms de Brún: Expenditure relating to the following Non-Departmental Bodies is shown in the table below: the National Board for Nursing, Midwifery and Health Visiting for Northern Ireland (NBNI), the Northern Ireland Council for Postgraduate Medical and Dental Education (NICPMDE), the Mental Health Commission for Northern Ireland (MHC) and the Fire Authority for Northern Ireland.

	2000/ 2001 £000's	1999/ 2000 £000's	1998/ 1999 £000's	1997/ 1998 £000's	1996/ 1997 £000's	1995/ 1996 £000's	1994/ 1995 £000's
NBNI	8,397	7,846	7,751	14,383	15,691	17,159	17,715
NICPMDE	24,085	22,586	18,698	15,832	15,240	14,248	15,092
MHC	381	365	363	363	314	345	311
Fire Authority	56,582	52,584	52,071	43,700	43,339	41,852	39,493
Total				74,278	74,584	73,604	72,611

Taispeántar caitheachas bainteach leis na Comhlachtaí Neamhroinne a leanas sa tábla thíos: An Bord Náisiúnta d'Altranas, do Mhná Cabhrach agus do Chuartaíocht Sláinte do Thuaisceart Éireann (BNTÉ), Comhairle Iarchéimithe d'Oideachas Míochaine agus Fiaclóireachta Thuaisceart Éireann (CIOMFTÉ), Cumann um Shláinte Meabhrach do Thuaisceart Éireann (CSM) agus an tÚdarás Dóiteáin do Thuaisceart Éireann.

	2000/ 2001 £000í	1999/ 2000 £000í	1998/ 1999 £000í	1997/ 1998 £000í	1996/ 1997 £000í	1995/ 1996 £000í	1994/ 1995 £000í
BNTÉ	8,397	7,846	7,751	14,383	15,691	17,159	17,715
CIOMFTÉ	24,085	22,586	18,698	15,832	15,240	14,248	15,092
CSM	381	365	363	363	314	345	311
An tÚdarás Dóiteáin	56,582	52,584	52,071	43,700	43,339	41,852	39,493
Iomlán				74,278	74,584	73,604	72,611

Telemedicine Equipment

Mr Weir asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety how much money has been spent on telemedicine equipment by each Health Trust in each of the last five years. (AQW 2265/01)

Ms de Brún: The information is not readily available in the form requested and could only be provided at disproportionate cost.

Níl eolas ar fáil go réidh san fhoirm iarrtha agus ní fheadfaí é a fháil ach ar chostas díréireach.

Primary Care

Mrs Carson asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety if she has approached the

General Practitioners Committee, The Royal College of Nursing and The Royal College of Midwives, with regard to the future of Primary Care in Northern Ireland; and to make a statement. (AQW 2278/01)

Ms de Brún: I met representatives of the General Practitioners Committee and the Royal College of Nursing in the course of a listening exercise which I conducted in the summer of 2000, to hear views from various interests on the future of primary care. The General Practitioners Committee, the Royal College of Nursing and the Royal College of Midwives were invited to comment on my proposals for future arrangements in primary care as part of the consultation process from Autumn 2000 to Spring 2001 on the document *Building the Way Forward in Primary Care*.

Bhuail mé le hionadaithe Choiste Dochtúirí Ginearálta agus an Choláiste Ríoga Altranais le linn cleachtaidh éisteachta a rinne mé i samhradh 2000, le tuairimí ó pháirtithe leasmhara éagsúla a chluinstin ar thodhchaí phríomhchúraim. Iarradh ar Choiste Dochtúirí Ginearálta, an Choláiste Ríoga Altranais agus ar Choláiste Ríoga na mBan Cabhrach trácht ar mo chuid moltaí do shocrúithe i bpríomhchúram sa todhchaí mar chuid den phróiseas comhairlithe ón Fhómhar 2000 go dtí an tEarrach 2001 ar an cháipéis *Building the Way Forward in Primary Care*.

Outpatient Referrals

Mrs Carson asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety if she will consider the provision of a common system for booking outpatient referrals. (AQW 2279/01)

Ms de Brún: All hospitals use the Patient Administration System, which provides a common system for booking outpatient referrals, to manage outpatient clinics. Plans are in hand to introduce an electronic booking system of first outpatient appointments from GP practices, although this will necessarily take some time to implement.

Úsáideann gach otharlann Córas Riaracháin Othar a sholáthraíonn córas coitianta le haghaidh atreoraithe othar seachtarach a chur in áiríthe, agus clinicí othar seachtarach a bhainistiú. Tá pleananna idir lámha chun córas leictreonach áirithinte do chéad choinní othar seachtarach ó chleachtais DGanna a thabhairt isteach, cé gur gá go nglacfaidh seo tamall maith lena chur i bhfeidhm.

Laboratory/Pathology and Prescribing System

Mrs Carson asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety if she will consider the provision of a common laboratory/pathology and prescribing system across all levels of care. (AQW 2280/01)

Ms de Brún: I am currently pursuing a policy of common Information and Communications Technology

(ICT) systems for the Health and Personal Social Services. Initiatives already being taken forward include the introduction of a new unique identifier for patients, consolidation of health and social care data, and provision of additional ICT services for GPs and other care professionals. This approach is designed to ensure they have secure and reliable access to electronic data, including laboratory/pathology results.

Tá mé faoi láthair ag tabhairt faoi pholasáí córais choitianta Teicneolaíocht an Eolais agus na Cumarsáide (TEC) do na Seirbhísí Sláinte agus Sóisialta Pearsanta. Áirítear i measc na dtionscnamh atá tugtha chun tosaigh cheana féin ná tabhairt isteach aimsitheora nua uathúil faoi choinne othar, sonraí sláinte agus cúraim shóisialta a dhaingniú, agus seirbhísí breise TEC do DGanna agus gairmithe eile cúraim a sholáthar. Tá an cur chuige seo deartha chun cinntiú go bhfuil rochtain shlán agus iontaofa ar shonraí leictreonach acu agus torthaí saotharlainne/paiteolaíochta san áireamh.

Disability Learning Budget

Mr Shannon asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety how many children benefit from the Disability Learning budget in each Board Area. (AQW 2283/01)

Ms de Brún: Information is available on the number of children with learning disabilities who had contact with Health Service Providers, and is detailed in the table below.

CHILDREN WITH LEARNING DISABILITIES WHO HAD CONTACT WITH HEALTH SERVICE PROVIDERS BY BOARD, 2000/01

Board	No.
EHSSB	743
NHSSB	182
SHSSB	350
WHSSB	375
Total	1,650

Tá eolas ar fáil ar líon na bpáistí a bhfuil míchumas foghlama acu a raibh teagmháil acu le Soláthraithe Seirbhíse Sláinte, agus tá sé léirithe sa tábla thíos.

PÁISTÍ A BHFUIL MÍCHUMAS FOGHLAMA ACU A RAIBH TEAGMHÁIL ACU LE SOLÁTHRAITHE SEIRBHÍSE SLÁINTE DE RÉIR BOIRD, 2000/01

Bord	Líon
BSSSO	743
BSSST	182
BSSSD	350
BSSSI	375
Iomlán	1,650

Nurses: Average Wage Increase

Mr Shannon asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the average wage increase for nurses in each of the last 3 years.

(AQW 2285/01)

Ms de Brún: The basic wage increase for nurses in each of the last 3 years was:

Year	Increase
1999 – 2000	4.7%
2000 – 2001	3.4%
2001 – 2002	3.7%

Ba é méadú tuarastail bhunúsaigh d'altraí le trí bliana anuas ná:

Bliain	Méadú
1999 – 2000	4.7%
2000 – 2001	3.4%
2001 – 2002	3.7%

Care Beds

Mr Gibson asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety if she will make a statement on her plans to increase the number of care beds across Northern Ireland.

(AQW 2286/01)

Ms de Brún: Health and Social Services Boards have operational responsibility for the assessment of the need for nursing home care and residential care in their areas and are constantly reviewing the beds available against the assessment of need.

Tá freagracht oibríochtúil ar Bhoird Shláinte agus Sheirbhísí Sóisialta as measúnú riachtanais ar chúram baile altranais agus ar chúram cónaithe ina gceantair agus déanann siad athbhreithniú de shíor ar na leapacha ar fáil i gcomparáid le measúnú riachtanais.

Tyrone County Hospital: Effective Service Provision

Mr Gibson asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what assessment can she make of the capacity of Tyrone County Hospital to meet the acute health needs of the community.

(AQW 2288/01)

Ms de Brún: The Western HSS Board, in close collaboration with Sperrin Lakeland Trust, continually monitors and reviews the capacity of both the Tyrone County and Erne Hospitals to ensure effective service provision.

Déanann Bord SSS an Iarthair, i ndlúth-comhoibriú le hIontaobhas Speirín Tír na Lochanna, monatóireacht agus athbhreithniú go rialta ar chumas Ortharlanna Thír

Eoghain agus na hÉirne beirt chun soláthar seirbhíse éifeachtaí a chinntiú.

Tyrone County Hospital: Access Road

Mr Gibson asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what discussions she has had with the Department for Regional Development concerning the provision of an access road for Tyrone County Hospital; and to make a statement.

(AQW 2290/01)

Ms de Brún: Neither I nor my officials have had any discussions with the Department for Regional Development regarding the provision of an access road for Tyrone County Hospital.

Ní raibh cainteanna agam féin ná ag m'oifigigh leis an Roinn Forbartha Reigiúnach maidir le soláthar bóthar rochtana d'Otharlann Chontae Thír Eoghain.

Care Needs

Mr M Robinson asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety how she will ensure that once an individual's care needs have been assessed, those needs are then met regardless of the resources available to either the individual or the Health Authority.

(AQW 2298/01)

Ms de Brún: My Department sets priorities for the delivery of health and personal social services within the constraints of the total level of funding available and the targets and priorities set out by the Executive in its Programme for Government. While the Department seeks to ensure that all identified care needs are met, what is possible is limited by the amount of resources which are available.

Leagann mo Roinn tosaíochtaí síos do chur ar fáil na seirbhísí sláinte agus sóisialta pearsanta laistigh de sriantacht an leibhéil iomláin mhaoinithe ar fáil agus laistigh de na spriocanna agus de na tosaíochtaí leagtha amach ag an Fheidhmeannas ina Chlár um Rialtas. Cé go bhfuil an Roinn ag iarraidh cinntiú go riartar ar na riachtanais aitheanta chúraim go léir, cuireann an méid acmhainní atá ar fáil srian ar an mhéid is féidir a dhéanamh.

Development of Health Services: Local Involvement

Mr M Robinson asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety how she has improved local involvement in the development of health services.

(AQW 2299/01)

Ms de Brún: My Department has improved local involvement in the development of health services in a number of ways, particularly in engaging the public at an early stage in the development of policies and strategies,

and the delivery of services by seeking their views and ensuring they are taken into account when decisions are taken, inviting their participation on various regional and local groups and keeping them informed of progress.

All significant Departmental Policies and Strategies are now routinely the subject of widespread public consultation for a minimum period of 8 weeks. Recent examples include consultation for the Investing for Health Strategy, my Department's and associated bodies equality obligations under section 75 of the Northern Ireland Act, proposals for new arrangements in Primary Care and plans involving the community and voluntary sectors in taking forward the Drug and Alcohol Strategies.

At an area and local level, examples of improvements in local involvement include HSS Board and Trust community development initiatives such as work on the Health Action Zones, community involvement in shaping services such as Fuel Poverty in Health, the involvement of marginalized and isolated groups in cross-community activities, user involvement in the reviews of services for older people and acute in-patient mental health provision, addressing health issues in disadvantaged communities in Belfast involving local community groups, the planning of future Occupational Therapy Services and the establishment of a Wheelchair User Forum.

D'fheabhsaigh mo Roinn rannpháirteachas áitiúil i bhforbairt seirbhísí sláinte ar roinnt dóigheanna: ag cur an phobail san áireamh go luath agus polasaithe agus straitéisí á bhforbairt, chomh maith le seirbhísí a sholáthar trína gcuid barúlacha a lorg agus trí chinntiú go raibh siad curtha san áireamh nuair a rinneadh cinneadh, mar aon le fáilte a chur roimh a rannpháirteachas ar ghrúpaí reigiúnacha agus áitiúla agus iad a chur ar an eolas faoin dul chun cinn.

Mar ghnáthamh anois, téann gach Polasaí agus Straitéis Shuntasach Roinne trí chomhairliú leathan poiblí ar feadh tréimhse 8 seachtain ar a laghad. I measc na samplaí le gairid tá comhairliú le haghaidh Straitéis Infheistíochta sa tSláinte, dualgaís chomhionannais mo Roinne agus comhlachtaí bainteacha de réir alt 75 d'Acht Thuaisceart Éireann, moltaí i leith socruithe nua Príomhchúraim agus pleananna a bhfuil baint ag na hearnálacha poiblí agus deonacha leo chun Straitéisí Drugaí agus Alcóil a thabhairt chun tosaigh.

Ag leibhéal an cheantair agus leibhéal áitiúil is é atá san áireamh le samplaí d'fheabhsuithe i rannpháirteachas áitiúil ná tionscnaimh de chuid Iontaobhais agus Bhoird na SSS i bhforbairt pobail amhail obair ar Chriosanna Gnímh ar Shláinte, rannpháirteachas pobail i seirbhísí a mhúnlú amhail Bochtanas Breosla sa tSláinte, rannpháirteachas grúpaí imeallaithe agus aonraithe i ngníomhaíochtaí trasphobail, rannpháirteachas úsáideora sna hathbheithnithe ar sheirbhísí do dhaoine níos sine agus ar ghéarsholáthar sláinte meabhrach othar cónaitheach ag tabhairt faoi cheisteanna sláinte sna pobail faoi

mhíbhuntáiste i mBéal Feirste ag cur grúpaí pobail áitiúla san áireamh, pleanáil Seirbhísí Teiripe Saothair amach anseo agus bunú Fóram Úsáideoirí Cathaoir Rotha.

Suicide and Attempted Suicide

Mr M Robinson asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail current figures on the incidence of suicide and attempted suicide.

(AQW 2300/01)

Ms de Brún: In 1999/00, there were 141 recorded deaths from suicide, and 439 discharges from local hospitals where there was a diagnosis of attempted suicide.

I 1999/00, bhí 141 bás trí fhéinmharú taifeadta, agus 439 a scaoileadh amach ó otharlanna áitiúla, áit a ndearnadh diagnóis go raibh iarracht ar fhéinmharú ann.

Psychiatric Inpatient Beds

Mr M Robinson asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what 24 hour acute psychiatric provision is currently available.

(AQW 2301/01)

Ms de Brún: There are approximately 1350 acute psychiatric inpatient beds, which are accessible 24 hours a day. Local mental health services can also assess patients presenting themselves at local Accident and Emergency Departments.

Tá thart faoi 1350 géarleaba othar cónaitheach síciatrach, atá insroichte 24 uair sa lá. Is féidir le seirbhísí sláinte áitiúil teacht ar othair a théann chuig Ranna Taisimí agus Éigeandála.

Hospital Sterilization and Disinfection Unit

Mr McElduff asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail (a) the further measures required to ensure the accreditation of the HSDU (Hospital Sterile Decontamination Unit) at the Tyrone County Hospital in Omagh, (b) any actions that have taken place towards accreditation and (c) any further plans for service improvement.

(AQW 2317/01)

Ms de Brún: Considerable work has already been done to enable the Hospital Sterilization and Disinfection Unit (HSDU) at Tyrone County Hospital, Omagh to meet current decontamination standards and allow accreditation under Medical Devices Directive 93/42/EEC in the near future.

The HSDU has been extensively refurbished to allow segregation of wash, pack and sterilization processes, and to allow packing to be carried out in a controlled environment. New automatic washer-disinfectors have been installed, and documentation, procedures and systems are well advanced to meet the necessary quality standards.

Periodic performance verification of process equipment and quality testing of processing fluids remain to be completed. Additional staffing requirements are being addressed.

Plans are in place to further improve the service through installation of water treatment plant and an IT based traceability system, as well as replacement of existing sterilizers.

Tá obair iontach déanta cheana féin chun cur ar chumas an Ionaid Steiriliúcháin agus Dhíghalraithe Otharlainne (ISDO) in Otharlann Chontae Thír Eoghain, An Ómaigh na caighdeáin reatha dhíthruaillithe a bhaint amach agus chun creidiúnú a cheadú de réir na Treorach ar Ghléasanna Míochaine 93/42/EEC gan rómhoill.

Athchóiríodh an ISDO go forleathan chun scaradh na bpróiseas níocháin, pacála agus steiriliúcháin a éascú agus chun ligean don phacáil le bheith déanta i dtimpeallacht rialaithe. Suiteáladh díghalróirí nua uathoibríocha níocháin agus is mór an dul chun cinn atá déanta ar dhoiciméadú, ghnáthaimh agus ar chórais leis na caighdeáin cháilíochta riachtanacha a bhaint amach.

Tá deimhniú tréimhsiúil fheidhmiú trealamh phróiseála agus tástáil cháilíochta leachtanna próiseála le críochnú go fóill. Táthar ag tabhairt faoi riachtanais bhreise na foirne.

Tá pleananna i bhfeidhm chun an tseirbhís a fheabhsú a thuilleadh trí shuiteáil ghléasra cóireála uisce agus chórais inaisithe bunaithe ar theicneolaíocht an eolais, chomh maith le malartú na steirileoirí atá ann faoi láthair.

Student Nurses: Training Costs

Mr Shannon asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the cost of training student nurses. (AQW 2318/01)

Ms de Brún: The average cost, including student bursary, to train a newly qualified nurse is £30,000.

Is é £30,00 an meánchostas, sparánacht mac léinn san áireamh, chun altra nuacháilithe a thraenáil.

Nurses Leaving the Health Service

Mr Shannon asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the number of nurses who have left the health service in each of the last two years per board area. (AQW 2319/01)

Ms de Brún: This information is only held centrally for the year ending September 2001 and is given in the table below.

**NURSES¹ WHO LEFT THE HEALTH SERVICE
- OCTOBER 2000 TO SEPTEMBER 2001**

Board area	Headcount
Eastern	334

Board area	Headcount
Northern	112
Southern	74
Western	74

¹ Qualified nurses excluding health visitors and midwives.

Ní choinnítear an t-eolas seo go lárnach ach don bhliain ag críochnú Meán Fómhair 2001 agus tugtar é sa tabla thíos.

**ALTRAÍ¹ A D'FHÁG AN TSEIRBHÍS SLÁINTE
- DEIREADH FÓMHAIR 2000 GO DTÍ MEÁN FÓMHAIR 2002**

Ceantar Boird	Líon
An tOirthear	334
An Tuairceart	112
An Deisceart	74
An tIarthar	74

¹ Altraí cáilithe gan chuairteoirí sláinte agus mná cabhrach san áireamh.

General Practitioner Vacancies

Mr Gibson asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the number of general practitioner vacancies in each of the last two years.

(AQW 2322/01)

Ms de Brún: There is no specified number of General Practitioners required to provide general medical services here and so it is difficult to identify numbers of vacancies. The number of general practitioners who have been deleted from, and the numbers added to, the Medical List in the last two years are shown in the table below.

	Number of GPs deleted from the Medical List		Number of GPs added to the Medical List	
Total	38	41	46	49

Níl líon áirithe Dochtúirí Ginearálta atá de dhíth le seirbhísí ginearálta míochaine a sholáthar anseo luaite agus mar sin de, bíonn sé deacair líon na bhfolúntas a mheas. Léirítear líon na ndochtúirí ginearálta sa tabla thíos a baineadh den agus a cuireadh leis an Liosta Míochaine sa dá bhliain deireanacha.

	Líon na nDGanna bainte den Liosta Míochaine		Líon na nDGanna curtha leis an Liosta Míochaine	
Iomlán	38	41	46	49

Erne Hospital: Locum Consultants

Mr McElduff asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail (a) the amount of additional expenses which were incurred due to the appointment of locum consultants for the paediatric unit in the Erne Hospital over the past two years and (b) if these

expenses included accommodation for family members and mobile telephone expenses. (AQW 2323/01)

Ms de Brún: The additional costs associated with locum cover for the paediatric unit in the Erne hospital were as follows:

Year Ending	Salaries	Accommodation
March 00	£17,144	£200
March 01	£56,719	£8,373

There were no additional expenses incurred in relation to mobile telephone expenses.

Is iad a leanas costais bhreise bhainteacha le haghaidh clúdach ionadaíochta don aonad péidiatraiceach in Otharlann na hÉirne.

Bliain ag Críochnú	Tuarastail	Lóistín
Márta 00	£17,144	£200
Márta 01	£56,719	£8,373

Ní raibh costais bhreise gearrtha maidir le costais gutháin siúil.

Tyrone County Hospital: Shortage of Nursing Staff

Mr McElduff asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail her plans to address the shortage of nursing staff which has prevented a service for acute renal failure at the sub-regional renal unit at the Tyrone county Hospital in Omagh.

(AQW 2326/01)

Ms de Brún: Sperrin Lakeland Health and Social Services Trust has recently recruited 3 additional nurses and an expansion of the service is scheduled for the beginning of April.

D'fhostaigh Iontaobhas Speirín Tír na Lochanna 3 altra breise agus tá méadú na seirbhíse sa sceideal do thús mhí Aibreáin.

DHSSPS: Structural Duplication and Bureaucracy

Mrs Carson asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what action has she taken to reduce structural duplication and bureaucracy within her department over the past 3 years. (AQW 2335/01)

Ms de Brún: My Department's Business Support Unit continuously reviews the work of Branches to help ensure the effective use of resources. In carrying out its examinations, the Unit has regard to the need for the work being done, its organisation and, where appropriate, makes recommendations for change. The Unit also provides a control on the numbers and grading of posts in the Department.

Over the last three years, the Unit has reviewed posts across the Department as follows:

1999/00	147 posts
2000/01	131 posts
2001/02 (To date)	117 posts

Déanann Aonad Tacaíochta Gnó na Roinne s'agam athbhreithniú leanúnach ar obair na mBráinsí chun úsáid éifeachtach acmhainní a chinntiú. Agus é i mbun a chuid scrúdaithe, tá meas ag an Aonad ar an ghá leis an obair atá á déanamh, á heagrú agus, nuair is cuí, déanann sé moltaí le haghaidh athruithe. Cuireann an tAonad rialú ar líon agus ar ghrádú na bpost sa Roinn.

Le trí bliana anuas, rinne an tAonad athbhreithniú ar fud na Roinne mar a leanas:

1999/00	147 post
2000/01	131 post
2001/02 (go dtí seo)	117 post

Cancelled Operations

Mr Hilditch asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety how many operations have been cancelled in each of the last 3 years. (AQW 2351/01)

Ms de Brún: Information is not readily available in the form requested and could only be obtained at disproportionate cost.

Níl eolas ar fáil go héasca sa dóigh ar iarradh é agus ní féidir é a fháil ach ar chostas díréireach.

Bed Blocking

Mr Hilditch asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail her policy to prevent bed blocking. (AQW 2352/01)

Ms de Brún: The problem of delayed discharges needs to be tackled both within the hospital system and in the community. I allocated an additional £2 million from April 2001 to enable Boards and Trusts to meet the target of providing an increased 230 community care packages in the course of 2001/02. A further £10.8 million has been allocated in-year specifically for winter pressures and community services and I will shortly be announcing the allocations which will be made for community services next year. These will enable Boards to expand their caseload capacity by 1,000 new packages of care and among the priorities will be minimising delayed discharges, reducing waiting lists in the community and restoration of domiciliary care as a realistic alternative to institutional care.

In addition, various initiatives have been taken to help alleviate the pressures on acute hospital services. Examples of these are the use of Discharge Co-ordinators, Rapid Response Nursing, Hospital at Home, Intensive

Community Care and Home from Hospital schemes that provide intermediate care in the community and prevent undue delay in hospital and inappropriate admissions to hospital.

Ní mór tabhairt faoin fhadhb i moill scaoilte amach ó laistigh den chóras otharlainne agus sa phobal araon. Dháil mé £2 milliún ó Aibreán 2001 chun cur ar chumas Bord agus Iontaobhas an sprioc le 230 pacáiste breise cúraim phobail a sholáthar le linn 2001/02 a bhaint amach. Dáileadh £10.8 milliún breise i mbliana go háirithe do bhrúnna geimhridh agus do sheirbhísí pobail agus beidh mé ag fógairt na ndálaí ar ball a thabharfar do sheirbhísí pobail an bhliain seo chugainn. Cuirfidh siad seo ar chumas Bord 1,000 pacáiste nua cúraim a chur le toilleadh a n-ualaigh cháis agus i measc na dtosaíochtaí beidh íosmhéadú scaoilte amach, laghdú liostaí feithimh don phobal agus athsholáthar cúraim bhaile mar rogha réadúil eile in áit chúraim institiúide.

Ina theannta sin, cuireadh tús le roinnt scéimeanna chun cuidiú leis na brúnna ar sheirbhísí géarotharlainne a mhaolú. I measc na solaoidí díobh seo tá úsáid Chomhordaitheoirí Scaoilte Amach, Altranaís Mhearfheagartha, Chúraim Otharlainne sa teach, Dhianchúraim Phobail agus Scéimeanna Éisotharlainne. Tá a sholáthraíonn cúram idirthréimhse don phobal agus a chuireann cosc ar mhoill neamhriachtanach agus ar ghlacadh isteach mícheart sna hotharlanna.

Health Boards and Trusts: Reporting Fraud

Mr Beggs asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety, pursuant to AQW 2013/01, if all Health Boards and Trusts follow guidance on reporting fraud to the Comptroller and Auditor General, as required under Government Accounting procedures.

(AQW 2357/01)

Ms de Brún: Health and Social Service Boards and Trusts are required to comply with guidance consistent with the requirements of Government Accounting procedures on reporting fraud.

All Health and Social Service Boards and Trusts have confirmed their compliance with these requirements.

Bíonn ar Bhoird agus Iontaobhais Seirbhíse Sláinte cloí de réir an dlí le treoir chomhsheasmhach chun riachtanais mhodhanna Cuntasaíocht Rialtais ar chalaíocht a thuairisciú.

Chinntigh gach Bord agus Iontaobhas Sláinte agus Seirbhísí Sóisialta gur chomhlíon siad na riachtanais seo.

HSS&PS Estate

Mr Hussey asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail those parts of the current HSS&PS estate not used for HSS&PS or related ancillary purposes.

(AQW 2363/01)

Ms de Brún: The details are as follows:

Craigavon Area Hospital Group HSS Trust	4.2 acres
Down Lisburn HSS Trust	1,800sq metres in main Downshire Hospital Building 2.23 acres of land
Foyle Community HSS Trust	178.5 acres
Green Park Healthcare HSS Trust	7 acres
North & West Belfast HSS Trust	36 acres
Royal Group of Hospitals HSS Trust	122 Units of Staff Accommodation
South & East Belfast HSS Trust	117 acres
Sperrin Lakeland HSS Trust	1,824 sq metres in main hospital building at Tyrone & Fermanagh Hospital 2.120 acres
Ulster Community & Hospitals HSS Trust	13 acres
United Hospitals HSS Trust	40.5 acres

In addition, 3 sites owned by the Fire Authority are not currently used for fire service purposes:

- Building and site adjacent to Newtownards Fire Station in South Street, Newtownards.
- Land to the rear of Lurgan Fire Station, Alexandra Crescent, Lurgan.
- Land to the rear of Westland Fire Station, Westland Road, Belfast.

Is iad a leanas na sonraith:

Iontaobhas SSS Ghrúpa Otharlann Cheantar Craigavon	4.2 acra
Iontaobhas SSS an Dúin/Lios na gCearrbhach	1,800 méadar cearnach i bpríomhfhoirgneamh Otharlann Downshire 2.23 acra talaimh
Iontaobhas SSS Pobal an Fheabhail	178.5 acra
Iontaobhas Cúram Sláinte SSS na Páirce Glaise	7 acra
Iontaobhas SSS Béal Feirste Thuaidh & Thiar	36 acra
Iontaobhas SSS Grúpa Ríoga Otharlann	122 Aonad de Lóistiín Foirme
Iontaobhas SSS Bhéal Feirste Theas & Thoir	117 acra
Iontaobhas Speirín Tír na Lochanna	1,824 méadar cearnach i bpríomhfhoirgneamh Otharlann Thír Eoghain & Fhear Meanach 2.120 acra
Iontaobhas SSS Pobail & Otharlann Uladh	13 acra
Iontaobhas SSS Otharlann Aontaithe	40.5 acra

Ina theannta, tá 3 suíomh, ar leis an Údarás Dóiteáin iad, nach bhfuil in úsáid faoi choinne seirbhísí dóiteáin.

- Foirgneamh agus suíomh taobh le Stáisiún Dóiteáin i Sráid Theas, Baile Nua na hArda.
- Talamh ar chúl Stáisiún Dóiteáin Bhaile an Lorgain, Corrán Alexandra, An Lorgain.
- Talamh ar chúl Stáisiún Dóiteáin Westland, Bóthar Westland, Béal Feirste

Mental Health Services and Mental Health Order: Review

Mrs I Robinson asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety when the Strategic Review of Mental Health Services, and the 1986 Mental Health Order are to commence. (AQW 2383/01)

Ms de Brún: A review of current mental health policy, strategy and legislation is about to commence and will be completed over the next 2 years.

Táthar réidh le tús a chur le hathbhreithniú ar pholasaí, straitéis agus réachtaíocht láithreach sláinte meabhrach agus críochnófar é thar an chéad dá bhliain eile.

Out-of-Hours GP Service: Strabane/Omagh Districts

Mr Byrne asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to outline the operational system for the 'Out of Hours' GP service in the Strabane and Omagh districts; and to make a statement. (AQO 982/01)

Ms de Brún: The operational system for the out-of-hours GP service for patients in the Strabane and Omagh districts includes the use of out-of-hours centres. Out-of-hours calls for the Strabane, Donemana and Castlederg area are covered by the Mournedoc GP co-operative centred in Strabane, and calls for the West Tyrone area are covered by the Westdoc GP co-operative with centres in Omagh and Enniskillen. GPs in Omagh Town Health Centre make their own arrangements for out-of-hours services for their patients.

The current out-of-hours co-operative arrangements began here in 1995. As a result of these arrangements, the majority of GPs have moved to form out-of-hours co-operatives through which large numbers of GPs organise and cover their members' patients on a rota basis.

Cuimsíonn an córas oibríochta do sheirbhís gnáthdhochtúirí éis-uaire i gceantar an tSrátha Bháin agus na hÓmaigh úsáid ionad éis-uaire. Clúdaíonn comharchumann gnáthdhochtúirí Mhórna, atá lonnaithe ar an tSráth Bhán, glaonna éis-uaire do limistéar an tSrátha Bháin, Dhún na Manach agus an Chaisleáin Dheirg; clúdaíonn comharchumann gnáthdhochtúirí Westdoc, ag a bhfuil ionaid san Ómaigh agus in Inis Ceithleann, glaonna do limistéar Thír Eoghain thiar. Déanann gnáthdhochtúirí in Ionad Sláinte Bhaile na hÓmaigh a gcuid socrúithe féin do sheirbhísí éis-uaire dá gcuid othar. Thosaigh na socrúithe reatha anseo in 1995.

Mar thoradh ar na socrúithe sin, tá comharchumannn éis-uaire bunaithe ag an chuid is mó de ghnáthdhochtúirí trína n-eagraíonn líon ard ghnáthdhochtúirí agus trína gclúdaíonn siad othair a gcuid comhalta ar bhonn uainchláir.

Ambulance Stretchers

Rev Robert Coulter asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to outline (a) the cost of ambulance stretchers which were scrapped; and (b) the type and cost of replacements. (AQO 978/01)

Ms de Brún: The Ambulance Service has been having problems with one particular make of trolley, purchased at a cost of £126,000 between April 1998 and July 1999, and has recently decided to start a programme of trolley replacement. The Ambulance Service is currently seeking compensation from the supplier for the trolleys being replaced. The new York 4 Stretcher Trolleys are being purchased at a cost of £66,960.

Tá deacrachtaí ag an tSeirbhís Otharcharr le cineál amháin ar leith tralaí, a ceannaíodh ar chostas de £126,000 (céad fiche is a sé mhíle) idir Aibreán 1998 agus Iúil 1999, agus cinneadh le déanaí go gcuirfí tús le clár le tralaíthe nua a chur ina n-áit. Tá an tSeirbhís Otharcharr ag lorg cúitimh faoi láthair ó sholáthraí na dtralaíthe a bhfuil cinn eile le cur ina n-áit. Tá Tralaíthe Sínteáin nua York 4 á gceannach ar chostas de £66,960 (seasca is sé mhíle, naoi gcéad seasca).

Neonatal Intensive Care Unit: Royal-Jubilee Maternity Service

Ms McWilliams asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety why has the regional unit for neonatal care at the Royal Maternity Hospital not been opened since its refurbishment; and to make a statement. (AQO 953/01)

Ms de Brún: The regional neonatal intensive care unit of the Royal-Jubilee Maternity Service, has been open and has been functioning effectively since its refurbishment was completed in autumn 1999.

Tá an t-aonad dianchúraim nua-naíoch réigiúnach i Seirbhís Mháithreachais an Ospidéal Ríoga-na hIúbhaile oscailte agus ag tá sé ag feidhmiú go héifeachtach ó críochnaíodh a athchóiriú i bhFómhar 1999.

Executive: Health Spending

Mr McElduff asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what indications have been given by the Executive regarding its future approach to Health spending. (AQO 1011/01)

Ms de Brún: The Executive's approach to future funding of the Health and Personal Social Services will be decided in the context of the 2002 Spending Review.

Socrófar cur chuige an Choiste Feidhmiúcháin i leith mhaoiniú Seirbhísí Sláinte Sóisialta agus Pearsanta sa todhchaí i gcomhthéacs an Athbhreithnithe Caiteachais 2002.

Mental Health Facilities: Location

Mr Gibson asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what steps is she taking to locate mental health facilities alongside acute hospital provision.

(AQO 958/01)

Ms de Brún: Approximately 50 percent of acute psychiatric inpatient facilities are alongside acute hospital provision. However, there are differing views on whether a psychiatric unit should be integrated with acute hospitals and the alternative view is that we should provide a range of services and facilities in community settings, which are locally accessible and meet user's needs.

Tá thart ar 50 faoin chéad de ghéarshaoráidí siciatracha d'othair chónaitheacha in éineacht le soláthar géarospidéil. Tá tuairimí éagsúla ann, áfach, ar chóir aonad siciatrach a chomhtháthú le géarospidéil; tá a athrach de thuairim ann gur chóir dúinn réimse seirbhísí agus saoráidí a sholáthar i suímh phobail a bhfuil teacht áitiúil orthu agus a dhéanann freastal ar riachtanais úsáideoirí.

Neurosurgeons: Royal Group of Hospitals

Mrs E Bell asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the current situation regarding the provision of neuro-surgical consultants at the Royal Victoria Hospital.

(AQO 994/01)

Ms de Brún: There are 5 consultant neurosurgeons employed by the Royal Group of Hospitals Trust.

The consultants are supported, at present, by 2 specialist trainees. One further specialist trainee is currently filled by a locum appointment. Maintenance of three specialist training posts will provide for future consultant vacancies arising through retirement or the establishment of additional posts.

Tá cúigear néarmháinlia comhairleach fostaithe ag Iontaobhas Ghrúpa Ríoga na nOspidéal.

Tá na comhairligh á dtacú, faoi láthair, ag beirt oiliúnaí speisialtóra. Tá ceapachán locum ann faoi láthair d'oiliúnaí speisialtóra breise. Soláthróidh cothabháil trí phost oiliúna speisialtóra folúntais do chomhairligh, má éiríonn comhairleach as post nó má bhunaítear poist bhreise.

District Nursing: Sperrin Lakeland Trust

Mr Gallagher asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the provision of district nursing in the Sperrin Lakeland Trust area for the past 3 years.

(AQO 977/01)

Ms de Brún: The number of nurses providing district nursing services in Sperrin Lakeland Trust over the past 3 years is as follows:

1999	106
2000	114
2001	133

Is é a leanas líon na n-altraí a sholáthraíonn seirbhísí altranaís ceantair in Iontaobhas Speirín, Tír na Lochanna le trí bliana anuas:

1999	106
2000	114
2001	133

Ambulances: Additional Provision

Mr Savage asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to consider the provision of additional ambulances in areas where response times are clearly well below the provincial average.

(AQO 983/01)

Ms de Brún: The Implementation Plan on the Strategic Review of Ambulance Services identifies the range of measures needed to improve response times. These measures, which require significant additional investment, include an increase in the number of Patient Care Service vehicles and crews, a modern communication system, a Medical Priority Despatch System, additional training capacity, new response locations, "Rapid Responder" units and additional A&E vehicles and crews.

A Medical Priority Despatch System is to be piloted in the EHSSB Ambulance Control from April 2002 and new response locations have already been established at Ballygawley, Carrickfergus, and Seaforde. In addition, Executive Programme Funds amounting to £3.21m will provide for two key Ambulance Service developments over the next three years, namely the introduction of Digital Trunk Radio to modernise communications and Rapid Responder schemes to improve response times in rural areas.

Sainaitníonn an Plean Feidhmithe ar Athbhreithniú Straitéiseach na Seirbhísí Otharchairr na bearta atá riachtanach le hamanna freagartha a fheabhsú. r na bearta sin, a éilíonn infheistíocht bhreise shuntasach, tá méadú sa líon feithiclí agus foirne Seirbhíse Cúraim Othar, córas nua-aimseartha cumarsáide, Córas Eis-Seolta Tosaíochta Liachta, cumas breise oiliúna, suímh nua freagartha, aonaid "Mearfhreagróir" agus feithiclí agus foirne breise Taisme agus Éigeandála.

Déanfar píolótú ar Chóras Eis-Seolta Tosaíochta Liachta i Rialú Otharcharr Bhord an Oirthir ó Aibreán 2002, agus bunaíodh suímh nua freagartha cheana féin i mBaile Geithligh, Carraig Fhearghais agus Baile Forda. Chomh maith leis sin, soláthróidh Cistí Chlár an Choiste

Feidhmiúcháin de £3.21 (trí pointe fiche is a haon) mhilliún dhá eochairfhorbairt Seirbhíse Otharcharr thar na chéad trí bliana eile; is iad sin Raidió Trunca Digiteach a thabhairt isteach le cumarsáid a nua-chóiriú chomh maith le scéimeanna Mearfhreagróir le feabhas a chur ar amanna freagartha i gceantair thuaithe.

Mobile Phone Handsets: Radiation

Mr M Murphy asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to make a statement on the growing medical evidence to suggest that children are being exposed to high dosages of radiation from mobile phone handsets. (AQO 954/01)

Ms de Brún: The Stewart Report concluded that RF radiation produced by mobile phones here is within guidelines drawn up by the National Radiological Protection Board and the International Commission on Non-Ionising Radiation Protection and as such is highly unlikely to be a cause of direct adverse health effects on the general population.

The report, nevertheless, recommended that a precautionary approach to the use of mobile phone technologies be adopted until much more detailed and scientifically robust information on any health effects becomes available. In line with this approach, the report also recommended that widespread use of mobile phones by children should be discouraged.

Ba é cinneadh Thuarascáil Stewart go bhfuil radaíocht a sholáthraítear anseo ag gutháin phóca laistigh de na treoirilínte arna leagan amach ag an Bhord Cosanta Raideolaíochta Náisiúnta agus ag an Choimisiún Idirnáisiúnta ar Chosaint Radaíochta Neamh-Ianaithe, agus mar sin ní móide go mbeadh sé ina chúis dhíreach easláinte sa daonra ginearálta.

Mar sin féin, mhol an tuairisc dúinn a bheith cúramach faoi dul le teicneolaíochtaí ghuthán póca go dtí go bhfuil fáil ar eolas i bhfad níos sonraí agus níos fódúla ó thaobh na heolaíochta de ar conas a rachadh siad i gcion ar an tsláinte. Ag coinneáil leis an chur chuige seo, mhol an tuairisc fosta gur chóir áiteamh ar pháistí gan ró-úsáid a dhéanamh de ghutháin phóca.

Nurses and Doctors: Training Places

Mr J Kelly asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the measures she has taken to increase the number of training places for nurses and doctors. (AQO 1000/01)

Ms de Brún: 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 position for consultant

medical staffing the number of medical students was increased in 2001 by 8.5%, from 166 to 180.

In September 1997 pre-registration nursing and midwifery education moved to the Higher Education sector with provision for 440 student places. With effect from September 2000 the number of student places was increased to 540 per year and from September 2001 the number of places was increased by a further 100, bring the total student intake to 640. As well as this expansion in the number of available student nurse places other initiatives have been taken to enhance the supply of qualified nurses, including free training for nurses and midwives returning to practice.

In response to identified training needs and to ease to retention difficulties my Department continues to allocate significant resources, in excess of £9m annually, to support the continued professional development of qualified nursing staff.

Déantar athbhreithniú bliantúil ar líon oibre na speisialtóirí liachta agus déantar coigeartú ar an líon atá ar oiliúint, má cheadaíonn na hacmhainní sin, leis an suíomh athraitheach a chur san áireamh. Le feabhas a chur ar líon reatha na gcomhairleach liachta, méadaíodh líon na mac léinn leighis faoi 8.5% (ocht pointe a cúig) i 2001, ó 166 (céad seasca is a sé) go dtí 180 (céad ochtó).

I Meán Fómhair 1997 ghluais an t-oideachas cnáimhseachais agus altranaís réamhchláraithe go dtí an earnáil Ard-Oideachais agus foráladh do 440 áit mac léinn. Le héifeacht ó Mheán Fómhair 2000 méadaíodh an líon áiteanna mac léinn go dtí 540 sa bhliain agus ó Mheán Fómhair 2001 méadaíodh an líon áiteanna 100 eile, a thugann an glacadh iomlán mac léinn go dtí 640. Chomh maith leis an leathnú seo sa líon áiteanna mac léinn altranaís atá ar fáil chuathas i mbun tionscnamh eile le méadú a dhéanamh ar an soláthar altraí cáilithe, le hoiliúint in aisce d'altraí agus do chnáimhsí a bhíonn ag fillleadh ar chleachtas san áireamh.

Mar fhreagairt ar riachtanais sainaitheanta oiliúna agus le deacrachtaí coinneála a mhaolú, leanann mo Roinn de bheith ag leithdháileadh acmhainní suntasacha, sa bhreis ar £9 milliún in aghaidh na bliana, le tacú le forbairt leanúnach ghairmiúil na foirne cáilithe altranaís.

Pay Awards: Chief Executives

Ms Ramsey asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the measures she has put in place to tackle the issue of pay awards for Trust and Board Chief Executives. (AQO 999/01)

Ms de Brún: Using the powers contained in the Health and Personal Social Services Act (NI) 2001 I have directed all HPSS employers, with one exception, to restrict Chief Executives' pay awards in the 2001/02 year to 2% for those Trusts with performance pay

schemes and 3.5% for those without performance pay schemes. In the case of Causeway Trust, because of the levels of performance pay already awarded I have restricted the increase to 1%.

I have also introduced a new pay and grading scheme for all new Chief Executive posts. The scheme is based on a job evaluation and pay progression is based solely on performance. Existing Chief Executives have been invited to opt for the new arrangements.

Ag úsáid na gcumhachtaí atá san Acht Sláinte agus Seirbhísí Sóisialta Pearsanta (TÉ) 2001, tá treoir tugtha agam do gach fostaí de chuid na seirbhísí sláinte, le heisceacht amháin, dámhachtainí pá Príomhfheidhmeannach sa bhliain 2001/02 a theorannú chuig 2% (dhá faoin chéad) do na hIontaobhais sin le scéimeanna pá i gcoibhneas le feidhmiú agus chuig 3.5% (trí pointe a cúig) dóibh sin gan scéimeanna pá i gcoibhneas le feidhmiú. I gcás Iontaobhas an Chlocháin, mar gheall ar na leibhéil pá i gcoibhneas le feidhmiú a dhámh mé cheana féin, theorannaigh mé an méadú chuig 1%. Thug mé isteach scéim nua pá agus grádála do gach post nua Príomhfheidhmeannaigh. Tá an scéim seo bunaithe ar mheastóireacht oibre, agus tá forchéimniú pá bunaithe go huile agus go hiomlán ar fheidhmiú. Iarradh ar Phríomhfheidhmeannaigh na socruithe nua a roghnú.

REGIONAL DEVELOPMENT

Brownfield Housing Potential

Mr M Robinson asked the Minister for Regional Development what guidance he has given to the Department of the Environment in order to maximise the brownfield housing potential within our cities and towns.

(AQW 2157/01)

The Minister for Regional Development (Mr P Robinson): Maximising the brownfield housing potential of our towns and cities is a key objective underpinning my Department's recently published Regional Development Strategy. The strategy, which was approved by the Assembly and supported by all Ministers, outlines the strategic and long-term framework for the future development of Northern Ireland up to the year 2025.

Specifically, in relation to housing, the strategy provides guidance on managing housing growth and distribution, supporting urban renaissance, achieving balanced communities and sets an ambitious regional target for 60% of new urban housing growth to be within existing urban areas. Of critical importance to achieving this is the introduction of a plan, monitor and manage approach to the identification and release of development land.

The strategy also commits my Department to prepare a regional Planning Policy Statement, to set out policy

guidance on housing in settlements and how the Plan, Monitor and Manage approach will work. I hope to publish this policy statement by this summer.

In the interim my officials have been working closely with officials in DOE, both in relation to the preparation of the Planning Policy Statement and Development Plan preparation. It is important that all policy and guidance provided by my Department incorporates the best practice adopted both within these islands and Europe more generally. To that end my officials along with those in DOE have recently held a series of best practice seminars on approaches to urban capacity studies, housing density, phasing and the sequential approach to site identification and release. These seminars were well attended by officials from both Departments and provided clear guidance on best practice approaches from United Kingdom and Europe.

Strangford Lough Ferry

Mr McCarthy asked the Minister for Regional Development to make a statement on the failure of the Strangford Ferry to operate between the evening of Friday 15 February 2002 and the afternoon of Saturday 16 February 2002.

(AQW 2178/01)

Mr P Robinson: My Department's Roads Service has advised me that, on Friday 15 February 2002, the new MV Portaferry II suffered an engine problem which resulted in the Strangford Lough ferry service being suspended from 5.00 pm for the rest of that evening.

The fault was rectified at around 1.00 am on Saturday 16 February 2002. Regrettably, however, when the service recommenced on schedule at 8.15 am that morning, a further engine problem became apparent and the vessel was immediately taken out of service so that appropriate investigations could be carried out. A further fault, unrelated to the previous one, was repaired and normal service was restored at 2.30 pm on Saturday 16 February 2002.

Unfortunately, during the periods the service was suspended, neither of the back-up ferry vessels were available for use. The standby vessel, the MV Strangford, was in dry dock for its annual refit and the passenger-only vessel, the MV Isla O'Valla, developed a fuel system problem. The situation was exacerbated because a private boat, with which there is a standing back-up arrangement, could not be launched because of the state of the tide and Roads Service was not able to use the MV Portaferry, the former standby vessel, as its passenger-carrying certificate had expired.

Since these events, Roads Service is working closely with the suppliers of the new vessel to identify why the faults occurred. In addition, Roads Service has obtained a 3-week passenger-carrying certificate for the MV Portaferry so that it can be used as a temporary standby vessel during the remaining period of the MV Strangford refit.

I have also asked senior Roads Service officials to ensure that, in future, back-up arrangements are regularly tested so that a vessel is always immediately available in the event of the main ferry vessel having to be taken out of service.

Newry and Mourne: Winter Maintenance

Mr Kennedy asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail (a) the private contractors currently employed and authorised to carry out winter maintenance, gritting and emergency call-out work in the Newry and Mourne Roads Service Agency depot; (b) if it is permissible to sub-let any or all of these contracts; and (c) if any of the existing contracts have been sub-let. (AQW 2205/01)

Mr P Robinson: My Department's Roads Service lets an annual tender, for each of its 4 operational divisions, for the "provision of skilled and unskilled personnel for road maintenance works". This allows Roads Service to call-off drivers or labourers from the contract to assist when there is a shortfall in their own work force or to assist in dealing with an emergency situation. The current contract covering our Southern Division, which includes the area covered by the Newry and Mourne depot, was awarded to Colas (NI), 4a The Square, Ballynahinch.

Under the conditions of this contract the contractor can assign, transfer or sub contract/sub-let the contract, or any portion, after seeking and receiving the Department's consent in writing.

During the term of the present contract Colas (NI) made no request to the Department to sub-let their contract in the Southern Area.

Newry and Mourne Roads Service: Overtime

Mr Kennedy asked the Minister for Regional Development to provide a detailed breakdown on the overtime worked since 1 November 2001 by (a) foremen/ supervisors; and (b) industrial staff at the Newry and Mourne Roads Service Agency depot. (AQW 2206/01)

Mr P Robinson: My Department's Roads Service has advised me that during the period 1 November 2001 to 20 February 2002 the number of hours of overtime worked by foremen/supervisors and industrial staff at the Newry and Mourne Section Office was 745.5 hours and 135 hours respectively.

Roads Service Southern Division: Winter Maintenance

Mr Kennedy asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail (a) the nature of training and expertise expected from private contractors employed and responsible for work such as winter maintenance; gritting, bitmac patching; and (b) if all issues of health and safety and

good working practice are fully adhered to at the Newry and Mourne Roads Service Agency depot as part of private contracts. (AQW 2207/01)

Mr P Robinson: Roads Service Southern Division has appointed a contractor to assist in carrying out after hours gritting duties. Before being employed in this activity, the contractor's drivers received training in the use of Roads service equipment and instruction on and experience of the salted network routes.

Contractors employed by my Department's Roads Service to carry out bitmac patching and emergency call-out work are generally employed under the terms of the Roads Service measured term contract for small scale and responsive works. There is no requirement under this form of contract for contractors to provide details of the nature of training given to their staff or the level of expertise of their staff. Contractors are expected to employ staff who are sufficiently competent to carry out the works for which they (the contractors) have tendered.

Under the Construction (Design and Management) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 1995 all contractors are required to complete health and safety questionnaires to demonstrate their ability to carry out work safely. The measured term contracts also set out in detail steps to be taken by contractors to ensure health and safety when dealing with hazards such as traffic management, work in the vicinity of electric cables, hazardous materials etc. In managing these contracts, Roads Service staff carry out regular inspections during the works to ensure that health and safety requirements are being met.

Newry and Mourne Roads Service: Services

Mr Kennedy asked the Minister for Regional Development if there are any plans to upgrade and expand the services currently provided by the Newry and Mourne Roads Service Agency depot. (AQW 2208/01)

Mr P Robinson: My Department's Roads Service has no plans to upgrade or expand the services currently provided by its Newry and Mourne Section Office.

Roads Service Southern Division: Industrial Dispute

Mr Kennedy asked the Minister for Regional Development what action he intends to take to resolve the ongoing dispute between DRD management and the relevant staff and trade unions in the Roads Service Southern Division. (AQW 2234/01)

Mr P Robinson: There are established procedures in place, agreed between the Department and Trade Union Side, to resolve industrial disputes. My Private Secretary outlined these procedures to you in his letter dated 19 December 2001. It would not therefore be appropriate

for me to intervene in what is essentially an operational matter within the Department.

I understand that discussions are continuing to take place between Roads Service management and Trade Union Side officials regarding this particular matter.

Coleraine Harbour: Development Plans

Mr Dallat asked the Minister for Regional Development if he has had sight of development plans costing £1 million involving port and non-port work at Coleraine Harbour Estate for Coleraine Harbour Commissioners; and to make a statement. (AQW 2235/01)

Mr P Robinson: I have seen an outline plan for the proposed development, which I understand is at a very early stage.

Coleraine Harbour is an independent statutory body whose board is charged with the stewardship of the Port. Under the terms of a Memorandum of Understanding dated 1 March 2002 between the Department and the Harbour, the Commissioners are required to give written notice to the Department and obtain its consent to any proposals involving the sale, lease or licence of any part of port land, or if they should wish to use port operational land for non port purposes. I am advised however that the proposed development is port related and will only proceed if found to be commercially viable.

Liscurry Gardens: Roadworks

Mr Hussey asked the Minister for Regional Development, pursuant to AQW 159/01, to detail progress on the road works within Liscurry Gardens, Artigarvan, Strabane since 1 October 2001. (AQW 2237/01)

Mr P Robinson: Subsequent to my answer to your earlier Written Assembly Question AQW 56/01, the developer of Liscurry Gardens did not honour the commitment which he gave to my Department's Roads Service to begin remedial and outstanding road works in October 2001. To date, no road works have commenced.

Roads Service has written to the developer on a further 3 occasions (ie, 11 times to date) and has tried to contact him by telephone. The developer has not responded to these letters and telephone calls. In its latest letter to the developer dated 28 February 2002, Roads Service advised that, unless the developer commences work immediately, Roads Service will issue the necessary statutory notice and will carry out all necessary works on his behalf. If this proves necessary, Roads Service will take steps to recover its costs from the developer.

Water Service: Consultancy Costs

Dr O'Hagan asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail the total expenditure paid to consultants in relation to competitive tendering within the Water Service in each of the past five financial years. (AQW 2339/01)

Mr P Robinson: Water Service has paid a total of £26,000 to consultants in relation to competitive tendering over the past 5 financial years, excluding payments to consultants involved in the capital investment programme. The amount paid each year is set out below.

1997/98	£ Nil
1998/99	£12,000
1999/00	£ Nil
2000/01	£14,000
2001/02	£ Nil

Consultants involved in the capital investment programme carried out appraisal studies, competitive tendering, project management, detailed design and site supervision. It is difficult to separate out payments relating to consultancy work devoted solely to competitive tendering since all of these are intrinsically linked. Such information could only be provided at disproportionate cost.

Water Service: Financial Savings

Dr O'Hagan asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail the total financial savings made by the Water Service as a result of competitive tendering over the past five years. (AQW 2340/01)

Mr P Robinson: Water Service uses competitive tendering as the principal means of securing value for money in the procurement of goods, services, and capital works.

Over the past 5 years Water Service has achieved savings of £9,900,000 as a result of competitive tendering. The amount of financial savings each year is set out below.

1996/97	£1,400,000
1997/98	£1,600,000
1998/99	£2,000,000
1999/00	£2,400,000
2000/01	£2,500,000

SOCIAL DEVELOPMENT

"Towards a Shared Agenda": Progress

Mr Hussey asked the Minister for Social Development to detail progress against each of the 36 recommendations as outlined in the Housing Executive's action plan

for delivery of its housing and health strategy 'Towards a Shared Agenda'. (AQW 2258/01)

The Minister for Social Development (Mr Dodds): I have provided this information to the Member and placed a copy in the Assembly Library.

Housing Executive: Land

Mr Beggs asked the Minister for Social Development to outline, by district council area, the quantity of land owned by the NI Housing Executive which is zoned by planners for new housing development. (AQW 2303/01)

Mr Dodds: The Housing Executive's land assets records are not disaggregated to District Council level. The Housing Executive does not generally have surplus land, that is, land for which there is no operational use within a 5 year period. Land acquired and zoned for housing is transferred to housing associations on a phased basis to facilitate the new build programme. In broad terms, approximately one third of the housing associations' programme is provided on land owned by the Housing Executive.

Housing Executive: Land

Mr Beggs asked the Minister for Social Development if he has any plans to review the quantity of development land owned by the NI Housing Executive in order to improve existing housing stock and support new housing where under-provision exists. (AQW 2304/01)

Mr Dodds: Improvements to existing housing stock are carried out through maintenance programmes. Where the Housing Executive owns insufficient land with which to meet identified demand, it works closely with housing associations to find suitable sites for further new social housing.

Where local programme planners indicate that sites should be held to meet needs, the Housing Executive will hold these until funding is available for a housing association to develop the land.

Housing Executive: Multi-Element Improvement Schemes

Mr Paisley Jnr asked the Minister for Social Development what NIHE multi element improvement schemes are on schedule to commence in the next financial year in (a) Ballymena; (b) Ballymoney; and (c) Ballycastle districts. (AQW 2328/01)

Mr Dodds: The position is as follows:

- Three Multi-Element improvement schemes will start in Ballymena. They are:

- Moorlands/Taylorstown for which tenders were returned on 5 March 2002
- Woodgreen Kells which will be tendered in March 2002
- Sunview/Hazelwood which will be tendered in April 2002.

- There are no Multi-Element improvement schemes scheduled to start in Ballymoney during 2002/03. However, 3 contracts commenced during 2001/02 in Ballymoney, Dervock, and Townparks/Hillcrest.
- One Multi-Element improvement scheme will start in Ballycastle:
 - Heronshaw, Bushmills for which tenders were returned on 12 February 2002.

Housing Executive Estates in Ballymena: Expenditure

Mr Paisley Jnr asked the Minister for Social Development to detail (a) the level of expenditure allocated to NIHE estates in Ballymena; and (b) the breakdown of expenditure per estate. (AQW 2329/01)

Mr Dodds: The information is as follows:

The total expenditure on Housing Executive dwellings in Ballymena in the current financial year is £4,971,000. The Housing Executive does not set individual budgets for its estates, however the undernoted expenditure can be attributed to certain estates for the financial year 2001/02:

Riverdale/Tullygarley	£240,000	MEI contract
Condiere Avenue	£525,000	MEI contract
Maine Park	£217,000	MEI contract
Rectory/Adair	£333,000 £46,000	ECM scheme Heating Change
Ballykeel 1	£87,000	ECM scheme
Ballykeel 2	£279,000	ECM scheme
Drumtara/Lettercreeve	£200,000	ECM scheme
Total	£1,927,000	

The balance of £3,044,000 is allocated to individual dwellings across the whole District Council area to cover Response Maintenance requests, maintenance of grounds, communal lights and roomheaters.

Ballykeel Estate, Ballymena

Mr Paisley Jnr asked the Minister for Social Development what are the NIHE plans for the future of Ballykeel estate in Ballymena. (AQW 2330/01)

Mr Dodds: The Housing Executive's Board approved an overall strategy for the future of Ballykeel estate (Area 2) in Ballymena, in November 2000. The strategy

proposed environmental improvements and selective demolition in the upper end of the estate, towards the Crebilly Road, and the demolition of 265 dwellings, mainly in the lower end of the estate. The implementation of the strategy is now under way, with 96 dwellings demolished so far. Tenant consultation on the first phase of the environmental improvements to part of the estate is nearing completion, the detailed design of which will be considered by the Housing Executive's Board in April 2002.

In Ballykeel (Area 1), the Housing Executive recently demolished flats at Barra Drive and Shona Green and the site will be redeveloped by a Housing Association. Proposals are currently being developed for the Kintyre bedsits, which are to be considered by the Executive's Board in March 2002.

St Patrick's Barracks, Ballymena

Mr Paisley Jnr asked the Minister for Social Development to make it his policy that land belonging to the NIHE in front of St Patrick's Barracks, Ballymena will not be used for development purposes but will remain as an amenity and green space facility. (AQW 2334/01)

Mr Dodds: There are no plans to develop this land at present. The Housing Executive recognises the amenity value of the land and it will consult with local residents should any land use issues arise.

Rural Cottages: Strabane and Omagh

Mr Hussey asked the Minister for Social Development, pursuant to AQO 878/01, to outline his timetable for assessment of the remaining 3 rural cottages in Omagh District Council area and 23 rural cottages in Strabane District Council area for inclusion in the ongoing programme for refurbishment or replacement. (AQW 2368/01)

Mr Dodds: The Housing Executive intends to start work on all the cottages in the Strabane and Omagh areas within the next 2 years.

In terms of its assessment, the Housing Executive took into account a number of factors in determining the timetable for the work. The houses are spread out over a wide area and the Housing Executive has tried, in the interests of value for money, to carry out the work in clusters. Some of the sites are more difficult than others in terms of the infrastructure improvements required, for example septic tank replacements, and the Housing Executive has therefore programmed the work so that the more straightforward schemes can progress quickly and will not be compromised by the more difficult sites.

Rural Cottages: Strabane and Omagh

Mr Hussey asked the Minister for Social Development, pursuant to AQO 878/01, to detail the number of rural cottages that have been sold in (i) Strabane; and (ii) Omagh District Council areas. (AQW 2369/01)

Mr Dodds: The Housing Executive has sold:

- i. 91 rural cottages in Strabane District Council area; and
- ii. 11 rural cottages in Omagh District Council area.

Housing Executive: Labour Squads

Mr Hilditch asked the Minister for Social Development if the NIHE has any plans to increase the number of directly employed labour squads as a means of obtaining best value. (AQW 2371/01)

Mr Dodds: The Housing Executive currently has no plans to expand its Direct Labour Organisation (DLO).

Any increase in DLO numbers would depend on an assessment under Best Value principles, showing that better value would be achieved by increasing DLO numbers with a consequent reduction in the use of external contractors. An annual assessment of DLO performance indicates that Best Value is being achieved with the current number of directly employed labour squads.

Social Security Benefits: Fraudulent Claims

Mr Shannon asked the Minister for Social Development to detail the criteria set out to identify those who are defrauding the welfare systems by making fraudulent claims for social security benefits. (AQW 2372/01)

Mr Dodds: There are no set criteria. Counter fraud work is carried forward on 2 fronts, proactive and reactive.

Proactive fraud prevention drives are carried out in a number of high-risk areas of the informal economy. In addition, extensive data matching is carried out across various systems to identify fraudulent claims.

Reactive investigative work is carried out in response to allegations of fraud which are received from a wide variety of sources. All of these allegations are examined and investigated.

The Social Security Agency also co-operates with other organisations such as Inland Revenue and the Housing Executive to identify and investigate discrepancies in information held by these bodies in order to detect fraud.

Jobseeker's Allowance: Fraudulent Claims

Mr Shannon asked the Minister for Social Development to detail, by District Council area, the number of

claimants in receipt of Jobseeker's Allowance who were found to be claiming fraudulently in each of the last 5 years. (AQW 2373/01)

Mr Dodds: A breakdown by District Council area is unavailable for each of the last 5 years. Breakdown, by Social Security Office, of the number of confirmed cases of customers claiming Jobseeker's Allowance fraudulently in each of the last 2 years is shown in the table below.

Benefit Office	Number of cases	
	2000	2001
Andersonstown	39	61
Antrim	51	27
Armagh	21	33
Ballymena	45	72
Ballymoney	36	72
Ballynahinch	7	26
Banbridge	22	34
Bangor	56	63
Carrickfergus	33	17
Coleraine	72	98
Cookstown	15	45
Corporation Street	32	92
Downpatrick	30	60
Dungannon	26	58
Enniskillen	102	136
Falls Road	31	52
Foyle	56	101
Hollywood Road	41	117
Kilkeel	11	17
Knockbreda	35	39
Larne	17	18
Limavady	30	65
Lisburn	49	53
Lisnagelvin	53	76
Lurgan	28	21
Magherafelt	26	60
Newcastle	30	31
Newry	91	82
Newtownabbey	25	38
Newtownards	23	74
Omagh	49	68
Portadown	22	29
Shaftsbury Square	91	31
Shankill	14	28
Strabane	84	77
Total	1,393	1,971

Benefit Fraud: Prevention and Detection

Mr Hilditch asked the Minister for Social Development to detail any measures that have been taken to reduce benefit fraud since April 2001. (AQW 2388/01)

Mr Dodds: The Social Security Agency has a comprehensive strategy to prevent and detect fraud. It contains an extensive programme of initiatives to ensure that:

- Claims entering the system are legitimate.
- Once in the system claims are properly maintained.
- Where fraud and error do enter the system they are detected and appropriate action is taken.

Measures include proactive use of intelligence, rigorous checks and case management, the sharing and matching of information and robust investigation and detection.

Public Housing Stock

Mr Gibson asked the Minister for Social Development what plans he has to provide assistance to increase the stock of public housing in Northern Ireland. (AQW 2429/01)

Mr Dodds: I recognise the importance of providing good quality affordable housing, particularly in the context of promoting social inclusion and meeting our commitments under the Programme for Government. I will continue therefore to bid for sufficient funds to meet housing need and to explore ways of maximising the resources available to me.

Some examples which contribute either directly or indirectly to the social housing stock include:

- The introduction of new procedures requiring those housing associations with sufficient financial capacity, to fund major repairs to their properties from their own resources. Previously my Department would have been the main source of funding aid for such works from the capital budget. Since my Department no longer funds the majority of major repair works the money allocated for that purpose can now be applied to other priorities within the housing programme.
- The Department and the Housing Executive are piloting competitive schemes to produce new social housing at a low cost to the public purse.
- Requiring associations under the Voluntary Purchase Grant (VPG) scheme to lodge the net surplus on sales together with the VPG received into a ring-fenced sales disposals fund. This fund is for the provision of replacement housing and must be used within three years. If it is not my Department will recover the funds.

In addition, another important element in the affordable housing equation is the role of the Co-ownership Housing Scheme. Under the scheme prospective house purchasers

may part rent, part buy a property of their choice with help from the Northern Ireland Co-ownership Housing Association (NICHHA). By inputting around £10m in grant to NICHHA for low cost home ownership my Department expects some £20m to be invested by participants in the form of mortgages in addition to almost £9m from NICHHA's own resources generated from the proceeds of previous sales. In total this will permit around 610 participants to take the first step to home ownership in the current year. It is likely that some of these persons may otherwise have been unable to afford to purchase a home of their own and they may therefore have had no alternative but to seek social housing.

I am also mindful of the valuable role which the private rented sector plays in meeting housing need and current reviews of this sector will help identify what further contribution it might make.

Building Maintenance Budget

Mr Shannon asked the Minister for Social Development what is the building maintenance budget for his Department in each of the last 3 years. (AQW 2482/01)

Mr Dodds: The following are the maintenance budgets for the Specialised Buildings maintained by the Department for Social Development since devolution:

Financial Year	
1999/00	£59k
2000/01	£133k
2001/02	£130k

ASSEMBLY COMMISSION

Rental Allowance for Constituency Offices

Mr Ford asked the Assembly Commission what plans it has to bring the Assembly into line with the new House of Commons' rules regarding rental allowance for constituency offices. (AQW 2261/01)

The Representative of the Assembly Commission

(Mr Fee): It is the Commission's intention to discuss the House of Commons' revised guidance on the arrangements for Members' offices and surgeries outside Westminster at an early Commission meeting. However, the Commission will not want to make any changes to our existing guidance until it has also had time to consider the Senior Salaries Review Body's (SSRB) report on Members' Salaries, Allowances and Pension arrangements, due at the end of April. A key element of the SSRB review has been to look at ways of building in greater accountability to the allowances arrangements. This is designed to protect the public interest and to safeguard Members against allegations that the allowances are being diverted to other purposes.

Job Advertisements

Mr Ford asked the Assembly Commission to detail (a) those publications it uses to advertise job vacancies; and (b) if it uses Irish Medium publications to advertise vacancies requiring use of the Irish language.

(AQW 2262/01)

Mr Fee:

- (a) Vacancies up to and including middle management level (equivalent to Assistant Assembly Clerk) are advertised in the Belfast Telegraph, Irish News, Newsletter and also on the Assembly's website. For more senior positions, in addition to the three main Northern Ireland daily newspapers and the Assembly's website, advertisements are placed in the Irish Times and London Times. Additionally, where senior posts require a particular specialism or parliamentary expertise, advertisements are placed in the relevant specialist publications, eg the House of Commons and the Scottish Parliament house magazines.
- (b) To date Irish Medium publications have not been used to advertise vacancies requiring the use of the Irish language, however, the use of specialist publications will continue to be considered as and when the need arises.

NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

Friday 22 March 2002

Written Answers to Questions

OFFICE OF THE FIRST MINISTER AND DEPUTY FIRST MINISTER

Strategic Planning

Mr Dalton asked the Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister whether the Executive can bind future administrations to the legislative and financial requirements of ongoing strategies such as the 'Regional Development Strategy for Northern Ireland 2025'.

(AQW 2268/01)

Reply: While it is normal for planning to be taken forward on the basis of continuity, decisions of the Executive do not bind successive administrations. It is a matter for each new administration to decide whether to adopt the strategies and policies of its predecessor. Any changes to those strategies and policies can be made through legislation, the budgets, or administratively, as appropriate.

Register of Sex Offenders

Mr Weir asked the Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister to detail any representations made to HM Government and the European Commission to have a common register of sex offenders throughout the European Union.

(AQW 2401/01)

Reply: We have not made any representations to UK Government or the European Commission to have a common register of sex offenders throughout the European Union. This is a matter for the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland.

Building Maintenance Budget

Mr Shannon asked the Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister what is the building maintenance budget for its properties in each of the last 3 years.

(AQW 2403/01)

Reply: Accommodation and Construction Division (ACD) within the Department of Finance and Personnel hold the maintenance budget for office buildings and will respond in respect of these buildings. However, the Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister has responsibility for a number of properties that fall outside ACD control. Set out below are the relevant figures for each the buildings for the last three years:

	1999/2000	2000/2001	2001/2002
Enterprise House, Belfast	Nil	Nil	Nil
North South Ministerial Council, Armagh	69,000*	69,000*	69,000*
NI Bureau, Washington	NIL	10,300	10,300
NI Executive, Brussels	NIL	5,100	7,335

*The figures for the North South Ministerial Council are for NI only and encompasses both rental and all maintenance of the property

Attacks on Vulnerable People

Mr Dalton asked the Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister if it would consider establishing a forum of related agencies, as suggested by leading charities, to tackle the increasing level of violent attacks against pensioners; and to make a statement.

(AQW 2404/01)

Reply: We deplore all attacks on vulnerable people. Such attacks have no place in a democratic society. The responsibility for criminal justice including criminal law on assault is a reserved matter.

However, we understand that the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland intends to consult on the scope for strengthening legislation in respect of attacks motivated by racism and sectarianism. We are not aware however of any plans to strengthen the law in relation to attacks against older people.

Commissioner for Children

Ms Lewsley asked the Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister to make a statement on the Commissioner for Children.

(AQO 1028/01)

Reply: Following a very successful consultation, which closed on 8 November 2001, over 300 responses have been analysed and decisions are being taken on the way forward. We intend to introduce legislation to the Assembly in the near future, with a view to appointing the Commissioner in the Autumn.

We are at an advanced stage of drafting the Bill and we are also bringing forward the necessary preparatory work for the appointment.

We recognise that progress in taking this initiative forward has not been as quick as we had hoped. However, we firmly believe that it is better to take a little more time now, to make sure that the office we establish can properly discharge its important role. We believe that by doing this, Northern Ireland can be a world-leader in improving life for children and young people.

Visit to the USA

Mr Dallat asked the Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister what plans the First Minister and Deputy First Minister have to visit the USA; and to make a statement. (AQO 1059/01)

Reply: We currently have no plans to make a joint visit to the USA. We made joint visits to the US in early February and again on 12-14 March. Both visits included meetings with senior members of the US Administration on Capitol Hill. During our recent visit to Washington we met with President Bush and updated him on progress with devolution and expressed our thanks for the ongoing support from the US administration. At a subsequent meeting with Secretary of State, Colin Powell, we reflected on developments over the past number of months, work being progressed by the Executive and what assistance and expertise may be available through the US administration in relation to taking forward some of the major policy reviews including the Review of Public Administration.

National Parks

Mr McGrady asked the Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister would it support the concept of National Park designation for Northern Ireland; and to make a statement. (AQO 1063/01)

Reply: We understand the Department of the Environment has prepared a Report on National Parks and Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty. The issues covered, including the involvement of local communities and the need to resource any management bodies, are complex and require careful consideration.

The Environment Committee has provided its initial views on the Report. When officials in the Department of the Environment, and Minister Nesbitt, have considered these comments, we understand that the Minister will make a statement on the way forward.

In the circumstances, it would be premature for us to express a view on the concept of National Park designation.

Executive Business

Mr McCarthy asked the Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister to make a statement on business transacted at the last meeting of the Executive. (AQO 1027/01)

Reply: The last Executive meeting was held on the 19 March. The Executive discussed the Capital of Culture bid and agreed the draft Victims Strategy.

AGRICULTURE AND RURAL DEVELOPMENT

Farm Subsidy Claims

Mr Bradley asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to outline (a) the dates on which all 2002 annual subsidies are due for payment; and (b) the latest anticipated payment dates in each category. (AQW 2487/01)

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development (Ms Rodgers): EU rules provide for advance payments on direct farm subsidy claims for the 2002 scheme year to commence from 16 October 2002 and for balance payments to be 96% complete by the end of June 2003. The Department will publish its detailed scheme by scheme payment targets within this overall timetable prior to the start of payments in October 2002.

The Department's Annual Profile of Premia Payments for 2001/02, which was published by press release on 31 October 2001, set out the payment targets for the 2001 scheme year. Updates on performance against this Profile have been published in press releases on 18 January 2002, 19 February 2002 and 14 March 2002.

Livestock and Meat Commission

Mr Bradley asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to outline the benefits the dairy industry receive in lieu of its financial contribution to the Livestock and Meat Commission for Northern Ireland. (AQW 2489/01)

Ms Rodgers: The dairy industry contributes to the Livestock and Meat Commission for Northern Ireland (LMC) through levies collected on slaughter from animals derived from the dairy herd. It receives the same benefits from levies collected as are available to the specialist beef sector.

The LMC activities which are funded by levy are Information Services, Agriculture and Marketing/Promotion.

Information Services are designed to fulfil LMC's legal obligation to research, analyse and disseminate information about markets, prices and other pertinent matters in regard to the entire beef and sheep sector.

In regard to "Agriculture", LMC's primary role is to ensure that the producer sector is aware of market require-

ments, including quality assurance, weight and grade specification, etc.

Marketing and Promotion which seeks to enhance the market opportunities for Northern Ireland beef and lamb, is the area where LMC spends the majority of its levy income.

Farmyard Accidents

Mr Weir asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to detail the number of farmyard accidents in each of the last 5 years. (AQW 2490/01)

Ms Rodgers: Under the Reporting of Injuries, Diseases and Dangerous Occurrences Regulations (Northern Ireland) 1997, it falls to individual employers and the self-employed to report accidents, which result in either major injuries or absences of more than three days away from work, to the Health and Safety Executive (NI). My Department's responsibility in this area relates only to its employees. The number of farmyard accidents involving the Department's employees during the last five years is outlined in the table below.

Year	Number of accidents
March 1997 –February 1998	19
March 1998 –February 1999	13
March 1999 –February 2000	17
March 2000 –February 2001	20
March 2001 –February 2002	6

Consignia

Mr Dallat asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development if she has engaged in discussions with Consignia on how information relating to Agriculture and Rural Development can be delivered through the Post Office as a one-stop shop. (AQO 1038/01)

Ms Rodgers: I am aware of the pilot exercise carried out in collaboration with Consignia in Leicestershire, and that officials in Northern Ireland, including officials in my own Department, are considering whether something similar could prove effective in Northern Ireland.

I am, of course, very keen that anyone who wishes to use DARD's extensive range of services should have ready access to information about those services from the widest possible range of sources. If Consignia are able to offer an additional means of providing such information in a way which is effective and which represents value for money, I should certainly be prepared to give it close consideration.

Good Farming Practice

Mr Close asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development how many farmers have enrolled on Good Farming Practice courses. (AQO 1032/01)

Ms Rodgers: The launch of the Good Farming Practice programme was delayed until 29 January 2002 due to the FMD crisis. Since the launch at the end of January 1,500 applications have been received with 1,200 training places being offered. To 8 March 2002, 500 participants completed the introductory workshop and it is anticipated that a further 450 to 500 participants will have completed this workshop by the end of the 2001/02 financial year.

Ballyhornan and Bishops court

Mr McGrady asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development what is her assessment of the problems faced by the community in Ballyhornan and Bishops court in County Down; and to make a statement. (AQO 1047/01)

Ms Rodgers: I am well aware of the Member's keen interest in this part of his constituency, and of the efforts he has made in drawing its problems to Ministers' attention.

Many of those problems seem to relate to major infrastructure issues which fall outside my area of responsibility. Nevertheless, officials from the Rural Development Division of DARD are aware of developments in the Ballyhornan area and would welcome applications from local collectives or co-operatives wishing to promote local regeneration projects for funding under the new round of EU Structural Funds Programmes.

I understand that a number of local groups are currently engaged in drawing up a development programme for the area. Needless to say, I shall be happy to consider any assistance which my Department might be able to offer in implementing that programme when it is complete.

Tullaghmurray Lass

Ms Lewsley asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to give her assessment of the search operation for the fishing vessel 'Tullaghmurray Lass'; and to make a statement. (AQO 1035/01)

Ms Rodgers: The Tullaghmurray Lass was reported missing in the early hours of the 15th February, and my Department's fishery protection vessel was involved with 2 helicopters and a Nimrod in the subsequent Search and Rescue operation co-ordinated by HM Coastguard.

The search and rescue operation was terminated by HM Coastguard at 1100 on Saturday 16 February.

Having met the Greene family I was conscious of the need to make every effort to find the missing vessel, thought to be somewhere on the seabed in its usual fishing area, and made representations to the authorities in both jurisdictions. In due course the Marine Accident Investigation Bureau of DTLR made available HMS Bridport,

and the Irish Naval Service the LE Eithne. Both ships commenced a sonar search on 19 February co-ordinated by MAIB.

Although hampered frequently by rough weather, these minesweepers made a detailed examination of the seabed in areas determined by the Kilkeel fishermen who knew the habits of Tullaghmurray lass best. Contacts revealed by sonar were inspected by video where possible.

Both vessels had to leave the search on occasion to re-fuel and change crew, and HMS Bridport received fresh orders on 26 February, handing over to HMS Bangor.

Despite unprecedented efforts by the vessels of both Navies and my Department's Fishery Protection Vessel, none of the contacts were identified as a sunken vessel.

On 6 March I met Admiral John Lang the Chief Inspector of the MAIB, who showed me a chart of the search area and explained that in his professional assessment the exercise must sadly be concluded without success. Although MAIB terminated the search at midday on 6 March, the investigation remains open and further significant evidence would result in the return of a vessel for a video examination.

Food Body Working Group

Mr McMenamin asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development when she expects to set up the working group into the proposed food body for Northern Ireland; and to make a statement. (AQO 1039/01)

Ms Rodgers: The Food Body Working Group was appointed on 21 February 2002 and met for the first time last week. The Group's role is to consider whether or not there is a need for a Food Body and, if there is, its possible structure, functions and funding. It has been asked to report by the middle of June.

Safety at Sea

Mr M Murphy asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development if she has any plans to visit Kilkeel to hear the concerns of local fishermen on the issue of sea safety. (AQO 1045/01)

Ms Rodgers: Safety at sea is the responsibility of Department of Transport, Local Government and the Regions Maritime and Coastguard agency, and is a reserved matter. Following the tragedies of the sinking of the Charisma and the loss of the Tullaghmurray Lass, nobody can be in any doubt of the dangers involved in putting out to sea.

I have recently visited Kilkeel and spoken at length to fishermen and members of their families. I am therefore aware of the understandable concerns they have over their safety, and I can assure the Member that my Department will make every provision to encourage the industry to

improve safety in the catching sector in light of these incidents and encourage implementation of any recommendations that may result from them in the Marine Accident Investigation Bureau reports.

Modulation Expenditure

Mr Ford asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to detail (a) the sectors on which modulated funds were spent last year; and (b) the percentage of all expenditure which went to farmers. (AQO 1036/01)

Ms Rodgers: There has been no significant expenditure of modulation monies to date, but those funds which have been committed have been used in support of organic farming and afforestation of agricultural land. Expenditure of modulation monies is, however, set to rise significantly as participants in the other agri-environment schemes start to qualify for payments. The beneficiaries of modulation funds committed so far would have been required either to have owned the land in question or to have held it in a long-term lease.

CULTURE, ARTS AND LEISURE

Building Maintenance Budget

Mr Shannon asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure what is the building maintenance budget for his department in each of the last 3 years. (AQW 2407/01)

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure (Mr McGimpsey): The Department currently has its Headquarters within the Interpoint Building in central Belfast. Accommodation and Construction Division within the Department of Finance and Personnel hold the maintenance budget for this building and they will respond in respect of Interpoint.

DCAL has responsibility for the Public Record Office of Northern Ireland and their maintenance budget for the period since devolution on 2 December 1999 to 31 March 2002 has been as follows :

2 Dec 1999 to 31 March 2000	£56,000 (apportioned to the annual budget of £168,000)
2000/2001	£180,000
2001/2002	£163,000

Similarly the Ordnance Survey of Northern Ireland maintenance budget for the period since devolution on 2 December 1999 to 31 March 2002 has been follows:

2 Dec 1999 to 31 March 2000	£18,333 (apportioned to the annual budget of £55,000)
2000/2001	£68,000
2001/2002	£70,000

Since the transfer of the three Inland Waterways and Fisheries properties at Bushmills, Movagh Fish Farm in Kilrea and Riversdale in Co Fermanagh from the former Department of Agriculture for Northern Ireland there has been no formal maintenance budget. However the following has been spent on maintenance and the money transferred from within other programme budgets.

2 Dec 1999 to 31 March 2000	£1,497.00
2000/2001	£5,382.00
2001 to date	£48,264.00

Disability Sport

Mr Shannon asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure what action he is taking to ensure equality issues are adhered to in relation to the level of funding provided to Disability Sport. (AQW 2431/01)

Mr McGimpsey: The Sports Council is totally committed to providing equality of opportunity for people who suffer social disadvantage for any reason, including disability. The Council fully supports the “mainstreaming” of people with a disability into every day sporting opportunities. To this end the Council, under the distribution of Lottery Funds, affords a higher priority to projects which provide opportunities for people with a disability and allow a higher percentage of funding for these projects.

Soccer Strategy

Mr B Hutchinson asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure when does he plan to publish the draft strategy for the development of soccer in Northern Ireland. (AQW 2469/01)

Mr McGimpsey: Following careful consideration of the comments received from the consultation exercise, I hope to be in a position to publish a draft strategy for the development of soccer in Northern Ireland before the summer. I envisage that this will include proposed actions involving my Department as well as other key organisations involved in soccer.

Youth Football Development

Mr B Hutchinson asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure what plans the Sports Council have to develop youth football in Northern Ireland over the next 3 years using Executive Programme Funds. (AQW 2470/01)

Mr McGimpsey: The Sports Council is currently engaged in drawing up specific criteria for the establishment of a network of Football Development Centres to be located at soccer clubs across Northern Ireland, over the next 3 years, using Executive Programme Funds. The Sports Council hopes to involve 10,000 children and

young people on an annual basis and the programme, being prepared, will seek to address wider community and social deprivation issues through the medium of soccer. It will also include a talent identification and development programme for young players attending the Development Centres. It is intended that each Centre will employ a full time Development Officer who will be responsible for leading the programme for their respective club. It is envisaged that Development Officers will be in post by September 2002.

HM The Queen's Golden Jubilee

Mr Gibson asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure what plans he has to encourage celebrations of HM The Queen's Golden Jubilee year in Northern Ireland. (AQW 2471/01)

Mr McGimpsey: As I outlined in my statement to the Assembly on 19 February 2002 a number of initiatives has already been undertaken by my Department in relation to encouraging events for the Golden Jubilee.

In July 2001, I established a Golden Jubilee Advisory Panel, representing various sectors such as youth, voluntary, business, events organisers etc. The remit of this group is to guide on programme content and the funding scheme, as well as general Golden Jubilee publicity in Northern Ireland. The emphasis has continually been on community-led events, and this was encouraged through the establishment of the Golden Jubilee Non Lottery grants scheme through my Department. The uptake of this scheme has been encouraging.

Briefings have been held with the Lord Lieutenants, and a Jubilee contact has been established in almost every district council. Through these networks, as well as substantial mailings to community groups, headquarter organisations and schools, officials in my Department have received almost 500 completed event registration forms. These outline provisional planned events for the Golden Jubilee.

The events planned will form the basis of a publication – Golden Jubilee Diary of Events - which will show the extent and variety of the events planned throughout Northern Ireland encompassing all ages and areas. It is hoped that this souvenir brochure will be launched at the beginning of May. The distribution of the grants will also take place over this period, as assessment will then be complete.

Another initiative which will be announced by the Department, is the provision of souvenirs or mementoes for school children. As I outlined to the Assembly, my Department is investigating a number of options, and I hope to provide further detail on these in the near future.

Strategic Review of Disability Sports

Mr Shannon asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to outline (a) steps the Sports Council for Northern

Ireland has taken to undertake a strategic review of Disability Sports; (b) the progress to date; and (c) the time-scale for completion of this review. (AQW 2472/01)

Mr McGimpsey: In 2001/02, the Sports Council expressed its intention of undertaking a Strategic Review of Disability Sports. This Review has not yet taken place. However, Disability Sports have prepared a development plan and this will form the basis of the Review, which is expected to be completed in the Autumn of 2002.

National Sports Stadium

Mr B Hutchinson asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to outline (a) his plans to progress a national sports stadium; and (b) if he plans to provide funding for existing stadia. (AQW 2501/01)

Mr McGimpsey: As you will be aware, the Advisory Panel's report on the development of a soccer strategy for Northern Ireland has called on Government, in conjunction with the governing body for football, to end the uncertainty on the issue by making a firm commitment to establish a national stadium for football. The report also recommended that an early decision should be taken on the mix of sports that should be involved with football in the project. My Department is in the process of working up a strategy for the development of football in the province, this will include how we propose moving forward on the national stadium issue.

I have managed to secure an additional £1m for 2002/3 to build upon the Interim Safety at Sports Grounds Scheme, which was designed to address the urgent health and safety needs at Northern Ireland's sporting venues. My Department is also considering the needs in the longer term and is in the process of drawing proposals for a programme of improvements at sports stadia.

Review of Regional Museums

Mr McGrady asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure what is the current position with the Review of Regional Museums in Northern Ireland; and to make a statement. (AQO 1055/01)

Mr McGimpsey: Firstly, I am pleased to be able to say that my officials are about to pass a draft response on the Local Museum and Heritage Review to key stakeholders for comment; it will then be sent to the Members of the Culture, Arts and Leisure Committee. After that, the document will be published for consultation.

However, I do not want to give the impression that no progress has been made on the issues raised in the Review. Since last year the Cultural Forum has been established and is doing important work in bringing together the key players in the museum and heritage sectors, and in assisting district councils in the develop-

ment of their local cultural strategies. In addition, we are funding a partnership between the Linenhall Library and the Nerve Centre to develop the CultureNorthernIreland website to promote awareness of our rich cultural heritage. The development of an Archives Policy is also continuing apace with a workshop-based conference planned for early April and a digitisation project planned for the next financial year. And my Department is working closely with the Education and Training Inspectorate to develop a Learning Strategy.

One of the fundamental aspects of the Review is the question of providing increased funding. We intend therefore to use the opportunity of the current spending review to bid for the extra resources required to take forward other Review recommendations.

Sign Language

Ms Lewsley asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure what measures he is taking to promote the use of sign language. (AQO 1057/01)

Mr McGimpsey: My Department recognises that work needs to be done to develop a coherent policy in respect of British and Irish sign languages. Meetings with the Royal National Institute for the Deaf and the British Deaf Association have identified interpreting services as a key issue. As I stated in a previous response to the member on 24 September 2001 my Department is convening a working party of interested individuals and organisations to explore important issues and agree a way forward. Discussions have taken place with officials and representative organisations with a view to constituting the working party in April.

Since the 24 September 2001 progress has been made in my Department in promoting the use of sign language. Staff from Linguistic Diversity Branch have attended a deaf awareness training course and this is now being extended to all officials in my Department. My Department is engaged in developing, on behalf of all Executive departments, a linguistic diversity awareness seminar which will include reference to sign languages. I am aware that staff from some other Departments have already attended deaf awareness training courses and we would encourage officials who have not already done so to avail of the opportunity.

Development of Local Museums

Mr Dallat asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to outline his plans for encouraging the development of local museums; and to make a statement. (AQO 1056/01)

Mr McGimpsey: This issue will be addressed in our response to the Local Museums and Heritage Review.

I am pleased to be able to say that my officials are about to pass a draft response on the Review to key stakeholders for comment; it will then be sent to the Members of the Culture, Arts and Leisure Committee. After that, the document will be published for consultation.

However, I do not want to give the impression that no progress has been made on the issues raised in the Review. Since last year the Cultural Forum has been established and is doing important work in bringing together the key players in the museum and heritage sectors, and in assisting district councils in the development of their local cultural strategies. In addition, we are funding a partnership between the Linenhall Library and the Nerve Centre to develop the CultureNorthernIreland website to promote awareness of our rich cultural heritage. The development of an Archives Policy is also continuing apace with a workshop-based conference planned for early April and a digitisation project planned for the next financial year. And my Department is working closely with the Education and Training Inspectorate to develop a Learning Strategy.

One of the fundamental aspects of the Review is the question of providing increased funding. We intend therefore to use the opportunity of the current spending review to bid for the extra resources required to take forward other Review recommendations.

Disability Sports NI: Funding

Mr Shannon asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure what steps are being taken to ensure that adequate funding is provided to Disability Sports NI.

(AQO 1022/01)

Mr McGimpsey: The Sports Council for Northern Ireland is responsible for the distribution of funding for sport, including disability sport. This includes funding for Talented Athletes with disabilities and a substantial capital investment for improving access for the disabled.

I understand that the Sports Council is in receipt of an application from Disability Sport under the Lottery 'Starting Well' programme, which, if successful, would provide £84,000 over 4 years.

The Department is currently working with the Sports Council and Disability Sport to make a case for Executive Programme Funds which, if successful, would include provision for people with disabilities.

Ordnance Survey NI

Mr Ford asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to detail any discussions he has had with Ordnance Survey NI regarding the publication of maps for towns outside Belfast.

(AQO 1050/01)

Mr McGimpsey: Ordnance Survey of Northern Ireland is an Agency within my Department. As part of its core work it produces a range of detailed topographic maps including a Road Atlas showing 16 town maps.

OSNI actively encourages the use of these topographic maps in partnership or under licence to local Councils to enable the production of individual street maps. As the production cost of a current street map is £20k, it is only when there are sufficient sales to cover the cost would OSNI publish a map.

I understand that discussions are underway with some local councils on co-funding a new series of street maps, as past sales of these have not recovered the full cost of production and bringing these to the market.

County Museum Strategy

Mr Byrne asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure what proposals he has to bring forward a County Museum strategy; and to make a statement.

(AQO 1053/01)

Mr McGimpsey: This issue will be addressed in our response to the Local Museums and Heritage Review.

I am pleased to be able to say that my officials are about to pass a draft response on the Review to key stakeholders for comment; it will then be sent to the Members of the Culture, Arts and Leisure Committee. After that, the document will be published for consultation.

However, I do not want to give the impression that no progress has been made on the issues raised in the Review. Since last year the Cultural Forum has been established and is doing important work in bringing together the key players in the museum and heritage sectors, and in assisting district councils in the development of their local cultural strategies. In addition, we are funding a partnership between the Linenhall Library and the Nerve Centre to develop the CultureNorthernIreland website to promote awareness of our rich cultural heritage. The development of an Archives Policy is also continuing apace with a workshop-based conference planned for early April and a digitisation project planned for the next financial year. And my Department is working closely with the Education and Training Inspectorate to develop a Learning Strategy.

One of the fundamental aspects of the Review is the question of providing increased funding. We intend therefore to use the opportunity of the current spending review to bid for the extra resources required to take forward other Review recommendations.

EDUCATION

Special Educational Needs

Mr S Wilson asked the Minister of Education what assessment has he made in relation to the increase in the

number of statemented children and to detail the amount of money set aside for special educational needs for schools in each of the last 5 years. (AQW 2408/01)

The Minister of Education (Mr M McGuinness): The introduction of the Code of Practice on the Identification and Assessment of Special Educational Needs in 1998 served to increase awareness of special educational needs in schools and among parents. Since then an increase in referrals for statutory assessment has led to a consequential increase in the number of statements issued.

The total numbers of statements for the last three years are:

	Total	% Increase
2000	9718	3.2%
1999	9411	3.1%
1998	9104	

A related issue has been an increase in the number of children presenting for statutory assessment with diagnoses of specific conditions or displaying significant behavioural difficulties.

Money is not set aside, as such, for the education of children with special educational needs. Instead, Education and Library Boards assess and respond to need on an individual basis, in line with the Code of Practice.

Details of approximate funding for special educational needs pupils for the last three years are given below. It was not possible to provide figures for the five-year period within the timescale of the question.

	1998/99	1999/00	2000/01
SELB	11,292,619	13,566,091	15,074,825
NEELB	11,495,000	12,900,000	14,213,000
SEELB	10,976,000#	20,302,000	23,702,000
WELB	8,240,000##	10,209,627##	12,428,532##
BELB	15,048,751###	Not available	18,576,820###

1998/99 SEELB figure does not include non-delegated General Schools Budget items such as mainstream classroom assistants, LMS formula allocations for both pupils in units attached to mainstream schools and non-statemented pupils in mainstream schools, and staff costs associated with special units.

WELB figure includes non-delegated costs of Special Units and classroom assistants in mainstream schools only.

BELB figure includes only LMS formula funding for Special Needs as its non-delegated GSB cost.

All figures are the best approximations by the Boards available within the timescale of the question.

Statemented Pupils

Mr S Wilson asked the Minister of Education to detail (a) the number of categories for statemented pupils; and (b) the number of pupils in each category for each of the last 5 years. (AQW 2410/01)

Mr M McGuinness: The information requested is as follows:

- (a) There are currently 13 categories for statemented pupils collected in the school census. In previous years there were 9 categories.
- (b)

	1997/98	1998/99	1999/2000 ¹	2000/2001
Behavioural and Social	1,434	1,656	1,266	1,489
Visual	477	483	410	515
Hearing	505	533	378	539
Physical Disability	1,859	1,990	1,407	1,977
Intellectual Learning Difficulties	6,472	6,812	5,562	7,067
Emotional and Behavioural Difficulties	663	778	609	1,155
Epilepsy	633	643	607	592
Communication	3,282	3,380	2,665	3,480
Other	414	490	447	820

2001/02 Attention Deficit	
Hyperactivity Disorder ²	219
Asperger's Syndrome ²	163
Behavioural and Social ³	680
Visual	503
Hearing	647
Physical Disability	1,839
Dyspraxia ⁴	34
Dyslexia ⁵	396
Emotional and Behavioural Difficulties	1,785
Epilepsy	639
Communication	3,708
Intellectual Learning Difficulties	6,764
Other	887

¹ Data on categories of statement in respect of nursery and primary schools are not included. Such data were not collected centrally in 1999/2000.

² Previously counted under Behavioural and Social.

³ Includes autism other than Asperger's Syndrome.

⁴ Previously counted under Other.

⁵ Previously counted under Intellectual Learning Difficulties.

Truancy Officers

Mr Shannon asked the Minister of Education to detail (a) the number of truancy officers; and (b) how they are distributed across the Boards. (AQW 2433/01)

Mr M McGuinness: The staffing position in the Education Welfare Service at 1 March 2002 was:

	Officers	Vacancies
BELB	29	8
NEELB	32	
SEELB	32	
SELB	31	
WELB	34	

Truancy

Mr Shannon asked the Minister of Education what steps are being taken to prevent truancy amongst primary school children. (AQW 2434/01)

Mr M McGuinness: My Department will be setting targets in the Public Service Agreement for improved attendance at school and monitoring the position. However, it must be remembered that responsibility to ensure regular attendance at school rests primarily with parents. Where a school has concerns about a pupil's attendance, a referral can be made to the Education Welfare Service. An officer will normally visit the home to make an assessment of the situation and from that determine appropriate follow up action based on the underlying reasons for the poor attendance.

Truancy

Mr Shannon asked the Minister of Education what steps are being taken to prevent truancy amongst secondary and grammar school children. (AQW 2435/01)

Mr M McGuinness: My Department will be setting targets in the Public Service Agreement for improved attendance at school and monitoring the position. However, it must be remembered that responsibility to ensure regular attendance at school rests primarily with parents. Where a school has concerns about a pupil's attendance, a referral can be made to the Education Welfare Service. An officer will normally visit the home to make an assessment of the situation and from that determine appropriate follow up action based on the underlying reasons for the poor attendance.

Moneydarragh PS, Annalong and St Joseph's PS, Ballymartin Village

Mr M Murphy asked the Minister of Education to outline (a) the current status of both Moneydarragh Primary School, Annalong and St Joseph's Primary School, Ballymartin Village regarding their applications for new school facilities at both sites; and (b) if there are any plans to amalgamate the two schools contrary to the wishes of the local community. (AQW 2450/01)

Mr M McGuinness: Moneydarragh Primary School, Annalong is one of a number of schools which is included in my Department's programme of economic appraisals. Preliminary work has already commenced on this appraisal and a site meeting to discuss options for improving the accommodation has been arranged for April.

In relation to St. Joseph's Primary School, Ballymartin Village, the Council for Catholic Maintained Schools (CCMS) has asked my Department to arrange a site visit to assess the school's accommodation problems, with a view to including a scheme in the school capital priorities list. This visit has also been arranged for April.

My Department is not aware of any current plans to amalgamate these two schools.

Performance at GCSE Level

Mr Gibson asked the Minister of Education what recent assessment he has made of the performance at GCSE of (a) pupils at grammar schools; and (b) their equivalent cohort in secondary schools. (AQW 2454/01)

Mr M McGuinness: The percentage of pupils achieving 5+ GCSEs at grades A* to C in secondary and grammar schools is as follows:

	1996/97	1997/98	1998/99	1999/00	2000/01
Secondary	30%	31%	33%	34%	34%
Grammar	95%	94%	95%	95%	95%

The percentage of pupils achieving 5+ GCSEs at grades A* to G in secondary schools is as follows:

	1996/97	1997/98	1998/99	1999/00	2000/01
Secondary	77%	79%	80%	80%	80%

I consider that pupils in both secondary and grammar schools are continuing to perform at a creditable level. However, there is much to be done in the drive to achieve higher standards in all sectors, and the School Improvement Programme is central to my Department's efforts in this area.

Consultation on Educational Issues

Mr Gibson asked the Minister of Education what steps he has taken to consult young people about the policies of his Department. (AQW 2473/01)

Mr M McGuinness: I fully support the need to consult young people on educational issues which affect them and I am, for example, currently considering how best to achieve this as part of the consultations on the review of post-primary education.

I am aware too that this issue will be considered as part of the discussions on the draft Bill of Rights and the

Children's Commissioner and I look forward to playing a full part in those discussions.

Public-Private Partnerships

Mr Gibson asked the Minister of Education if he will make a statement on the use of Public Finance Initiatives for schools. (AQW 2474/01)

Mr M McGuinness: My Department has completed a number of Public Private Partnerships projects in schools in which it has determined that value for money deals are achievable through PPP and it has learned valuable lessons on how best to make use of PPP. Last year, I announced eight secondary school projects with a total capital value of some £70m to be taken forward under PPP as part of the 2001 New Starts Capital Programme. I will be making an announcement later this month of this year's New Starts Capital Programme.

Notwithstanding legitimate concerns about Public Private Partnerships, I believe that, properly managed, the use of PPP will allow faster progress on meeting urgent accommodation needs than would otherwise be possible with the resources available to my Department. However Public Private Partnerships are not an appropriate method of procurement in all circumstances. In the education sector smaller projects in particular do not lend themselves to PPP as they are unlikely to attract private sector interest or offer better value for money. The future use of the PPP in schools will therefore focus on putting a number of schemes together to create a project which will offer value for money, whilst at the same time meeting the full educational needs of the individual schools involved.

Building Maintenance Budget

Mr Shannon asked the Minister of Education what is the building maintenance budget for his Department in each of the last 3 years. (AQW 2475/01)

Mr M McGuinness: The Department allocates recurrent funding to Education and Library Boards for the maintenance of controlled and maintained schools and other Board property. The resources expended by the Boards in each of the last three years are set out below.

1999-2000 £000s	2000-2001 £000s	2001-2002 £000s
39,600	47,900	49,900

Offensive Weapons in Schools

Mr M Robinson asked the Minister of Education how he intends to address the growing problem of pupils bringing offensive weapons into schools. (AQW 2492/01)

Mr M McGuinness: Policy on dealing with pupils who bring weapons into school is a matter for schools. Schools are responsible for their own discipline policies and within these to determine the sanctions which will be applied in respect of any breaches.

Pupil Attacks on Teachers

Mr M Robinson asked the Minister of Education to detail the number of recorded incidences of pupil attacks on teachers, in each Education and Library Board, for each year since 1995. (AQW 2493/01)

Mr M McGuinness: My Department does not collect this information. The possibility of collecting it at education and library board level through the notifications from schools about suspensions is under consideration.

School Leavers Without Formal Qualifications

Mr Weir asked the Minister of Education, pursuant to AQW 2179/01, what percentage of pupils leaving school in each of these years do the figures represent. (AQW 2495/01)

Mr M McGuinness:

	Expressed as % of 16 year old pupils leaving school	Expressed as % of all pupils leaving school
1990/91	12.4	6.6
1991/92	9.9	5.3
1992/93	7.6	4.0
1993/94	6.0	3.2
1994/95	5.2	2.8
1995/96	2.3*	1.2*
1996/97	4.7	2.5
1997/98	4.4	2.3
1998/99	4.6	2.4
1999/00	5.8	3.0

* Qualifications data were missing for 479 16 year old leavers in 1995/96. This represents 3.5% of 16 year old school leavers and 1.9% of all school leavers. There is evidence that the missing data relate predominantly to those with no GCSEs.

These figures do not include pupils at special or independent schools.

School Leavers Without Formal Qualifications

Mr Weir asked the Minister of Education, pursuant to AQW 2179/01, how these figures compare to (a) the

UK average for each of these years; and (b) figures available for other regions within the UK.

(AQW 2496/01)

Mr M McGuinness: Data are not available in exactly comparable form but for Scotland, available figures relate to all school leavers with no Scottish Certificate of Education (SCE) qualifications.

	Scotland Percentage of school leavers with no SCE qualifications ¹	Northern Ireland Percentage of school leavers with no GCSE qualifications ²
1990/91	10.3	13.0
1991/92	9.9	11.7
1992/93	10.5	7.1
1993/94	8.8	6.1
1994/95	7.9	5.5
1995/96	7.2	3.7 ³
1996/97	6.9	6.2
1997/98	6.5	5.3
1998/99	5.8	4.6

1. Some of these pupils may have gained other qualifications such as National Certificate Modules or English exam board qualifications (e.g. GCSE/ A level qualifications), which are not covered in this analysis.
2. Excludes pupils at independent schools and special schools.
3. Qualifications data were missing for 3% of school leavers in 1995/96.

For England and Wales, available figures relate to 16 year-olds who are not in full-time education.

	England and Wales ¹ Percentage of 16 year-olds not in full-time education, with no GCSE qualifications	Northern Ireland ² Percentage of 16 year-old school leavers who did not enter further education, with no GCSE qualifications
1990/91	17	18
1992/93	16	11
1994/95	16	9
1996/97	15	9
1998/99	11	8

1. Source: Youth Cohort Study (YCS). Excludes those who attended special schools. Qualifications are self-reported. The table shows figures for those years in which the YCS was carried out.
2. Excludes those who attended special or independent schools.

Nursery Provision: Derry City Council

Mrs Courtney asked the Minister of Education to detail the number of schools located in the Derry City Council area that do not have nursery provision.

(AQW 2504/01)

Mr M McGuinness: There are currently 25 schools in the Derry City Council area that do not have nursery provision. They are:

- Groarty Primary School
- Culmore Primary School
- Ballougry Primary School
- Drumahoe Primary School
- Eglinton Primary School
- Newbuildings Primary School
- Lisnagelvin Primary School
- Cumber Claudy Primary School
- Maydown & Strathfoyle Primary School
- Craigbrack Primary School
- Broadbridge Primary School
- St Mary's Primary School
- Listress Primary School
- Mullabuoy Primary School
- St John's Primary School
- St Anne's Primary School
- St Oliver Plunkett Primary School
- St Columba's Primary School
- Trench Road Primary School
- St Therese's Primary School, Lenamore
- Chapel Road Primary School
- St Eithne's Primary School
- Bunscoil Cholmcille
- St Patrick's Primary School
- Foyle and Londonderry College Prep Department

Belvoir Primary School: Nursery Unit

Mr M Robinson asked the Minister of Education to detail (a) the number of applications for enrolment at Belvoir Nursery Unit, Belvoir Primary School, Belfast BT8; (b) the number of successful applications; and (c) the total enrolment at the school beginning September 2001.

(AQW 2518/01)

Mr M McGuinness: Set out below is the information requested in respect of the nursery unit at Belvoir Park Primary School for the 2001/2002 and 2002/03 school years:

BELVOIR PRIMARY SCHOOL – NURSERY UNIT SEPTEMBER 2001

Number of Applications	Number of successful Applications	Total Enrolment
Full-time places: 54	Full-time places: 26	Full-time places: 26
Part-time places: 58	Part-time places: 52	Part-time places: 52

SEPTEMBER 2002

Number of Applications	Number of successful Applications	Total Enrolment
Full-time places: 84	Full-time: 26	Full-time places: 26
Part-time places: 29	Part-time: 52	Part-time places: 52

The allocation of places for the 2002/03 school year will not be complete until 14 June 2002.

Pre-School Admission: Benefits

Mr M Robinson asked the Minister of Education to detail the research undertaken by his Department which has resulted in the children of parents in receipt of Income Support or Jobseeker's Allowance, being given priority for full-time positions in nursery school.

(AQW 2519/01)

Mr M McGuinness: The statutory pre-school admissions arrangements which afford priority to children whose parents are in receipt of Income Support or Income Based Jobseekers Allowance in the allocation of funded pre-school places, whether full or part-time, are part of the implementation of the Pre-School Education Expansion Programme. The decision to amend the existing admissions arrangements stemmed from the substantial body of research in the USA and UK which showed that experience of good quality pre-school education was beneficial for children from socially disadvantaged circumstances. In view of the research which already existed, it was not considered necessary to commission locally based research.

EMPLOYMENT AND LEARNING

Departmental Working Group

Ms McWilliams asked the Minister for Employment and Learning to give consideration to the establishment of a cross departmental working group to deal with the recent attacks on students in South Belfast and residents' concerns in the University area.

(AQW 2023/01)

The Minister for Employment and Learning (Ms Hanna): While I very much deplore and condemn attacks on student in South Belfast, this is a law and order issue and as such is a reserved matter. As regards residents' concerns, while your question does not elaborate, your letter to me of 6 February points up a number of difficulties. I shall be responding separately to your letter but, in essence, none of the points you highlighted fall within the ambit of my Department's responsibilities. In the circumstances I do not propose to pursue the establishment of a cross departmental working group.

Student Loans

Mr Gibson asked the Minister for Employment and Learning if she will make a statement on her plans to review the system of student loans.

(AQW 2455/01)

Ms Hanna: Currently I have no plans to undertake a further review of the student loan system. However, I will consider the implications of any outcomes emerging from the current DfES review into student finance.

Restructuring of Higher Education

Mr Gibson asked the Minister for Employment and Learning what plans she has to implement proposals for the restructuring of higher education in Northern Ireland.

(AQW 2456/01)

Ms Hanna: I have no proposals to restructure Higher Education in Northern Ireland.

Modern Apprenticeships

Mr Gibson asked the Minister for Employment and Learning if she will make a statement on the introduction of modern apprenticeships in schools.

(AQW 2457/01)

Ms Hanna: Modern Apprenticeships are work based full time training opportunities available to young people who have attained minimum school leaving age and are under 25 years of age. Certain existing employees are also eligible.

There are no plans to introduce Modern Apprenticeships in schools.

Student Drop Out Rates

Ms McWilliams asked the Minister for Employment and Learning if she has monitored the reasons given by students for dropping out of further and higher education institutions; and to make a statement.

(AQW 2458/01)

Ms Hanna: The Department does not monitor currently the reasons why students drop out of further and higher education.

A-Level Students

Mr Weir asked the Minister for Employment and Learning what efforts she has made to encourage A-Level students to continue their studies in Northern Ireland rather than leave the Province.

(AQW 2497/01)

Ms Hanna: Careers Officers from this Department's Careers Service provide impartial guidance and accurate, timely and up to date careers information to A level students in schools and colleges to help them make informed decisions about opportunities in continuing education, training and employment.

New Deal Programme

Mrs E Bell asked the Minister for Employment and Learning, pursuant to AQW 2260/01, how many Northern Ireland MPs have employed staff under the New Deal scheme. (AQW 2545/01)

Ms Hanna: No Northern Ireland MPs have employed staff under the New Deal Programme.

ENTERPRISE, TRADE AND INVESTMENT

Call Centres

Mr S Wilson asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to detail (a) the number of people employed in call centres in each of the last 3 years; (b) the proportion of those who are male, female; and (c) the proportion of those who are full-time and part-time. (AQW 2294/01)

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment (Sir Reg Empey) [*holding answer 12 March 2002*]: Employment in call centres in Northern Ireland has increased significantly over the past number of years. However, not all call centres have received support from the Industrial Development Board (IDB) or the Local Enterprise Development Unit (LEDU), as some have been the result of developments in the commercial sector; and in addition, call centres have no Standard Industry Classification of their own. Therefore, it is difficult to determine a precise figure for the number of people employed in this sector. However, the total number currently employed in call centres supported by IDB and LEDU is approximately 5,500. This figure is based on Full Time Equivalents, which means that the actual number of individuals employed would exceed 6,000.

IDB and LEDU do not maintain data on the male/female balance within call centres.

Consignia: Implications for Northern Ireland

Mr Hussey asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to make a statement on the implications for Northern Ireland industry and business as a result of the decision to grant commercial freedom to Consignia. (AQW 2397/01)

Sir Reg Empey: Postal services are a reserved matter for which the Department of Trade and Industry is responsible across the UK. The implications for Northern Ireland industry and business of any decision that has been, or may be, taken with regard to greater market liberalisation are unclear at present. My Ministerial colleagues and I will continue to monitor the situation.

Montracon Management

Mr Dalton asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to detail any discussions officials from his Department have had with management of Montracon Ltd in Mallusk in an attempt to safeguard employment. (AQW 2438/01)

Sir Reg Empey: Officials from IDB have been in contact with Montracon Management over recent months and offered assistance to the company as it worked through the rationalisation required in order to remain competitive in the marketplace. The loss of skilled jobs is always very regrettable but the company believes that the actions taken will help safeguard the employment of the remaining workforce. IDB will maintain contact with the company.

Montracon, Mallusk

Mr Dalton asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to give his assessment of the commercial viability of the Montracon plant in Mallusk. (AQW 2439/01)

Sir Reg Empey: The various actions taken by the company, including the redundancy of some 60 workers at Mallusk, are seen as necessary to ensure continuing operations in Northern Ireland and the group as a whole. The trailer market in the UK and ROI is extremely competitive and the company must continue to look at ways to maintain its position in the market.

Difficulties Facing the Hi-Tech Sector

Mr Dalton asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment if he has any plans to order an investigation into the current problems associated with local hi-tech industry. (AQW 2440/01)

Sir Reg Empey: The Department's agencies are acutely aware of the difficulties facing the hi-tech sector and they are working to safeguard employment and promote competitiveness in established companies, in addition to encouraging new investment from indigenous and overseas companies. Whilst there are no plans to organise an investigation into the current problems faced by the hi-tech sector, the agencies are promoting a number of sectoral initiatives including export promotion, the opening of the NI Technology & Development Centre in Boston, quality initiatives and broadband access programmes.

SX3

Mr Dalton asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to detail plans to address the impact on the employment situation in Newtownabbey regarding the prospect of job losses at the local IT company, SX3. (AQW 2441/01)

Sir Reg Empey: Services and Systems solutions Limited (SX3) has announced that up to 150 compulsory redundancies will take place across the UK and Ireland. It is too early to say how many redundancies will take place in Northern Ireland and which sites will be affected. Any redundancies are regrettable, however, this is a commercial decision taken by the company as a result of worsening conditions in the IT sector.

There are a number of areas under discussion with the company. For reasons of commercial confidentiality I cannot provide details. However, I can give you my assurance that all reasonable steps will be taken to minimise the local impact of the restructuring where that is possible.

SX3

Mr Dalton asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to detail any discussions officials from his Department have had with management of Sx3 in an attempt to safeguard employment. (AQW 2442/01)

Sir Reg Empey: Services and Systems solutions Limited (SX3) has announced that up to 150 compulsory redundancies will take place across the UK and Ireland. The company currently employs approximately 750 staff in Northern Ireland; total employment in UK and Ireland is about 1300. These redundancies are in addition to the 100 voluntary redundancies announced in November 2001, also across the UK and Ireland.

This recent announcement follows a restructuring of SX3's businesses. It is not clear at this time how this announcement will affect operations in Northern Ireland. However, I have written personally to the Managing Director of SX3 Ireland in order to express government's support for the Northern Ireland operations. I have also stated my hope that this successful homegrown Northern Ireland IT services company can find ways to minimise the impact on local employment.

I have continued to maintain close contact through my officials who have had a number of meetings with the company. My officials are continuing to examine ways in which assistance might be offered to the company to minimise the local impact of the restructuring where that is possible. These discussions are ongoing.

North/South Pipeline

Mr Close asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to detail (a) when he will be in a position to confirm if the introduction of the North-South pipeline would lead to an increase in electricity costs; and (b) if a copy of the investment appraisal of the project can be placed in the public domain. (AQW 2459/01)

Sir Reg Empey: I am aware that Dr Sean Farren, Minister of Finance and Personnel, wrote to you on 19

March 2002 about this matter. I can confirm that I am content with the contents of this letter. A copy of this letter will be placed in the Assembly Library.

Industrial Development Board

Mr B Hutchinson asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to detail the number of jobs created by the Industrial Development Board in East, West, North and South Belfast in the years 1998-99, 1999-2000, 2000-01 and 2001-02. (AQW 2466/01)

Sir Reg Empey: Projects typically take 4-5 years to build up to maximum employment. Consequently the Industrial Development Board (IDB) starts to analyse job creations in the second year after projects are secured. The table below shows the number of jobs created to date in respect of projects secured in 1998/99 and 1999/2000.

For comparison, the relevant job promotion figures for projects secured by IDB in the years 1998/99, 1999/2000 and 2000/2001 are also shown. Promotion figures for 2001/02 are not yet available.

Parliamentary Constituency	1998/99		1999/00		2000/01	
	Jobs Promoted	Jobs Created	Jobs Promoted	Jobs Created	Jobs Promoted	Jobs Created
Belfast East	312	376	1,310	706	116	*
Belfast North	1,189	426	536	95	1,506	*
Belfast South	917	691	1,696	963	847	*
Belfast West	75	82	314	16	385	*

* Creation figures will be made available during 2002/03.

Tourism Ireland

Mr B Hutchinson asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to detail the marketing strategy for Northern Ireland by Tourism Ireland for the year 2002. (AQW 2467/01)

Sir Reg Empey: Tourism Ireland in conjunction with the Northern Ireland Tourist Board (NITB) has devised a number of special promotional campaigns, which are aimed specifically at increasing visitors to Northern Ireland. Such initiatives include campaigns in Scotland and the North of England, together with campaigns aimed at attracting more car visitors from Britain.

Tourism Ireland launched its Marketing Strategy for 2002 at functions in Dublin and Belfast on 7 November 2001 and will present details of its promotional programme to members of the Industry in Northern Ireland at three road shows organised by the Northern Ireland Tourist Board on 20 & 21 March 2002 in Belfast, Enniskillen and Londonderry.

Tourism Ireland aims to introduce overseas travel trade and media, many for the first time, to the appeals and attractions of Northern Ireland.

Unemployment Statistics

Mr B Hutchinson asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to detail, by electoral ward, the unemployment rate for the parliamentary constituency of Belfast North. (AQW 2468/01)

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 Belfast North Parliamentary Constituency Area can be found in Table 1 overleaf. Also provided (Table 2) is an unemployment rate for Belfast North Parliamentary Constituency Area as a whole compared to Northern Ireland.

Claimant count data is published monthly in the Department's Labour Market Statistics (LMS) publication, copies of which are placed in the Assembly Library. The LMS bulletin contains a detailed breakdown of claimant unemployment at sub-Northern Ireland level, including Parliamentary Constituency Area. This information, as well as up-to-date claimant unemployment data at ward level for Northern Ireland, are also available via DETI Statistics Research Branch website at www.deti.gov.uk/statsres.

TABLE 1 NUMBER OF CLAIMANT COUNT UNEMPLOYED IN BELFAST NORTH PARLIAMENTARY CONSTITUENCY AREA BY ELECTORAL WARD AT FEBRUARY 2002.

District Council	Ward	Male	Female	Total
Belfast	Ardoyne	269	50	319
Belfast	Ballysillan	129	26	155
Belfast	Bellevue	92	27	119
Belfast	Castlevew	100	31	131
Belfast	Cavehill	69	17	86
Belfast	Chichester Park	126	28	154
Belfast	Cliftonville	106	34	140
Belfast	Crumlin	138	41	179
Belfast	Duncairn	123	31	154
Belfast	Fortwilliam	67	14	81
Belfast	Legoniel	137	38	175
Belfast	Newlodge	270	54	324
Belfast	St Anne's	183	33	216
Belfast	Waterworks	286	45	331

District Council	Ward	Male	Female	Total
Belfast	Woodvale	132	29	161
Total - Belfast North PCA		2,227	498	2,725

TABLE 2 NUMBER AND RATE OF CLAIMANT COUNT UNEMPLOYED IN BELFAST NORTH PARLIAMENTARY CONSTITUENCY AREA AND NORTHERN IRELAND AT FEBRUARY 2002.

	Number	% of workforce				
	Male	Female	Total	Male	Female	Total
Belfast North	2,227	498	2,725	5.8	1.5	3.7
Northern Ireland	29,638	8,622	38,260	6.7	2.5	4.9

ENVIRONMENT

Job Decentralisation

Mr Dallat asked the Minister of the Environment to detail the number of personnel currently employed within his department and how many of these jobs may be decentralised between January and December 2002.

(AQW 2109/01)

The Minister of the Environment (Mr Nesbitt) [*holding answer 4 March 2002*]: There are currently some 1950 personnel employed in my department. Approximately 60% of these are already located outside the Greater Belfast area.

In relation to any further job decentralisation, a strategic review of civil service office accommodation, which includes an examination of the scope for decentralisation of civil service jobs, is currently ongoing. Pending the outcome of the review, opportunities to relocate civil service jobs will continue to be examined on a case by case basis, as particular needs and issues arise. Where there are considered to be pressing accommodation needs or where short-term decisions are required, business cases are prepared taking full account of the current relocation policy.

Management Plan for the Mournes

Mr McGrady asked the Minister of the Environment when will resources be made available for the development of a management plan for the Mournes; and to make a statement.

(AQW 2349/01)

Mr Nesbitt: Work on the development of a management plan for the Mournes is currently scheduled to begin in the Spring of 2003. This work would be led by the Environment and Heritage Service (EHS). The feasibility

of accelerating that programme will be assessed against EHS's other priorities.

I have no doubt that a management plan for the Mourne is desirable. It would provide a shared agenda for the many bodies with an interest in the area. The Mourne is one of our most valuable scenic areas. It is of exceptional importance for visitors who go there either to enjoy the landscape or take part in outdoor recreational pursuits. A management plan, based on the Mourne Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONB), would help to provide co-ordination and direction to the work needed to achieve the objectives of the AONB designation. Public participation in the development of the plan would also help to create a sense of common purpose.

Outer Ards ASSI

Lord Kilclooney asked the Minister of the Environment to outline (a) if he has received advice that a number of land holders have not been informed about the proposed SPA and ASSI declarations in the Outer Ards Area; (b) if there has been a request to extend the consultation period for a further 3 months; and to make a statement. (AQW 2405/01)

Mr Nesbitt: All known owners and occupiers of land within the Outer Ards ASSI and proposed SPA were notified by my Department in December 2001.

A significant number of people claiming to hold rights within the designated area were not notified. Notification packages have been served within the last few weeks on those who have, for that reason, made contact with the Department.

The Department has received some requests to extend the period of consultation. Those parties recently notified, as indicated above, will be allowed three months to make representations. For others previously notified the date for the submission of comments remains 15 March 2002.

Unless there are substantial and valid objections, it remains my Department's intention to classify the SPA before the end of June 2002, at the same time as the ASSI is confirmed.

University of Ulster, Coleraine: Student Accommodation

Mr McClarty asked the Minister of the Environment what progress has been made to establish a meeting between officials from his Department, the Department for Employment and Learning and the authorities of the University of Ulster at Coleraine to discuss issues of student accommodation and multiple-student occupancy in Portstewart. (AQW 2421/01)

Mr Nesbitt: I understand that the meeting has been arranged for 11 April 2002 at County Hall, Coleraine.

Flashing Warning Lights at Schools

Mr Bradley asked the Minister of the Environment, pursuant to AQO 946/01, if he will liaise with his Executive colleague, the Minister for Regional Development, with a view to providing flashing school warning signs at schools that front on to A class and B class routes. (AQW 2443/01)

Mr Nesbitt: The provision of flashing warning lights is a matter for the Department for Regional Development. The Regional Development Minister, Peter Robinson, has advised me that it is the policy of his Department's Roads Service to reserve the use of warning lights for sites where traffic speeds are greatest. I am informed that to provide such lights at all schools on A and B class roads would lead to a proliferation of the warning lights and a consequential lessening of their impact on road safety.

Given that all road authorities in the United Kingdom apply the above policy, I understand that the Regional Development Minister has no plans to amend current practice.

Review of Public Administration

Mrs I Robinson asked the Minister of the Environment to give a commitment that any future review of local government will include ring-fencing funds for the purposes of the construction of new civic centres which may be needed to accommodate the administrative needs of newly formed local government authorities. (AQW 2444/01)

Mr Nesbitt: No such commitment can be given. The structure, responsibilities and delivery of services by local government will be considered in the context of the wider review of public administration. There are no predetermined outcomes of that review.

Building Maintenance Budget

Mr Shannon asked the Minister of the Environment what is the building maintenance budget for his Department in each of the last 3 years. (AQW 2478/01)

Mr Nesbitt: Accommodation and Construction Division within the Department of Finance and Personnel holds the maintenance budget for office buildings occupied by NICS departments and will respond in respect of these buildings.

In respect of the specialised buildings occupied by DOE, the maintenance expenditure is as follows:

Financial Year	Cost
1999/00 (from devolution: 2/12/99)	£177,973
2000/01	£397,782
2001/02 (at 28/02/02)	£376,554

European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages

Mr McMenamin asked the Minister of the Environment what measures have been taken by him to inform District Councils of their responsibilities under the European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages.

(AQW 2528/01)

Mr Nesbitt: A circular has issued to district councils recently, which provides background information about the European Charter for Regional and Minority Languages. It outlines possible implications for councils. Legal advice, however, has been sought about the definition of “administrative authority” in the context of the Charter and also on the specific reference to the use by local authorities of regional or minority languages in debates, without excluding the use of the official languages of the State. The Department hopes to be in a position soon, to clarify the responsibilities of district councils under the Charter.

FINANCE AND PERSONNEL

Hippo Bags

Mr Beggs asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel to list those properties controlled by the NI Civil Service that are currently using Water Service ‘Hippo Bags’.

(AQW 2356/01)

The Minister of Finance and Personnel (Dr Farren) [*holding answer 19 March 2002*]: I attach a list of all Government buildings which have been or are about to be fitted with ‘Hippo Bags’. The Department of Finance and Personnel is responsible for the general office estate and individual Departments are responsible for their respective specialist buildings.

The use of Hippo Bags is being promoted by the Water Service, an agency within the Department for Regional Development. In consultation with the Construction Service, the Water Service is planning to issue posters and Hippo Bags to all government buildings within the next 3 months. When received, the Hippo Bags will be fitted where appropriate.

LIST OF BUILDINGS WITH HIPPO BAGS INSTALLED OR ABOUT TO BE INSTALLED

General Office Estate
Commonwealth House – installed
Calvert House – installed
Hill Street – about to be installed

DOE (Specialised Estate)

Moir Depot

Castlewellan Depot
Dundrum Castle
Ballycopeland Windmill
Kirkistown Castle
Nendrum
Greyabbey
Roe Valley Country Park
Bellaghy Bawn
Portrush Countryside Centre
Carrickfergus Castle
Lough Neagh Nature Reserve
Hillsborough Fort
Hillsborough Court House
Scrabo Country Park
Quoile Countryside Centre

DETI (about to be installed) (Specialised Estate)

Trading Standard Services Building, Newtownbreda

Industrial Research and Technology Unit, Lisburn

DRD (Specialised Estate)

Water Service

Southern Division

Dungannon
Armagh
Banbridge
Newry
Seagoe

Northern Division

Ballykeel
Larne
Newmills
Magherafelt

Cookstown

Antrim

Ballymoney

Ballycastle

Eastern Division

Dunmurry Lab

Conlig

Westland House

Downpatrick

Lisburn

Western Division

Omagh

Limavady

Gelvin Grange

Enniskillen

Strabane

Executive Programme Funds

Mr Paisley Jnr asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel what percentage of Executive Programme Funds have been allocated to the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development. (AQW 2394/01)

Dr Farren: The total amount of funding allocated from Executive Programme Funds to the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development is £9.6 million which represents 4.4% of the total £218.9 million allocated to date or almost 2.6% of the total £373.4 million set aside by the Executive. Of the £9.6 million allocated, the Department has received a total of £8.5 million from the New Directions Fund and £1.1 million from the Social Inclusion Fund.

Budget Allocation: Department of Agriculture and Rural Development

Mr Paisley Jnr asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel what percentage of the NI budget is allocated to the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development. (AQW 2395/01)

Dr Farren: The total departmental expenditure limit (DEL) for the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development for 2001-02 is £204.9 million or 3.6% of the total Northern Ireland DEL. In 2002-03 the Department will be allocated £213.2 million which is 3.5% of the total Northern Ireland DEL. The total Northern Ireland DEL includes, amongst other things, the European Union Special Support Programme for Peace and Reconciliation.

This excludes expenditure by DARD under the Common Agriculture Policy (CAP) which is accounted for under annually managed expenditure (AME) and is anticipated to amount to £165.5 million in 2002-03, as set out in the Budget document.

Equal Opportunities: NI Civil Service

Mr C Murphy asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel what progress has been made since 1992 to implement goals and timetables in relation to the under representation of women and Catholics in most senior grades within the NI Civil Service. (AQW 2499/01)

Dr Farren: As reported in the Fifth Report of the NI Civil Service's Equal Opportunities Unit (EOU), copies of which are available in the Library, goals and timetables were first established in December 1992 and February 1993 as benchmarks against which progress could be assessed in addressing the under-representation of, respectively, Roman Catholics and women in the General Service group at Grade 5 level and above. Subsequently, goals and timetables were also established for the General Service grades of Grade 7 and Deputy Principal (DP). Progress against these benchmarks was

reported in the Sixth Report of the EOU. The Seventh Report of the EOU sets out the further goals and timetables in respect of administrative posts in the Senior Civil Service, Grade 7 and DP that were subsequently agreed with the former Fair Employment and Equal Opportunities Commissions and have been reviewed in consultation with the Equality Commission for Northern Ireland during 2000. The expectation is that progress against these benchmarks and the establishment of any further goals and timetables will be set out in the Eighth Report of the Equal Opportunities Unit which it is planned to publish later this year.

Procurement Review Implementation Team

Ms Lewsley asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel what is the current position with regard to the recommendations of the Procurement Review Implementation Team. (AQW 2624/01)

Dr Farren: The public consultation on the Team's Report has been completed and the Team has commented on the consultation responses. I am now considering those responses and the Team's comments and I plan to submit proposals to the Executive on the way ahead in this important area after the Easter recess.

Alongside the public consultation on the Team's report, and with the Executive's approval, my Department has been taking forward preparatory work on setting up the proposed new Central Procurement Directorate, which will bring together the Government Purchasing Agency and the Construction Service, and on the appointment of its Director. The new Directorate will be established from 1 April 2002 and its Director is expected to be in post shortly thereafter.

HEALTH, SOCIAL SERVICES AND PUBLIC SAFETY

Elderly Programme: Gross Expenditure

Mr Weir asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the total budget for each of the last 3 years for pensioners in (i) residential care; and (ii) nursing home care. (AQW 1975/01)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety (Ms de Brún): Gross expenditure in the Elderly Programme of care on residential and nursing home places in the last three years was as follows:

	Residential £m	Nursing Home £m
1998-1999	49.7	65.2
1999-2000	53.1	69.2
2000-2001	51.9	87.2

Total contributions in these years of £44.6/48.8/52.8m bringing the net expenditure on residential and nursing care to:

	£m
1998-1999	70.4
1999-2000	73.6
2000-2001	86.3

Seo a leanas caiteachas comhlán an Chláir Chúraim do Sheandaoine ar áiteanna i dtithe cónaithe agus altrachta sna trí bliana deireanacha:

	Teach Cónaithe £m	Teach Altrachta £m
1998-1999	49.7	65.2
1999-2000	53.1	69.2
2000-2001	51.9	87.2

Seo a leanas an caiteachas iomlán ar chúram cónaithe agus altrachta nuair a chuirtear na síntiúis iomlána de £44.6/48.8/52.8m sna blianta sin thíos leis:

	£m
1998-1999	70.4
1999-2000	73.6
2000-2001	86.3

Scoliosis Surgery

Mrs Carson asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail (a) the cost of operations relating to Scoliosis in each of the past 5 years; (b) the estimated cost per operation; and (c) the funds available for these operations. (AQW 2090/01)

Ms de Brún: Scoliosis surgery is carried out at Greenpark Health Care Trust and the Royal Group of Hospitals Trust.

(a) Greenpark Health Care Trust introduced costing at procedure level for 2000/01. In that year the total cost attributed to scoliosis surgery was £30,465.

The costs of surgery relating to paediatric scoliosis at the Royal Victoria Hospital are as follows:

Year	Cost
96/97	£144,400
97/98	£121,600
98/99	£91,200
99/00	£228,000
00/01	£152,000

The information relating to adult scoliosis procedures was not available from the RVH within the required timescale. I will write to the Member detailing the costs as soon as they are available.

(b) The estimated cost per patient is not a fixed amount as the requirement for post-operative care varies. The average cost per patient for 2000/01 was £6093 at Greenpark and £7600 (paediatric) at the RVH.

(c) No specific funds are set aside for these procedures. They are financed from both Trusts' general orthopaedic budgets.

Déantar máinliacht Scolóise in Iontaobhas Cúram Sláinte na Páirce Glaise agus in Iontaobhas Otharlanna an Ghrúpa Ríoga.

(a) Thionscain Iontaobhas Cúram Sláinte na Páirce Glaise costáil ar leibhéal gnáthaimh don bhliain 2000/01. Sa bhliain sin, ba é £30,465 an costas iomlán a bhí ar mháinliacht scolóise.

Seo a leanas costais na máinliachta a bhaineann le scolóis phéidiatraiceach in Otharlann Ríoga Vichteoiria:

Bliain	Costas
96/97	£144,400
97/98	£121,600
98/99	£91,200
99/00	£228,000
00/01	£152,000

Ní raibh an t-eolas a bhaineann le gnáthaimh scolóise ar dhaoine fásta ar fáil ó ORV laistigh den tréimhse ama leagtha síos. Scríobhfaidh mé chuig an Bhall ag tabhairt mionchuntais ar na costais a luaithe agus a bheidh siad ar fáil.

(b) Níl méid an chostais mheasta de réir othair socraithe mar go n-athraíonn na coinníollacha le haghaidh cúraim iar-oibrithigh. Ba é £6093 in Iontaobhas na Páirce Glaise agus £7600 (péidiatraiceach) in ORV an meánchostas de réir othair.

(c) Níl airgead ar leith ar bith curtha i leataobh le haghaidh na ngnáthamh seo. Tá siad maoinithe ó ghnáthbhuiséid ortaipéideacha an dá Iontaobhas féin.

Ministerial Visits Outside Northern Ireland

Mr Weir asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the total amount spent on Ministerial visits outside Northern Ireland in each of the last 3 years. (AQW 2094/01)

Ms de Brún: Since the establishment of the Executive in December 1999 the amount spent on Ministerial visits outside here is as follows:

2 December 1999 – 31 March 2000	Nil
1 April 2000 – 31 March 2001	£2,230.93
1 April 2001 – Present	£11,281.55

Ó bunaíodh an Feidhmeannas i Nollaig 1999 seo a leanas an méid a caitheadh ar chuairteanna Aireachta lasmuigh den áit seo:

2 Nollaig 1999 – 31 Márta 2000	NÁID
1 Aibreán 2000 – 31 Márta 2001	£2,230.93
1 Aibreán 2001 – An lá inniu	£11,281.55

Consultation with the British Medical Association

Mr Beggs asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what consultation she has had with GP representatives on the British Medical Association during the past year concerning the proposed structures to replace GP Fundholding. (AQW 2180/01)

Ms de Brún: I met a delegation from the General Practitioners Committee of the British Medical Association on 9 January 2002 to discuss details of the proposed new arrangements for primary care.

Bhuail mé le toscaireacht ón Choiste Dochtúirí Ginearálta de Chumann Míochaine na Breataine ar 9 Eanáir 2002 chun sonraí na socruithe nua molta do phríomhchúram a phlé.

Equality Issues

Mr Ford asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to outline (a) if her Secondary Care Directorate has been referred to the Equality Commission; and (b) any steps she is taking to address equal access to fertility treatment under the new interim arrangements. (AQW 2196/01)

Ms de Brún:

- (a) I understand that a complaint under my Department's Equality Scheme has been made to the Equality Commission.
- (b) The interim arrangements for the provision of sub-fertility services provide a limited service in line with published criteria. These intermediate arrangements will help to determine the potential demand and basis for the longer-term development of these services, which will be the subject of public consultation, including an equality impact assessment, later this year.
- (a) Tuigim go ndearnadh gearán leis an Choimisiún Comhionannais faoi Scéim Chomhionannais mo Roinne.
- (b) Soláthraíonn na socruithe eatramhacha do sholáthar seirbhísí fothorthúlachta seirbhís teoranta de réir na gcritéar foilsithe. Cuideoidh na socruithe idirthréimhse seo an ráchairt ionchasach chomh maith leis an dúshraith d'fhorbairt fhadtéarmach na seirbhísí seo

a bheidh faoi réir comhairlithe phoiblí, mar aon le measúnú tionchair chomhionannais, níos moille i mbliana a shocrú.

Community Care for Pensioners

Mr Hilditch asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail what additional practical help is offered to pensioners who are in hospital for more than 6 weeks. (AQW 2204/01)

Ms de Brún: The implementation of the assessment and care management arrangements requires HSS Trusts, when undertaking needs-based assessments for community care, to ensure that patients leaving hospital are provided with the necessary support. Equally it is the aim that no one remains in hospital longer than necessary after he or she has been assessed as medically fit for discharge.

Where the Trust has assessed the person's needs they will discuss the options available, which may involve residential or nursing home care, or domiciliary care to enable the individual to remain in their own accommodation or a similar tenure. Trusts may also provide a Home Help service that offers clients practical assistance and care in their own homes. Without the provision of the Home Help service, many more people might have to go into a care home or remain in hospital.

In addition, the health and personal social services have piloted a number of local projects and schemes which will make their community services more responsive to service users. Examples of these are the Rapid Response Nursing, Hospital at Home, Intensive Community Care and Home from Hospital schemes that provide intermediate care in the community and prevent undue delay in hospital and inappropriate admissions to hospital. Such 'step-up' and 'step-down' initiatives have developed good practice and demonstrated innovation in the way community care can be delivered to older and other vulnerable people. The Community Care Review has identified a number of these projects and it is my intention that information on such good practices is made available throughout the health and personal social services.

Éilíonn an cur i bhfeidhm socruithe measúnaithe agus bainisteoireacht cúraim ar Iontaobhais SSS, agus iad ag tabhairt faoi measúnaithe bunaithe ar riachtanais le haghaidh cúram pobail, chun cinntiú go bhfuil an tacaíocht chuí curtha ar fáil do na hothair ag fágáil na hotharlainne. Ar an dóigh chéanna is é an aidhm atá leis nach bhfanann duine ar bith san otharlann níos faide ná mar is gá i ndiaidh dó nó di bheith measúnaithe agus iad i dteideal, ar bhonn sláinte, scaoileadh amach.

Má dhéanann an tIontaobhas riachtanais an duine a mheasúnú pléifidh siad na roghanna ar fáil, is féidir go mbeidh cúram cónaitheach nó teach altanais i gceist, nó cúram baile chun cur ar chumas an duine fanacht ina áit féin nó a dhalta den tionacht sin. Is féidir go soláthrófar

Iontaobhais seirbhís Cuidiú Baile a chuireann ar fáil cúnamh agus cúram praiticiúil ina mbaile féin. Is féidir go mbeidh ar i bhfad níos mó daoine dul isteach chuig teach cúraim nó fanacht san otharlann mura raibh soláthar seirbhís Cuidiú Baile ann.

Ar a bharr, threoirthionscnaigh seirbhísí sláinte sóisialta pearsanta roinnt tionscadal áitiúil agus scéimeanna a dhéanfaidh a gcuid seirbhísí pobail a níos tuisceana maidir le húsáideoirí seirbhísí. Is iad na samplaí dá leithéid ná na scéimeanna a sholáthraíonn cúram idirthréimseach sa phobal agus a choscann moill mhíchúí san otharlann nó iontráil neamhfhoirteanach otharlainne amhail Altranais Mheiriceaghartha, Otharlann sa Bhaile, Dianchúram Pobail agus Baile ar shiúl ón Otharlann. D'fhorbair a leithéid de thionscnaimh 'céim suas' agus 'céim síos' dea-chleachtas agus a léirigh nuálaíocht sa dóigh gur féidir cúram pobail a chur ar fáil dó dhaoine níos sine agus daoine soghonta eile. D'aimsigh an tAthbhreithniú ar Chúram Pobail roinnt de na tionscadail seo agus tá sé de rún agam an t-eolas ar a leithéid de dhea-chleachtais a chur ar fáil ar fud na seirbhísí sláinte agus pearsanta sóisialta.

Asthma Drugs and Devices

Mr M Robinson asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what was the total value of prescription drugs and devices to treat asthma in each of the past 5 years. (AQW 2215/01)

Ms de Brún: The total value of prescription drugs and devices to treat asthma for the five years up to 2000/2001, the most recent year for which complete information is available, is as follows:

	£m
1996/97	22.3
1997/98	22.8
1998/99	23.1
1999/2000	22.9
2000/2001	22.7

The figures above relate to the ingredient cost and cover prescriptions for Bronchodilators, Corticosteroids and Cromoglicate, related therapy and leukotriene receptor antagonists.

Seo a leanas costas iomlán na n-oideas agus na ngléasanna úsáidte le plúchadh a chóireáil do na cúig bliana suas go 2000/01, an bhliain is deireanaí a bhfuil eolas iomlán ar fáil uirthi:

	£m
1996/97	22.3
1997/98	22.8
1998/99	23.1
1999/2000	22.9
2000/2001	22.7

Baineann na figiúirí thuas le costas na gcomhábhar agus le hoidis chumhdaigh do Bronchodilators, Corticosteroids agus do Cromoglicate, le teiripe bainteach leo agus le freasaitheoirí gabhdóra leukotriene.

Asthma Drugs and Devices

Mr S Wilson asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail (a) the total value of prescriptions for drugs and services to treat asthma in each of the last 5 years; and (b) the income from prescriptions for drugs and services to treat asthma in each of the last 5 years. (AQW 2230/01)

Ms de Brún: In relation to the total value of prescriptions for asthma drugs and devices, I refer the Member to the reply which I gave to AQW 2215/01.

Information about the value of asthma services can be given only insofar as treatment is provided through GP asthma clinics. The cost of reimbursing doctors for this specific service for the five years up to 2000/2001 is as follows:

	£m
1996/97	0.3
1997/98	0.4
1998/99	0.4
1999/2000	0.4
2000/2001	0.4

Regarding the second part of the question, there is no information available on the income from prescriptions for asthma drugs and services.

Maidir le costas iomlán oideas do dhrugaí agus do ghléasanna plúchta, luaim don Bhall an freagra a thug mé ar AQW 2215/01.

Ní féidir eolas ar chostas sheirbhísí plúchta a thabhairt ach i dtaca le cóireáil soláthraithe i gclínici plúchta DGí. Seo a leanas costas aisíoc dochtúirí as an tseirbhís ar leith seo a sholáthar do na cúig bliana suas go 2000/01:

	£m
1996/97	0.3
1997/98	0.4
1998/99	0.4
1999/2000	0.4
2000/2001	0.4

Maidir leis an dara cuid den cheist seo, níl eolas ar bith ar fáil ar an ioncam ó oidis do dhrugaí agus do sheirbhísí plúchta.

Incidence of Diabetes in Children

Mr S Wilson asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the incidence of

diabetes in children aged 15 years and under for each of the last 5 years. (AQW 2231/01)

Ms de Brún: This information is not available.

Níl an t-eolas seo ar fáil.

Accident and Emergency Departments: Staffing

Mr S Wilson asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety if all A&E departments are staffed to the minimum level as recommended by the British Association for A&E Medicine. (AQW 2281/01)

Ms de Brún: A&E Departments are not necessarily staffed in accordance with recommendations of the British Association for A&E Medicine. Staffing is the responsibility of Health and Social Services Trusts taking into account not only views of relevant professional bodies but also other factors, such as service needs and available resources.

The Consultant medical workforce, across all hospital based specialties, is reviewed by my Department on an annual basis and this informs decisions on the numbers in training. Recommendations of the British Association for A&E Medicine are taken into account when deciding training numbers.

Ní gá go mbíonn déanamh foirne i Rannoga T&É de réir moltaí Cumann Mhíochaine T&É na Breataine. Is iad na hÍontaobhais Shláinte agus Sheirbhísí Sóisialta atá freagrach as déanamh foirne ag cur san áireamh ní amháin dearcadh comhlachtaí gairmiúla ábhartha ach factóirí eile chomh maith, amhail riachtanais sheirbhísí agus acmhainní atá ar fáil.

Déantar athbhreithniú ar fhoireann mhíochaine Chomhairleach, ar fud gach speisialacht otharlann bhunaithe ar bhonn bliantúil agus téann seo i bhfeidhm ar chinní ar uimhreacha faoi thraenáil. Cuirtear san áireamh moltaí Cumann Míochaine T&É na Breataine nuair atáthar ag déanamh cinní faoi uimhreacha traenála.

Review of the Ambulance Service

Mr Shannon asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety, pursuant to AQW 1623/01, to outline the timescale and costs for the review of the NI Ambulance Service. (AQW 2282/01)

Ms de Brún: The review of the Ambulance Service was commissioned in October 1998 and resulted in the publication of the report "Mapping the Road to Change – A Strategic Review of the Northern Ireland Ambulance Service" in February 2000. As I explained in my answer to AQW1623/01 some further work was required to fully cost and provide a more detailed analysis of a number of the key recommendations emanating from this compre-

hensive review. This work has been completed and the report "Implementing the Strategic Review of the Ambulance Service" sets out fully costed proposals for implementing the changes needed to improve ambulance services.

The costs associated with the programme of work needed to get to this stage have been met largely from within the administrative budgets of the Department and the Ambulance Service and cannot be separately identified.

Coimisiúnaíodh an t-athbhreithniú ar an tSeirbhís Otharcharr i mí Dheireadh Fómhair 1998 agus tháinig foilsiú na tuairisce "Ag Leagan Amach an Bhealaigh Chun Athrú – Athbhreithniú Straitéiseach ar Sheirbhís Otharcharr Thuaisceart Éireann" as i mí Feabhra 2000. Mar a mhínigh mé sa fhreagra a thug mé ar AQW1623/01 bhí tuilleadh oibre de dhíth chun cuid de na heochairmholtaí a tháinig ón athbhreithniú cuimsitheach seo a lánhostáil agus chun anailís níos mine a dhéanamh orthu. Tá an obair seo críochnaithe anois agus leagann an tuairisc "Ag Leagan Amach an Bhealaigh Chun Athrú – Athbhreithniú Straitéiseach ar Sheirbhís Otharcharr Thuaisceart Éireann" amach moltaí lánhostáilte do chur i bhfeidhm na n-athruithe atá riachtanach le seirbhísí otharcharr a fheabhsú.

Seasadh na costais bainteach leis an chlár oibre a bhí de dhíth leis an chéim seo a bhaint amach ó laistigh de bhuiséid riaracháin na Roinne agus na Seirbhíse Otharcharr den chuid is mó agus ní féidir na buiséid seo a mheas ina gceann agus ina gceann.

Accident and Emergency Units

Mr Gibson asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what plans she has to re-open accident and emergency units which were closed during the last decade. (AQW 2321/01)

Ms de Brún: I am considering the report of the Acute Hospitals Review Group as well as news put forward during the initial period of consultation. Following discussions at the Executive, proposals can then be put out for a full public consultation and an Equality Impact Assessment. It is hoped that final decisions on the future configuration of acute hospital services, including emergency provision, can be taken before the end of the year.

Tá mé ag déanamh machnaimh ar thuairisc an Ghrúpa Athbhreithnithe ar Ghéarotharlanna chomh maith le scéala a cuireadh chun tosaigh ag tús na tréimhse comhairlithe. I ndiaidh caibidlí leis an Fheidhmeannas, is féidir ansin na moltaí a chur amach le haghaidh comhairlithe iomláin phoiblí agus Measúnú Tionchair ar Chomhionannas. Táthar ag súil gur féidir an cinneadh deireanach ar shocrú seirbhísí géarotharlainne sa todhchaí, soláthar éigeandála san áireamh, a dhéanamh roimh dheireadh na bliana.

High Dependency/Intensive Care Units

Mr McElduff asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the comparative figures for nursing staff for the high dependency/intensive care units in the Erne Hospital, Enniskillen and the Tyrone County Hospital; and to make a statement.

(AQW 2324/01)

Ms de Brún: The High Dependency Unit/Intensive Care Unit in the Tyrone County Hospital has two beds and is linked with the Recovery and Theatre area. This Unit has a funded establishment of 9.77 whole time equivalent staff.

The High Dependency Unit/Intensive Care Unit in the Erne Hospital is a separate Unit with five beds and has a funded establishment of 18.56 whole time equivalent staff.

The Sperrin Lakeland Health and Social Services Trust has confirmed that it continues to monitor service provision in conjunction with the Western Health and Social Services Board.

Tá dhá leaba san Ionad Ardspleáchais/Dianchúraim in Otharlann Chontae Thír Eoghain agus tá sé ceangailte leis an láthair Téarnaimh agus Obrádlainne. Tá 9.77 oibrí coibhéise lánaimseartha á maoiniú san Ionad seo.

Is Ionad ar leith le cúig leaba é an tIonad Ardspleáchais/Dianchúraim in Otharlann na hÉirne agus tá 15.56 oibrí coibhéise lánaimseartha á maoiniú ann.

Dhearbhaigh Iontaobhas Sláinte agus Seirbhísí Sóisialta Speirín Tír na Lochanna go ndéanann sé monatóireacht go fóill ar sholáthar seirbhísí i gcomhar le Bord Sláinte agus Seirbhísí Sóisialta an Iarthair.

Primary Care

Mrs Carson asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety why it has taken over 10 months to develop effective plans for primary care.

(AQW 2338/01)

Ms de Brún: When GP Fundholding was extended last year I agreed to extend the period of consultation on Building the Way Forward in Primary Care until March 2001. It was our intention then to establish the new groups over the period up to September 2001 as resources were freed up from the ending of GP Fundholding. The extension of GP Fundholding meant that people and resources could not be freed up immediately to work on the arrangements for setting up new Groups. Managing and monitoring the scheme in its final difficult year has absorbed much of the resources which would otherwise have been devoted to the development of the new Groups.

Nonetheless, at the same time, guidance was developed on the new arrangements and many complex issues resolved. There was also a need to take soundings from

various stakeholders as the guidance was developed. On the basis of guidance issued so far, excellent progress has been made, namely the configurations of the Groups have been determined and Boards are taking action to establish Management Boards.

Nuair a síneadh an scéim Sealbhú Ciste DGanna anuraidh d'aontaigh mé an tréimhse chomhairliúcháin ar *Ag Tógáil an Bhealaigh Chun Tosaigh i bPríomhchúram* a shíneadh go Márta 2001. Bhí sé ar intinn againn ansin na grúpaí nua a bhunú thar an tréimhse suas go dtí Meán Fómhair 2001 mar gur saoradh acmhainní nuair a cuireadh deireadh leis an scéim Sealbhú Ciste DGanna. Chiallaigh síneadh na scéime Sealbhú Ciste DGanna nár fhéad muid na daoine agus na hacmhainní a shaoradh láithreach le hobair a dhéanamh ar na socruithe le haghaidh chur ar bun na nGrúpaí nua. Caitheadh an chuid is mó de na hacmhainní ar stiúradh agus ar mhonatóireacht a dhéanamh ar an scéim ina bliain dheireanach dheacair, acmhainní a bhféadfá a chaitheamh ar fhorbairt na nGrúpaí nua.

Dá ainneoin sin, ag an am chéanna, forbraíodh an treoir ar na socruithe nua agus thángthas ar réiteach ar chuid mhór ceisteanna coimpléascacha. Bhí gá ann fosta glacadh le comhairle ó choimhéadaithe éagsúla geallta agus an treoir á forbairt. Bunaithe ar an treoir tugtha go dtí seo, rinneadh dul chun cinn thar barr, is é sin, bhí cinneadh déanta ar chur le chéile na nGrúpaí agus tá Boird ag déanamh gnímh le Boird Stiúrtha a bhunú.

Waiting Times for Appointments: Hospital Consultants

Mr Hilditch asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail any measures she is taking to reduce waiting times for appointments with hospital consultants.

(AQW 2384/01)

Ms de Brún: Boards and Trusts are implementing a range of measures to improve efficiency in relation to diagnosis, admission to hospital, treatment and discharge. These include the validation of waiting lists, the development of GP referral protocols, the provision of additional hospital inpatient procedures and the piloting of community provision as alternatives to hospital admission. For example:

- in the area of heart disease, immediate action is being taken to improve staffing levels and capacity at the Royal Group of Hospitals, thus facilitating increased numbers of procedures in this key specialty. Extra cardiac surgery procedures are also being commissioned from units elsewhere for a number of patients who are able and willing to travel. Additional angiography facilities have been opened recently at Altnagelvin Hospital, which will increase overall capacity for this diagnostic testing and help reduce waiting times;
- in cancer services, a two-week outpatient appointments target was introduced 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, which should improve waiting time significantly.

Tá Boird agus Iontaobhais ag cur réimse beart i bhfeidhm chun éifeachtacht a fheabhsú maidir le fáthmheas, glacadh isteach, cóireáil agus le scaoileadh amach daoine. Ina measc tá daingniú liostaí feithimh, forbairt ghnáthaimh atreoraithe DGanna, soláthar ghnáthaimh bhreise otharlainne othair chónaithigh agus píolótú soláthair phobail mar roghanna eile in áit daoine a ghlacadh isteach san otharlann. Mar shampla:

- Maidir le galar croí, tá gníomh láithreach á dhéanamh chun leibhéil na n-oibrithe agus toilleadh a fheabhsú ag Grúpa Ríoga Otharlann, mar sin de, ag éascú méadú i líon na ngnáthamh sa phríomhspeisialacht seo. Tá gnáthaimh mháinliachta croí bhreise á gcoimisiúnú fosta ó ionaid eile do roinnt othar atá ábalta agus toilteanach le taisteal. Osclaíodh áiseanna breise aingiagrafaíochta in Otharlann Alt na nGealghan ar na mallaibh, a mheadóidh an toilleadh iomlán don tástáil dhiagnóiseach seo agus a chuideoidh le hamanna feithimh a laghdú;
- I seirbhísí aille, leagadh síos sprioc dhá seachtaine do choinní éisothair anuraidh do dhaoine measta le hailse chíce bheith orthu. I raiditeiripe, d'fhorbair mé ceannach dhá luasaire líneacha breise d'Otharlann Belvoir ar na mallaibh a d'fhéadfadh amanna feithimh a fheabhsú go mór.

Eating Disorders: Facility for Children

Mr B Hutchinson asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety if she has any plans to establish a facility for children suffering from eating disorders; and to make a statement. (AQW 2414/01)

Ms de Brún: My Department is currently considering the Eating Disorders Services report, which was presented to the Specialty Advisory Committee on Psychiatry in November 2001. This report includes proposals for the provision of services for all age groups of people suffering from eating disorders.

Tá an Roinn s'agam ag déanamh machnaimh ar thuairisc Seirbhísí Neamhord Ite, a cuireadh i láthair Choiste Comhairlithe Speisialtacht ar Shíciatracht i Samhain 2001. Sa tuairisc seo tá moltaí dosholáthar seirbhísí do gach aoisghrúpa daoine ag fulaingt ag neamhoird ite.

Orthopaedic Surgery: Waiting Times

Mrs Carson asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety, pursuant to AQW 2031/01, to detail the number of patients in the (a) 1998/99; (b) 1999/00; and (c) 2000/01 periods who have waited in those particular periods (i) 1 year; (ii) 2 years; (iii) 3 years;

(iv) 4 years; (v) 5 years; (vi) 6 years; (vii) 7 years; (viii) 8 years; and (ix) 9 years for orthopaedic surgery.

(AQW 2422/01)

Ms de Brún: This information is detailed in the table below.

COMPLETED WAITS FOR SURGERY IN THE TRAUMA & ORTHOPAEDICS SPECIALTY BY TIME WAITING, 1999/00 - 2000/01

Time Waiting	1999/00	2000/01
< 1 year	11,660	11,503
1-2 years	954	670
2-3 years	227	190
3-4 years	50	39
4-5 years	5	11
5-6 years	0	0
6-7 years	2	1
7-8 years	0	0
8-9 years	0	0
9 years +	1	1
Total	12,899	12,415

Data for 1998/99 is not of sufficient quality to provide the requested information.

Tá an t-eolas seo léirithe sa tábla thíos.

FANACHT CRÍOCHNAITHE DO MHÁINLACHT I SPEISIALTACHT TRÁMA AGUS ORTAIPÉIDIC DE RÉIR AMA AG FANACHT, 1999/00 – 2000/01

Am ag Fanacht	1999/00	2000/01
< 1 bliain amháin	11,660	11,503
1-2 bliain	954	670
2-3 bliain	227	190
3-4 bliain	50	39
4-5 bliain	5	11
5-6 bliain	0	0
6-7 bliain	2	1
7-8 bliain	0	0
8-9 bliain	0	0
9 bliain +	1	1
Iomlán	12,899	12,415

Níl go leor de cháilíocht sna sonraithé do 1998/99 leis an eolas a iarradh a chur ar fáil.

Operations Completed on the Day of Admission

Mrs Carson asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety, pursuant to AQW 2031/01, to detail the number of patients in the (a) 1998/99; (b) 1999/00; and (c) 2000/01 periods who have had their

operations completed on the day of admission with no waiting. (AQW 2423/01)

Ms de Brún: This information is detailed in the table below.

COMPLETED WAITS FOR SURGERY IN THE TRAUMA & ORTHOPAEDICS SPECIALTY; OPERATIONS CARRIED OUT ON SAME DAY AS ADMISSION, 1998/99 - 2000/01

1998/99	4,898
1999/00	4,827
2000/01	4,704

Tá an t-eolas seo léirithe sa tábla thíos.

FANACHT CRÍOCHNAITHE DO MHÁINLIACHT I SPEISIALTACHT TRÁMA AGUS ORTAIPÉIDIC; OBRÁIDÍ DÉANTA AR LÁ NA HIONTRÁLA 1998/99 - 2000/01

1998/99	4,898
1999/00	4,827
2000/01	4,704

Operations Deferred for Clinical Reasons

Mrs Carson asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety, pursuant to AQW 2031/01, to detail (a) the number of patients in the (i) 1998/99; (ii) 1999/00; and (iii) 2000/01 periods who have had their operations deferred for clinical reasons; and (b) what those clinical reasons were. (AQW 2424/01)

Ms de Brún: Information is not readily available in the form requested and could only be obtained at disproportionate cost.

Níl an t-eolas seo ar fáil go héasca sa dóigh ar iarradh é agus ní féidir é a fháil ach ar chostas díreireach.

Consultations and Reviews

Mrs Carson asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety, pursuant to AQW 1490/01, to detail the number and costs of consultations, reviews and other public discussion documents that have been issued by Boards, Trusts and other agencies under the remit of her Department. (AQW 2445/01)

Ms de Brún: Some 28 consultations, reviews and other public discussion documents at an estimated cost of £125,472 have been issued by Boards, Trusts and other agencies under the remit of the Department since the establishment of the Executive in December 1999.

D'eisigh Boird, Iontaobhais agus gníomhaireachtaí faoi théarmaí tagartha na Roinne 28 comhairliú, athbhreithniú agus doiciméad diospóireachta poiblí ar chostas measta £125,472 ó bunaíodh Coiste an Fheidhmeannas i Mí Nollag 1999.

Fire Authority Cars

Mr Dallat asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what procedures are in place to ensure that the fleet of cars operated by the NI Fire Authority are correctly identified and marked for emergency use and that mileage is accurately recorded; and to make a statement. (AQW 2446/01)

Ms de Brún: Although all Fire Authority cars are fitted with two-tone horns they do not have any permanent fixed overt markings identifying them as Fire Service vehicles. They are however equipped with detachable flashing light systems which officers can use en route to emergency incidents.

Discussions are on going between the Fire Brigades Union and the Fire Authority on the use of permanent livery and fixed light bars on cars, but the Union is concerned that clearly marking them as Fire Service vehicles could result in attacks when attending incidents.

All Fire Authority vehicles, including cars, are provided with vehicle log books which are audited on a monthly basis. New log books are to be introduced from 1st April 2002, which will extend the range of journey information available and also contain details of mileage undertaken by each vehicle.

Cé go bhfuil carranna go léir an Údaráis Dóiteáin feistithe le hadharca dhá thuin níl marcálacha soiléire buana orthu a léiríonn gur feithicil na Seirbhíse Dóiteáin iad. Tá córais inscartha soilse splancarnacha iontu inar féidir le hoifigigh a úsáid agus iad ar a mbealach go teagmhais éigeandála.

Tá caibidlí ar siúl idir Cumann na mBriogáidí Dóiteáin agus an tÚdarás Dóiteáin ar úsáid fheistis bhuain agus bharranna feistithe soilse ar charranna, ach tá an Cumann buartha dá gcuirfí marcálacha soiléire na Seirbhíse Dóiteáin ar na feithicilí, d'ionsófaí iad agus iad ag dul chuig teagmhais.

I bhfeithicilí go léir an Údaráis Dóiteáin, carranna san áireamh, tá leabhair chláráithe a ndéantar iniúchadh orthu go míosúil. Tá leabhair nua chláráithe le tabhairt isteach ó 1 Aibreán 2002, a chuirfidh leis an réimse eolais ar thurais ar fáil agus iontu beidh sonraí ar líon na mílte tiomanta ag gach feithicil.

Sperrin Lakeland Trust: Consultant Surgeon

Mr P Doherty asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety why Sperrin Lakeland Trust has employed a full-time locum as a fourth consultant surgeon on the Erne site, and what additional activity has so far been generated by this appointment.

(AQW 2460/01)

Ms de Brún: The Trust has three permanent posts each at the Tyrone County and Erne Hospitals. A con-

sultant post at the Erne Hospital had been vacant for a number of years despite the Trust's efforts to recruit a permanent post holder. To date, this post has been covered by a series of locums, with some leaving at short notice. The most recent locum was offered an eighteen month contract for 2 reasons:

- there was no certainty that the Trust would be able to secure a permanent appointment;
- even if a permanent postholder was appointed, there was a need to provide cover for the release of a Surgeon into the Breast Care Network.

The third permanent post was filled substantively within the last year. Since this appointment, the locum has been undertaking clinical sessions at both hospitals.

From, July 2001 until 28 February 2002 this individual has provided the following volume of service:

- Outpatient Appointments – 894
- Inpatient Episodes – 664
- Day Cover – 178

Tá trí phost bhuana ag Otharlann Chontae Thír Eoghain agus na hÉirne araon. Tá post comhairleach folamh ag Otharlann na hÉirne le roinnt blianta in ainneoin iarrachtaí déanta le duine buan a earcú. Go dtí seo, rinne roinnt ionadaithe an post seo a chomhlíonadh, agus d'imigh cuid acu ar fhógra gairid. Tairgeadh don ionadaí is déanaí conradh ocht mí dhéag ar 2 réasún:

- Ní raibh cinnteacht ar bith ann go dtiocfadh leis an Iontaobhas ceapachán buan a chinntiú;
- Fiú dá gceapfaí duine, bhí gá le tréimshí a chlúdach chun Máinlia a scaoileadh amach chuig Greasán Cúram Cíche.

Líonadh an tríú post buan go substaintiúil laistigh den bhliain dheireanach. Ón cheapachán seo thug an t-ionadaí faoi sheisiúin chliniciúla ag an dá otharlann.

Ó Mí Iúil 2001 go dtí Mí Feabhra 2002 sholáthair an duine seo méid seirbhíse a leanas:

- Coinní Othar Seachtrach – 894
- Tréimshí Othar Cónaitheach – 664
- Clúdach Lae - 178

Prescription and Other Health Service Charges

Mr M Robinson asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety if there are any plans to revise Prescription and other National Health charges.

(AQW 2461/01)

Ms de Brún: I plan to increase prescription and other health service charges from 1 April 2002 in line with increases to be introduced in England and Scotland.

I propose an increase in the prescription charge of £0.10 from £6.10 to £6.20 for each quantity of a drug or

appliance dispensed. The cost of prescription pre-payment certificates will rise to £32.40 for a 4-month certificate and £89.00 for an annual certificate. Charges for elastic stockings and tights, wigs and most fabric supports supplied through the Hospital Service will be increased similarly. The maximum patient charge for a single course of dental treatment begun on or after 1 April 2002 will increase from £360 to £366. Optical voucher values will increase from 1 April 2002 overall by 1.95% to help children, people on low income and certain people with complex sight problems with the cost of spectacles or contact lenses.

Regulations to increase health service charges have been laid before the Assembly and copies placed in the Library.

Tá sé de rún agam muirir oidis agus muirir eile seirbhíse sláinte a mhéadú ón 1 Aibreán 2002 ag cloí le méaduithe le bheith tugtha isteach i Sasana agus in Albain.

Tá sé molta agam méadú ar mhuirear oidis de £0.10 ó £6.10 go £6.20 do gach cainníocht druga nó do gach fearas a thabharfar amach. Ardófar costas teastais réamhíocaíochta oidis ó £32.40 ar theastas 4 mí agus £89.00 ar theastas bliantúil. Méadófar mar a gcéanna na muirir ar stocaí agus ar riteogaí leaisteacha, bréagfhoilt agus tacaí fabraice a chuirtear ar fáil tríd an tSeirbhís Otharlainne. Beidh an t-uasmhurear othair i leith cúrsa singil cóir leighis fiacloireachta a tosaíodh ar nó i ndiaidh 1 Aibreán 2002 méadaithe ó £360 go £366. Méadófar luachanna ar dhearbháin optúla ón 1 Aibreán 2002 le 1.95% san iomlán le cuidiú le páistí, le daoine ar ioncam íseal agus le daoine a bhfuil fadhbanna casta radhairc acu costas na spéaclaí nó lionsaí tadhaill a íoc.

Cuireadh rialacháin chun muirir na seirbhíse sláinte a mhéadú faoi bhráid an Tionóil agus cuireadh cóipeanna sa Leabharlann.

Transporting Patients

Mr P Doherty asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail (a) the total annual cost, including ambulance and nursing costs, for transporting patients from Tyrone County Hospital to the Erne Hospital for CT scanning; and (b) any additional expenditure which has been incurred in transporting patients for emergency scans outside normal working hours.

(AQW 2462/01)

Ms de Brún: The information requested is not available.

Níl fáil ar an eolas a iarradh.

Bed Blocking

Mr M Robinson asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what efforts are being made

to tackle delayed discharges in the National Health Service. (AQW 2463/01)

Ms de Brún: I refer the Member to my answer to AQW 2352/01.

Treoraím an Ball do mo fhreagra a thug mé ar AQW 2352/01.

Support for Victims of Sexual Abuse

Mr M Robinson asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what action is being taken to support individuals who have been sexually abused.

(AQW 2464/01)

Ms de Brún: My Department provides funding to organisations which offer counselling and treatment programmes to survivors of sexual abuse. These organisations include the Nexus Institute, Belfast Rape Crisis and Sexual Abuse 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 the financial year 2000/01.

As part of their child protection procedures, the Health and 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. In addition, adults who have mental health problems resulting from child sexual abuse are treated within the Health and Social Services 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 Belfast Rape Crisis and Sexual Abuse Centre. Survivors can also self-refer to these organisations.

Tugann mo Roinn maoiniú d'eagrais a thairgíonn cláir chomhairle agus cóireála do mharthanóirí drochíde gnéasaí. I measc na n-eagras seo tá Institiúid Nexus, Ionad Éignithe agus Drochíde Gnéasaí Bhéal Feirste, Cónaidhm Chuidiú Ban Thuaisceart Éireann, Childline, agus an tIonad Comhairle do Thuismitheoirí a fuair £473,000 san iomlán eatarthu féin sa bhliain airgeadais 2000/01.

Mar chuid dá ngnáthaimh ar chosaint páistí, tugann na Boird agus na hIonataobhais Shláinte agus Sheirbhísí Sóisialta comhairle i roinnt sainíonad do pháistí a d'fhulaing drochíde gnéasaí. Tá gach páiste cláraithe ar an Chlár Chosaint Páistí faoin chatagóir 'drochíde gnéasaí' curtha faoi choimirce Phlean Chosaint Páistí. Ag brath ar thosca an pháiste aonair, sa Phlean beidh gné de chomhairliú agus d'idirghabháil theiripeach. Ina theannta

sin, cóireáiltear daoine fásta a bhfuil fadhbanna sláinte meabhrach acu de dheasca drochíde gnéasaí i gCláir Shláinte Meabhrach na nIonataobhas Sláinte agus Seirbhísí Sóisialta. Féadann oibrithe i bhFóirne Pobail Sláinte Meabhrach comhairliú a thabhairt do mharthanóirí fásta a d'fhulaing drochíde gnéasaí nuair a bhí siad ina bpáistí. Is féidir go seolfar daoine eile chuig eagrais dheonacha amhail Institiúid Nexus agus Ionad Éignithe agus Drochíde Gnéasaí Bhéal Feirste chun sainchomhairliú a fháil. Is féidir le mharthanóirí dul chuig na heagrais seo ar a gconlán féin fosta.

Elderly and Infirm Patients

Mr M Robinson asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety how many falls among elderly and infirm patients in NHS hospitals have been recorded in each Health Board area in each year since 1995.

(AQW 2498/01)

Ms de Brún: Information is not readily available in the form requested and could only be provided at disproportionate cost.

Níl eolas ar fáil go réidh san fhoirm iarrtha agus ní fhéadfaí é a fháil ach ar chostas díréireach.

Haematologists: Altnagelvin Area Trust

Mrs Courtney asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety how many haematologists are currently employed in the Altnagelvin Area Trust.

(AQW 2506/01)

Ms de Brún: Altnagelvin Hospital Health and Social Services Trust currently employs two locum consultant haematologists.

Fostaíonn Ionataobhas Sláinte agus Seirbhísí Sóisialta Otharlann Alt na nGealbhan beirt haemaiteolaithe comhairleacha ionaid i láthair na huaire.

Payments to Statutory and Private Residential Homes

Mr Shannon asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to outline any difference in her policy for payments by Health Trusts to (a) statutory residential homes; and (b) private residential homes for the elderly.

(AQW 2510/01)

Ms de Brún: My policy is that quality of service and value for money must be secured in the delivery of all social services whether provided in-house or contracted out to the private or voluntary sector. Decisions about service provision should be based entirely on judgements about value and optimum outcomes for service users.

Is é an polasaí atá agam go gcaithfear cáilíocht seirbhíse agus luach do chuid airgid a chinntiú le soláthar gach seirbhíse sóisialta bíodh sin innmheánach nó ar conradh ag an earnáil phríobháideach nó dheonach. Ba chóir go ndéantar cinneadh ar sholáthar seirbhíse bunaithe go hiomlán ar bhreithiúnais ar fhiúntas agus thorthaí optamacha d'úsáideoirí seirbhíse.

Microwave Oven Safety

Mrs I Robinson asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to outline (a) advice which is available for the safe use of microwave ovens in food preparation; and (b) the risk of emissions of radio waves from such appliances. (AQW 2520/01)

Ms de Brún: My Department relies on the scientific advice of the Food Standards Agency (FSA) and the National Radiological Protection Board (NRPB) in respect of microwave oven safety.

The FSA does not have specific guidelines on the safety of food cooked in microwave ovens but advises that, as with any method of cooking, it is important to ensure the food is cooked thoroughly so that the harmful bacteria which cause food poisoning are destroyed. Consumers should follow any guidelines provided by food or microwave manufacturers to help ensure the food is cooked properly. If food is re-heated, it should be checked to ensure that it is hot all the way through.

Radio frequency emission standards are determined by the NRPB and are set out in its 1993 Statement on Restrictions on Human Exposure to Static and Time Varying Electromagnetic Fields and Radiation. The limit (for leakage) is 5 milliwatts of microwave per square centimetre at approximately 2 inches from the oven surface. This is far below the level known to be harmful to people. Moreover, as distance from the oven increases, the level of any radiation falls dramatically—at 20 inches it is about 1/1000 of the amount at 2 inches. Manufacturers of microwave ovens must also comply with a harmonised European standard-BSEN 603335-2-90:1998.

Braitheann an Roinn s'agam ar chomhairle eolaíoch na Gníomhaireachta Caighdeáin Bhia (GCB) agus an Bhoird Náisiúnta Cosanta Raideolaíochta (BNCR) maidir le sábháilteacht oigheann micreathonnach.

Níl saintreoirilínte ag an GCB ar shábháilteacht bia cócaráilte san oigheann micreathonnach ach cuireann sé in iúl gur tábhachtach, mar atá le gach cineál cócaireachta, cinntiú go bhfuil bia cócaráilte go huile agus go hiomlán sa dóigh go bhfuil na baictéir dhochracha is cúis le nimhiú bia scriosta. Ba chóir do thomhaltóirí treoirilínte ar bith a chuireann lucht déanta bia nó oigheann micreathonnach ar fáil chun cuidiú le cinntiú go bhfuil an bia cócaráilte mar is ceart. Má tá an bia téite arís ba chóir é a sheiceáil le cinntiú go bhfuil sé te an bealach iomlán tríd.

Cinneann an BNCR caighdeáin astaithe minicíocht raidió agus tá siad leagtha amach ina Ráiteas ar Choisc maidir le Neamhchosaint Dhaonna ar Réimsí Leictreamaighnéadacha agus ar Radaíocht Statach a Athraíonn de réir Ama. Is é 5 milleavata de mhicreathonn i ngach ceintiméadar cearnach ag 2 orlach go garbh ó dhromchla an oighinn an teorann (don sceitheadh). Tá an méid seo i bhfad faoin leibhéal is eol a bheadh dochrach do dhaoine. Lena chois sin, de réir mar a mhéadaíonn an t-achar ón oigheann, titeann leibhéal na radaíochta go suntasach — ag 20 orlach is 1/1000 den tsum atá ann ag dhá orlach. Ní mór d'oighinn mhicreathonnacha cloí le caighdeán comhréirithe Eorpach-BSEN 603335-2-90:1998.

Fire Service Fleet

Mr Dallat asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to state that (a) all cars in the Northern Ireland Fire Service fleet comply with current health and safety regulations; (b) they are clearly identified and marked as emergency vehicles; and (c) they have 'Fire' signs permanently fitted to the roofs. (AQW 2522/01)

Ms de Brún: The Chief Fire Officer has confirmed that all cars in the Fire Service fleet now comply with Health and Safety regulations.

Although all Fire Authority cars are fitted with two-tone horns, they do not have any permanent fixed overt markings identifying them as Fire Service vehicles. They are however equipped with detachable flashing light systems which officers can use en route to emergency incidents.

Discussions are on going between the Fire Brigades Union and the Fire Authority on the use of permanent livery and fixed light bars on cars, but the Union is concerned that clearly marking them as Fire Service vehicles could result in attacks when attending incidents.

Chinntigh Príomh-Oifigeach na Seirbhíse Dóiteáin go gcloíonn gach carr i gcabhlach na Seirbhíse Dóiteáin le rialacháin Shláinte agus Shabháilteachta.

Cé go bhfuil carranna go léir an Údaráis Dóiteáin feistithe le hadharca dhá thuin níl marcálacha soiléire buana orthu a léiríonn gur feithiclí na Seirbhíse Dóiteáin iad. Tá córais inscartha soilse splancarnacha iontu inar féidir le hoifigigh a úsáid agus iad ar a mbealach go teagmhais éigeandála.

Tá caibidlí ar siúl idir Cumann na mBriogáidí Dóiteáin agus an tÚdarás Dóiteáin ar úsáid fheistis bhuain agus bharranna feistithe soilse ar charranna, ach tá an Cumann buartha dá gcuirfí marcálacha soiléire na Seirbhíse Dóiteáin ar na fheithiclí, d'ionsófaí iad agus iad ag dul chuig teagmhais.

Navigator Blue

Mr Dallat asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail (a) the total value of contracts

awarded by the Northern Ireland Fire Service to Navigator Blue in the last 5 years; and (b) if these contracts were tendered for and awarded to the lowest bidder.

(AQW 2525/01)

Ms de Brún: Navigator Blue was first chosen in 1998 to provide the Fire Authority with media services and has been paid as follows:

1998/99	£218,000 inc. VAT
1999/00	£345,000 inc. VAT
2000/01	£351,500 inc. VAT
2001/02	£132,000 inc. VAT (to 8 March 2002)

The contract for media services was awarded to Navigator Blue following presentations by four companies drawn from the 1998 select tendering list of the Northern Ireland Office. Navigator Blue's selection was based on the presentation to the Fire Authority's Evaluation Panel chaired by an Authority Board member. Price was not used as a criterion for selection, as the successful consultants are paid a commission based on the cost of the advertising procured.

The Fire Authority has recently sought tenders for the future provision of media services and the closing date for receipt of tenders is 23 April 2002. A new contract will be awarded shortly after that date.

Roghnaíodh Navigator Blue ar dtús i 1998 le seirbhísí meán a sholáthar don Údarás Dóiteáin agus íocadh astu mar atá léirithe thíos:

1998/99	£218,000 CBL san áireamh
1999/00	£345,000 CBL san áireamh
2000/01	£351,500 CBL san áireamh
2001/02	£132,000 CBL san áireamh (go 8 Márta 2002)

Rinneadh an conradh le haghaidh seirbhísí meán le Navigator Blue i ndiaidh léiriúchán déanta ag ceithre chomhlacht roghnaithe ó roghliosta tairisceana Oifig Thuaisceart Éireann i 1998. Bhí roghnú Navigator Blue bunaithe ar an léiriúchán curtha faoi bhráid Phainéal Measúnaithe an Údaráis Dóiteáin a raibh ball de Bhord an Údaráis ina Chathaoirleach air. Níor úsáideadh an praghas mar na critéir le haghaidh an roghnaithe, mar go n-íoctar coimisiún don chomhlacht a n-éiríonn leis bunaithe ar chostas na fógraíochta déanta.

D'iarr an tÚdarás Dóiteáin ar thairiscintí ar na mallaibh do sholáthar seirbhísí meán sa todhchaí agus is é 23 Aibreán 2002 an dáta deiridh a ghlacfar le tairiscintí. Déanfar conradh nua ar ball i ndiaidh an dáta sin.

Fire Service Command and Control System

Mr Dallat asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail (a) the total cost of the

Northern Ireland Fire Service Command and Control System; and (b) if the system is now installed and fully operational in all fire stations. (AQW 2526/01)

Ms de Brún: The total cost of the Fire Service Command and Control system including telephony is £2,895,000.

Although the system hardware has been installed in all Fire Stations there have been software problems regarding system access at Retained Fire Stations. It is expected that the system will be fully operational by 1 April 2002.

Is é £2,895,000 an costas iomlán ar chóras Rialú agus Cheannas an Udaráis Dóiteáin, córas teileafóin san áireamh.

Cé go bhfuil crua-earraí an chórais curtha isteach i ngach Staisiún Dóiteáin bhí fadhbanna bogearraí ann maidir le rochtain chórais ag Staisiún Dhóiteáin Choinnithe. Táthar ag dúil go mbeidh an córas i bhfeidhm go hiomlán roimh 1 Aibreán 2002.

Northern Ireland Fire Brigade: Dogs

Mr Dallat asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail (a) the number of dogs under the control of the Northern Ireland Fire Service; (b) the total cost of training the dogs and their handlers; and (c) the current duties carried out by both dogs and handlers.

(AQW 2527/01)

Ms de Brún: The Northern Ireland Fire Brigade currently has two dogs trained to search for and detect the use of hydrocarbon accelerants.

The total cost of training the dogs and their handlers was £33,147 of which Zurich Insurance, which provides sponsorship for the dogs, paid £28,545.

The duties of the dogs and their handlers are as follows:

Operational	Attendance at suspected arson/serious fire scenes as requested Operational Control of dog at the fire scene Administration associated with fire scene investigation procedures Liaison with other agencies at scene e.g. Police and Forensic Court attendance as required
Training	Certification training for dog – Fire Service College Daily/weekly training programme for dog – operational efficiency and behaviour Training administration
Community/schools	Arson awareness programme Primary schools - Key stage two talks Community talks
Welfare/husbandry	Daily feeding/grooming/cleaning of dog Health and safety requirements Veterinary requirements Licensing Welfare/husbandry administration

Faoi láthair, tá dhá mhadra ag Briogáid Dóiteáin Thuaisceart Éireann oilte le luasairí hidreacarbóin a chuardach chomh maith lena mí-úsáid a fháil amach.

Ba é £33,147 costas iomlán oiliúint na madaí agus a gcoimhédaithe ar íoc Zurich Insurance, a théann in urra ar na madaí, £28,545 de.

Seo a leanas dualgais na madaí agus a gcoimhédaithe:

Feidhmiúil	Freastal ar láithreacha amhrasacha coirloiscthe/tromchúiseacha dóiteáin má iarrtar orthu Smacht Feidhmiúil ar an mhadra ag an láthair dóiteáin Riarachán bainteach le gnáthaimh fhiosrúchán láithreach dóiteáin Comhoibriú le gníomhaireachtaí eile ag an láthair m.sh. na Póilíní, Foirne Dlí-eolaíochta Freastal ar Chúirt má iarrtar orthu
Oiliúint	Oiliúint dheimhnithe do mhadra – Coláiste na Seirbhíse Dóiteáin Clár oiliúna laethúil/seachtainiúil do mhadra – éifeachtacht fheidhmiúil agus iompar Oiliúint ar riarachán
Pobal/scoileanna	Clár eolais ar choirloscadh Bunscoileanna – cainteanna Eochairchéim a Dó Cainteanna pobail
Leas/tíos	Cothú/cóiriú/glanadh laethúil an mhadra Coinníollacha sláinte agus sábháilteachta Coinníollacha Tréidliachta Ceadúnú Leas/riarachán tís

North/South Ministerial Council: Combating Cancer

Dr Birnie asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what contribution is the North-South Ministerial Council making to combat cancer in Northern Ireland. (AQO 1064/01)

Ms de Brún: The cancer consortium, which links the health and research communities, North and South, with the NCI in the US, is an outstanding practical example of co-operation. The North South Ministerial Council is fostering the cancer consortium collaboration. Through the consortium, the research and development office has already secured two jointly funded, three-year epidemiology fellowships, which are linked to the Belfast and the Southern cancer registries. The close co-operation and collaboration of the registries will, for the first time, make data available on the incidence of cancer throughout the island of Ireland. The consortium is also fostering a scholar exchange programme among the three partners, as well as a major clinical trials initiative. The latter will enable cancer patients throughout the island of Ireland to participate in clinical trials.

Co-operation is underway in assessing new technologies such as PET scanning for imaging and telesynergy equipment to facilitate data transfers between centres.

Discussions are also underway to assess how best to treat rare cancers for which neither Dublin or Belfast have sufficient throughput to be maximally effective.

A major review of radiotherapy/oncology services has started in the South and we have been invited to provide technical input. This will offer the opportunity for consideration of how co-operation could be increased between our two health services especially with respect to accessibility to services for those living in remote rural areas.

Is eiseamláir phraiticiúil den chéad scoth an cuibhreannas ailse den chomhoibriú, a nascann na pobail shláinte agus thaighde ó Thuaidh agus ó Dheas leis an NCI sna Stáit Aontaithe. Tá an Chomhairle Aireachtá Thuaidh Theas ag cur comhoibriú an chuibhreannais chun cinn. Tríd an chuibhreannas, fuair an oifig taighde agus forbartha cheana dhá chomhaltas éipidéimeolaíochta trí bliana chomh-mhaoinithe a bhfuil nasc acu le cláranna Bhéal Feirste agus an Deiscirt. Cuirfear, den chéad uair, an dáta ar fáil trí dhlúthchomhar agus comhoibriú ar theagmhas ailse ar fud oileán na hÉireann. Tá an cuibhreannas ag cothú clár malartaithe scolairí i measc na dtrí comhpháirtithe mar aon le mórhionscnamh trialacha cliniciúla. Cuirfidh trialacha cliniciúla ar chumas othair ailse ar fud oileán na hÉireann bheith páirteach i dtrialacha ailse.

Tá comhoibriú ar siúl ar mheasúnú teicneolaíochtaí nua amhail scrúdú PET d'íomháú agus trealamh Teilisineirgeise chun aistriú sonraí idir na hionaid a éascú. Tá caibidlí ar siúl fosta le measúnú a dhéanamh ar an dóigh is fearr le hailsí annamha a chóireáil, ailsí nach bhfuil ionaid i mBaile Átha Cliath nó i mBeal Feirste eolach go leor orthu le bheith uaséifeachtach.

Thosaigh athbhreithniú mór ar sheirbhísí raiditeiripe/oinceolaíochta sa Deisceart agus iarradh orainn ionchur teicniúil a sholáthar. Tabharfaidh sé seo deis dúinn machnamh a dhéanamh ar an dóigh ar féidir comhoibriú idir an dá sheirbhís sláinte a mhéadú go háirithe maidir le sroicheadh seirbhísí dóibh siúd a chónaíonn i gceantair iargúlta tuaithe.

Local Health and Social Care Groups

Mr Hamilton asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety how and to what extent will patient care be improved through the introduction of local health and social care groups. (AQW 2552/01)

Ms de Brún: Even in the early stages of their development, Local Health and Social Care Groups will have considerable potential to improve patient care. From the outset, they will receive budgets for primary care development, which they will control and for which they will determine their own spending priorities. They will be able to use these budgets to fill identified gaps in local services both at primary care and at community level. The extent to which Groups are successful in

improving patient care will, consequently, depend on the decisions they themselves take and how they deploy the resources available to them.

Before they take on budgets for commissioning services, which they will be able to do from 1 April 2003, Groups will contribute to Health and Social Services Board commissioning decisions, reflecting the local dimension. Through this involvement in the commissioning process, Groups will have further opportunities to bring about improvements in the delivery of services to patients.

Go luath ina bhforbairt fiú, beidh cumas iontach ar Ghrúpaí Áitiúla Sláinte agus Seirbhísí Sóisialta a gcúram d'othair a fheabhsú. Ón tús, gheobhaidh siad buiséid d'fhorbairt phríomhchúraim, a stiúrfaidh siad agus ar a ndéanfaidh siad cinneadh faoi thosaíochtaí a gcaiteachais féin. Beidh siad ábalta na buiséid seo a úsáid le bearnaí aitheanta i seirbhísí áitiúla a líonadh ar an leibhéal príomhchúraim agus pobail araon. Ar an ábhar sin, braithfidh a mhéad a éireoidh leis na Grúpaí cúram othar a fheabhsú ar na socruithe a dhéanfaidh siad féin agus ar an dóigh a n-úsáidfí siad na hacmhainní a bheidh ar fáil dóibh.

Sula bhfaighidh siad na buiséid, a gheobhaidh siad ó Aibreán 2003, chun seirbhísí a choimisiúnú, beidh Grúpaí ábalta cur le socruithe Bhoird Shláinte agus Sheirbhísí Sóisialta ar choimisiúnú, ag léiriú na gné áitiúla díobh. Trína rannpháirtíocht sa phróiseas coimisiúnaithe seo, beidh tuilleadh deiseanna ag na Grúpaí feabhas a chur ar sholáthar na seirbhísí d'othair.

REGIONAL DEVELOPMENT

Central Claims Unit: Location of Incident

Mrs Carson asked the Minister for Regional Development, pursuant to AQW 1556/01, where the incident happened, referenced by Central Claims Unit as R/07/04/0317/2000, including road name and road designation. (AQW 2176/01)

The Minister for Regional Development (Mr P Robinson): The location of the incident leading to claim reference number R/07/04/0317/2000 is now, after investigation known to be the Far Circular Road which is the B 517. The claimant in this instance however identified the location as the Killyman Road which is how it was recorded by the Department's Central Claims Unit. Similarly, there were 7 other claims made arising from the same defect on the same day but none of the claimants identified the location as the Far Circular Road all referring to either the Killyman Road or Circular Road. As a result of this latest information the answer to part (c) of AQW 1556/01 is now 8 claims in the year 2000.

Translink

Mr Hussey asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail the latest available figures for (a) passenger kilometre journeys per annum carried by (i) Northern Ireland Railways; (ii) Ulsterbus; and (iii) Citybus; and (b) the asset value of rolling stock currently held by (i) Northern Ireland Railways; (ii) Ulsterbus; and (iii) Citybus. (AQW 2245/01)

Mr P Robinson: Translink has advised that some 227.1 million passenger kilometres were travelled by train in 2000/01. During the first 6 months of 2001/02, some 106 million passenger kilometres were travelled by train. Similar statistics are not available for bus passenger kilometres for Ulsterbus and Citybus. However, Translink has advised some 66.7 million bus kilometres were travelled in 2000/01 accounting for 67.1 million passenger journeys. During the first 6 months of 2001/02, total bus kilometres travelled were 32.3 million, accounting for 29.4 million passenger journeys.

Translink has also advised that the Net Book Value of rolling stock currently held by its operating companies, Northern Ireland Railways, Ulsterbus and Citybus is £19.7 million, £25 million and £13.6 million respectively.

Enterprise Service

Mrs Carson asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail (a) the reason why the Enterprise express train has an Iarnród Éireann engine attached to it and (b) what has happened the original Enterprise train engine. (AQW 2327/01)

Mr P Robinson: The Enterprise Service between Belfast and Dublin is a service operated jointly between Northern Ireland Railways and Iarnród Éireann. Translink have advised that of the four Enterprise liveried locomotives in existence, two are owned by Northern Ireland Railways and two owned by Iarnród Éireann. These locomotives are used interchangeably on the Belfast to Dublin route. However, two of them, one Northern Ireland Railways and one Iarnród Éireann, are currently out of service undergoing major engine repairs and maintenance. As a result an Iarnród Éireann liveried locomotive is in use on the route hauling one of the three Enterprise trains that operate each day.

Omagh Throughpass: Tamlaght Road Roundabout

Mr Hussey asked the Minister for Regional Development, pursuant to AQW 2020/01, what steps will he take to investigate traffic flow at the Tamlaght Road roundabout on the Omagh throughpass with particular regard to peak flow periods. (AQW 2364/01)

Mr P Robinson: Officials in my Department's Roads Service have advised me that the Omagh Throughpass generally operates well, although at peak periods there is some congestion at the Tamlaght Road roundabout, in common with many other urban locations. Despite this, I understand that journey times on this important route are very much better than they were before Stages 1 and 2 of the Throughpass were built. I look forward to further journey time improvements if the statutory approvals and funding can be secured to construct Stage 3 of this road.

The construction of Stage 3 is expected to alter traffic flows in the town, including those in the vicinity of the Tamlaght Road roundabout. In these circumstances, my Department's Roads Service believe it to be more appropriate to wait until after Stage 3 has been completed and traffic patterns have settled down before undertaking a traffic study. Meanwhile, our Divisional traffic engineers are continuing to monitor the performance of the junction.

Hippo Bags

Mr Beggs asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail the number of 'Hippo Bags' that have been distributed by the Water Service to conserve water usage during each of the past 3 years. (AQW 2365/01)

Mr P Robinson: The promotion of the use of Hippo bags is one of the initiatives recommended in Water Service's Water Efficiency Plan. Hippo bags are issued to customers on request, free of charge. Over the past three years, 21,700 Hippo bags have been issued to customers as follows:

April 1999 to March 2000	8,000
April 2000 to March 2001	5,500
April 2001 to December 2001	8,200

Hippo Bags

Mr Beggs asked the Minister for Regional Development what steps is he taking to raise public awareness of the cost savings and environmental benefits resulting from the use of the 'Hippo Bag', supplied by the Water Service. (AQW 2366/01)

Mr P Robinson: In April 2000, Water Service published its Water Efficiency Plan to promote the efficient use of water through the actions of Water Service and its customers. One of the water saving initiatives recommended by the Plan is the use of Hippo bags.

Around 30% of all water supplied to domestic properties is flushed down the toilet. Most toilets do not require a full cistern to flush effectively. The Hippo bag is a flexible plastic bag, which can be inserted into a toilet cistern. Because it can retain up to 3 litres of water each time the toilet is flushed, it reduces the volume of

water used for flushing purposes. It is best suited to cisterns that have a minimum capacity of 9 litres.

Hippo bags are issued to customers on request, free of charge. This approach has been taken because market research in Great Britain and customer surveys in Northern Ireland indicate that only 20% of Hippo bags would be installed if mailed directly to all customers.

The use of Hippo bags has been promoted in a wide range of leaflets produced by Water Service. During 2000 and 2001 leaflets, explaining how to use water wisely and the steps that can be taken by individuals to save water, were issued to every property in Northern Ireland. One of these leaflets was dedicated entirely to explaining the benefits of installing a Hippo bag. The use of Hippo bags has also been promoted in the water audit leaflets for the home, school, business and agricultural premises. These leaflets are being displayed in public buildings including libraries and post offices.

Water Service has a Water Bus which visits schools to enhance the awareness of pupils about water and wastewater services. Hippo bags are issued to all pupils who visit the Water Bus. Schools are encouraged to carry out a water audit prior to visits to demonstrate how water savings can be achieved. Agricultural shows, garden festivals and the Ideal Home Exhibition have also been used to raise public awareness and promote water efficiency measures, including the use of Hippo bags.

Over 37,000 Hippo bags have been issued since 1997. Water Service will continue to examine opportunities to further promote their use. Hippo bags will be issued to all government buildings within the next 3 months. A leaflet, which provides advice on dealing with bogus callers and using water wisely, is currently being distributed to every property in Northern Ireland.

Hippo Bags

Mr Beggs asked the Minister for Regional Development to outline (a) the total number of properties that are serviced by the Water Service; and (b) the total number and percentage of 'Hippo Bags' that have been issued to these properties. (AQW 2367/01)

Mr P Robinson: Water Service provides a water supply to some 735,000 domestic, agricultural, commercial and business properties. To date, 37,000 Hippo bags have been issued to customers upon request. This represents 5.1% of total properties served by a water supply.

Traffic-Calming Measures

Mr Gibson asked the Minister for Regional Development what measures such as traffic calming measures, is he taking to reduce accidents due to speeding. (AQW 2387/01)

Mr P Robinson: My Department is committed to the aim of reducing the number of accidents on our roads. In this regard a partnership approach is essential if the problem is to be addressed effectively. While the Department of the Environment's road safety responsibilities relate to education, publicity and the co-ordination of road safety policy, my Department is responsible for road safety engineering measures. Other parties also have important roles to play, including the police in terms of enforcement, and also all road users.

Roads Service undertakes an annual programme of traffic calming measures in urban areas where there is a history of road traffic injury accidents. The aim of this programme is to reduce the number and severity of accidents by reducing vehicle speed.

Roads Service also takes into account the history of road accidents in drawing up its ongoing programme of accident remedial schemes, which are aimed specifically at improving the safety performance of the public road network.

The control of speed is a crucial element in the fight against road casualties in the coming years. Roads Service is examining ways by which modern technology can be applied through, for example, the use of variable message signs at certain locations to encourage traffic to comply with the relevant speed limit.

Knockmore Line

Mr Dalton asked the Minister for Regional Development to outline (a) any plans he has to include the Knockmore line in any future Belfast-Antrim- Lisburn circular service; and (b) when such a scheme would be implemented. (AQW 2415/01)

Mr P Robinson: The Regional Development Strategy recognises the long term potential for the creation of a circular passenger rail service on the Belfast-Bleach Green-Antrim-Lisburn-Belfast section of the railway network. Subject to economic conditions being conducive this option could be an important element in the enhancement of our transportation network in the longer term. However, there are no plans at present to develop this circular service.

If the Assembly decides that the Antrim to Knockmore line should be closed it will be mothballed so that it can be re-opened in the future either for resumption of the present type of service or for a circular service.

Antrim-Knockmore Railway Line

Mr Dalton asked the Minister for Regional Development, in light of his decision to discontinue services on the Antrim-Knockmore railway line, to give details of a proposed bus timetable provision. (AQW 2416/01)

Mr P Robinson: I have not decided to discontinue services on the Antrim to Knockmore railway line. In accordance with Section 60 of the Transport Act (NI) 1967 such a decision cannot be taken until a proposal to that effect has been approved by the Assembly.

In the meantime, a combination of train and bus substitution services will continue, as detailed in the recently published Equality Impact Assessment. A full bus substitution service will be provided by Translink if and when the Assembly takes a decision to discontinue train services on the Antrim-Knockmore line.

Safety Barriers: M2, Templepatrick

Mr Dalton asked the Minister for Regional Development what plans he has to erect safety barriers along the central reservation of the M2 near Templepatrick. (AQW 2417/01)

Mr P Robinson: My Department's Roads Service has an ongoing programme of works to replace the central earth mound along our motorway network with safety barriers. The current contract on the M2 Motorway extends from Sandyknowes to Walkmill Bridge, which is approximately 1.4 kilometres from the Templepatrick Interchange and should be completed before 31 March 2002.

The next stage of the replacement works, from Walkmill Bridge through the Templepatrick Interchange, to the Parkgate Bridge, is programmed for 2002/03 and will be extended on to the Rathbeg roundabout if finances permit. The overall replacement programme will be completed in stages over a number of years, progress being dependent on the availability of funding.

Proposed Road Schemes

Mr Gibson asked the Minister for Regional Development to outline the road building proposals which are being considered by his department; and to make a statement. (AQW 2426/01)

Mr P Robinson: The attached Appendix lists road schemes which are included in my Department's Major Works Construction Programme and Major Works Preparation Pool. Schemes in the former are currently under construction and schemes in the latter are those which the Department hopes to construct or to commence within the next 5 years or so.

In addition, you and other elected representatives will be aware – from correspondence you received from my predecessor and the Roads Service Chief Executive dated 26 September and 11 October 2001 respectively – that Roads Service is preparing a 10-year Forward Planning Schedule. The Schedule will include major road schemes which it is expected could be started within the

10-year period of the Department's Regional Transportation Strategy.

The list of schemes to be assessed for possible inclusion in the Schedule is currently being finalised and I hope to publish details of the schedule later this year.

APPENDIX

MAJOR WORKS CONSTRUCTION PROGRAMME

Tillysburn Railway Bridge

Motorway Telecommunications and Control (Phase II)

A5 Newtown Stewart Bypass

A2 Limavady Bypass

A5 Strabane Bypass (Stage II)

M1 Bann River Bridge Strengthening

M1 Dunmurry Bridge Strengthening

MAJOR WORKS PREPARATION POOL

A6 Toome Bypass

Comber Bypass (Stage II)

Skeoge Link, Londonderry

Motorway Telecommunications and Control

Rathfriland Road Junction on the A1 at Banbridge

A8 Belfast to Larne Road

Hillsborough Road Junction on the A1 at Dromore

A1 Loughbrickland to Beech Hill

Cairnshill Park and Ride, Belfast

A5 Omagh Throughpass (Stage III)

A4 Belfast to Ballygawley Road, at Eglishe and Cabragh near Dungannon

M2 Crosskennan Slip-Roads at Antrim Area Hospital

Westlink and M1 Motorway

A1 Newry to Border

Further Quality Bus Corridors, Belfast

Foyle Bridge Strengthening

Bann River, Bridge Strengthening, Portadown

M2 Over Bridges Strengthening

Regional Development Strategy for Northern Ireland 2025

Mr Gibson asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail (a) the amount of private capital; and (b) public capital required to fund the strategic transport plans within the Regional Development Strategy for Northern Ireland 2025. (AQW 2427/01)

Mr P Robinson: The Regional Development Strategy for Northern Ireland 2025 sets out the long-term transportation vision for the region. The Regional Transportation Strategy which is currently being prepared and which will cover the initial 10-year period of the 25-year Regional Development Strategy, will identify transportation investment priorities and consider potential sources of alternative funding.

The Proposed Regional Transportation Strategy, which I announced in the Assembly on 4 February, is out for consultation until 16 April 2002. It seeks to make significant progress in the medium term towards achieving the 25-year transportation vision. This Proposed Strategy would require additional funding of £950 million above the reference case, or "existing funding level continued" over the next 10 years. The reference case funding of £2099 million is public expenditure.

The Proposed Strategy illustrates one way in which this required additional funding of £950 million might be raised. Private Sector funding of £325 million plus £80 million in Developers' Contributions is assumed to be potentially achievable along with an additional £545 million of public funds.

Roads Infrastructure: West Tyrone

Mr Gibson asked the Minister for Regional Development what recent decisions he has made in respect of the future plans for the roads infrastructure in West Tyrone. (AQW 2428/01)

Mr P Robinson: Subsequent to my answer to your Written Assembly Question (AQW1888/01) dated 21 February 2002, I have not made any recent decisions about future plans for the roads infrastructure in West Tyrone. As I explained at that time, a number of major works schemes in West Tyrone are currently being considered for possible inclusion in the Roads Service 10-Year Forward Planning Schedule. I hope to publish details of the schemes which will be included in that Schedule later this year following the Assembly's consideration of the draft Regional Transportation Strategy.

Development of Newry to Dundalk Road

Mr Bradley asked the Minister for Regional Development to outline (a) the negotiations he has undertaken with his Ministerial counterpart in the Republic of Ireland to discuss the development of the Newry/Dundalk Road; and (b) what assurances can he give that the design and standard of the through road will be similar on both sides of the border. (AQW 2447/01)

Mr P Robinson: I have not been involved in any negotiations with my Ministerial counterpart in the Republic of Ireland about the proposed Newry to Dundalk link road scheme.

The development of the scheme is controlled by the Newry to Dundalk Link Road Project Board which comprises representatives from my Department's Roads Service, the National Roads Authority and Louth County Council. The Project Board meets regularly to oversee progress on the scheme.

Roads Service officials have advised me that, whilst there might be some minor differences in the cross-section layout of the road north and south of the Border, the standard of the road will be fundamentally the same throughout. It will be an all-purpose dual carriageway with grade separated junctions.

Roundabout at Craigtlet Crossroads

Mrs E Bell asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail the timetable for the development of a roundabout at the Craigtlet crossroads.

(AQW 2451/01)

Mr P Robinson: I understand that the provision of a roundabout at Craigtlet crossroads was one of a number of schemes considered for inclusion in the programme of minor road works for the North Down area, at a meeting with the Council in November 2001.

In the event the Council chose to give their support in priority terms to the improvement of the complex junction known as Six Road Ends on the A48 Newtownards to Donaghadee road. This scheme, together with other more minor proposals, will account for the limited funding available for such works in this area over the next two years.

It is therefore unlikely that the Craigtlet scheme can be considered again before 2004, when it will have to compete for inclusion in the minor works programme with any other worthwhile schemes.

The Member will appreciate that there are many more aspirations and demands for road schemes than there are resources to meet them. It is in this context of limited resources that difficult decisions have to be made in prioritising schemes.

Unauthorised Water Loss

Mr Hussey asked the Minister for Regional Development, pursuant to AQO 935/01, what assessment has been made of unauthorised water loss from the system via illegal tapping of water pipelines. (AQW 2480/01)

Mr P Robinson: In order to protect the quality of the water supply, all connections to watermains must be authorised by Water Service and carried out by authorised personnel. Water Service has well established procedures in place to ensure that these requirements are complied with. However, the watermains distribution network comprises some 25,000 kilometres of underground pipe-

work and it is recognised that, despite these procedures, unauthorised connections can occur.

Consistent with UK Water Industry practice, Water Service includes an estimate of 0.1% of total water production for losses due to unauthorised connections.

Building Maintenance Budget

Mr Shannon asked the Minister for Regional Development what is the building maintenance budget for his Department in each of the last 3 years. (AQW 2481/01)

Mr P Robinson: In addition to normal office accommodation, which is the responsibility of DFP, my Department's Roads and Water Services have functional and specialised buildings such as depots, stores and laboratories.

The maintenance budgets (excluding rates) for these buildings for the periods in question were:

Dec 1999 – March 2000	£589,000
2000-01	£1,922,000
2001-02	£2,045,000

SOCIAL DEVELOPMENT

Disability Living Allowance: Application Form

Mr Shannon asked the Minister for Social Development if he will include in the application form for Disability Living Allowance information to permit direct contact with hospital consultants to determine eligibility for this benefit. (AQW 2516/01)

The Minister for Social Development (Mr Dodds): The facility already exists on Disability Living Allowance claim forms for a customer to provide the name of their hospital consultant. Hospital consultants will be contacted if sufficient information is not available from other sources.

Points System for Housing Needs

Mr Shannon asked the Minister for Social Development, in respect of the draft Housing Bill 2002, if a new points system will be introduced to address the housing needs of single, divorced and separated parents who have visitation rights for their children. (AQW 2517/01)

Mr Dodds: The Common Selection Scheme, rather than legislation, determines allocations of social housing tenancies. The scheme is currently being evaluated, and the results of the evaluation will be summarised and circulated for consultation during April/May 2002.

NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

Friday 12 April 2002

Written Answers to Questions

OFFICE OF THE FIRST MINISTER AND DEPUTY FIRST MINISTER

Review of Public Administration

Mr McElduff asked the Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister to detail those issues affecting local government structures and responsibilities that are being considered as part of the Review of Public Administration. (AQO 724/01)

Reply: The Review of Public Administration will be a comprehensive and strategic examination of all aspects of public administration in Northern Ireland. The Review will focus on the way in which services are delivered to the public, and the most appropriate structure and accountability for those services.

North/South Implementation Bodies

Mr Weir asked the Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister to detail (a) the current staffing levels in each of the North/South Implementation Bodies; (b) where these jobs are located; and (c) a breakdown of the fair employment statistics for the staff in each of these Bodies. (AQW 1811/01)

Reply [holding answer 22 February 2002]: The information requested in respect of the six North/South Bodies is set out in the Table below.

Community Notification Laws

Mr Weir asked the Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister what representations it has made

NORTH/SOUTH IMPLEMENTATION BODIES

	(a) Staffing Feb 2002	(b) Location		(c) Fair Employment Statistics ¹			
				P	RC	NK	No requirement to Monitor ²
Waterways Ireland	243	Enniskillen	Employees 4 Secondes 12	-	-	-	4 12
		Scarriff, Carrick-on- Shannon, Dublin	227	-	-	-	227
Food Safety Promotion Board	19	Dublin/Cork	18	-	-	-	18
		Belfast	1	-	-	-	1
Intertrade Ireland	34	Newry	Employees 31 Secondes 3	5 -	26 -	- -	- 3
Special European Union Programmes Body	36	Belfast	Employees 16 Secondes 9	2 -	10 -	4 -	- 9
		Omagh	Employees 6 Secondes 1	1 -	4 -	1 -	- 1
North/South Language Body	41	Monaghan	Employees 2 Secondes 2	- -	- -	- -	2 2
Foyle Carlingford Irish Lights Commission	33	Belfast	5	-	-	-	5
		Dublin	36	-	-	-	36
Foyle Carlingford Irish Lights Commission	33	Foyle Area	29	17	12	-	-
		Carlingford Area	4	-	-	-	4

¹ Figures based on Equality Commission registration and monitoring requirements

² Employers with more than 10 employees working wholly or mainly in NI are required to monitor the community background of their employees. Employees do not include secondees, temporary staff provided by employment agencies, and consultants.

to HM Government to introduce community notification laws with regard to convicted paedophiles.

(AQW 2267/01)

Reply: We have not jointly made any representations to UK Government on the introduction of community notification laws. This is a matter for the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland.

However, we understand that the Northern Ireland Office has introduced multi-agency procedures for the assessment and management of risk for sex offenders in Northern Ireland. These procedures are based on the recommendations of a multi-agency working group comprising representatives from the police, the Probation Board for Northern Ireland, the Northern Ireland Prison Service, the voluntary sector, Health & Social Services Boards, Education, the Housing Executive, the Social Services Inspectorate and the Northern Ireland Office.

Northern Ireland's Interests in Europe

Mr Hussey asked the Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister to detail (a) if Junior Ministers within OFMDFM have met with Northern Ireland's MEPs to discuss how the Executive can work with them to further Northern Ireland's interests in Europe; and, if so, (b) those areas of discussion. (AQW 2269/01)

Reply: Ministers Nesbitt and Haughey have so far had separate meetings with two of Northern Ireland's MEPs.

On 20 February 2001, Mr Nesbitt and Mr Haughey brought together a group of people with an interest in European affairs. Mr Hume MP, MEP attended and discussions related to how the Executive's office in Brussels could be best used to promote Northern Ireland's interests in Europe.

On 23 July 2001, Mr Nesbitt and Mr Haughey met Mr Nicholson MEP. On that occasion the discussions covered the development of a strategy on European issues; identifying the key policy issues for Northern Ireland in Europe; the links with the UK Government; provision of briefings to the NI MEPs, and the setting up of the Executive's office in Brussels and the role it should play.

Ministers Nesbitt and Haughey have attempted to meet Rev Dr Paisley MP, MEP, MLA but have not yet been able to identify a mutually convenient opportunity.

EU Policy Group

Mr Hussey asked the Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister what progress has been made by EU Policy Group towards its terms of reference.

(AQW 2270/01)

Reply: The European Union Policy Group, an inter-departmental group chaired by the Junior Ministers,

held its first meeting in April 2001. Since then it has met at regular intervals to continue to work towards identifying the most effective strategy for Northern Ireland in the European Union, and co-ordinating its implementation across departments. There are a number of activities associated with this aim, and on all of them some progress has been made by the Group.

At present the Executive is considering a paper which provides the framework for a strategy towards the European Union. This paper was developed under the auspices of the European Union Policy Group. Further work will be necessary to identify and take forward key detailed policy priorities within this framework. Our plan is to bring the Strategy document, when ready, before the Executive and the Assembly.

World Summit on Sustainable Development

Mr Ford asked the Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister, pursuant to AQW 1388/01, to detail the plans for NI representation at the World Summit on Sustainable Development later this year.

(AQW 2306/01)

Reply: We would refer the Member to our response to AQW 1592/01.

Paedophiles: Increasing the Length of Sentences

Mr Weir asked the Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister what representations have been made to HM Government to increase the length of sentences for paedophiles. (AQW 2398/01)

Reply: We have not jointly made any representations to the UK Government about increasing the length of sentences for paedophiles. This is a matter for the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland.

Paedophiles: Electronic Tagging

Mr Weir asked the Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister to detail any representations made to HM Government to extend electronic tagging to paedophiles. (AQW 2402/01)

Reply: We have not jointly made any representations to the UK Government about to extend electronic tagging to paedophiles. This is a matter for the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland.

Victims Groups: Funding

Mr Berry asked the Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister to outline their strategy and

current funding allocation to help victims groups remain sustainable, therefore continuing work with innocent victims of the Troubles. (AQW 2485/01)

Reply: Responsibility for core funding of victims' organizations is currently with the Northern Ireland Office. On 11 December 2001 the Northern Ireland Office announced, among other things, the allocation of £3 million to be spent over the next two years to extend the Core Funding Scheme for victims groups. Pending the evaluation of the current Core Funding Scheme, no decisions have yet been taken as to how the new scheme might be administered or what the eligibility criteria for the scheme might be.

Following a wide ranging consultation exercise, our department has developed a cross-departmental strategy to deliver practical help and services for victims which will be published in the very near future. The strategy will, among other matters, address the issues of funding and sustainability.

Community Relations Unit

Mr Weir asked the Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister to detail the work of the Community Relations Unit within the last year. (AQW 2644/01)

Reply: The aims of the Community Relations Unit are to increase cross-community contact and co-operation and to encourage mutual respect, understanding and appreciation of cultural diversity. Its main functions are to provide funding to promote better community relations purposes, to formulate community relations policy, and to provide advice to Ministers on community relations matters.

During the past year, its main work has been:

- the provision of funding to the Community Relations Council and associated monitoring of expenditure;
- the provision of funding and advisory support to the District Councils;
- participating in the District Council Community Relations Programme and associated monitoring of expenditure;
- arrangements for the closure of two community relations measures under the EU Structural Funds and Peace I Programmes 1994-99;
- arrangements for the opening of a new community relations measure under the EU Peace II Programme 2000-2004;
- the provision of interim ('gap') funding to more than 30 projects pending the opening of the Peace II Programme and associated monitoring of expenditure;
- direct funding of a number of capital projects and other community relations initiatives, including the TARA Counselling Centre at Omagh and Co-operation Ireland, and associated monitoring of expenditure;

- review of existing community relations strategy in accordance with Programme for Government action 2.4.1 including preparation of a working paper, the holding of seminars and meetings with stakeholders, participating in relevant conferences and interim reports to Ministers and the Committee of the Centre;
- liaison with the Department's Research Branch on community relations research projects and evaluations of community relations initiatives;
- liaison with the International Fund for Ireland and other groups outside Government which provide support for community relations initiatives;
- involvement in community relations initiatives on the ground in North Belfast and Larne;
- responding to Assembly questions and providing briefing for Ministers and the Committee of the Centre on community relations matters.

Promoting Social Inclusion Report on Travellers

Ms Lewsley asked the Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister to give an update on the Promoting Social Inclusion Report on Travellers. (AQO 1080/01)

Reply: Work on the development of the Executives strategic response to the Promoting Social Inclusion Report on Travellers is at an advanced stage.

We have consulted on the recommendations in the PSI Working Group report on Travellers. These recommendations cover a number of issues including Traveller health, education and accommodation.

Our officials consulted with Traveller representative organisations on how best to carry out a consultation process with Travellers and ensured that Travellers were consulted in a culturally appropriate manner.

Victims Unit

Mr Berry asked the Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister to outline (a) the role and remit of the Victims Unit; and (b) its staffing levels and running costs on a yearly basis. (AQW 2722/01)

Reply: The overall aim of the Victims Unit is to raise awareness of, and co-ordinate activity on, issues affecting victims across the devolved administration. This includes the development of a cross-departmental victims' strategy. The Unit also has responsibility for delivering on the commitments given in relation to victims of the conflict by the Executive in its Programme for Government.

The Unit, which was established in June 2000, currently comprises 5 staff with annual running costs of approximately £135,000.

AGRICULTURE AND RURAL DEVELOPMENT

BSE

Mrs Carson asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to detail the incidences of BSE in (a) 1998; (b) 1999; (c) 2000; and (d) 2001.

(AQW 2547/01)

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development (Ms Rodgers): The incidence of BSE in each of the years 1998, 1999, 2000 and 2001 is detailed in the table below:

Year	Incidences of BSE
1998	18
1999	6
2000	76*
2001	69**

*includes 54 cases identified as a result of TSE surveillance programme

**includes 40 cases identified as a result of TSE surveillance programmes

Cod Closure Box

Mr Hamilton asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to detail (a) if the Scottish Parliament has introduced a Cod Closure Box in West of Scotland waters; (b) if the exclusion applies to the Northern Ireland fishing fleet; and (c) if such exclusion is compatible with an EU Directive to refuse West of Scotland closures in respect of cod catches.

(AQW 2548/01)

Ms Rodgers: The Scottish Executive have introduced legislation to close part of the Firth of Clyde for the period 14 February to 30 April to assist the recovery of cod stocks. This closure applies to all UK fishery vessels, including those from Northern Ireland. Whilst the compatibility of this closure legislation with EU Directives is a matter for the Scottish Executive, I understand they are not aware of any such Directives.

Funding Research Programme

Mr Gibson asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development what plans she has to fund high quality research institutions to address the future sustainability of the agricultural industry.

(AQW 2567/01)

Ms Rodgers: My Department currently funds a research programme in agri-food that is conducted in house by DARD Science Service and underpins one of my Department's objectives of sustaining the future of the agriculture industry. The research conducted is of high national and international standing as evidenced by the fact that the outputs of such research are regularly

published in the international, refereed, scientific literature and by the fact that a significant proportion of it is conducted in collaboration with other national and international scientific institutions.

I recently commissioned a review of the arrangements for agricultural R&D in Northern Ireland and the outcome of this is due at the end of April.

Nitrate Vulnerable zones

Mr Shannon asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development what assistance has she offered land-owners who have had their land designated as nitrate vulnerable zones (NVZs).

(AQW 2568/01)

Ms Rodgers: The three NVZs in Northern Ireland were designated in 1999 following a detailed scientific survey of nitrate levels in both ground and surface waters throughout Northern Ireland, in accordance with the provisions of the EU Drinking Water Directive.

The Department of Agriculture and Rural Development, in conjunction with the Department of the Environment's Environment and Heritage Service, provided farmers in the designated NVZs the opportunity to receive an information pack and a farm visit to help them understand what was required of them in practical terms.

Advisory booklets and recording sheets were issued to 83 farmers, 21 of whom requested and received on-farm advisory visits.

Tuberculosis and Brucellosis

Mr Kennedy asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to detail (a) measures she is taking to prevent further outbreaks of tuberculosis and brucellosis and curtail the spread of the diseases in the constituency of Newry and Armagh; (b) the number of current cases; and (c) their location.

(AQW 2583/01)

Ms Rodgers: (a) Under the Brucellosis control programme in Northern Ireland herds in the highest incidence areas of Enniskillen, Newry and Armagh are tested every year while herds in all other areas are tested every 2 years.

Following identification of Brucellosis infection all reactors are removed for slaughter and movement restrictions are immediately placed on the infected premises prohibiting cattle movements onto or off the premises except directly to slaughter. The Department then carries out an epidemiological risk assessment of the entire herd and where this assessment indicates a risk of infection the Department will remove and slaughter the remaining breeding animals in the herd.

An intensified testing regime is then applied around the infected premises through herds contiguous to the infected herd (inner ring herds) being restricted and

tested immediately and subsequently at 4 monthly intervals. Herds in the outer ring, that is, herds contiguous to the inner ring, are tested immediately and at 4-monthly intervals. Movement restrictions will continue to apply for a specified period of time depending on the individual circumstances and until the Department is satisfied that the risk of disease is removed.

Concerns at the level of Brucellosis have led us to take a number of additional measures. Within the last year my Department has introduced a blood sampling programme for cows being slaughtered under the Over Thirty Month Scheme and a bulk milk sampling programme.

In relation to Tuberculosis there is an extensive programme of identification and removal of infected animals combined with control on movements. All herds are tested annually and all animals that show a positive result to the test are slaughtered. In-contact cattle considered at serious risk of being infected are also slaughtered. Movement restrictions are placed on infected herds and herds are investigated for the source of infection including the testing of herds contiguous to a breakdown and deemed to be at risk plus forward and backward tracing of suspect animals.

My Department has recently taken steps to help reduce the time taken for removal of reactors from farms. The Department has appointed three new valuation officers and an additional slaughter plant for OTMS reactor cattle has been brought on board. In addition policy reviews of both Tuberculosis and Brucellosis are currently underway and we are looking at all aspects of the control measures for both diseases and considering whether or not further or different measures might be introduced.

(b) The number of herds currently restricted due to Brucellosis infection in the Armagh DVO area is 66 and in the Newry DVO area is 99 and the number of herds currently restricted due to Tuberculosis infection in the Armagh DVO area is 314 and in the Newry DVO area is 370.

(c) In relation to the location of these current cases, the release of this information is governed by the Data Protection Act and I cannot therefore provide specific information on individual disease outbreaks without the written consent of the herdowners concerned.

BSE

Mrs Carson asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development how many BSE cases have been found in animals born after 1998. (AQW 2594/01)

Ms Rodgers: One case of BSE has been found an animal born after 1998. The case was identified earlier this year as a result of the TSE surveillance testing programme of casualty animals. The animal concerned

was over 30 months of age and would not therefore have entered the food chain.

Agricultural Office: Trillick, Co Tyrone

Mr McElduff asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to provide a progress report on the future of the Agricultural Office in Trillick, Co Tyrone. (AQW 2610/01)

Ms Rodgers: These premises are rented monthly and while the landlord has advised that he has other plans for the property, he has not asked the Department to vacate them on a specific date. I have initiated consideration of the options of either relocation to other premises or closure with the service being provided by other offices in the area. Before taking a decision on this, I want to reflect on the cost and staffing considerations on the one hand and the needs and alternatives for the local community on the other. I will wish to consult widely with interested parties.

I do not anticipate taking any final decisions on this matter just yet, as I need to allow sufficient time for a full assessment.

Nitrate Vulnerable Zones

Mr Shannon asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development if she has any plans to designate more areas as Nitrate Vulnerable Zones (NVZs) and, if so, what consultation has taken place with the relevant landowners. (AQW 2612/01)

Ms Rodgers: Responsibility for implementing the 1991 EC Nitrates Directive in Northern Ireland lies with the Department of the Environment. The designation of areas of land as Nitrate Vulnerable Zones (NVZs), which is a consequence of the Directive, is the joint responsibility of the Department of the Environment and the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development.

The Minister for the Environment announced on 8 March 2002 that DOE officials will be reviewing the results of monitoring networks to assess the impacts of nitrate losses on diffuse pollution. It is intended that this review should be concluded later this year.

No further NVZ designations can be announced until this review is completed, and consequently no consultation has taken place with landowners.

Northern Ireland Fishery Harbour

Mrs I Robinson asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to detail the extent of her authority over the Northern Ireland Fishery Harbour Authority. (AQW 2625/01)

Ms Rodgers: The Northern Ireland Fishery Harbour Authority was established under the Harbours Act (Northern Ireland) 1970 and the Northern Ireland Fishery Harbour Authority Order (Northern Ireland) 1973. Whilst this latter legislation was initially made by the then Ministry of Commerce for Northern Ireland the functions were transferred to the Ministry of Agriculture for Northern Ireland in 1973. This latter has now become the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development. As a Non Departmental Public Body, the Authority is subject to agreeing with the Department such areas as its future expenditure plans, the setting of operational targets and performance indicators. In addition it is required to produce an Annual Report and Accounts and is subject of a periodic review of its role, functions and performance.

Fishing Vessel Decommissioning Scheme

Dr Birnie asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development if she has any plans to modify the Fishing Vessel Decommissioning Scheme in light of the form of the schemes adopted in England and Scotland.

(AQW 2635/01)

Ms Rodgers: I have no plans to modify the Fishing Vessel (Decommissioning) Scheme (Northern Ireland) 2001, which was introduced primarily to reduce fishing effort on fragile whitefish stocks in the Irish Sea, whilst improving the economic viability of the remaining Northern Ireland fleet.

Imported Meat

Mr S Wilson asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to detail (a) her policy to ensure that the provenance of imported meat is clearly stated; and (b) the steps she has taken where misleading or absent information is discovered.

(AQW 2640/01)

Ms Rodgers: Inspections of imported meat from Third Countries are carried out at the Border Inspection Posts in accordance with EU regulations. Where discrepancies are discovered in the accompanying documentation a detention notice is issued under the Products of Animal Origin (Import and Export) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 1998. Consignments not in compliance with the requirements for entry into the EU may be ordered to be destroyed, re-exported or referred for processing for animal feed.

EC Beef Labelling Rules require all beef and veal marketed within and between Member States to bear a traceability code, provide details relating to country of birth, rearing, slaughter and cutting together with the licence number of the slaughter and cutting premises. Enforcement of beef labelling is carried out in abattoirs, cutting plants and other DARD supervised premises by inspectors from the Department's Quality Assurance

Division and in other premises by Environmental Health Officers of local District Councils using powers provided by The Beef Labelling (Enforcement) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2001 (the "Enforcement Regulations").

The Enforcement Regulations create offences and penalties for non-compliance and provide powers requiring the removal from sale of such beef and veal. Where labelling information is found to be absent or misleading, immediate corrective action is required by the operator.

Tullaghmurray Lass

Mr S Wilson asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development (a) to give a detailed report on the recent tragedy in Kilkeel; and (b) what assessment she has made of further improvements that could be made to Kilkeel harbour entrance.

(AQW 2641/01)

Ms Rodgers: The loss of the 'Tullaghmurray Lass' was a terrible tragedy and I would wish again to extend my sympathies to Mrs Greene, her family and all who were affected by the loss. Following the report that the 'Tullaghmurray Lass' was missing there was an extensive search carried out involving local fishery vessels, the Royal Navy and Irish Navy and the Department's Fishery Protection Vessel, the 'Ken Vickers'. It was not until recently that the vessel was found by the 'Ken Vickers'. The Marine Accident Investigation Board are continuing their investigation into the cause of the loss.

On the subject of the entrance to Kilkeel Harbour, there are proposals which would remedy the current difficulties - essentially by the replacement of the existing harbour by a new outer harbour. The cost of such a project is put at around £25m-£30m and would need to be subject, amongst other things, to a full economic appraisal. Even if all goes well funding for the project will have to compete with other bids on the public purse. In addition, the Department have been working with the Northern Ireland Fishery Harbour Authority to agree their capital expenditure plans over the next few years. They envisage expenditure of some £7.9m, of which around £6.5m is in relation to projects at Kilkeel.

Farm Waste Management Facilities: Grants Available

Mr Weir asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development what grants are currently available for farmers wishing to improve their farm waste management facilities and if there are any plans to introduce new grants in the future.

(AQW 2645/01)

Ms Rodgers: I can advise you that I have secured an allocation of £6.1 million from Executive Programme Funds for a targeted Farm Waste Management Scheme. The proposed Scheme is aimed at minimising farm

source pollution, which is contributing to water quality problems. It will give capital assistance towards repair projects to slurry tanks which are considered as being able to deliver a beneficial reduction in the risk of effluent escaping into watercourses.

My Department is currently engaged with the Department of Environment's Environment and Heritage Service in establishing those rivers, tributaries or headwater catchments that are most in need of remedial action, and where pollution from agricultural sources is considered to be the greatest contributory factor.

It is anticipated that some 1,500 farmers will benefit initially from this Scheme. It is hoped, subject to the Scheme receiving favourable uptake and achieving its objectives, that it could be extended to further catchments in subsequent years as funding provision permits.

You may wish to note that these figures, and those for each of the past 20 years, are available in the statistical data sheets on the Department's website (www.dardni.gov.uk).

However, before the Scheme can be formally announced, my Department must obtain State Aids approval from the EU Commission, and whilst this work is at an advanced stage, I am not yet in a position to give a definitive date for the opening of the Scheme.

I will, of course, be advising the Assembly Committee on Agriculture and Rural Development in due course of the detail of the proposed scheme and seeking their agreement to the necessary legislation to enable the scheme to open.

The introduction of an environmental on farm capital grant scheme, inter alia, to help address point source pollution, was one of the recommendations in the Vision Report on the Future of the Agri-Food industry. I am currently considering the outcome of the consultation exercise on the report before developing an Action Plan. The question of further grants to improve farm waste management facilities will be considered in that context.

BSE

Lord Kilclooney asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to detail the number of BSE cases in (a) each of the past 5 years; (b) January and February 2002; and to make a statement.

(AQW 2672/01)

Ms Rodgers: The number of BSE cases in each of the past 5 years, January and February 2002 is detailed in the tables below. The first table shows the number of cases identified through the normal reporting of BSE suspects (passive surveillance). The second table includes those cases identified through passive surveillance together with a breakdown of cases recorded after the introduction in 2000 of active surveillance testing for Transmissible Spongiform Encephalopathies.

Year	Number of BSE Cases
1997	28
1998	18
1999	6

Year	Passive Surveillance	Active Surveillance	Number of BSE Cases
2000	22	54	76
2001	29	40	69
January 2002	5	6	11
February 2002	4	11	15

With the introduction of the surveillance programme, the Department is actively testing for BSE in high risk categories and it is therefore not unexpected for an increase in the number of BSE cases detected.

Full-time Farmers

Mr Shannon asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to detail the number of full-time farmers for each of the last 3 years. (AQW 2683/01)

Ms Rodgers: The numbers of full-time farmers in Northern Ireland for each of the last 3 years, as estimated from the June Agricultural Census, are shown below.

1999	21,536
2000	20,534
2001	20,169

The figures refer to farmers who work at least 30 hours per week on their farms.

You may wish to note that these figures, and those for each of the past 20 years, are available in the statistical data sheets on the Department's website (www.dardni.gov.uk).

Imported Meat: Standards

Mr Savage asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development if beef sourced in Argentina, Brazil and other non-EC sources meets the same stringent standards as expected of farmers in Northern Ireland.

(AQW 2693/01)

Ms Rodgers: Yes, the meat has to meet full EU standards. Meat may only be imported into the EU from establishments and countries specifically approved by the EU through Food Veterinary Office inspections. The meat must comply with the import conditions of the EU and be certified as doing so. An import certificate must accompany all consignments and the meat marked with the country and establishment of origin.

Inspections of imported meat from Third Countries are carried out at the Border Inspection Posts in accordance

with EU regulations. Where discrepancies are discovered in the accompanying documentation or physical problems with the consignment observed a detention notice is issued under the Products of Animal Origin (Import and Export) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 1998. Consignments not in compliance with the requirements for entry into the EU may be ordered to be destroyed, re-exported or referred for processing for animal feed.

EC Beef Labelling Rules require all beef and veal marketed within and between Member States to bear a traceability code, provide details relating to country of birth, rearing, slaughter and cutting together with the licence number of the slaughter and cutting premises.

For beef imported from a Third Country where all of the above information is not available the label must include the wording "Origin:Non-EC" and "Slaughtered in [name of third country]". Any additional claims made on the label relating to characteristics, production methods or regional origin etc must be approved in advance by DARD under the Beef Labelling Scheme. Such claims are subject to regular audit by an approved independent third party verifier.

Stress in the Rural Community

Mr Shannon asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development what action is she taking to address rural stress among land-owners and farmers.

(AQW 2744/01)

Ms Rodgers: I am very conscious of the increased levels of stress in the rural community especially due to the financial pressures in farming over recent years and last year's outbreak of Foot and Mouth Disease.

In November 2000 I announced the allocation of a sum of money to help alleviate stress in rural areas and the following has been achieved:

- A number of local groups have organised events to help people in rural families be more aware of stress and encourage them to adopt ways of increasing a sense of well-being and reducing stress.
- Over 150 people, who are in daily contact with farmers and agricultural students at our Colleges, have been trained in stress awareness and how to signpost those who need support to providers of help.
- The establishment of the Rural Stress Helpline and Website.
- The production of a video 'Change for the better' outlining ways of dealing with change.
- The production of a young rural persons drama.
- A rural stress conference held recently to publicly raise the issue and help determine the way forward.

I am now building on the work that has been done and have agreed the establishment of the 'Rural Support' network that should help to give a strategic framework

to future developments. The initial funding is being provided jointly by my Department and the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety.

Botulism

Mr Shannon asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development what steps has she taken to allay fears to the public of an outbreak of botulism.

(AQW 2745/01)

Ms Rodgers: Officials from my Department have been liaising closely with the Food Standards Agency (FSA) in relation to deaths in cattle where it is suspected that the deaths may have been due to botulism. Only type C toxin has been identified in cattle deaths in Northern Ireland and since type C is not recognised as a threat to public health the risk to the public is considered to be very low. My Chief Veterinary Officer recently stated publicly that there was very little risk to public health from the type of toxin involved in bovine deaths.

However as a precautionary measure the Food Standards Agency has put in place measures to ensure that meat and milk from affected farms does not enter the food chain until at least 14 days have elapsed since the last case on farm.

CULTURE, ARTS AND LEISURE

Disability Sport NI: Funding

Mr Shannon asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure what level of finance has been given to Disability Sport NI in each of the last 3 years.

(AQW 2430/01)

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure (Mr McGimpsey): Details are as follows:

	1999/00 £	2000/01 £	2001/02 £
Exchequer Grant	Nil	Nil	5,500
Sports Development Grant	28,000	30,000	30,000
Equity Challenge Fund	Nil	Nil	2,775

Local Film Industry: Equal Representation of Religious Communities

Mr Shannon asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure what representations have been made to the local film industry to address equality in representation of both religious communities in Northern Ireland.

(AQW 2530/01)

Mr McGimpsey: DCAL's policy for film and television is guided by the Northern Ireland Film and Television Commission (NIFTC), a company limited by guarantee, with a Board of sixteen directors drawn from all sections of the community in Northern Ireland.

The NIFTC's new ten year strategy has been drafted in the context of DCAL's ongoing commitment to equality of opportunity and equal access for people from all sections of the community to the arts and culture. The strategy highlights the NIFTC's commitment to supporting and mirroring the Government's underpinning policies of cultural diversity and social inclusion.

All the NIFTC's training and production schemes apply rigorous equal opportunities and fair employment criteria. I am satisfied that all projects submitted to the NIFTC for funding from public sources will have exactly the same assessment criteria applied to them.

National Lottery's Community Fund

Mrs Carson asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure what action is being taken to persuade the National Lottery's Community Fund to retain women as a priority area for funding. (AQW 2558/01)

Mr McGimpsey: The National Lottery is a reserved matter and overall responsibility rests with the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport in London (DCMS). Therefore it is not appropriate for the Minister to issue direct guidance on this matter. The Community Fund can solicit applications to pursue strategic objectives and I am aware that women and women's groups could potentially be grant beneficiaries under a number of strategic areas. In the last financial year April 2000 – March 2001 over 43% of all Community Fund grants were awarded to projects that defined their beneficiaries as 'families, lone parents and children or women or girls'. The value of these awards totalled £5.079m, which represented over 36% of last year's budget.

Council of Europe Charter for Regional or Minority Languages

Mr Adams asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure, pursuant to AQW 397/00, when he expects to publish the action plan for the implementation of Part III of the Council of Europe Charter for Regional or Minority Languages. (AQW 2621/01)

Mr McGimpsey: My Department chairs an Inter-departmental Charter Group to co-ordinate implementation of the Charter. This group includes representatives from all NICS Departments, the Northern Ireland Court Service, HM Customs and Excise, Departmental Solicitor's Office and the Inland Revenue. Its remit is to provide Departments and the devolved administration with advice on implementing the Charter and preparing progress reports;

monitor implementation of the Charter; advise on resource implications; and develop guidance for Departments. The group has met on four occasions.

The Charter Group is currently finalising central policy guidance on implementing the European Charter. The draft policy guidance will be submitted to the Executive meeting on 16 May 2002 for approval.

It is for individual Departments to decide how to implement the Charter within their areas of responsibility. All Departments will be asked to provide DCAL with information on how they are implementing the provisions of the Charter applicable to them. My officials will prepare an overall position paper for the Executive to inform the Foreign Secretary of how the Charter is being implemented by the devolved administration. The Foreign Secretary will inform the Council of Europe of the UK's activities in line with its commitments, by 1 July 2002.

Council of Europe Charter for Regional or Minority Languages

Mr Adams asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure, pursuant to AQW 397/00, to account for the delay in publishing an action plan for the implementation of Part III of the Council of Europe Charter for Regional or Minority Languages. (AQW 2622/01)

Mr McGimpsey: My response to AQW 2621/01 explains the process and time scale for providing a paper to the Executive explaining the action which the devolved administration has in hand to meet UK commitments in relation to the European Charter.

The delay has been due to pressure on resources and the complex nature of the relevant issues which involve all Departments.

EDUCATION

GCE O Level Passes: 1966-67

Mr Kennedy asked the Minister of Education to detail the percentage of all Secondary School leavers who achieved 5 or more GCE O level passes in 1966-67. (AQW 2531/01)

The Minister of Education (Mr M McGuinness): In 1966-67, 21% of all Secondary (Grammar and Non-Grammar) School leavers achieved 5 or more GCE Ordinary Level Passes, or higher qualifications.

GCSEs

Mr Kennedy asked the Minister of Education what percentage of all 15 year old pupils achieved 5 or more GCSEs in 1999-00 at (i) Grades A* to A including

GNVQ Intermediate Part I equivalent; and (ii) Grades A* to B including Intermediate Part I equivalent.

(AQW 2532/01)

Mr M McGuinness: In 1999-00, 14% of 15 year old pupils achieved 5 or more GCSEs at Grades A* to A, and 32% of 15 year old pupils achieved 5 or more GCSEs at Grades A* to B.

GCSEs

Mr Kennedy asked the Minister of Education to detail the percentage of all year 12 pupils who achieved 5 plus GCSE Grades A* to C including GNVQ Intermediate Part I passes in 1998-99.

(AQW 2546/01)

Mr M McGuinness: In 1998-99 56% of year 12 pupils achieved 5 plus GCSEs Grades A* to C including GNVQ Intermediate Part I passes.

School Choice

Mr S Wilson asked the Minister of Education to detail the number of pupils who entered an integrated school but who had a grammar school as their first preference.

(AQW 2557/01)

Mr M McGuinness: The number of pupils who entered an integrated school at Year 8 in September 2001 but who had a grammar school as their first preference was 88.

Nursery Provision

Mr Shannon asked the Minister of Education what steps he is taking to address the financial difference for nursery provision between the voluntary/community sector and the maintained sector.

(AQW 2569/01)

Mr M McGuinness: I have no plans to change the normal funding arrangements for the statutory and voluntary/private sectors.

Computer Skills

Mr M Robinson asked the Minister of Education what action has been taken to ensure that all schoolchildren surpass the minimum standard in computer skills.

(AQW 2570/01)

Mr M McGuinness: Information Technology (IT) is a Cross-Curricular Theme and as such is a compulsory element of the curriculum for all pupils. In addition, CCEA offers a Key Stage 3 IT Accreditation Scheme, which has been in place since 1997 and while the scheme is not mandatory it has attracted entries from almost 75% of all pupils in that age group. The scheme has now been extended to Key Stage 2.

Six key skills were introduced from September 2000 as part of the Curriculum 2000 reforms and IT is one of

three which are assessed both internally (through the building of a portfolio of evidence) and externally (through testing) leading to a key skills qualification at levels 1 to 4 of the National Qualifications Framework.

As part of the current Curriculum Review, CCEA has identified ICT as a skill within each subject area, thus embedding it in the curriculum.

Burns Report: Legislation

Mr Wells asked the Minister of Education to confirm that any change in post-primary education as a result of the implementation of the Burns Report will not proceed unless passed by a vote of the Northern Ireland Assembly.

(AQW 2595/01)

Mr M McGuinness: Decisions on new arrangements must await the outcome of the current consultation. I want to achieve high standards for all pupils through a modern, fair education system and will seek to build consensus on the best way forward. Any necessary legislative changes will be subject to Assembly approval.

Drugs Education

Dr Birnie asked the Minister of Education what opportunities he provides for young people and children to learn about the harm caused to the unborn child by misusing drugs during pregnancy.

(AQW 2599/01)

Mr M McGuinness: There is a statutory requirement for school authorities to provide drugs education for all pupils throughout their compulsory schooling (age 4 – 16). This is delivered mainly through the cross-curricular theme of Health Education but also through programmes of study such as Science where, at key stages 3 and 4 pupils learn about the requirements to maintain healthy bodies and healthy babies during pregnancy, and the effects of alcohol, smoking and drugs. The topic has also been identified and explored in approximately half of the School Age Mothers Projects (SAMs) running this school year.

GCSEs

Mr Dalton asked the Minister of Education to detail the number of (a) grammar school pupils leaving school without GCSEs, A and As levels; and (b) non-grammar school pupils leaving school without GCSEs, A and As levels.

(AQW 2607/01)

Mr M McGuinness:

(A) GRAMMAR

Number of pupils leaving school without A or AS levels, 1999/2000.	2273
Number of pupils leaving school without GCSEs, A or AS levels, 1999/2000.	83

(B) SECONDARY

Number of pupils leaving school without A or AS levels, 1999/2000.	13510
Number of pupils leaving school without GCSEs, A or AS levels, 1999/2000.	1226

A and AS Levels

Mr Dalton asked the Minister of Education to detail the number of (a) grammar school pupils achieving A and As levels, by grade, since 1998; and (b) non-grammar school pupils achieving A and As levels, by grade, since 1998. (AQW 2608/01)

Mr M McGuinness: The number of passes at each grade is as follows:

GRAMMAR - LEVEL

Grade	1997/98	1998/99	1999/00	2000/01
A	5007	5608	5975	6282
B	5615	5541	5493	5485
C	5011	5009	4721	4759
D	3750	3434	3178	3064
E	2169	1876	1693	1646

AS LEVEL

Grade	1997/98	1998/99	1999/00	2000/01 ¹
A	89	75	82	143
B	122	92	105	79
C	94	98	112	62
D	98	107	102	66
E	121	140	110	114

¹ Advanced Supplementary qualifications. Does not include Advanced Subsidiary qualifications.

NON-GRAMMAR - A LEVEL

Grade	1997/98	1998/99	1999/00	2000/01
A	421	470	448	592
B	674	717	642	747
C	726	759	775	868
D	693	671	650	764
E	515	474	455	494

AS LEVEL

Grade	1997/98	1998/99	1999/00	2000/01 ¹
A	11	#	11	8
B	15	8	15	5
C	16	15	10	13
D	43	21	19	11
E	49	39	32	31

#: denotes number less than 5

¹ Advanced Supplementary qualifications. Does not include Advanced Subsidiary qualifications.

GCSEs

Mr Dalton asked the Minister of Education to detail the number of (a) grammar school pupils achieving GCSEs, by grade, since 1998; and (b) non-grammar school pupils achieving GCSEs, by grade, since 1998.

(AQW 2609/01)

Mr M McGuinness: The number of passes at each grade is as follows:

GRAMMAR

Grade	1997/98	1998/99	1999/00	2000/01
A*	6915	8478	10102	10658
A	20514	21017	21872	21639
B	27225	27473	27226	27525
C	19096	19089	18449	18319
D	5683	5277	4634	4361
E	1335	1089	930	877
F	272	177	126	145
G	82	47	54	56

NON-GRAMMAR

Grade	1997/98	1998/99	1999/00	2000/01
A*	959	1322	1202	1215
A	4867	4715	5184	5457
B	12021	12399	12742	13543
C	26880	29256	29457	30479
D	21846	23177	22803	23618
E	15490	15735	15767	15458
F	8556	8636	8647	8761
G	4132	4253	4157	4169

Youth Organisations: Funding

Mr Shannon asked the Minister of Education what financial assistance is available to youth organisations to enable them to obtain premises in general and, specifically, in the Strangford constituency. (AQW 2614/01)

Mr M McGuinness: Youth organisations can seek financial assistance for capital works from the Executive Programme Capital/Infrastructure Renewal Fund and the Department's major and minor works programmes. In certain areas, funding is available from the Belfast Regeneration Office and the Londonderry Regeneration Initiative.

Youth organisations in the Strangford constituency can make application to the Department's Youth Service Branch.

Youth Organisations: Funding

Mr Shannon asked the Minister of Education to detail (a) the level of funding set aside for youth organisations within the Strangford constituency in 2000-01; and (b) the actual level of funding that was provided.

(AQW 2615/01)

Mr M McGuinness: The Department does not specify the level of funding for youth organisations by Parliamentary constituency. It was a matter for the South-Eastern Education and Library Board to distribute the funding of £2.9 million which was allocated for the youth service in its area from its 2000/01 budget. A breakdown of the funding is not available in the format requested.

Pre-School Nursery Places: Strangford Constituency

Mr Shannon asked the Minister of Education to detail the number of fully funded pre-school nursery places available in the Strangford constituency in the last 3 years.

(AQW 2616/01)

Mr M McGuinness: The number of funded pre-school places in the Strangford constituency in each of the last 3 years is as follows:

	Statutory	Voluntary/ private	Total
1999/2000	312	131	443
2000/2001	494	197	691
2001/2002	494	350	844

Pre-School Nursery Places: Strangford Constituency

Mr Shannon asked the Minister of Education how many groups applied for fully funded pre-school nursery places in the Strangford constituency in each of the last 3 years.

(AQW 2626/01)

Mr M McGuinness: The number of private and voluntary settings in the Strangford constituency who applied for funded pre-school places under the Pre-School Education Expansion Programme in each of the last 3 years is as follows:

	1999/2000	2000/2001	2001/2002
No. of applications	25	31	22
No. of centres allocated places	10	15	19

Common Funding Formula

Dr Birnie asked the Minister of Education to give his assessment of the Common Funding Formula's adequacy in providing for pupils whose first language is Chinese.

(AQW 2636/01)

Mr M McGuinness: The consultation document on the common funding formula included a proposal that schools should be allocated an additional £750 for each pupil designated as having English as an additional language. This proposal was made on the basis that the need for support for these pupils will arise within, and generally be provided by, the school. Education and Library Boards may continue to offer centralised support.

At present only one Board has a specific factor within its formula to take account of pupils for whom English is an additional language and the proposal to include a similar factor within the common formula will ensure that all schools with such pupils will receive additional funding in recognition of the additional costs incurred.

As with all factors within the formula the operation of this factor will be subject to ongoing review by the Department and our education partners.

Cost of Vandalism

Mr Weir asked the Minister of Education to detail, by Education and Library Board area, the costs of repairing vandalism on school buildings and school buses in each of the last 5 years.

(AQW 2646/01)

Mr M McGuinness: The costs incurred by Education and Library Boards on repairing vandalism on controlled and maintained school buildings and school buses are set out below. The cost of repairs in other schools is not available.

	1997/98 £	1998/99 £	1999/2000 £	2000/01 £	2001/02 £
Belfast	332,303	247,047	285,026	259,829	315,000*
Western	122,731	115,579	99,311	92,658	96,585*
North-Eastern	267,540	269,483	320,506	294,006	290,465*
South-Eastern	193,814	176,775	180,416	186,620	157,699*
Southern	193,530	219,782	148,389	79,967	34,965*

* Estimated costs to February 2002.

Academy Primary School, Saintfield

Mrs I Robinson asked the Minister of Education to explain what steps he has taken to ensure that Academy Primary School has the capacity to extend its premises to cope with the increasing population of Saintfield.

(AQW 2670/01)

Mr M McGuinness: Academy Primary School is a controlled school, which is the responsibility of the South-Eastern Education and Library Board (SEELB). Any consideration about the future needs for extending

the school's premises is a matter in the first instance for the Board. The Board has been in contact with the Planning Service and the Roads Service to register its objection to the proposed development beside Academy Primary School and will be pursuing this further with those agencies.

Academy School, Saintfield

Mrs I Robinson asked the Minister of Education if his Department has made any representations to the Planning Service in respect of the proposals for the planned development beside the Academy School, Listooder Road in Saintfield. (AQW 2671/01)

Mr M McGuinness: My Department has not made any representations to the Planning Service in respect of the proposals for the planned development beside the Academy School, Listooder Road in Saintfield. That would be a matter for South-Eastern Education and Library Board, which I understand has already been in contact with the Planning and Roads Services to lodge an objection to the proposed development.

Discipline Strategy

Mr M Robinson asked the Minister of Education what guidance has been given to local authorities regarding educating children who have been permanently excluded from school. (AQW 2710/01)

Mr M McGuinness: No specific guidance has been given to the Education and Library Boards. The Discipline Strategy published in 1998 contains the framework for service development in respect of pupils whose behaviour is a concern and this provides the basis for educational arrangements for pupils who have been expelled from school. New services have been developed since 1998 and further improvements will depend on the availability of resources.

Exclusion of Disruptive Pupils

Mr Hussey asked the Minister of Education to detail his current policy on the exclusion of disruptive pupils from school. (AQW 2736/01)

Mr M McGuinness: The decision on whether to expel or suspend a pupil rests with a school and is made in line with its own discipline policy which will describe unacceptable behaviour. Any decision to suspend or expel a pupil must follow the procedures which are prescribed in legislation. My Department has issued guidance to schools on promoting positive behaviour and this contains approaches which schools can use in the management of poorly behaved pupils.

Sure Start Strategy

Mr Close asked the Minister of Education what plans he has to implement the Sure Start strategy. (AQW 2765/01)

Mr M McGuinness: Responsibility for the implementation of the Sure Start strategy falls within the remit of the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety.

Castle Gardens Primary School, Newtownards

Mr Hamilton asked the Minister of Education what plans he has for the use or disposal of the property which formerly housed Castle Gardens Primary School, Newtownards. (AQW 2766/01)

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. The Board is awaiting legal advice concerning the site and cannot proceed further until the position is clarified.

EMPLOYMENT AND LEARNING

Ministerial Visits Outside Northern Ireland

Mr Weir asked the Minister for Employment and Learning to detail the total expenditure for Ministerial visits outside Northern Ireland in each of the last 3 years. (AQW 2153/01)

The Minister for Employment and Learning (Ms Hanna): The total expenditure for such visits is as follows:

Financial Year	Total
1999/2000	£ 1,312.00
2000/2001	£53,256.00
2001/2002*	£ 5,720.00

(*covers the period up to February 2002).

These costs include all supporting officials.

Building Maintenance Budget

Mr Shannon asked the Minister for Employment and Learning what is the building maintenance budget for her department in each of the last 3 years. (AQW 2412/01)

Ms Hanna: Accommodation and Construction Division (ACD) within the Department of Finance and Personnel

hold the maintenance budget for office buildings and will respond in respect of these buildings.

The maintenance budget for specialised buildings held by my Department in each of the last 3 years is detailed below;

Building	Financial Year	Cost
Training Centres (9)	1999/2000	£651,135
Training Centres (9)	2000/01	£614,188
Felden Training Centre	2001/02	£412,530

Part-Time Work: Students

Mr Hilditch asked the Minister for Employment and Learning what assessment can she make in relation to part-time work available to students attending the proposed Hotel and Tourism degree course at Portrush Catering College during the off-season months, compared to the outlets surrounding the Jordanstown Campus and Greater Belfast area. (AQW 2534/01)

Ms Hanna: In the off-season months students are likely to take up part-time work opportunities all over Northern Ireland and indeed beyond. My Department does not collect information on this aspect of student life.

Relocation of the Hotel and Tourism Degree

Mr Hilditch asked the Minister for Employment and Learning what assessment can she make in relation to the proposed relocation of the Hotel and Tourism degree course to Portrush Catering College. (AQW 2535/01)

Ms Hanna: The location of provision within a university or a college of further education is a matter for the relevant institution to decide.

Training Providers

Dr Birnie asked the Minister for Employment and Learning what guidelines does she issue to training providers regarding the provision of completion bonuses in NVQII courses. (AQW 2689/01)

Ms Hanna: Training providers were informed by a Jobskills Memo issued on 18 May 1998 that bonus payments in respect of qualification achievement, would “no longer be paid to young people who enter or re-enter the programme on or after 1 June 1998.”

Dyslexia

Mr M Robinson asked the Minister for Employment and Learning what steps have been taken to support further and higher education students who suffer from dyslexia. (AQW 2750/01)

Ms Hanna: Students suffering from dyslexia attract extra funding for Colleges and Universities under the Department's funding mechanisms. FE Colleges receive further assistance through the Additional Support Fund which helps with the costs of providing technical support. Students in Higher Education are eligible for the Disabled Students' Allowance which can be used to finance the purchase of equipment and the assistance of non-medical helpers to support their studies.

My Department is also providing funding towards the establishment of a Register of Support Workers for Students with Specific Learning Difficulties. The project will create a secure internet database of professional and non-professional support workers who can be accessed quickly to act as part-time non-medical helpers.

Teacher Training Courses

Mr M Robinson asked the Minister for Employment and Learning to detail the number of students recruited to (a) primary; and (b) secondary teacher training courses in each year since 1995. (AQW 2751/01)

Ms Hanna: The table below sets out information on the number of students recruited to the first year of teacher training courses at Northern Ireland Institutions since 1995/96 academic year.

NUMBER OF STUDENTS RECRUITED TO THE FIRST YEAR OF TEACHER TRAINING COURSES¹ AT NORTHERN IRELAND HIGHER EDUCATION INSTITUTIONS BY TEACHING QUALIFICATION SOUGHT OVER A SIX YEAR PERIOD

Academic Year	Primary	Secondary	Total
2000/01	410	388	798
1999/00	382	368	750
1998/99	352	328	680
1997/98 ²	N/A	N/A	644
1996/97 ²	N/A	N/A	683
1995/96 ²	N/A	N/A	734

Note: This is defined by the Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA) as ‘On initial or pre-service teacher training course leading to qualified teacher status’

Higher Education Institutions in Northern Ireland were not required in this year to identify the education sector of the teaching qualification sought.

Rates of Support

Mr M Robinson asked the Minister for Employment and Learning to detail any changes to the rates of support for further and higher education students which will apply in the academic year 2002-03. (AQW 2752/01)

Ms Hanna: The increased rates for loans, grants and tuition fees for higher and further education students are detailed in tables which I have placed in the Assembly library.

Further Education Colleges: A Levels

Mr M Robinson asked the Minister for Employment and Learning to detail the number of secondary school students enrolled at further education colleges in each of the last 3 years in order to sit 'A' levels. (AQW 2753/01)

Ms Hanna: In the 1998-99 academic year there were a total of 396 recorded 'Link' enrolments on A-level courses at NI Further Education Institutions. This figure increased to 438 in 1999-00, but then decreased to 294 in 2000-01. (Link students are defined as full-time school pupils attending an FE College during school hours to undertake a programme of study.)

New Deal for Disabled People

Mr Gibson asked the Minister for Employment and Learning, pursuant to AQW 281/01, to provide an update on the support she is giving to help those with disabilities back into work. (AQW 2755/01)

Ms Hanna: My Department and the Department for Social Development continue to provide New Deal for Disabled People (NDDP) to assist people who are on incapacity benefits to gain employment. NDDP was enhanced in July 2001 with the introduction of a Job Broking service. In addition to NDDP, my Department through the Disablement Advisory Service and Careers Service provides a comprehensive range of support to assist people with disabilities to gain employment.

External Quality Assurance Regime

Dr Birnie asked the Minister for Employment and Learning to outline (a) if there will be any impact on higher education in light of the Quality Assurance Agency's review for higher education in England, published March 2002; and (b) if she was consulted by The Rt Hon Margaret Hodge, Minister of State for Lifelong Learning and Higher Education about this matter. (AQW 2767/01)

Ms Hanna: The new external quality assurance regime, announced recently by the Rt Hon Margaret Hodge, applies to England only. Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales had Observer status on the Task Group charged with developing the new method and the NI universities were included in each consultation exercise with the sector. It is now for each jurisdiction to develop its own quality assurance method taking account, in particular, of the need for a degree of consistency in quality assurance throughout the UK to enable benchmarking of provision. My Department will shortly be discussing the implications for Northern Ireland with the local universities.

Cultural Diversity Working Group

Mr Maskey asked the Minister for Employment and Learning if she has any plans to introduce anti-racism into the course-work of Further Education Colleges. (AQO 1085/01)

Ms Hanna: My Department is committed to the promotion of community relations, on a broad basis, in colleges. It has established the Cultural Diversity Working Group, which is tasked with addressing and advancing cultural diversity issues, including anti-racism, within the sector. The outcomes from the work of this group will inform provision in colleges. I am very aware of the need to include anti-racism within the consideration of this group given the number of ethnic communities and the need to set Northern Ireland issues in a wider international context.

Burns Report

Mr Fee asked the Minister for Employment and Learning what response she has made to the Burns Report. (AQO 1090/01)

Ms Hanna: I will have an opportunity later this month to discuss the Report with Mr McGuinness. Meanwhile, my officials are liaising closely with Department of Education officials on progress with the consultation process.

Taskforce on Long-Term Employability

Mr McMenamin asked the Minister for Employment and Learning when she anticipates the work of the Taskforce on Long-Term Employability to be completed. (AQO 1088/01)

Ms Hanna: Bi-lateral meetings with other Government Departments are still underway and the body of the report is being drafted. The Taskforce will take a view as to when the report will be finalised at its next meeting on 11 April.

West Belfast and Greater Shankill Task Forces

Mr Attwood asked the Minister for Employment and Learning how she proposes to respond to the recommendations of the two West Belfast and Greater Shankill Taskforce Reports. (AQO 1095/01)

Ms Hanna: The reports of the West Belfast and Greater Shankill Task Forces have made many wide-ranging recommendations which merit careful examination and which are relevant to the work of the Taskforce on Employability and Long-term Unemployment which I chair. I shall ensure that the matters relevant to the work of my Department are addressed and incorporated in the formal reply which the two sponsoring Departments, DETI and DSD, will issue to the Taskforces.

ENTERPRISE, TRADE AND INVESTMENT

State Aid: Electricity

Mr Hussey asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to make a statement on the European Commission decision that measures determined by the UK in favour of Northern Ireland Electricity (NIE) constitutes no state aid within the meaning of the EC Treaty (IP/02/322); and to give his assessment of the implications of this decision for energy costs. (AQW 2549/01)

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment (Sir Reg Empey): The Commission's decision relates to the State aid clearance of any levy on electricity consumers that might be introduced to recover any costs arising from the long term contracts between Northern Ireland Electricity (NIE) and the generators which became stranded as a result of the further opening of the electricity market in Northern Ireland to competition.

Stranded costs could arise in these circumstances since NIE's payment obligations to the generators under the contracts would remain unchanged even if those customers who were eligible to purchase electricity in the competitive market no longer obtained their supplies from NIE. In the absence of the introduction of a levy, across all customers, these costs would have to be borne by NIE's reduced customer base which would lead to an increase in prices for those customers. The Department is exploring ways in which the market opening might be expanded so as to avoid or minimise any stranded costs.

It is not possible to provide a more detailed assessment of the implications of the Commission's decision for energy costs, at this stage. The size of any stranded cost levy would depend upon, for example, the extent of further market opening, the level of migration by eligible customers to the competitive market, and the effect of any measures aimed at the alleviation of stranded costs.

Ionising Radiation

Dr Birnie asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to detail (a) any research his Department has on the effects of exposure to ionising radiation on unborn children in the workplace; and (b) the advice his Department gives to employers in workplaces where pregnant employees may be exposed to ionising radiation. (AQW 2637/01)

Sir Reg Empey: [a] The Health and Safety Executive for Northern Ireland (HSENI), one of the Department's NDPB's, is part sponsoring with the Health and Safety Executive in Great Britain (HSEGB) research into the effects of ionising radiations, entitled "Dose Constraints For Comforters and Carers". This research, which

includes some aspects of the effects of ionising radiation on unborn children, is to be completed by July 2002.

[b] It is a statutory requirement under the Ionising Radiations Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2000 for an employer to give advice to female employees who work with ionising radiation of the possible risks to the foetus. Additional guidance is given in the Approved Code of Practice "Work with Ionising Radiation" which accompanies these regulations and also in two other guidance documents published by HSEGB, i.e. "Working safely with ionising radiation - Guidelines for expectant or breastfeeding mothers" and "New and expectant mothers at work - a guide for employers".

Cross-Border Business Park

Mr McMenamin asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment if he would consider the setting up of a cross-border business park in West Tyrone/Strabane/Lifford through the IDB/IDA and include tax-free incentives to encourage inward investment. (AQO 1084/01)

Sir Reg Empey: A cross-border business park is one of the actions being considered under the Invest Northern Ireland / IDA pilot initiative, Invest Northwest, which is marketing the council areas of Derry City, Limavady, Strabane and Donegal as a single location for inward investment. Discussions are continuing about the feasibility of such a park and no decision has been taken on its location. However, Invest NI is also working with a private developer who is providing 30,000 sq ft of new business space at Orchard Road, Strabane to be ready by September this year.

In relation to incentives, some grants from Invest NI are already more tax beneficial than from the IDA eg capital grants.

Communications with Barbour Threads

Ms Lewsley asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment what communication he has had recently with the management of Barbour Threads. (AQO 1081/01)

Sir Reg Empey: Although I have had no direct communication with the company my officials at Invest Northern Ireland continue to maintain contact with the management of the company.

ENVIRONMENT

Planning Service Special Studies Unit

Mr Wells asked the Minister of the Environment to detail the average length of time taken by the Special

Studies Unit of the Planning Service to issue a substantive reply to letters from elected representatives.

(AQW 1906/01)

The Minister of the Environment (Mr Nesbitt): *[holding answer 5 March 2002]*: Planning Service does not know the average time taken to provide a substantive reply to correspondence from elected representatives, as we do not hold a central database to provide that information.

Correspondence received by the Special Studies Section relates mainly to specific planning applications or enforcement cases. This correspondence is handled through Planning Service's 20/20 computer system in a similar manner to all letters of objection and representation received by the Service. This correspondence is acknowledged and attached to the relevant case file and dealt with on a case by case basis.

The existing system for dealing with correspondence triggers substantive responses at the appropriate time, on the issue of a formal planning decision or on the resolution of enforcement cases. However, our current systems focus on individual cases and do not include a monitoring capacity to provide aggregated information on specific individuals or groups.

Townland Names

Mrs Carson asked the Minister of the Environment what he has done to encourage the use of townland names in written communications. (AQW 1968/01)

Mr Nesbitt: My department's policy is to facilitate the use of townland addresses when it has been notified of them. It will also reply to correspondence using the address given including the townland name.

Townland Names

Mrs Carson asked the Minister of the Environment how many local district councils have officially endorsed and encouraged the use of townland names.

(AQW 2065/01)

Mr Nesbitt: *[holding answer 5 March 2002]*: The Department of the Environment does not monitor the activities of district councils, in relation to the use of townland names. The issue of the use of townland names by district councils is not the responsibility of my department.

Wake up to Waste Roadshow

Mr Hussey asked the Minister of the Environment, pursuant to AQW 1886/01, to detail (a) the firm of PR Consultants which designed and directed the 'Wake up to Waste Roadshow'; and (b) the cost of this project.

(AQW 2254/01)

Mr Nesbitt: *[holding answer 12 March 2002]*: The 'Wake up to Waste Roadshow' was designed and directed by McCann Erickson (Belfast) Ltd, who have been awarded the advertising contract for the Department's Public Awareness and Information Campaign.

The projected cost of the 11 Roadshows is around £33,000. They are elements of a £1.5 million project, over the next 3 years, to raise public awareness throughout Northern Ireland on waste management issues.

All key shopping centres are able to calculate accurately weekly visitor numbers from electronic monitoring devices which detect all visitors entering the building.

It would not be appropriate to disclose publicly visitor figures for the selected shopping centres, for reasons of commercial sensitivity.

Fourteen other locations were investigated, but not selected to host the Roadshows. Again, for reasons of commercial sensitivity, it would not be appropriate to disclose publicly visitor figures for these locations.

There are currently no plans to make a modular version of it available in this phase of the public awareness campaign. However, this may be considered for subsequent phases.

Following discussions with the consultants, the Department has now allocated a portion of the media budget to the provision of transportable stands, with 'Wake Up to Waste' graphic material, for each District Council to use. These have already been delivered to every Council and can be used in Council offices, shopping centres, libraries, schools and conference venues.

It is not possible to provide details of individual Roadshow costs. They are a combination of both fixed and variable costs of set design, hire charges, the Roadshow team and venue space.

Wake up to Waste Roadshow

Mr Hussey asked the Minister of the Environment, pursuant to AQW 1886/01, to detail (a) the methodology of calculating visitor numbers to locations selected for the 'Wake up to Waste Roadshow'; and (b) the visitor figures to these locations suggested by such methodology. (AQW 2255/01)

Mr Nesbitt: The 'Wake up to Waste Roadshow' was designed and directed by McCann Erickson (Belfast) Ltd, who have been awarded the advertising contract for the Department's Public Awareness and Information Campaign.

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It is not possible to provide details of individual Roadshow costs. They are a combination of both fixed and variable costs of set design, hire charges, the Roadshow team and venue space.

Wake up to Waste Roadshow

Mr Hussey asked the Minister of the Environment, pursuant to AQW 1886/01, to state the visitor figures for other locations investigated but not selected to host the 'Wake up to Waste' roadshow. (AQW 2274/01)

Mr Nesbitt: The 'Wake up to Waste Roadshow' was designed and directed by McCann Erickson (Belfast) Ltd, who have been awarded the advertising contract for the Department's Public Awareness and Information Campaign.

The projected cost of the 11 Roadshows is around £33,000. They are elements of a £1.5 million project, over the next 3 years, to raise public awareness throughout Northern Ireland on waste management issues.

All key shopping centres are able to calculate accurately weekly visitor numbers from electronic monitoring devices which detect all visitors entering the building.

It would not be appropriate to disclose publicly visitor figures for the selected shopping centres, for reasons of commercial sensitivity.

Fourteen other locations were investigated, but not selected to host the Roadshows. Again, for reasons of commercial sensitivity, it would not be appropriate to disclose publicly visitor figures for these locations.

There are currently no plans to make a modular version of it available in this phase of the public awareness

campaign. However, this may be considered for subsequent phases.

Following discussions with the consultants, the Department has now allocated a portion of the media budget to the provision of transportable stands, with 'Wake Up to Waste' graphic material, for each District Council to use. These have already been delivered to every Council and can be used in Council offices, shopping centres, libraries, schools and conference venues.

It is not possible to provide details of individual Roadshow costs. They are a combination of both fixed and variable costs of set design, hire charges, the Roadshow team and venue space.

Wake up to Waste Roadshow

Mr Hussey asked the Minister of the Environment, pursuant to AQW 1886/01, if a modular version of the 'Wake up to Waste' roadshow will be available, and if so, when, and at what cost. (AQW 2275/01)

Mr Nesbitt: The 'Wake up to Waste Roadshow' was designed and directed by McCann Erickson (Belfast) Ltd, who have been awarded the advertising contract for the Department's Public Awareness and Information Campaign.

The projected cost of the 11 Roadshows is around £33,000. They are elements of a £1.5 million project, over the next 3 years, to raise public awareness throughout Northern Ireland on waste management issues.

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It is not possible to provide details of individual Roadshow costs. They are a combination of both fixed

and variable costs of set design, hire charges, the Roadshow team and venue space.

Wake up to Waste Roadshow

Mr Hussey asked the Minister of the Environment, pursuant to AQW 1886/01, to detail the cost, exclusive of design costs, of staging each of the 'Wake up to Waste' roadshows. (AQW 2276/01)

Mr Nesbitt: The 'Wake up to Waste Roadshow' was designed and directed by McCann Erickson (Belfast) Ltd, who have been awarded the advertising contract for the Department's Public Awareness and Information Campaign.

The projected cost of the 11 Roadshows is around £33,000. They are elements of a £1.5 million project, over the next 3 years, to raise public awareness throughout Northern Ireland on waste management issues.

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It is not possible to provide details of individual Roadshow costs. They are a combination of both fixed and variable costs of set design, hire charges, the Roadshow team and venue space.

Disposal of Dead Animals

Mr Berry asked the Minister of the Environment to detail each District Council's policy on the dumping of dead animals in the countryside. (AQW 2476/01)

Mr Nesbitt: [holding answer 21 March 2002]: Disposal of dead animals is the responsibility of the owner. However, where irresponsible owners choose to avoid the effort or cost of safe disposal and dump carcasses in

the countryside, this can lead to a public health nuisance. While the Department does not have the details of each District Council's policy it is, normally the responsibility of District Councils to take action.

Fallen animals are an agricultural rather than a controlled waste and their disposal is likely to become more difficult with restrictions to on-farm burial under the proposed EU Animal By-Product Regulation. However, my Department and the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development will be working together to develop a strategy for agricultural waste to be incorporated into the overall Northern Ireland Waste Management Strategy, at its first review point in 2003.

Disposal of Dead Animals

Mr Berry asked the Minister of the Environment what plans are in place to deal with the problem of dumping dead animals in the countryside. (AQW 2477/01)

Mr Nesbitt: [holding answer 21 March 2002]: Disposal of dead animals is the responsibility of the owner. However, where irresponsible owners choose to avoid the effort or cost of safe disposal and dump carcasses in the countryside, this can lead to a public health nuisance. While the Department does not have the details of each District Council's policy it is, normally the responsibility of District Councils to take action.

Fallen animals are an agricultural rather than a controlled waste and their disposal is likely to become more difficult with restrictions to on-farm burial under the proposed EU Animal By-Product Regulation. However, my Department and the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development will be working together to develop a strategy for agricultural waste to be incorporated into the overall Northern Ireland Waste Management Strategy, at its first review point in 2003.

CCTV

Mr Gibson asked the Minister of the Environment if he has any plans to provide funding to District Councils to enable them to install CCTV schemes. (AQW 2479/01)

Mr Nesbitt: The Department of the Environment is not providing any funding for CCTV schemes, nor has it any plans to do so. However, the Northern Ireland Office is making provision for community safety in the forthcoming Justice (NI) Bill. This legislation will enable the Secretary of State to develop, in consultation with all relevant bodies, a strategy for community safety, which may provide for the establishment of Community Safety Partnerships (CSPs) for each district council area. At present, the Department of the Environment is considering making legislation that would enable district councils to engage in community safety activities, including participation in CSPs. I understand that CSPs would be

charged with developing community safety action plans for local areas. Such plans may include the provision of CCTV in areas where there is a proven need. Funding of CSPs is the responsibility of the NIO.

National Trust: Funding

Mr Paisley Jnr asked the Minister of the Environment to detail (a) any funding provided to the National Trust in each of the last 10 years directly or indirectly by his Department or agencies; (b) the allocation of the funding; (c) the auditing process; and (d) the criteria for releasing funding. (AQW 2536/01)

Mr Nesbitt: The following funding has been provided to The National Trust over the last 5 years:

1997/1998	£513,265
1998/1999	£501,220
1999/2000	£437,590
2000/2001	£419,465
2001/2002	£129,913 (up to 28 February 2002).

Figures relating to the period before 1997/98 could only be provided at disproportionate cost, because of changes to the computerised accounting system at that time.

Funding was allocated on the following basis:

LAND ACQUISITION AND CONSERVATION SCHEMES GRANT-AID:

1997/1998	£498,957.71
1998/1999	£500,000
1999/2000	£423,590
2000/2001	£408,002.89
2001/2002	£116,075.14 (up to 28 February 2002).

HISTORIC BUILDINGS GRANT-AID:

1997/1998	£14,306.83
1998/1999	£1,220.06
1999/2000	£14,000
2000/2001	£11,462.50
2001/2002	£13,838.13 (up to 28 February 2002)

Funding provided to The National Trust by the Department is subject to both Internal Audit and Northern Ireland Audit Office scrutiny.

In relation to land acquisition and conservation schemes grant aid, funding is released on transfer of title of the lands in the case of land acquisition and on receipt of audited annual accounts, annual reports and management plans in the case of grant aid for management of the sites.

In relation to historic buildings grant aid, funding is released on successful completion of eligible works.

Pollution Regulations

Mr Weir asked the Minister of the Environment to detail (a) the number of incidents where the Department or any of its agencies has been found to be in breach of pollution regulations; and (b) the fines imposed relating to these in each of the last 5 years. (AQW 2584/01)

Mr Nesbitt: I understand that this Question is seeking information on the number of EU Directives on environmental issues which have not been transposed in Northern Ireland.

There are currently 16 Directives and 1 Regulation which have not been transposed or have been only partially transposed in Northern Ireland. These are:

Directive 89/369/EEC – Prevention of air pollution from new Municipal Waste Incineration Plants.

Directive 89/429/EEC - Prevention of air pollution from existing Municipal Waste Incineration Plants

Directive 94/66/EC - Limitations of emissions of certain pollutants into the air from large combustion plants

Directive 96/61/EC - Integrated Pollution Prevention and Control*

Directive 96/62/EC - Ambient Air Quality Management and Assessment

Directive 99/13/EC - Limitations of emissions of volatile organic compounds due to the use of organic solvents in certain activities and installations*

Directive 99/30/EC - Limit values for sulphur dioxide, nitrogen dioxide and oxides of nitrogen, particulate matter and lead in air*

Regulation (EC) No 2037/2000 - Substances that deplete the ozone layer*

Directive 75/439/EEC – Disposal of Waste Oils*

Directive 75/442/EEC - Waste Framework Directive*

Directive 99/30/EC - Limit values for sulphur dioxide, nitrogen dioxide and oxides of nitrogen, particulate matter and lead in air*

Directive 91/338/EEC - 10th amendment to Directive 76/769/EEC relating to restrictions on the marketing and use of certain dangerous substances and preparations*

Directive 94/60/EC - 14th amendment to 76/769/EEC

Directive 98/101/EC - Batteries and Accumulators containing certain dangerous substances*

Directive 99/31/EC - Landfill of Waste*

Directive 99/51/EC - 5th amendment to Annex 1 to Directive 76/769/EEC*

Directive 80/778/EEC - Quality of water intended for human consumption*

Directive 97/11/EC - Assessment of the effects of certain public and private projects on the environment

(This Directive has been largely transposed through planning legislation. Non-transposition element relates to agricultural water management abstraction schemes)*

The Commission has commenced or is pursuing infraction proceedings in the 12 cases above marked with an asterisk.

Directive 78/659/EEC – Quality of fresh waters needing protection or improvement in order to support fish life

Directive 91/271/EEC - Urban Waste Water Treatment

Directive 91/676/EEC - Protection of waters against pollution caused by nitrates from agricultural sources

Directive 91/689/EEC - Hazardous Waste

Directive 92/43/EEC - Conservation of Natural Habitats and of Wild Flora and Fauna

To date no fines have been imposed by the European Court of Justice in respect of any transposition case.

EU Water Quality Legislation

Mrs Carson asked the Minister of the Environment what is being done to comply with EU water quality legislation. (AQW 2596/01)

Mr Nesbitt: These Regulations, which incorporate the water quality requirements of the EC Drinking Water Directive, are implemented by the Drinking Water Inspectorate of Environment and Heritage Service (EHS).

In the case of the Water Quality Regulations (Northern Ireland) 1994, the Water Service of the Department for Regional Development, is responsible for the supply and distribution of public drinking water and for implementing the requirements of the Regulations. The Drinking Water Inspectorate of EHS has an independent responsibility to assess and regulate compliance against these standards. The Inspectorate publishes an annual report which provides an overview of drinking water quality in Northern Ireland.

Private water supplies are monitored by the Drinking Water Inspectorate in co-operation with the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development and the District Councils.

Urban Waste Water Treatment (UWWT) Directive 91/271/EEC

The Urban Waste Water Treatment (UWWT) Directive aims to reduce pollution of waters by domestic sewage and industrial waste water, collectively known as “urban waste water”. It is implemented here through the Urban Waste Water Treatment Regulations (NI) 1995, under which EHS sets standards for all discharges from Water Service Waste Water Treatment Works (WWTWs). The Directive itself sets minimum standards for the collection

and treatment of urban waste water, and requires that appropriate treatment should be in place at all WWTWs by the end of 2005.

Annual compliance is assessed and reported, on an UK-wide basis, to the European Commission. Water Service is advised of instances of non-compliance here and is responsible for ensuring that compliance is achieved.

A report on compliance is currently being prepared by the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (DEFRA). EHS will contribute.

EHS is also preparing a report to the Assembly Environment Committee on Water Service compliance, during 2001, with EHS standards including those set under the UWWT Directive.

Waters which are vulnerable to nutrient enrichment (eutrophication) may be designated as ‘sensitive’, under the terms of the UWWT Directive. Such designation requires nutrient reduction to be put in place at larger WWTWs. The catchments of the Erne and Lough Neagh were designated as ‘sensitive’ in 1994, and, following a further review by EHS, inner Belfast Lough, the Tidal Lagan and the Quoile Pondage area of Strangford Lough have also been designated as Sensitive Areas. EHS also recently reviewed the status of ‘Less Sensitive’ Areas, under the Directive and this resulted in the removal of this categorisation from 3 coastal areas: Portrush, Bangor and Kilkeel.

Council Directive 91/676/EEC; concerning the protection of waters against pollution caused by nitrates from agricultural sources (referred to as the Nitrates Directive)

This Directive is designed to protect surface waters and groundwaters against nitrate pollution from agriculture. It aims to reduce nitrate levels in areas where the water is polluted, and to prevent new pollution.

It is implemented here through the Protection of Water Against Agricultural Nitrate Pollution Regulations (Northern Ireland) 1996 (as amended by S.R. 1997 No. 256 and S.R. 1999 No. 3) and the Action Programme for Nitrate Vulnerable Zones Regulations (Northern Ireland) 1999.

In line with this Directive, three Nitrate Vulnerable Zones (NVZs), were designated in March 1999: one at Clogh Mills, Co Antrim and two near Comber, Co Down. Action Programmes were implemented in June 1999, setting out the measures which must be followed by those farming within these NVZs.

EHS is reviewing its water quality monitoring data, which includes steps to ensure that appropriate measures are in place to meet the requirements of the Directive.

Robust sampling for nitrates will continue for both groundwaters and surface waters: recent results from the monitoring of our groundwaters indicated elevated nitrate levels in a small number of boreholes. Further investigations

will take place in 2002 to determine whether these elevated results are indicative of general groundwater quality within the locality or are caused by local pollution (due to the possible contamination of the sample sites from the close proximity of farm areas/septic tanks).

Where the pollution of groundwaters is confirmed, candidate NVZs will be identified. EHS will also examine whether in 2002 eutrophic surface waters need to be included in designated NVZs.

Individual nitrate 'budgets' for the Lough Erne and Lough Neagh (excluding the Lower Bann) catchments, which have already been designated as 'Sensitive Areas' under the UWWT Directive, will be produced later this year. Where the agricultural contribution of nitrates to these catchments is greater than 20% of the total, the catchments will be identified as candidate NVZs.

Following this, a review of the eutrophication status of freshwaters, outside the current NVZ designations and the Sensitive Area designations, will be undertaken.

EHS recently completed a review of the eutrophic status of the five main sea loughs around our coast. The results show that the Quoile Pondage, near Downpatrick, may have to be identified as water affected by nitrate pollution, due to the contribution of agriculturally-derived nitrates.

EHS will consult interested parties (especially farmers) on proposals to designate any further NVZs.

The Shellfish Waters Directive (79/923/EEC)

Northern Ireland has nine designated shellfish waters, all of which are in sea loughs. They are given special protection under the Shellfish Waters Directive. All designated Shellfish Waters are monitored and action programmes have been developed for each site to ensure compliance with the Directive.

EHS is reviewing the number of designations with a view to designating more sites; the shellfish industry, government and the general public will be consulted.

Planning Service Consultations With Water Service

Mr Shannon asked the Minister of the Environment if he will liaise with his Ministerial colleague in the Department for Regional Development to ensure residential development can continue in Ards Peninsula in light of the upgrading of the sewage works in the villages of Ballywalter, Ballyhalbert, Ballygowan and Lisbane.

(AQW 2600/01)

Mr Nesbitt: Planning Service consults Water Service of the Department for Regional Development and Water Management Unit of Environment and Heritage Service as necessary on proposals for housing development.

When consulted by Planning Service my Department's Environment and Heritage Service seeks to identify the risk to the environment through assessment of the performance of the waste water treatment works (WWTW) and the sewerage system and also compliance with current and proposed Environment and Heritage Service and Urban Waste Water Treatment Directive standards.

In the locations referred to, all of the WWTWs are operating in excess of their capacity and Environment and Heritage Service has requested Planning Service that no further development be permitted until they have been upgraded.

Peter Robinson, Minister for Regional Development has advised that as part of the ongoing programme to upgrade wastewater treatment works to meet the requirements of the Urban Wastewater Treatment Regulations (NI) 1995, Water Service plans to commence the upgrading of the works in Ballywalter, Ballyhalbert, Ballygowan and Lisbane in 2004/05. This is of course subject to completion of all the required procedures, including planning approval, and the availability of the necessary resources at that time.

In order to seek to facilitate development, I have asked Planning Service to seek further advice from Environment and Heritage Service and Water Service on alternative or interim arrangements which might be applied to specific applications. These might include phasing of development, use of negative conditions attached to a planning consent to prevent development commencing pending a solution being put in place, or requests to the developer to contribute funding to possible solutions. You will appreciate that each case will have to be dealt with on its own merits. Where no alternative can be found, a refusal of planning permission would normally follow.

My officials will continue to liaise with officials in the Department for Regional Development on these matters. I would be happy to liaise with Minister for Regional Development on these matters also.

Council Planning Committees: Holding Veto

Mr K Robinson asked the Minister of the Environment, in the interests of democratising the planning process ahead of the lengthy consultation procedure involved in the Review of Public Administration, if he would consider giving Council Planning Committees a holding veto on all contentious planning applications until that review is completed and the consequent legislation introduced. (AQW 2620/01)

Mr Nesbitt: The Planning Service must consider planning applications within the existing legislation. Under Article 20 of the Planning (NI) Order 1991 and Article 15 of the Planning (General Development) Order (NI) 1993 the Department is required, before determining

an application for planning permission, to consult with the district council for the area in which the land is situated. A veto could not be given to Councils without legislative change. I am not persuaded, however, that there is a case for such legislative change pending the outcome of the Review of Public Administration. It is not possible to anticipate what the outcome of this Review will be.

Enforcement Officers and Cases

Mrs I Robinson asked the Minister of the Environment to detail (a) the number of enforcement officers currently working in each District Planning Office; (b) the number of enforcement cases currently being processed in each District Planning Office; and (c) the number of cases cleared by enforcement officers in each District Planning Office over the past year. (AQW 2627/01)

Mr Nesbitt: The number of posts purely devoted to enforcement within the Planning Service is 20. This is made up of 6 Higher Professional and Technology Officers (HPTOs), 8 Professional and Technology Officers (PTOs) and 6 Administrative Officers (AOs). All Divisions except Omagh and Londonderry have 1HPTO, 1PTO and 1 AO. Omagh and Londonderry each has an additional PTO to enable them to cover the Divisional Sub-Offices. In addition, a proportion of senior management in each Division is devoted to enforcement work.

Details of the number of cases currently being processed and the number of cases cleared by enforcement officers over the past year are set out below:

	Current Cases	Cleared Cases
Ballymena	295	259
Belfast	711	256
Craigavon	531	238
Downpatrick	469	163
Londonderry	408	370
Omagh	435	199
Total	2849	1485

Disposal of Abandoned Cars

Mrs I Robinson asked the Minister of the Environment, pursuant to AQW 1274/01, what obligations local government authorities will have following 1 April, with regard to the disposal of abandoned cars, in the light of EC End of Life Vehicles (ELV) Directive (2000/53/EC). (AQW 2628/01)

Mr Nesbitt: Under Article 30 of the Pollution Control and Local Government (NI) Order 1978, and subject to the other provisions of the Article, District Councils have a duty to remove abandoned vehicles. Article 31 of the Order empowers Councils to dispose of vehicles so removed, in such manner as they think fit.

It is not expected that implementation of the ELV Directive will impose any direct obligations on District Councils with regard to the removal or subsequent disposal of abandoned cars. However, following implementation of the ELV Directive, Councils exercising their powers to dispose of abandoned vehicles, whether through their own facilities or those provided by agreement with another person, will be required to do so in compliance with the requirements of the Directive. As acknowledged in the previous reply, this could lead to higher disposal costs.

However, because of the complexity of the issues involved and the need for further consultation in relation to systems and processes, the UK will not be in a position to implement the Directive by the implementation date of 21 April 2002. In the light of public consultation during 2001, discussions are continuing within Whitehall to determine the best legislative and implementation options. My officials are closely involved in those discussions. It is therefore unlikely that the Directive will be transposed into GB or NI law before mid-2003.

Kyoto Protocol on Climate Change

Mr McGrady asked the Minister of the Environment what discussions he has held with his Ministerial counterpart in Whitehall about the date on which the UK Government will eventually ratify the Kyoto Protocol on Climate Change. (AQW 2630/01)

Mr Nesbitt: The policy of this issue is reserved to the UK Government and as such the devolved administrations have been consulted in writing on the matter.

DEFRA has informed the Department that the Kyoto Protocol has been laid before Parliament for a sitting period of 21 days after which time the Foreign Secretary will authorise the Ratification process. This is due to take place on or after 19 April 2002.

Sellafield

Mr McGrady asked the Minister of the Environment what representations he has made to his Ministerial counterpart in Whitehall regarding the need for the nuclear reprocessing plant at Sellafield to be properly decommissioned and closed down; and to make a statement. (AQW 2631/01)

Mr Nesbitt: I met Mr Michael Meacher at the British-Irish Council (Environment Sectoral Group) meeting in Edinburgh on 25 February 2002, which he chaired. At that meeting, I emphasised that there was widespread concern in Northern Ireland about emissions from Sellafield, despite the fact that our extensive monitoring programme shows that such emissions are of negligible radiological significance to the Northern Ireland population.

I informed the meeting of the recent motion of the Northern Ireland Assembly on Sellafield and pointed out that the motion enjoyed cross-party support.

I also said that the British-Irish Council was the most appropriate forum for making such representations about Sellafield. Mr Meacher recognised the concerns which I had expressed and committed himself to bringing forward a UK Strategy on Radioactive Discharges within the next few months.

As you know, my predecessor, Sam Foster, wrote to Margaret Beckett seeking assurances that safety and security issues were assessed as part of the MOX decision-making process. In its reply of 23 January 2002, the Department of Trade and Industry (which is responsible for energy issues) gave assurances that:

1. The Office for Civil Nuclear Security had satisfied itself about security, not only of the MOX plant, but of the Sellafield site as a whole;
2. Following a review, security had been enhanced at nuclear sites since 11 September 2001; and
3. Safety arrangements for the transportation of nuclear material to and from Sellafield were adequate to protect public safety against any consequences of a terrorist attack or sabotage.

Environment Protection Agency

Mr McGrady asked the Minister of the Environment what further progress has been made towards the establishment of an Environment Protection Agency; and to make a statement. (AQW 2632/01)

Mr Nesbitt: Operational responsibility for environmental protection lies with the Environment and Heritage Service (EHS) of my Department. I have no plans at present to establish an Environment Protection Agency.

Kyoto Protocol on Climate Change: USA

Mr McGrady asked the Minister of the Environment what representations he has made to the Administration in the United States of America regarding their need to reduce greenhouse gases to 7% by 2010; to ratify the Kyoto Protocol on Climate Change; and to make a statement. (AQW 2633/01)

Mr Nesbitt: I have made no representations to the Administration in the United States of America with regard to the Kyoto Protocol.

Any decision to make representations to other parties to the Protocol would be for the United Kingdom Government.

However, in any future discussions on climate change with representatives of other administrations, I will

emphasise the importance of industrialised countries doing all that they can to reduce emissions of greenhouse gases.

Pollution Incidents: Agricultural Slurry

Mr Weir asked the Minister of the Environment to detail (a) the number of pollution incidents involving agricultural slurry; and (b) the fines imposed relating to these incidents in each of the last 5 years.

(AQW 2647/01)

Mr Nesbitt:

- (a) Over the 5 year period, from 1996 to 2000, the Department's Environment and Heritage Service has recorded **704** substantiated pollution incidents involving agricultural slurry. These figures include cattle slurry, pig slurry and poultry waste. Cattle slurry has been the most prominent pollution category of the three, over this 5 year period.
- (b) **79** prosecutions have been taken by the Department in respect of incidents involving agricultural slurry that occurred during this period, resulting in fines imposed by the courts totalling **£28,595**.

The breakdown of these figures is as follows:

Year	Incidents	Prosecutions	Fines £
1996	159	22	7,025
1997	151	18	5,320
1998	131	21	5,725
1999	139	10	7,750
2000	124	8	2,775

The fines in any year will not necessarily relate to incidents occurring in that year. The relevant statistics are not yet available for the year 2001.

Telecommunications Companies: Compulsory Mast Sharing

Mr McLaughlin asked the Minister of the Environment if he has any plans to introduce powers to make mast sharing by Telecommunications companies compulsory. (AQW 2662/01)

Mr Nesbitt: I have no plans to introduce legislation to make mast sharing by Telecommunications companies compulsory. I will, however, be publishing very shortly a new Planning Policy Statement, PPS 10, on telecommunications to accompany the introduction of new legislation into the Assembly which will abolish the current telecommunications 'Prior Approval' system and require full planning permission for all telecommunications development.

The sharing of masts will be a strong feature in the Department's new policy. For any new mast applicants

will reasonably be expected to provide evidence that they have considered the possibility of erecting antennas on an existing building, mast or other structure and indicate why this approach has not been pursued. This planning policy approach is backed up by conditions in the licences granted by the Department of Trade and Industry which already require Code System Operators to explore the possibility of sharing an existing radio site.

In addition the Telecommunications (Interconnection) Regulations 1997 provide that, in any instance where there is a dispute regarding the sharing of an existing mast or site, either party may ask the Director General of Telecommunications to resolve the matter. If the Director General considers it appropriate, he may direct the relevant telecommunications operators to share. The powers available under the Regulations do not, however, cover the refusal by a third party, such as a landowner, to allow shared use of a mast.

EU Water Quality Directives

Mrs Carson asked the Minister of the Environment how many EU water quality directives affect Northern Ireland. (AQW 2666/01)

Mr Nesbitt: There are 19 European Commission Directives which impact on water quality throughout the European Union including Northern Ireland. The Directives are set out below using the Commission's legislative citations:

- 1) 75/440/EEC of 16 June 1975 concerning the quality required of surface water intended for the abstraction of drinking water;
- 2) 76/160/EEC of 8 December 1976 concerning the quality of bathing water;
- 3) 76/464/EEC of 4 May 1976 on pollution caused by certain dangerous substances discharged into the aquatic environment. In addition to this 'parent' Directive there are five 'daughter' Directives which are listed below as Nos 4 – 8.
- 4) 82/176/EEC of 22 March 1982 on limit values and quality objectives for mercury discharges by the chlor-alkali electrolysis industry;
- 5) 83/513/EEC of 26 September 1983 on limit values and quality objectives for cadmium discharges;
- 6) 84/491/EEC of 9 October 1984 on limit values and quality objectives for discharges of hexachlorocyclohexane;
- 7) 86/280/EEC of 12 June 1986 on limit values and quality objectives for discharges of certain dangerous substances included in List 1 of the Annex to the Directive;

- 8) 88/347/EEC of 16 June 1988 amending Annex II to Directive 86/280/EEC on limit values and quality objectives for discharges of certain dangerous substances included in List 1 of the Annex to Directive 76/464/EEC;
- 9) 78/659/EEC of 18 July 1978 on the quality of fresh waters needing protection or improvement in order to support fish life;
- 10) 79/869/EEC of 9 October 1979 concerning the methods of measurement and frequencies of sampling and analysis of surface water intended for the abstraction of drinking water;
- 11) 79/923/EEC of 30 October 1979 on the quality required of shellfish waters;
- 12) 80/68/EEC of 17 December 1979 on the protection of groundwater against pollution caused by certain dangerous substances;
- 13) 80/778/EEC of 15 July 1980 relating to the quality of water intended for human consumption;
- 14) 87/217/EEC of 19 March 1987 on the prevention and reduction of environmental pollution by asbestos;
- 15) 91/271/EEC of 21 May 1991 concerning urban waste water treatment;
- 16) 91/676/EEC of 12 December 1991 concerning the protection of waters against pollution caused by nitrates from agricultural sources;
- 17) 91/692/EEC of 23 December 1991 standardizing and rationalizing reports on the implementation of certain Directives relating to the environment;
- 18) 98/83/EEC of 3 November 1998 on the quality of water intended for human consumption; (This revises and will replace Directive 80/778/EEC – No.13 on this list - when implemented at end of 2003) and
- 19) 2000/60/EC of 23 October 2000 establishing a framework for Community action in the field of water policy. This major Directive is commonly known as the Water Framework Directive and, when fully implemented, will subsume some of the older water quality Directives.

Hazard Perception Test

Mr Beggs asked the Minister of the Environment when will the new hazard perception test be included in the driving theory test. (AQW 2673/01)

Mr Nesbitt: The Driver and Vehicle Testing Agency of my Department expects the new hazard perception test to be included in the driving theory test by December 2002.

Telephone Bookings

Mr Beggs asked the Minister of the Environment when will telephone bookings for MOT tests be available from the Driver and Vehicle Testing Agency.

(AQW 2674/01)

Mr Nesbitt: The Agency expects the telephone booking service to be available from August 2002.

Monitoring of Shellfish Beds

Mr K Robinson asked the Minister of the Environment if the current arrangements for the monitoring of shellfish beds in Larne Lough compare favourably the equitably with the procedures currently in place in (a) Scotland; and (b) the Republic of Ireland; and to detail any deviations in monitoring requirements and standards in these three locations.

(AQW 2695/01)

Mr Nesbitt: Monitoring of shellfish beds is carried out under two Directives - the Shellfish Waters Directive and the Shellfish Hygiene Directive. My Department's Environment and Heritage Service, as the competent authority under the Shellfish Waters Directive, monitors water quality in Larne Lough as part of the requirements of the Shellfish Waters Directive (79/923/EEC). Monitoring is carried out quarterly as required by the Directive. Results to date indicate that water quality in the designated shellfish water meets the imperative standards set down in the Directive. The monitoring requirements under the Directive apply equally in Scotland and the Republic of Ireland.

The Shellfish Hygiene Directive (91/492/EEC) deals with the quality of shellfish flesh for human consumption. Monitoring of the bacteriological quality of shellfish flesh under this Directive is the responsibility of the Food Standards Agency (FSA) of the Department of Health, Social Service and Public Safety. Monitoring of shellfish waters for the presence of toxin producing algae which may affect shellfish is a matter for the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development (DARD).

A monitoring programme for contaminants such as heavy metals and organohalogens in shellfish flesh has been in place since 1993. Contaminant monitoring is carried out bi-annually to ensure that any seasonal variations are accounted for. The programme is jointly co-ordinated by DARD, the FSA and EHS and meets the monitoring requirements of both Directives.

Water Quality in Larne Lough

Mr K Robinson asked the Minister of the Environment to detail (a) the liaison that currently exists between his officials, officials in the Environmental Health Office of Larne Borough Council and officials in the Food Standards Agency, in the monitoring of water quality levels in Larne Lough; and (b) the impact of decisions made by

each of these agencies upon the commercial shellfish industry in the Lough.

(AQW 2696/01)

Mr Nesbitt: (a) There is no direct liaison between my officials and officials in either the Environmental Health Office of Larne Borough Council or the Food Standards Agency in relation to the monitoring of water quality in Larne Lough. Responsibility for carrying out this monitoring lies solely with the Environment and Heritage Service (EHS) of my Department.

However, EHS is currently co-operating with officials from the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development (DARD) and the Food Standards Agency (FSA) in a joint programme monitoring contaminants in shellfish flesh. This monitoring programme fulfils part of the responsibilities of EHS under the Shellfish Waters Directive (79/923/EEC). Liaison also takes place directly between the FSA and officials in the Environmental Health Office of Larne Borough Council in the context of their respective roles and responsibilities for monitoring the bacteriological quality of shellfish flesh for the purposes of the Shellfish Hygiene Directive (91/492/EEC).

(b) The FSA is responsible for considering the public health implications of the monitoring carried out under the Shellfish Hygiene Directive and can impose bans on the harvesting of shellfish from affected areas.

Larne Lough and Islandmagee: Visits

Mr K Robinson asked the Minister of the Environment what plans he has to visit the area that includes Larne Lough and Islandmagee to acquaint himself with the pressures impinging on this environmentally sensitive area and its associated zones of special scientific interest.

(AQW 2697/01)

Mr Nesbitt: I have currently no plans to visit the area that includes Larne Lough and Islandmagee. I am aware that there have been a number of contacts in recent years between my officials in the Environment and Heritage Service and local groups including the Friends of Larne Lough, concerning a range of environmental issues.

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 relating to Larne Lough.

Residential and Marina Development in Larne

Mr K Robinson asked the Minister of the Environment to outline (a) the date that the planning application for Residential and Marina Development at Larne was received; (b) the date Larne Borough Council was consulted; (c) the date the Council's decision on the matter

was recorded; and (d) when a planning determination will be made. (AQW 2698/01)

Mr Nesbitt: I refer the Member to my reply to AQW 2101/01, to you, which was answered on 1 March 2002.

Recycling Vehicles

Mr M Robinson asked the Minister of the Environment what goals have been set for the recycling of vehicles which have reached the end of their useful life.

(AQW 2699/01)

Mr Nesbitt: The EC End of Life Vehicles (ELV) Directive (2000/53/EC) aims to reduce the amount of waste arising from scrapped vehicles.

In particular, the Directive sets targets for the reuse, recycling and recovery of materials and components; requires manufacturers to design vehicles with reuse and recyclability in mind; requires the setting up of collection and dismantling systems; and sets standards for dismantlers and scrap metal recyclers.

Article 7 of the Directive sets targets for economic operators to reuse, recover and recycle 85% of all ELVs by January 2006 and 95% by January 2015.

EU Member States are required to transpose the Directive into national legislation by 21 April 2002.

The UK will not be in a position to transpose the Directive by this date. Following public consultation in 2001, discussions are continuing between the UK Government and the devolved administrations on the possible legislative options. My officials are closely involved in these discussions. There will also be a need for further public consultation in relation to a number of issues relating to implementation. It is therefore unlikely that the Directive will be transposed into GB and NI law before mid 2003.

Larne Lough: Sewage

Mr K Robinson asked the Minister of the Environment to give his assessment of the level of treatment of sewage in the vicinity of Larne Lough and to indicate if tertiary treatment is included in any of the current or proposed schemes. (AQW 2717/01)

Mr Nesbitt: Standards for sewage discharges into Larne Lough are set by the Environment and Heritage Service (EHS) of my Department at levels to ensure that the water quality standards required by relevant EC Directives, and EHS targets for the quality of coastal waters, are met. It is the responsibility of the Water Service of the Department for Regional Development (DRD) to provide the treatment capacity necessary to achieve these standards.

Sewage from the town of Larne is currently discharged untreated through a sea outfall close to the mouth of

Larne Lough. Under the Urban Waste Water Treatment Regulations, which implement the EU Urban Waste Water Treatment Directive, the discharge was required to have secondary treatment from 31 December 2000. EHS has set standards for the discharge, based on the requirements of the Directive and the Regulations. I understand from DRD that the Water Service is seeking to implement a capital works scheme for Larne to provide treatment to comply with the EHS standards. It is planned to commence the capital works during 2002, subject to planning permission and finance being available. A final decision on how the discharge standards are to be achieved has not yet been made, and discussions are continuing between EHS and the Water Service on whether secondary or tertiary treatment will be required.

There are other Waste Water Treatment Works in the area at Ballycarry, which currently provides secondary treatment, and Ballystrudder, which currently provides primary treatment. I understand that Water Service is considering plans to pump the sewage from Ballystrudder to the Ballycarry Works for secondary treatment. This would bring the Ballystrudder discharges into line with the requirements of the Directive and Regulations.

There are smaller Works at Magheramorne and Glynn. I am advised that the Water Service proposes to pump sewage from these works to the new works at Larne for treatment.

A number of private homes in the Millbay area use septic tanks. The Water Service has commissioned a consultant's report on the future provision of sewage treatment in this area.

Housing Development: Town Hill, Saintfield

Lord Kilclooney asked the Minister of the Environment to outline (a) the number of letters of opposition to the proposed development at Tower Hill, Saintfield (ref R/02/0039/09) which have been received; (b) that each letter will be taken into consideration by the Planning Service; (c) the date the planning application was received; (d) the result of the consultation with Down District Council; and (e) the date when a decision will be made.

(AQW 2719/01)

Mr Nesbitt: Sixty letters of objection to the application for planning permission for a housing development at Town Hill, Saintfield have been received.

The application was received on 14 January 2002 and it is not possible to indicate when a decision will be made as consultations with other statutory Agencies are not complete as yet.

My Department has not yet consulted Down District Council and will not be in a position to present an opinion to the Down District Council for discussion until all consultation responses have been received.

Finally I assure you that issues raised in all letters of objection received in relation to the planning application are carefully considered before an opinion on the application is reached.

European Recycling Directives

Mr Gibson asked the Minister of the Environment to make a statement regarding the implementation of European Recycling Directives. (AQW 2749/01)

Mr Nesbitt: Northern Ireland has made significant progress towards implementing European Recycling Directives.

The Producer Responsibility Obligations (Packaging Waste) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 1999 came into operation on 1 June 1999 as a result of the first of the 'producer responsibility' Directives, the Packaging and Packaging Waste Directive (94/62/EC). The Directive aims to decrease the amount of packaging waste going to landfill sites. Similar Regulations were introduced in Great Britain in 1997.

The Northern Ireland Packing Regulations impose on producers obligations to recover and recycle packaging waste in order to attain targets set in the Packaging Waste Directive. My Department issued a consultation document on 4 March 2002 seeking views on proposals to increase these targets for 2002.

The European Commission has carried out a review of the Directive and is proposing a substantial increase to recovery and recycling targets for Member States in 2006. A consultation paper will issue in Northern Ireland in due course seeking views on these proposals. The End of Life Vehicles (ELV) Directive (2000/53/EC) aims to reduce the amount of waste arising from scrap vehicles, and in particular, sets targets for reuse, recycling and recovery. Under Article 7 of the Directive, economic operators must meet reuse, recovery and recycling targets ("recycling targets") of 85% of all ELVs by January 2006 and 95% by January 2015.

Subject to consultation, legislation will be introduced in Northern Ireland to transpose the requirements of the Directive. The transposition date is likely to be mid 2003.

Pigeon Cull: Priory, Newtownards

Mr Shannon asked the Minister of the Environment to provide funds to cull feral pigeons at the Priory in Newtownards, in light of the noise and health problems they generate. (AQW 2768/01)

Mr Nesbitt: Newtownards Priory is a monument in the ownership of the Environment and Heritage Service (EHS) of my Department. I understand that some 40 feral pigeons roost there regularly. Although all wild birds have some legal protection throughout Northern Ireland,

it is permissible to cull feral pigeons for public health purposes. This culling may be done under the terms, and subject to conditions of, a general licence issued annually by the EHS.

Ards Borough Council has the statutory responsibility for preserving public health, but I am content that, in this case, it is appropriate for the Department, in its capacity as the landowner, to incur the cost of culling the pigeons.

EHS has therefore offered to pay the Council to undertake this work.

Sellafield Discharges

Mr McLaughlin asked the Minister of the Environment, in light of the increased levels of technetium-99 being found in seaweed off the coast of Norway and the statement by the Prime Minister of Norway, Brende Borge, for political and legal action to stop the discharges of this substance into the sea from the Sellafield nuclear plant, if he has any plans to meet with Prime Minister Borge to discuss the effects of British nuclear discharges into the Irish Sea. (AQW 2795/01)

Mr Nesbitt: I have no plans to meet with the Norwegian Prime Minister to discuss this matter. I understand that very low levels of Technetium 99 of Sellafield origin can be detected in seaweed and seawater in Norwegian waters; and that the Norwegian Government has expressed its concerns to the UK Government. International relations on issues of this nature are a matter for the UK Government.

Sellafield discharges are an agenda item for meetings of the British-Irish Council (Environment Sectoral Group). I will continue to emphasise at these meetings the need to reduce Technetium 99 discharges to sea.

I understand that the Environment Agency intends to revise the authorisation to discharge radioactivity into the Irish Sea in the near future. This is thought likely to result in a very significant reduction in Technetium-99 discharges.

I appreciate that the current levels of discharge of Technetium-99 have led to some public disquiet. It is re-assuring therefore that my Department's comprehensive programme for monitoring Sellafield discharges demonstrates that, even at prevailing levels, they are of negligible radiological significance.

Sellafield Discharges

Mr McLaughlin asked the Minister of the Environment if he can inform the Assembly of the current levels of technetium-99 in seaweed off the coast of Ireland. (AQW 2796/01)

Mr Nesbitt: The Department of the Environment has had a very comprehensive monitoring programme in place

since the 1970s to assess the impact on the Northern Ireland coastline of discharges from Sellafield into the Irish Sea.

The results of monitoring, including the current levels of Technetium-99 are published in the following reports:

Report of the Chief Alkali Inspector produced by the Environment and Heritage Service; Radioactivity in Food and the Environment (RIFE) published by the Food Standards Agency and the Scottish Environment Protection Agency; and The Northern Ireland Abstract of Statistics.

Copies of these reports can be found in the Assembly Library and the Report of the Chief Alkali Inspector can also be found on the Environment and Heritage Service website, www.ehsni.gov.uk. The RIFE report is on the Food Standards Agency website www.foodstandards.gov.uk/multimedia/PDFS/Rife6.

Results to date indicate that levels of contamination are of negligible radiological significance to the Northern Ireland population. The Technetium-99 levels detected in nephrops, lobster and edible seaweed during 2000 were 60, 60 and 19 becquerals per kilogramme (wet) respectively. These are well below the European Commission's intervention level for food stuffs of 1000 becquerals per kilogramme.

Implications of Climate Change

Mr McClarty asked the Minister of the Environment when will the results of the Northern Ireland Scoping Study on the Impacts of Climate Change be published.
(AQW 2887/01)

Mr Nesbitt: A Report entitled "Implications for Climate Change for Northern Ireland: Informing Strategy Development" was published today.

This Report identifies the key stakeholders in Northern Ireland who will be most affected by climate change and outlines the implications of climate change impacts on the economy and the environment and the adaptation measures that may be necessary.

The Report represents a first step towards developing a Northern Ireland strategy for climate change impacts and will enable NI to play its full role in the policies for climate change currently being developed on a UK, European and world-wide basis.

Climate change is one of the areas identified for enhanced cross-border co-operation through the British Irish Council (Environment Sectoral Group). The Report will also inform work in this area.

This is a technical Report and a summary is being prepared for a wider distribution.

Copies of the Report are available from the Business Office, Parliament Buildings.

FINANCE AND PERSONNEL

Decentralised Administration

Mr Gibson asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel what plans he has to ensure that all areas of Northern Ireland enjoy the benefits of a decentralised administration.
(AQW 2582/01)

The Minister of Finance and Personnel (Dr Farren): I am conscious of the contribution that public sector jobs can make to the economic and social development of local communities. However, until the conclusion of the strategic review of Civil Service office accommodation, which includes an examination of the scope for decentralisation of Civil Service jobs, it would be wrong to prejudge the outcome or to speculate as to the locations that might be involved in any subsequent dispersal of Civil Service jobs. On 11 March 2002, I announced the issue of an interim report on the accommodation review for public consultation and this was made available to all Members on that day.

Reduction in Rates: Community Halls

Mr Kennedy asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel to detail the criteria by which community halls may receive a reduction in rates.
(AQW 2585/01)

Dr Farren: The current legislation permits a measure of rate exemption on any hall where the wider community uses its facilities. Typically uses such as Sunday schools, community based youth clubs, OAP clubs, playgroups and church meetings are considered 'charitable' and apportioned out as exempt. The degree of exemption available is in direct proportion to the use of the facility for charitable and broad community purposes. There is no ceiling on the level of exemption available and a number of community halls already enjoy a substantial element of rate exemption on these grounds.

Local Strategy Partnerships: Political Representation

Mr Wells asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel to give a detailed breakdown of the political affiliation of the District Council representatives on each of the Local Strategy Partnerships.
(AQW 2597/01)

Dr Farren: In accordance with the requirements of the PEACE II Operational Programme the Special EU Programmes Body as Managing Authority for the Programme was responsible for overseeing the establishment of the 26 Local Strategy Partnerships (LSPs) and for ensuring that the process for nomination to them was open and transparent and that there was agreement at local level. A total of 627 Members are currently serving on the Local Strategy Partnerships of which 154 are District

Council Area	Total Lsp Membership	Total Council Membership	Political Parties								
			UUP	SDLP	DUP	SF	ALL	UUAP	PUP	IND	UKUP
Antrim	23	5	2	1	1	1	0	0	0	0	0
Ards	22	6	2	0	2	0	2	0	0	0	0
Armagh	27	5	2	1	1	1	0	0	0	0	0
Ballymena	24	6	2	1	3	0	0	0	0	0	0
Ballymoney	20	5	1	1	3	0	0	0	0	0	0
Banbridge	26	5	2	1	1	0	0	0	0	1	0
Belfast	28	7	1	1	1	2	1	0	1	0	0
Carrickfergus	20	5	1	0	2	0	2	0	0	0	0
Castlereagh	28	10	1	1	5	0	2	0	0	1	0
Coleraine	18	3	1	1	1	0	0	0	0	0	0
Cookstown	18	5	1	1	1	2	0	0	0	0	0
Craigavon	16	4	1	1	1	1	0	0	0	0	0
Derry City	28	7	0	4	1	2	0	0	0	0	0
Down	26	7	2	4	0	1	0	0	0	0	0
Fermanagh	28	7	2	2	0	3	0	0	0	0	0
Larne	25	4	1	1	1	0	1	0	0	0	0
Limavady	28	6	1	2	1	1	0	1	0	0	0
Lisburn	28	8	3	1	1	1	1	0	0	1	0
Magherafelt	20	4	0	1	1	1	0	0	0	1	0
Moyle	24	4	1	1	1	0	0	0	0	1	0
Newry	28	8	2	3	0	3	0	0	0	0	0
Newtownabbey	24	8	3	1	3	0	0	0	0	1	0
North Down	22	6	2	0	1	0	1	0	0	1	1
Omagh	26	7	1	2	1	2	0	0	0	1	0
South Tyrone	22	5	1	1	1	1	0	0	0	1	0
Strabane	28	7	1	2	1	3	0	0	0	0	0
Totals	627	154	37	35	35	25	10	1	1	9	1
% of Total LSP Membership		24.6	5.9	5.6	5.6	4.0	1.6	0.2	0.2	1.4	0.2

Council representatives. These include: 37 UUP, 35 SDLP, 35 DUP, 25 SF, 10 ALL, 1 UUAP, 1 PUP, 9 IND, 1 UKUP. A detailed breakdown of the political affiliation of District Council representatives for each Local Strategy Partnership is set out in the table above.

Official Cars

Mr K Robinson asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel to detail (a) those Ministers that have been using a contracted-out official car service; (b) what this has cost individually for each Minister over the past 2 years; (c) those Ministers that have been using the in-house official car service; and (d) how much this has cost individually for each Minister over the past 2 years. (AQW 2598/01)

Dr Farren: In relation to those Ministers whose transportation requirements have been the responsibility of the Department of Finance & Personnel's Centralised Transport Branch, the following arrangements have applied within the last 2 years:

OFMDFM	Deputy First Minister: In-House Official Car
	Junior Minister to First Minister: In-House Official Car
	Junior Minister to Deputy First Minister: Contractor's Car
DARD	In-House Official Car
DCAL	Contractor's Car
DEL	Contractor's Car to 21.10.01
	In-House Official Car from 22.10.01 – 13.12.01
	Contractor's Car from 14.12.01
DETI	In-House Official Car
DOE	Contractor's Car to 21.10.01
	In-House Official Car from 22.10.01
DFP	Contractor's Car to 21.10.01
	In House Official Car from 22.10.01
DRD	Contractor's Car 27.7.00 – 24.10.01
DSD	Contractor's Car

Information on the cost of provision of this service for each Minister/Department, for the 2 year period requested, can only be provided at disproportionate cost.

Strategic Spending Priorities: 2002-03

Mr S Wilson asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel what consultations he is having regarding strategic spending priorities for 2002-03.

(AQW 2657/01)

Dr Farren: There will be a number of phases of consultation in the preparation of both the Programme for Government and the Budget 2002 which will identify the Executive's key policy priorities and associated strategic spending priorities for 2002-03 and beyond. In preparing its Position Report for publication in late May, the Executive will take account of initial comments from Assembly Committees in relation to departmental contributions. The Position Report will also seek views on the overarching priorities and key policy areas that might be addressed in the Programme for Government. Over the Summer the Position Report will be the subject of consultation with Committees and views will also be sought from other key local interests. The draft Programme for Government and draft Budget, which will be informed by feedback from the Position Report, will be presented to the Assembly on 23rd September and this will be followed by formal consultation (including on the equality aspects of both documents) with Assembly Committees and the wider public. The comments received will be taken into account in the preparation of the final Programme for Government and Budget 2002 in December.

NICS Recruitments

Dr Birnie asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel to outline the percentage of new recruits to the Northern Ireland Civil Service in (a) 1999-2000; and (b) 2000-01 which were (i) male/female; and (ii) Catholic/ Protestant.

(AQW 2691/01)

Dr Farren: The information is as follows:

	%		%	
	Male	Female	Protestant	Roman Catholic
1999/2000	48	52	45.6	47.3
2000/2001	41	59	48.0	46.3

The figures include casual and industrial staff: community background figures exclude staff whose community background is not determined.

Aggregate Tax

Mr Gallagher asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel for an update on his negotiations concerning the aggregate tax; and to make a statement. (AQW 2707/01)

Dr Farren: Aggregates tax is an excepted matter and HM Treasury (Customs & Excise) has responsibility for

implementation. The Treasury remains committed to the timetable announced in the Pre-Budget Report (PBR November 2001) with the tax being implemented from 1 April 2002. Virgin aggregate will be subject to the tax at £1.60 per tonne, whereas aggregate used in processing in Northern Ireland will be exempt from the tax in the first year (2002/03) and thereafter will be phased in on an incremental basis, with full implementation envisaged by 2007/08. This is subject to State Aid approval by the European Commission and although not yet granted, HM Treasury have given assurances that the first-year exemption will be backdated to the introduction of the tax on 1 April 2002.

My officials are currently involved in negotiations with industry representatives to produce a draft strategy, which will outline an alternative to that proposed in the Pre Budget report. Once this draft strategy has been agreed with the industry I propose to correspond with HM Treasury outlining the proposals and seek agreement to take the case forward to the European Commission.

HEALTH, SOCIAL SERVICES AND PUBLIC SAFETY

Official Correspondence

Lord Kilclooney asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety if she forbids the use of the term 'Northern Ireland' in official correspondence from her Department; and to make a statement.

(AQW 1799/01)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety (Ms de Brún): Whilst it is not a term which I personally use there is no restriction on civil servants in the department using it in official correspondence.

Cé nach téarma é a úsáidim go pearsanta níl bac ar státseirbhísí sa Roinn é a úsáid i gcomhfhreagrachas oifigiúil.

Dental Provision

Mr M Robinson asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety how much was spent on dental provision, per Board area, in each of the last 3 years.

(AQW 1806/01)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety (Ms de Brún): The expenditure by Board area for dental services in each of the last three years is shown in the table below. The figures include general dental services, hospital dental specialties and community dental services. However, the figures do not include some minor elements of provision such as oral surgery and dental work

in plastic surgery as this information was not readily available and could only be provided at disproportionate cost.

DENTAL PROVISION BY HEALTH BOARD AREA

	1998/1999 £'000	1999/2000 £'000	2000/2001 £'000
NHSSB	12,026	12,183	12,741
SHSSB	9,199	9,420	9,966
EHSSB	23,314	23,222	24,104
WHSSB	9,902	9,857	10,527
Total	54,441	54,682	57,338

Léirítear an caiteachas de réir ceantar Boird le seirbhísí déadacha i ngach bliain de na trí bliana anuas sa tábla thíos. Cuimsíonn na figiúirí gnáthsheirbhísí déadacha, speisialtachtaí déadacha otharlainne agus seirbhísí déadacha pobail. Ní chuimsíonn na figiúirí roinnt mionghnéithe de sholáthar áfach amhail máinliacht bhéil agus obair dhéadach i máinliacht phlaisteach mar nach raibh an t-eolas seo ar fáil go réidh agus ní fhéadfaí é a chur ar fáil ach ar chostas dhíreireach.

SOLÁTHAR DÉADACH DE RÉIR CHEANTAR AN BHOIRD SHLÁINTE

	1998/1999 £'000	1999/2000 £'000	2000/2001 £'000
BSSST	12,026	12,183	12,741
BSSSD	9,199	9,420	9,966
BSSSO	23,314	23,222	24,104
BSSSI	9,902	9,857	10,527
Iomlán	54,441	54,682	57,338

Bed Complement: Erne and Tyrone County Hospitals

Mr P Doherty asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety, with reference to the Acute Hospital Review Group Report of June 2001, to detail (a) the current total bed complement and configuration for the Erne and Tyrone County Hospitals; and (b) if the figures in the report relating to acute beds were correct at the time of publication. (AQW 2302/01)

Ms de Brún:

(a) The current total bed complement for the Erne and Tyrone County hospitals, and their current configuration, are given in the table below. They are for the year 2000/2001, the latest year for which figures are available.

Hospital	Acute Beds	All Beds
Erne Hospital	172	231
Tyrone County Hospital	91	128

(b) The figures quoted for Acute Beds in the Acute Hospitals Review Group report were for 1999/2000 and are consistent with the information held by my Department.

(a) Tá cuóta iomlán leapacha d'Otharlanna na hÉirne agus Thír Eoghain, agus a socruithe faoi láthair, tugtha sa tábla thíos. Is do na blianta 2000/01 atá siad, an bhliain is déanaí a bhfuil figiúirí ar fáil di.

Otharlann	Géarleabacha	Gach Leaba
Otharlann na hÉirne	172	231
Otharlann Thír Eoghain	91	128

(b) Don bhliain 1999/2000 a bhí na figiúirí a tuairisíodh do Ghéarleabacha i dtuairisc an Ghrúpa Athbhreithithe ar Ghéarohtarlanna agus tá siad comhsheasamhach ar fad leis an eolas ag mo Roinn.

Central Salaries and Wages Department

Mrs Carson asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety if she will consider the provision of a central salaries and wages department to administer all salaries and allowances in the health service.

(AQW 2320/01)

Ms de Brún: My Department has commenced a review of the HPSS financial systems including payroll. This will include the preparation of business cases which will explore not only a range of IT solutions, but also how the salaries and wages function can be delivered in the most cost-effective way.

Chuir mo Roinn tús le hathbhreithniú ar chórais airgeadais na SSSP, párollaí san áireamh. Cuimseoidh sé seo ullmhú cásanna gnó nach scrúdóidh réimse réiteach TE amháin ach dóigheanna ar féidir leis na pánna agus na tuarastail a dhéanamh níos costas-éifeachtaí chomh maith.

District Nursing Services

Mr Gallagher asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what plans she has to ensure that there is equal access to District Nursing services across Northern Ireland and in particular rural areas.

(AQW 2325/01)

Ms de Brún: There is currently open access to district nursing services here across all areas including rural areas. District nurses will take referrals from various sources including general practitioners, hospitals and self-referrals from clients.

My Department's Nursing and Midwifery Advisory Group has established a Regional District Nursing Group to examine a range of issues. An objective of the Group is to set more systematic, standardised referral criteria

for access to district nursing services that will be applied consistently.

Tá rochtain oscailte faoi láthair do sheirbhísí altranais dhúiche anseo agus fud fad gach ceantar, ceantair thuaithe san áireamh. Glacfaidh altraí atreoraithe ó fhoinsé éagsúla dochtúirí ginearálta, otharlanna agus féin-atreorú ó chliaint san áireamh.

Bhunaigh Grúpa Comhairleach Altranais agus Mná Cabhrach na Roinne s'agam Grúpa Altranais Dhúiche Reigiúnaí le hamharc ar roinnt ceisteanna. Is é cuspóir amháin atá ag an grúpa ná critéir atreoraithe níos córasaí agus níos caighdeánaí faoi choinne rochtain ar sheirbhísí altranais dhúiche a chuirfear i bhfeidhm go seasta.

Improving Primary Health Care

Mr Hilditch asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what plans she has to improve primary health care. (AQW 2353/01)

Ms de Brún: Central to my plans to improve primary health care is the removal of the last elements of the internal market and the establishment of new Local Health and Social Care Groups. These new Groups will create a framework which will support primary care professionals to work in partnership with each other and with other parts of the health and social services in order to improve primary care services for the populations they serve. In addition, they will create opportunities for primary care to link with other statutory, community and voluntary agencies that can contribute to improving health and well-being.

The new Groups will support primary care in making its contribution to the implementation of other policies being pursued by the Department, such as securing input from local communities to the planning and commissioning of services at local level; implementing the *Investing for Health* strategy; and implementing any proposals that emerge from the *Best Practice – Best Care* consultation paper. The new Groups will contribute to the development of Health and Social Services Boards' Health and Well Being Investment plans and draw up their own plans to address local priorities to improve primary health and social care.

I plan for an orderly run down of the GP Fundholding scheme and for services currently supported by GP Fundholding monies to be maintained. My plans include arrangements for dealing with the human resource implications of ending the GP Fundholding Scheme. My plans also include the redistribution of some of the resources currently tied up in the GP Fundholding Scheme to front line primary care services.

I have plans to introduce measures to improve quality in primary care which include the introduction of clinical and social care governance, the promotion of life long

learning and enhanced professional regulation. Negotiations on a new GP contract and appraisal system are ongoing. This values achievements as well as improving performance.

On the Information and Communications Technology (ICT) front, I am planning for Boards and GPs to work with my Department to make available to GPs a greater range of ICT facilities, such as, electronic patient registration, E-mail and internet access, electronic pathology results, radiology reports and items of service claims

I also plan to take forward the recommendations arising from the mid-term evaluation of the Oral Health Strategy. My plans will include targets to increase number of 2 - 5 year olds being registered with general dental practitioners and to ensure the adoption of a consistent programme of School Dental Screening.

I plan for Boards and Trusts to work with community pharmacies to ensure that the community pharmacy medicines management initiative is expanded to more community pharmacies.

More detailed information on my plans for primary care and the key targets against which their achievement will be measured will be published soon in my Department's Priorities for Action 2002/03 document.

Is é atá mar chuid lárnach de mo phleananna chun príomhchúram a fheabhsú ná na gnéithe deireanacha den mhargadh inmheánach a bhaint ar shiúl agus Grúpaí Sláinte Áitiúla agus Cúraim Shóisialta nua a bhunú. Cruthóidh na Grúpaí nua seo creatlach a thacóidh le gairmithe príomhchúraim chun obair i gcomhar lena chéile agus le codanna eile de na seirbhísí sláinte agus sóisialta le haghaidh seirbhísí príomhchúraim a fheabhsú do na pobail a mbíonn siad ag freastal orthu. Ar a bharr, beidh siad ag soláthar deiseanna i leith príomhchúraim le ceangal a dhéanamh le gníomhaireachtaí eile reachtúla, pobail agus deonacha ar féidir leo cuidiú le sláinte agus folláine a fheabhsú.

Tacóidh na Grúpaí le príomhchúram trí chur leis an chur i bhfeidhm polasaithe eile ar mór ag an Roinn iad amhail ionchur a fháil ó phobail áitiúla le haghaidh pleanáil agus coimisiúnú ar bhonn áitiúil; straitéis *Infheistíocht sa tSláinte* a chur i bhfeidhm; agus moltaí ar bith a eascraíonn as páipéar comhairlithe *Sárchleachtadh-Sárchúram* a chur i bhfeidhm. Cuideoidh na Grúpaí nua le forbairt pleananna Infheistíochta Sláinte agus Folláine de chuid na mBord Sláinte agus Seirbhísí Sóisialta agus a gcuid pleananna féin a dhéanamh chun dul i ngleic le tosaíochtaí áitiúla chun príomhchúram sláinte agus sóisialta a fheabhsú.

Tá sé beartaithe agam breacadh síos ordúil ar airgead scéim Sealbhú Ciste GDanna a choinneáil. I measc na bpleananna tá socruithe chun deileáil le himpleachtaí acmhainní daonna a bheadh mar thoradh ar dheireadh a chur le Scéim Sealbhú Ciste GD. Is é a chuirtear san

áireamh le mo phleananna ná athdháileadh cuid de na háiseanna atá tugtha don scéim Sealbhú Ciste GD ar sheirbhísí príomhchúraim ar an líne tosaigh.

Tá pleananna agam bearta a thabhairt isteach chun caighdeán cáilíochta i bpríomhchúraim a fheabhsú ina n-áirítear riar cúraim chliniciúil agus shóisialta, foghlaim ar feadh an tsaoil agus rialú méadaithe gairimiúil. Tá Idirbheartaíocht ar chóras nua conartha agus meastóireachta DGanna á déanamh faoi láthair. Tréaslaíonn seo gnóthachtáil chomh maith le feidhmiúchán a fheabhsú.

I dtaca le Teicneolaíocht an Eolais agus na Cumarsáide (TEC) tá pleananna agam do Bhoird agus do DGanna le hobair leis an Roinn s'agam chun réimse níos mó áiseanna TEC a chur ar fáil amhail clárú leictreonach othair, R-phost agus rochtain idirlín, torthaí paiteolaíochta leictreonacha, tuairiscí raideolaíochta agus éilimh míreanna seirbhíse.

Tá plean agam chomh maith moltaí a d'éirigh as meastóireacht lárthearma ar an Straitéis Sláinte Béal a thabhairt chun tosaigh. Áireofar sna pleananna s'agam spriocanna chun líon na bpáistí idir 2 agus 5 bliain d'aois atá cláraithe a mhéadú chun cinntiú go dtabharfar isteach clár comhsheasmhach Scagthástáil Fiacloireachta Scoile.

Tá plean agam le Boird agus Iontaobhais chun obair le cógaslanna pobail chun cinntiú go leathnófar tionscnamh bainisteoireachta um chógaís cógaslann pobail chuig níos mó cógaslann pobail.

Foilseofar eolas níos grinne ar phleananna le haghaidh príomhchúraim agus na heochairspríocanna lena dtomhaisfear a gcuid gnóthachtála gan mhoill i ndoiciméad mo Roinne Tosaíochtaí le hAghaidh Gnímh 2002/03.

Waiting Times: A&E Departments

Mr Hilditch asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail any measures she is taking to reduce waiting times at accident and emergency departments. (AQW 2385/01)

Ms de Brún: In order to relieve pressure on hospital services, particularly accident and emergency departments, Boards and Trusts are providing a range of additional services, including extra community care provision and minor injuries units, which help to reduce demand on hospital services. Additional support is also available in the primary care sector, where a successful flu vaccination programme has been in place for people over the age of 65 and those at risk.

At the Ulster Hospital, I recently endorsed a major re-development programme, which includes a proposal to extend the accident and emergency department to provide additional capacity and upgrade to meet statutory standards. In addition, a ten-bedded accident and emergency observation unit, including nursing and support staff, has been opened at Antrim Area Hospital.

Leis na brúnna ar sheirbhísí otharlainne a mhaolú, sna ranna timpistí agus éigeandálaí ach go háirithe, tá Boird agus Iontaobhais ag soláthar réimse seirbhísí breise, mar aon le soláthar breise cúraim phobail agus le hionaid mhionghortuithe a chuideoidh leis an ráchairt ar sheirbhísí otharlainne a laghdú. Tá tacaíocht bhreise ar fáil fosta san earnáil phríomhchúraim, áit a bhfuil clár rathúil vacsaíniú fliú i bhfeidhm do dhaoine thar 65 bliain d'aois agus dóibh siúd atá i mbaol.

In Otharlann Uladh, d'fhormheas mé mórchlár athchóirithe, ina bhfuil moladh leis an roinn timpistí agus éigeandálaí a leathnú chun níos mó toille a sholáthar agus chun í a athchóiriú le caighdeán reachtúla a chomhlíonadh. Ina theannta sin, osclaíodh ionad grinnithe timpistí agus éigeandálaí le deich leaba agus le foireann altrachta agus thacaíochta in Otharlann Cheantar Aontroma.

Autism Spectrum Disorder

Mr Adams asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the number of children diagnosed with Autism Spectrum Disorder by Health and Community Trust Board area. (AQW 2386/01)

Ms de Brún: No information is held centrally on numbers of children with autistic spectrum disorder. Some limited information is available from the Child Health System (CHS). This is detailed in the table below:

TABLE 1.
CHILDREN DIAGNOSED WITH AUTISTIC SPECTRUM DISORDERS BY BOARD, SEPTEMBER 2001

Board	Number
EHSSB	349
WHSSB	196
NHSSB	56 ¹
SHSSB	131
Total	732

⁽¹⁾ As at February 2001. Current figures are not available for NHSSB.

Ní choinnítear eolas ar bith go lárnach ar líon na bpáistí a bhfuil neamhord speictream uathach orthu. Tá eolas teoranta ar fáil ó Chóras Sláinte Páistí (CSP). Tá seo léirithe sa tábla thíos:

TABLA 1.
PÁISTÍ A DHIAGNÓISIGH LE NEAMHORD SPEICTREAM UATHACH DE RÉIR BOIRD, MEÁN FÓMHAIR 2001

Bord	Líon
BSSSO	349
BSSSI	196
BSSST	56 ¹
BSSSD	131
Iomlán	732

¹ Mar a bhí ag Mí Feabhra 2002. Níl figiúirí láithreacha ar fáil don BSSST.

Acute Hospitals Review

Mr O'Neill asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to outline (a) any legislation she plans to put in place as a result of the Hayes Review; and (b) when the recommendations will be implemented.

(AQW 2505/01)

Ms de Brún: The need for legislation will not be known until final decisions on the way forward on the Acute Hospitals Review have been taken. Following consideration of the outcome of the initial consultation and after discussion at the Executive, proposals on the way forward can be put out for full public consultation. It is hoped that final decisions can be taken in the course of 2002.

Ní bheidh a fhios faoin ghá le reachtaíocht go dtí go mbíonn cinní deireanacha ar an bhealach chun tosaigh ar an Athbheithniú ar Ghéarotharlanna déanta. I ndiaidh machnamh a dhéanamh ar thorthaí an chomhairlithe tosaigh agus i ndiaidh caibidle a dhéanamh ag Coiste an Fheidhmeannais, is féidir moltaí ar an bhealach chun tosaigh a chur amach faoi choinne comhairlithe iomláin phoiblí. Táthar ag súil gur féidir cinní deireanacha a dhéanamh le linn 2002.

Resignation of the Chair of Causeway HSS Trust

Mr McClarty asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to make a statement on the resignation of Mrs Margaret Craig, Chairman of the Causeway Health Trust.

(AQW 2507/01)

Ms de Brún: It is a matter of some regret that I had to seek the resignation of the Chair of Causeway HSS Trust. Mrs Craig has given many years of distinguished public service but regrettably the Trust disregarded a letter from the Department asking them not to make any performance pay assessments until Departmental guidance was issued and they did not follow my requirement for moderation in the award of performance pay due in the 2001/02 pay year.

Is cúis bhróin domsa í gur iarr mé ar Chathaoirleach Iontaobhas SSS an Chlocháin éirí as a post. Tá cuid mhór blianta d'fhónamh poiblí oirirc déanta ag Bean Craig ach ar an drochuair, rinne an tIontaobhas neamhshuim de litir ón Roinn ag iarraidh orthu gan measúnuithe pá i gcoibhneas le feidhmiú a dhéanamh go raibh treoir na Roinne eisithe agus níor cloigh siad le mo choinníollacha le haghaidh féinstiúradh in íoc pá i gcoibhneas le feidhmiú a bhí le híoc sa phá-bhliain 2001/02.

Pay Awards: Senior Executives

Mr McClarty asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail (a) the Health Trusts

that issued pay awards to senior executives; and (b) the amounts paid.

(AQW 2508/01)

Ms de Brún: Twelve Trusts made awards to their senior executives in the 2001/02 pay year for performance carried out in the 2000/01 year. Details of the amounts paid to individuals are not available but information on the percentages awarded is set out in the table below.

PERFORMANCE PAY AWARDS FOR 2000/01 PAY PERIOD (PAYABLE IN 2001/02 PAY PERIOD)

Trust Name	% Award
Armagh & Dungannon HSS Trust	2.7%
Causeway HSS Trust	Awards range from 3% to 7%
Craigavon & Banbridge Community HSS Trust	2%
Craigavon Area Hospital HSS Trust	Awards range from 2.7% to 3%
Foyle HSS Trust	2%
Mater Hospital HSS Trust	Awards range from 2% to 3%
North & West Belfast HSS Trust	3%
Northern Ireland Ambulance Services HSS Trust	2.7%
South & East Belfast HSS Trust	1%
Sperrin Lakeland HSS Trust	2.9%
Ulster Community & Hospitals HSS Trust	2.4%
United Hospitals HSS Trust	2%

Bhronn dhá Iontaobhas déag duaiseanna ar a gcuid feidhmeannach sinsearach sa bhliain pá 2001/02 le haghaidh feidhmithe a rinneadh sa bhliain 2000/01. Níl mionsonraí ar shuimeanna a íocadh do dhaoine aonair ach tá eolas ar na céatadáin a bronnadh leagtha amach sa tábla thíos.

DUAISEANNA PÁ I GCOIBHNEAS LE FEIDHMIÚ DO 2000/01 – TRÉIMHSE PÁ (INÍOCTHA SA TRÉIMHSE PÁ 2002/02)

Ainm An Iontaobhais	% Duais
Iontaobhas SSS Ard Mhacha & Dhún Geanainn	2.7%
Iontaobhas SSS an Chlocháin	Téann réimse na nduaiseanna ó 3% go 7%
Iontaobhas SSS Pobail Craigavon & Dhroichead na Banna	2%
Iontaobhas SSS Otharlann Cheantar Craigavon	Téann réimse na nduaiseanna ó 2.7% go 3%
Iontaobhas SSS an Fheabhail	2%
Iontaobhas SSS Otharlann an Mater	Téann réimse na nduaiseanna ó 2% go 3%
Iontaobhas SSS Béal Feirste Thuaidh & Thiar	3%

Ainm An Iontaobhais	% Duais
Iontaobhas SSS Seirbhísí Otharchairr Thuaisceart Éireann	2.7%
Iontaobhas SSS Bhéal Feirste Theas & Thoir	1%
Iontaobhas SSS Speirín Tír na Lochanna	2.9%
Iontaobhas SSS Pobail & Otharlanna Uladh	2.4%
Iontaobhas SSS Otharlann Aontaithe	2%

Performance-Related Pay for Senior Executives

Mr McClarty asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to outline the guidance she issued in respect of performance related pay for senior executives. (AQW 2509/01)

Ms de Brún: In an effort to constrain the award of performance pay to more reasonable amounts my Department wrote to all HPSS Chairs in March 2001 asking them not to make assessments for performance payments due in the 2001/02 pay year until further guidance was issued. The subsequent guidance issued in October 2001 asked Chairs to ensure that restraint was shown and that they kept awards to the minimum necessary to observe contractual commitments.

Chun iarracht a dhéanamh srian a chur ar phá feidhmiúcháin go dtí méid níos reasúnta scríobh an Roinn s'agam chuig gach Cathaoirleach SSPS i Mí Mhárta 2001 ag iarraidh orthu gan mheasúnaithe d'iocaíocht feidhmiúcháin a dhéanamh a bhí le teacht sa bhliain pá 2001/02 go dtí go dtabharfar tuilleadh treoruithe. D'iarr an treorú a eisíodh i Mí Mhéan an Fhómhair ar Chathaoirleach le cinntiú gur taispeánadh srian agus go gcoinníonn siad duaiseanna ar an íosmhéid chuí chun gealltanais chonartha a choimhead.

Primary Care

Mrs I Robinson asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety, in relation to new arrangements for resourcing primary care, what action is she taking to fulfil assurances that she would be sympathetic when dealing with fundholding staff. (AQW 2521/01)

Ms de Brún: I have committed £1.8m of new money in 2002/03 towards primary care development. The prime purpose of this funding will be to maintain services put in place by fundholders and to help ensure that the population served by each Local Health and Social Care Group benefits from these on an equitable basis. The professionals currently providing these services will, consequently, continue to be employed.

Also, a Staff Redeployment Unit which has been in operation for some time within the HPSS, but to which GP-employed staff did not previously have access, has now been made available to fund management staff

employed by GPs, and by the Eastern Multifund, whose jobs may be at risk when fundholding ends. The Unit will seek to match registered staff with notified vacancies arising in the wider HPSS and will inform the employer of those who have been identified as potentially suitable. The employer will then draw up a shortlist, hold interviews and hopefully make an appointment. Use of the Unit will, I hope, ensure that the skills and experience of such staff will not be lost to the service. Fund management staff cannot, however, be guaranteed employment on the same terms and conditions as before, since many have been paid at much higher salaries than is the norm for comparable jobs in the HPSS.

I expect few, if any, redundancies when fundholding ends. Staff will either be retained by their practices in other posts, will be found employment in the wider HPSS through the Redeployment Unit, or will fill posts in the new Local Health and Social Care Groups.

Gheall mé £1.8m d'airgead nua i 2002/03 d'fhorbairt príomhchúraim. Is é príomhaidhm an mhaoinithe seo ná seirbhísí a cuireadh in áit ag cisteshealbhóirí a chothabháil agus iarracht a dhéanamh le cinntiú go mbaineann an pobal, ar a bhfreastlaíonn an Grúpa Cúram Sóisialta agus Sláinte Áitiúil, tairbhe ar bhonn cothroim. Fanfaidh na gairmithe atá ag soláthar na seirbhísí faoi láthair, mar thoradh air, i bhfostaíocht.

Chomh maith leis sin, cuireadh Aonad Athfhostaithe Foirne ar fáil atá ag feidhmiú le tamall maith anuas laistigh de na SSPS, ach nach raibh rochtain ag foirne fostaithe ag DGanna air, chun foirne bainistíochta fostaithe ag DGanna agus ag Ilchiste an Oirthir a dtiocfadh lena bpoist bheith i mbaol, a mhaoiniú. Déanfaidh an tAonad iarracht foirne cláraithe a mheaitseáil le folúntais fhógraithe ag teacht aníos sna SSPS go forleathan agus cuirfidh siad in iúl don fhostóir fúthu siúd a aimsíodh is féidir bheith inchuí. Socróidh an fostóir gearrliosta, cuirfidh sé agallaimh agus táthar ag súil go ndéanfar ceapachán. Cinntóidh úsáid an Aonaid, tá súil agam, nach gcaillfidh an tseirbhís scileanna agus taithí na foirne. Leis sin féin, ní féidir fostaíocht foirne bainistíochta maoinithe a chinntiú ar na téarmaí agus coinníollacha céanna mar a bhí roimhe, mar fuair roinnt mhaith acu tuarastal i bhfad níos airde na an gnáthphá dá macasamhail de phoist sna SSPS.

Ní bheinn ag dúil le mórán laghduithe post, má tharlaíonn sé ar chor ar bith, nuair atá deireadh le cistesheilbh. Coinneoidh an cleachtadh sin foireann ag obair i bpoist eile, socróidh an tAonad Athfhostaithe poist sa SSPS go forleathan, nó líonfaidh siad poist sna Grúpaí Cúraim Shóisialta agus Sláinte Áitiúla.

Number of Ambulances in Each Health Trust Area

Mr Weir asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the number of ambulances in each Health Trust area. (AQW 2537/01)

Ms de Brún: This information is not available in the form requested.

Níl an t-eolas ar fáil san fhoirm a iarradh é.

Paramedics: North Down

Mr Weir asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the recommended number of paramedics to service the North Down constituency.

(AQW 2538/01)

Ms de Brún: The information requested is not available, as Ambulance Station operational areas do not align with parliamentary constituency boundaries.

Níl an t-eolas a iarradh ar fáil, mar ní ailíníonn ceantair oibríochtúla Staisiún Otharchairr le teorainneacha dailcheantar parlaiminteach.

Number of Paramedics in Each Health Trust

Mr Weir asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the number of paramedics working in each Health Trust.

(AQW 2539/01)

Ms de Brún: This information is not available in the form requested.

Níl an t-eolas ar fáil san fhoirm a iarradh é.

Paramedics: North Down

Mr Weir asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety how many paramedics are currently working in the North Down constituency.

(AQW 2540/01)

Ms de Brún: I refer the Member to my answer to AQW 2538/01.

Treoraím an Ball do mo fhreagra a thug mé ar AQW 2538/01.

Fracture Services

Mr Berry asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what plans are in place to improve fracture services.

(AQW 2542/01)

Ms de Brún: A number of steps are being taken to improve fracture services here, including increasing the number of trainees in orthopaedics, provision of additional fracture theatre sessions, and arrangements to ensure, so far as possible, the transfer of all those requiring fracture surgery to a Main Fracture Centre within 48 hours. Furthermore, a new regional spinal surgery service will be established at the Royal Victoria Hospital in September this of year.

I have asked Boards and Trusts to continue to collaborate to improve the service, and to consider what further action is necessary to ensure effective fracture services in the medium to longer term.

Tá roinnt beart á ndéanamh le seirbhísí briste anseo a fheabhsú, chomh maith le méadú i líon na bprintíseach in ortaipéide, soláthar seisiún breise in obrádlanna briste, agus le socrúithe le cinntiú, a mhéad agus is féidir, go n-aistrítear na daoine sin go léir a bhfuil máinliacht bhriste de dhíth orthu go Príomhionad Briste laistigh de 48 uair. Chomh maith leis sin, cuirfear tús le seirbhís nua réigiúnach máinliachta dromlaigh in Otharlann Ríoga Viteoiria i Méan Fómhair na bliana seo.

D'iarr mé ar Bhoird agus ar Iontaobhais comhoibriú go fóill chun an tseirbhís a fheabhsú agus machnamh a dhéanamh ar na gníomhartha eile a bheadh riachtanach le seirbhísí éifeachtacha briste a chinntiú sa mheántearma agus san fhadtearma.

Acute Services

Mr Berry asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what short-term plan is in place to continue acute services until the implementation of the recommendations of the Hayes Report.

(AQW 2543/01)

Ms de Brún: Until longer-term decisions have been made on the way forward on the Acute Hospitals Review, I will expect Boards and Trusts to make every effort to maintain existing services. My officials are working closely with Boards and Trusts to assist them in sustaining services and the position in individual hospitals is being closely monitored.

Go dtí go ndéantar cinni fadtéarmacha faoin bhealach chun tosaigh ar an Athbhreithniú ar Ghéarotharlanna, beidh mé ag dúil go ndéanfaidh Boird agus Iontaobhais gach iarracht na seirbhísí faoi láthair a choinneáil. Tá m'óifigh ag obair go dlúth le Boird agus le hIontaobhais le cuidiú leo seirbhísí a choinneáil agus tá an riocht i ngach otharlann aonair faoi ghéarmhonatóireacht.

Population Covered in Each Health Trust Area

Mr Weir asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the population covered in each Health Trust area.

(AQW 2551/01)

Ms de Brún: Not all Trusts have boundaries which are contiguous with District Council or Ward boundaries. The estimates of population for those which have contiguous boundaries have been constructed from the 1999 mid-year estimates of population at local government District and Ward level and are shown on the following page.

**COMMUNITY AND INTEGRATED TRUST POPULATION
MID-YEAR ESTIMATES, 1999**

Trust	Population
Armagh & Dungannon	102,207
Causeway	96,941
Craigavon & Banbridge	117,326
Down Lisburn	175,076
Foyle	162,599
Sperrin Lakeland	118,827
Homefirst	330,726
Newry & Mourne	89,901
Ulster Community & Hospitals	147,096
North & West Belfast	164,764
South & East Belfast	186,359
Total	1,691,822

Ní ionann teorainneacha gach Iontaobhais agus teorainneacha Toghgharda nó Comhairle Ceantair. Rinneadh meastacháin dhaonra dóibh súid a bhfuil teorainneacha cóngaracha acu ó mheastacháin dhaonra lárbhliana 1999 ag leibhéal rialtais áitiúil, Ceantair agus Toghgharda agus léitá siad léirithe thíos.

**MEASTACHÁIN DHAONRA LÁRBHLIANA POBAIL AGUS
IONTAOBHAIS IMEASCTHA, 1999**

Iontaobhas	Daonra
Ard Mhacha & Dún Geanainn	102,207
An Clochán	96,941
Craigavon & Droichead na Banna	117,326
An Dún/Lios na gCearrbhach	175,076
An Feabhal	162,599
Speirín Tír na Lochanna	118,827
Homefirst	330,726
An tÚr & Múrn	89,901
Otharlanna Pobail Uladh	147,096
Béal Feirste Thuaidh & Thiar	164,764
Béal Feirste Theas & Thoir	186,359
Iomlán	1,691,822

Private Beds: Nursing/Residential Homes

Mr S Wilson asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the total number of private beds in (a) nursing homes; and (b) residential homes for each Health Board in each of the last 5 years.

(AQW 2555/01)

Ms de Brún: This information is detailed in the tables below.

**PRIVATE BEDS IN RESIDENTIAL AND NURSING HOMES IN
EACH BOARD, 1996/97 - 2000/01**
(A) RESIDENTIAL HOMES

Board	Year				
	1996/97	1997/98	1998/99	1999/00	2000/01
EHSSB	935	1,050	1,019	931	919
NHSSB	768	861	927	928	966
SHSSB	202	324	332	344	308
WHSSB	280	305	312	328	326
Total	2,185	2,540	2,590	2,531	2,519

(B) NURSING HOMES

Board	Year				
	1996/97	1997/98	1998/99	1999/00	2000/01
EHSSB	3,884	3,776	3,738	3,623	3,468
NHSSB	2,462	2,396	2,338	2,300	2,267
SHSSB	1,571	1,522	1,532	1,507	1,571
WHSSB	1,305	1,368	1,318	1,391	1,344
Total	9,222	9,062	8,926	8,821	8,650

Tá an t-eolas seo léirithe sna táblaí thíos.

**LEAPACHA PRÍOBHÁIDEACHA I DTITHE CÓNAITHE AGUS
ALTRANAIS I NGACH BORD, 1996/97 - 2000/01**
(A) TITHE CÓNAITHE

Bord	Bliain				
	1996/97	1997/98	1998/99	1999/00	2000/01
BSSSO	935	1,050	1,019	931	919
BSSST	768	861	927	928	966
BSSSD	202	324	332	344	308
BSSSI	280	305	312	328	326
Iomlán	2,185	2,540	2,590	2,531	2,519

(B) TITHE ALTRANAIS

Bord	Bliain				
	1996/97	1997/98	1998/99	1999/00	2000/01
BSSSO	3,884	3,776	3,738	3,623	3,468
BSSST	2,462	2,396	2,338	2,300	2,267
BSSSD	1,571	1,522	1,532	1,507	1,571
BSSSI	1,305	1,368	1,318	1,391	1,344
Iomlán	9,222	9,062	8,926	8,821	8,650

Waiting List for Operations

Mr Shannon asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety how many people are on the waiting list for operations for (a) head injuries; (b) tumours; and (c) brain haemorrhages, at the Royal Victoria Hospital.

(AQW 2571/01)

Ms de Brún: Information on people waiting for inpatient treatment is collected on the basis of specialty rather than the type of operation that they are waiting for.

Bailítear eolas ar dhaoine atá ag fanacht ar chóireál othar cónaitheach de réir speisialtachta seachas an cineál obráide lena bhfuil siad ag fanacht.

Child Protection

Mr M Robinson asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what measures are being taken to protect those children who have been identified as being 'at risk'. (AQW 2572/01)

Ms de Brún: All children who have been identified as being at risk are managed in accordance with the Child Protection Policy and Procedures which are produced by each of the four Board Area Child Protection Committees (ACPCs). An ACPC is a multi-agency, interdisciplinary committee which has responsibility for the protection of children who may be at risk of abuse, and for the promotion and safeguarding of their welfare.

Where a child or young person is identified as being at risk the course of action taken will depend on individual circumstances. Where the risk is significant, immediate emergency action will be taken and the child's name will be placed on the Child Protection Register. Where this occurs, a multidisciplinary plan will be agreed and regularly reviewed and appropriate services will also be offered to family members.

In some cases, the child or young person may be monitored through case planning. A multi-disciplinary plan is agreed and the relevant agencies meet regularly to ensure that the plan is in operation. The level of risk to the child is continuously monitored. In other cases, there may be a need to place the child with other family members or relatives. Foster placements may be sought or a residential placement made.

Déileáiltear le páistí aitheanta go raibh siad i mbaol de réir Pholasaithe agus Ghnáthaimh Chosaint Páistí a chuirtear amach ag gach ceann de na ceithre Choiste Cheantar Boird ar Chosaint an Pháiste (CCBCPi). Is coiste ilghníomhaireachta, ildhisciplíneach é an CCBCP atá freagrach as cosaint páistí is féidir go mbeidh siad i mbaol ó dhrochíde, agus as cur chun cinn agus as cosaint a leasa.

Nuair a aithnítear go bhfuil páiste nó ógánach i mbaol braithfidh an gníomh a dhéanfar ar thosca an duine aonair. Nuair atá an baol mór, déanfar gníomh láithreach éigeandála agus cuirfear ainm an pháiste ar Chlár Chosaint an Pháiste. Nuair a tharlaíonn sé seo, comhaontófar plean ildhisciplíneach, déanfar athbhreithniú rialta air agus thairgeofar seirbhísí cearta do bhaill teaghlaigh.

I roinnt cásana, is féidir go ndéanfar monatóireacht ar dhuine óg trí phleanáil cháis. Comhaontaítear plean ildhisciplíneach agus buaileann na gníomhaireachtaí cuí le chéile go rialta le cinntiú go bhfuil an plean i bhfeidhm. Déantar monatóireacht leanúnach ar leibhéal an bhaoil don pháiste. I roinnt cásanna eile, is féidir go

mbeidh gá ann an páiste a chur faoi chúram bhall teaghlaigh eile nó gaolta. Is féidir go gcuirfear an páiste faoi chúram altrama no i dteach cónaithe.

MMR Vaccine

Mr M Robinson asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety whether the single measles vaccine is as effective as the measles component of the MMR vaccine. (AQW 2573/01)

Ms de Brún: The MMR vaccine has shown itself to be highly effective in preventing measles, since it was first introduced here in 1988. On the other hand, the single measles component vaccines currently being used by a few doctors and clinics are unlicensed products and there is no sound information available on batch testing results for either purity or potency. Without being subject to the rigorous trials and controls that MMR has, there are concerns that they may be less effective or less safe than MMR.

Léirigh an vacsaín MMR go mbíonn sí an-éifeachtach i gcosc brúitíní, ó tógadh isteach anseo i dtús baire i 1988 í. Ar an taobh eile de, is earraí gan cheadúnas iad na vacsaíní le haghaidh brúitíneach amháin atá in úsáid ag roinnt dóchtúirí agus clinici faoi láthair agus níl eolas slán ar fáil ar thorthaí baiscsteisteála ar íonacht nó ar láidreacht. Gan bheith ina ábhar scrúduithe faoi na trialacha agus rialacha dian atá ar MMR, tá inní ann go mbeadh níos lú éifeacht nó níos lú sábháilte ag baint leo na mar atá leis an MMR.

Clinical Psychological Support: Diabetes

Mr Gibson asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to outline (a) if the consultant in the Altnagelvin Area Hospital responsible for the treatment of diabetes has the same psychological support as his colleagues in other Health Board areas; and (b) any steps she will be taking, if necessary, to address this situation. (AQW 2578/01)

Ms de Brún: I am assured that clinical psychological support is readily accessible to people with diabetes, in all Health and Social Services Board areas.

Deimhnítear dom go bhfuil rochtain éasca ag daoine le diaibéiteas ar thacaíocht shíceolaíoch chliniciúil i ngach limistéar de chuid an Bhoird Sláinte agus Seirbhísí Sóisialta.

Administrative and Management Costs: Southern Health Board Area

Mr Close asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail (i) the administrative; and (ii) management costs for each Trust in the Southern Health Board area in each of the last 3 years. (AQW 2579/01)

Ms de Brún: The information requested is disclosed in the attached tables.

Management costs represent the salaries and wages costs of staff performing management duties. This includes apportionments for those staff whose post involves a degree of management although their post may be of a nursing, clinical or social work nature. It will also include the costs of management staff in the administrative and clerical grades whose costs are also included in Table 1.

TABLE 1 - ADMINISTRATIVE AND CLERICAL COSTS

HSS Trust	2000/01 £'000	1999/2000 £'000	1998/99 £'000
Newry and Mourne	3,787	3,731	3,429
Armagh/Dungannon	3,316	3,372	3,080
Craigavon Area Hospital Group	4,120	3,499	3,208
Craigavon and Banbridge Community	2,450	2,315	2,190
Total	13,673	12,917	11,907

Source: FR 25 return

TABLE 2 - MANAGEMENT COSTS

HSS Trust	2000/01 £'000	1999/200 £'000	1998/99 £'000
Newry and Mourne	2,427	2,297	2,235
Armagh/Dungannon	3,241	3,261	3,107
Craigavon Area Hospital Group	2,472	2,046	1,998
Craigavon and Banbridge Community	2,425	2,162	2,065
Total	10,565	9,766	9,405

Source: Annual Accounts

Tá an t-eolas iarrtha léirithe san táblaí faoi iamh.

Baineann costais bhainisteoireacht le tuarastail agus pána na foirne a dhéanann dualgais bhainisteoireachta. Cuirtear san áireamh leis seo suimeanna don fhoireann úd a mbaineann an post s'acu le cineál bainisteoireachta cé gur féidir go mbaineann a bpost le post altranais, cliniciúil nó oibre sóisialta. Cuirfear san áireamh costais na foirne bainisteoireachta sna gráid cléireacha agus riaracháin a bhfuil na costais curtha san áireamh i dTábla 1.

TÁBLA 1 - COSTAIS RIARACHÁIN AGUS CHLÉIREACHA

Iontaobhas SSS	2000/01 £'000	1999/2000 £'000	1998/99 £'000
An tIúr agus Múrna	3,787	3,731	3,429
Ard Mhacha/Dún Geanainn	3,316	3,372	3,080
Grúpa Otharlainne Cheantar Craigavon	4,120	3,499	3,208
Pobal Craigavon agus Droichead na Banna	2,450	2,315	2,190
Iomlán	13,673	12,917	11,907

Foinse: FR 25 return

TÁBLA 2 - COSTAIS BHAINISTEOIREACHTA

Iontaobhas SSS	2000/01 £'000	1999/2000 £'000	1998/99 £'000
An tIúr agus Múrna	2,427	2,297	2,235
Ard Mhacha/Dún Geanainn	3,241	3,261	3,107
Grúpa Otharlainne Cheantar Craigavon	2,472	2,046	1,998
Pobal Craigavon agus Droichead na Banna	2,425	2,162	2,065
Iomlán	10,565	9,766	9,405

Foinse: Cuntais Bhliantúla

Insurance: Southern Health Board

Mr Close asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail (a) the costs of insurance premiums; and (b) any claims made for each Trust in the Southern Health Board area in each of the last 3 years.

(AQW 2580/01)

Ms de Brún: HSS bodies carry third party insurance for vehicles, arranged centrally through the Government Purchasing Agency whereby they are insured along with the NI Civil Service fleet of vehicles and a charge is apportioned to them. Some other special areas may carry insurance, for example Community Appliances or fostering.

The cost of insurance premiums borne by Trusts in the Southern Board area is shown in the following table:

TABLE 1 - INSURANCE PREMIUMS PAID BY SOUTHERN BOARD AREA HEALTH AND SOCIAL SERVICES TRUSTS

HSS TRUST	2000/01 £'000	1999/2000 £'000	1998/99 £'000
Armagh/Dungannon	32	36	24
Craigavon/Banbridge	24	25	16
Craigavon Area Hospital Group*	0	0	0
Newry and Mourne	10	13	6
Total	66	74	46

*CAH uses vehicles owned by Craigavon/Banbridge Community HSS Trust, for which the Trust pays a recharge at the year end.

The information on claims in respect of vehicle insurance in each Trust in the Southern Health Board area is not readily available and could only be obtained at disproportionate cost.

Health and Social Services Trusts do not generally purchase commercial insurance as the cost of premiums is likely to outweigh the compensation paid out and therefore it represents better value to self-insure. This applies to public liability and employer's liability insurance.

Clinical negligence is funded through direct funding by the Department to a central fund administered by the Central Services Agency.

Losses which would normally be covered by insurance policies are usually written off by the Department and details of such losses are disclosed in the notes to the final accounts of HSS Trusts. The amounts written off under "Losses and Special Payments" are detailed in Table 2 below. These include losses such as cash losses, stores and inventory losses, compensation payments and bad debts written off.

TABLE 2 - LOSSES AND SPECIAL PAYMENTS FOR SOUTHERN BOARD AREA HEALTH AND SOCIAL SERVICES TRUSTS

HSS TRUST	2000/01 £'000	1999/2000 £'000	1998/99 £'000
Armagh/Dungannon	42	170	229
Craigavon/Banbridge	16	25	23
Craigavon Area Hospital Group	247	249	258
Newry and Mourne	132	102	62
Total	437	547	346

Source: Losses and Special Payments note from the annual accounts.

CTá árachas tríú páirtí agcomhlachtaí SSS le haghaidh feithiclí, socraithe go lárnach trí Ghníomhaireacht Ceannaigh Rialtais a chinntíonn go bhfuil siad árachaithe mar aon le cabhlach feithiclí Státseirbhís TÉ agus gearrtar táille orthu. Is féidir go bhfuil árachas curtha ar achair speisialta eile, mar shampla, ar Fhearis Phobail nó ar altramas.

Tá costas préimheanna árachais íoctha ag Iontaobhais i mBordcheantar an Deiscirt léirithe sa tábla thíos:

TÁBLA 1 - PRÉIMHEANNA ÁRACHAIS ÍOCTHA AG IONTAOBHAIS SHLÁINTE AGUS SHEIRBHÍSÍ SÓISIALTA BHORDCHEANTAR AN DEISCIRT

IONTAOBHAS SSS	2000/01 £'000	1999/2000 £'000	1998/99 £'000
Ard Mhacha/Dún Geanainn	32	36	24
Craigavon/ Droichead na Banna	24	25	16
Grúpa Otharlann Cheantar Craigavon*	0	0	0
An tIúr agus Múrna	10	13	6
Iomlán	66	74	46

*Úsáideann OCCA feithiclí ar le hIontaobhas Pobail Craigavon/ Dhroichead na Banna iad, a n-athíocann an tIontaobhas táille dóibh ag deireadh na bliana.

Níl an t-eolas ar éilimh maidir le hárachas feithicle agach Iontaobhas i mBordcheantar Sláinte an Deiscirt ar fáil go éasca agus ní féidir é a fháil ach ar chostas díreireach.

Ní cheannaíonn Iontaobhais Shláinte agus Sheirbhísí Sóisialta árachas tráchtála de ghnáth mar gur dócha go bhfuil an cúiteamh íoctha níos mó ná costas na bpréimheanna agus mar sin de, luach níos fearr airgid a

bheadh ann féinárachú a dhéanamh. Baineann sé seo le hárachas dliteanais phoiblí agus árachais dliteanais fhostóra chomh maith.

Maoiníonn an Roinn faillí chliniciúil agus cuirtear an maoiniú díreach i gciste lárnach riartha ag an Lár-Ghníomhaireacht Seirbhísí.

Tá caillteanais a chlúdódh polasaithe árachais de ghnáth díscríofa ag an Roinn de ghnáth agus tá sonraí ar a leithéid de chaillteanais léirithe sna nótaí i gcuntais dheireannacha na nIontaobhas SSS. Miondealaítear na suimeanna díscríofa de réir "Caillteanais agus Íocaíochtaí Speisialta" i dTábla 2 thíos. San áireamh tá caillteanais amhail caillteanais airgid, caillteanais stóras agus fhardail, íocaíochtaí cúitimh agus drochfhiacha díscríofa.

TÁBLA 2 - CAILLTEANAS AGUS ÍOCAÍOCHTAÍ SPEISIALTA D'IONTAOBHAIS SHLÁINTE AGUS SHEIRBHÍSÍ SÓISIALTA BHORDCHEANTAR AN DEISCIRT

IONTAOBHAS SSS	2000/01 £'000	1999/2000 £'000	1998/99 £'000
Ard Mhacha/Dún Geanainn	42	170	229
Craigavon/ Droichead na Banna	16	25	23
Grúpa Otharlann Cheantar Craigavon	247	249	258
An tIúr agus an Múrna	132	102	62
Iomlán	437	547	346

Foinse: Nóta Caillteanas agus Íocaíochtaí Speisialta ó na cuntais bhliantúla.

Care Assistants: Pay and Conditions

Mr Close asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail (a) the hourly rates of pay; (b) holiday entitlement; (c) any mileage allowance paid; and (d) percentage pay increase to be paid in the next financial year for care assistants in each Trust in the Southern Health Board area. (AQW 2581/01)

Ms de Brún: All Trusts in the Southern Board area apply the same hourly rate of pay, holiday entitlement and mileage rates for care assistants. These rates are shown below:

(a) Hourly Rates of Pay

The current hourly rate of pay is £5.03.

(b) Holiday Entitlement

A care assistant, irrespective of length of service, is entitled to a holiday with a normal days pay on each of the 10 public holidays and in addition, 2 extra statutory days which is determined by the employer after consultation with employees.

The basic annual leave entitlement is 4 weeks, and 5 weeks after 5 years continuous service.

(c) Mileage Rates

The Regular User Allowances are:

Engine capacity	501 to 1000cc	1001 to 1500	Over 1500 cc
Lump sum per year	£508	£626	£760
Up to 9,000 miles	27.0p	33.5p	40.0p
Thereafter	16.2p	18.3p	20.5p

Employees who are not classified as “Regular Car Users” but use their car in the course of their employment are entitled to the following Standard Mileage Rates:

Engine Capacity	501 to 1000 cc	1001 to 1500 cc	Over 1500 cc
Up to 3,500 miles	34.0p	43.0p	53.0p
Thereafter	16.2p	18.3p	20.5p

The public transport rate is 23p per mile.

(d) Pay Increase 2002/03

This information is not available as agreement has not yet been reached for 2002/03.

Úsáideann gach Iontaobhas i gceantar Bhord an Deiscirt na rátaí pá céanna san uair, rátaí teidlíocht saoire agus rátaí míleáiste do chúntóirí cúraim. Tá na rátaí seo léirithe thíos:

(a) Ráta Pá san Uair

Is é £5.03 an ráta pá san uair.

(b) Teidlíocht Saoire

Tá cúntóirí cúraim i dteideal, beag beann ar fhad seirbhíse, saoire le ráta normálta pá lae ar gach ceann de na 10 lá saoire poiblí agus ina theannta sin, 2 lá breise reachtúil a shocraíonn an fostóir i ndiaidh dul i gcomhairle lena fhostaithe.

Is é 4 seachtain teidlíocht na saoire bhunúsaí, agus 5 seachtain i ndiaidh 5 bliain de sheirbhís leanúnach.

(c) Rátaí Míleáiste

Is iad na Liúntais Úsáideora Rialta:

Acmhainn Innill	501 go dtí 1000tc	1001 go dtí 1500	Thar 1500tc
Cnapshuim sa bhliana	£508	£626	£760
Suas go dtí 9,000 míle	27.0p	33.5p	40.0p
Mílte ina dhiaidh sin	16.2p	18.3p	20.5p

Tá fostaíthe nach bhfuil aicmithe mar “Úsáideoir Rialta Cairr” ach a úsáideann a gcarranna i gcúrsa a bhfostaíochta i dteideal na Rátaí Caighdeánacha Míleáiste a leanas:

Acmhainn Innill	501 go dtí 1000 tc	1001 go dtí 1500 tc	Thar 1500 tc
Suas go dtí 3,500 míle	34.0p	43.0p	53.0p
Mílte Ina dhiaidh sin	16.2p	18.3p	20.5p

Is é ráta iompair phoiblí 23p an míle.

(d) Ardú Pá 2002/03

Níl an t-eolas seo ar fáil go fóill mar níor thángthas ar chomhaontú do 2002/03 go fóill.

Brain Haemorrhages, Head Injuries and Tumour Operations: RVH

Mr Shannon asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety how many brain haemorrhages, head injuries and tumour operations are carried out each year at the Royal Victoria Hospital.

(AQW 2586/01)

Ms de Brún: Information on numbers of operations carried out for these diagnoses for the year 2000/01 is detailed in the table below.

OPERATIONS CARRIED OUT FOR SPECIFIC DIAGNOSES AT THE ROYAL VICTORIA HOSPITAL, 2000/01

Brain Haemorrhage	160
Fractured Skull	205
Brain Tumour	70

Tá eolas ar líon obráidí déanta mar thoradh ar na diagnóisithe don bhliain 2000/01 léirithe sa tábla thíos.

OBRÁIDÍ DÉANTA MAR THORADH AR DHIAGNÓIS SHAINIÚIL AG OTHARLANN RÍOGA VICTEOIRIA, 2000/01

Fuiliú Inchinne	160
Cloigeann Briste	205
Siada Inchinne	70

Waiting List for Operations

Mr Shannon asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what steps is she taking to reduce the waiting list for operations in relation to (a) brain haemorrhages; (b) head injuries; and (c) tumours.

(AQW 2587/01)

Ms de Brún: A number of measures are being taken to improve the provision of neurosurgical capacity at the Royal Group of Hospitals. These include staff recruitment drives, the provision of extra theatre sessions, increased community care provision and improved support services to enhance patient flow.

Tá roinnt beart á ndéanamh le soláthar cumais néarmhainliachta in Otharlanna an Ghrúpa Ríoga a fheabhsú. Ina measc tá feachtais earcaíochta oibrithe, soláthar seisiún breise obrádlainne, méadú i soláthar cúraim phobail agus seirbhísí tacaíochta níos fearr chun teacht isteach othar a mhéadú.

Midwives

Mr Kennedy asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail (a) the number of midwives, part-time and full-time, employed by the Jubilee Maternity Unit prior to its closure; (b) the number of midwives, part-time and full-time, employed by the Royal Victoria Hospital prior to the transfer of midwives from the Jubilee Maternity Unit; (c) the number of midwives who did not transfer to the Royal Victoria Hospital; and (d) the number of midwives who have subsequently left since their transfer to the Royal Victoria Hospital. (AQW 2588/01)

Ms de Brún:

- (a) At September 1999 there were 85 part-time and 79 full-time qualified midwives employed by the Jubilee Maternity Unit;
- (b) At September 1999 there 77 part-time and 96 full-time qualified midwives working in the Royal Victoria Hospital (RVH);
- (c) At September 2000, 35 of the 164 qualified midwives previously employed by the Jubilee Maternity Unit were not working in the RVH;
- (d) A further 14 of the former Jubilee Maternity Unit midwives have subsequently left the RVH.

Note: Figures relate to qualified midwives only and exclude student midwives and bank staff that cover for staffing shortfalls and fluctuating workloads.

- (a) I nDeireadh Fómhair 1999 bhí 85 bean ghlúine cáilithe go páirtaimseartha agus 79 go lánaimseartha ag Aonad Máithreachais na hIubháile;
- (b) I nDeireadh Fómhair 1999 bhí 77 bean ghlúine cáilithe go páirtaimseartha agus 96 go lánaimseartha ag obair in Otharlann Ríoga Vichteoiria (RVH);
- (c) I nDeireadh Fómhair 2000, bhí 35 de na 164 mná glúine fostaithe cheana ag Aonad Máithreachais na hIubháile nach raibh ag obair san RVH;
- (d) Bhí 14 breise de na hiarmhná glúine de chuid Aonad Máithreachais na hIubháile a d'fhág an RVH ina dhiaidh.

Nóta: Baineann na figiúirí le mná glúine cáilithe amháin agus ní bhaineann siad le mic léinn ina mná glúine agus foireann ar liosta a chlúdaíonn nuair atá líon na foirne thíos agus nuair a athraíonn ualach na hoibre.

Waiting List for Admission: Ulster Hospital, Dundonald

Mr Hamilton asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the extent of waiting

lists for admission to the Ulster Hospital, Dundonald at the end of (a) February 2001; and (b) February 2002.

(AQW 2589/01)

Ms de Brún: Information on persons waiting for inpatient treatment is collected quarterly on the basis of Trust rather than hospital. Details of persons waiting for inpatient admission to the Ulster Community & Hospitals Trust for the quarters ending December 2000 and December 2001 (the latest date for which information is available) are given in the table below.

TABLE 1 - PERSONS WAITING FOR INPATIENT ADMISSION TO THE ULSTER COMMUNITY & HOSPITALS TRUST, DECEMBER 2000 AND DECEMBER 2001

December 2000	5,530
December 2001	5,950

Bailítear eolas ar dhaoine ag fanacht ar chóireál othar cónaitheach go ráithiúil ar bhonn Iontaobhais in áit otharlainne. Tugtar sonraí ar dhaoine ag fanacht le iontráil othar cónaitheach chuig Iontaobhas Otharlann & Pobail Uladh do na cheathrúna ag críochnú Mí na Nollag 2000 agus Mí na Nollag 2001 (an dáta is déanaí ar a bhfuil eolas ar fáil) sa tábla thíos.

TÁBLA 1 - DAOINE AG FANACHT LE HIONTRÁIL OTHAR CÓNAITHEACH D'IONTAOBHAS OTHARLANN POBAIL ULADH, MÍ NA NOLLAG 2000 AGUS MÍ NA NOLLAG 2001

Mí na Nollag 2000	5,530
Mí na Nollag 2001	5,950

Cost of "In-House" Service for Personal Care: Southern Health and Social Services Trust

Mr Hamilton asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what formula does the Southern Health and Social Services Trust use to calculate the cost of their 'in house' service for personal care.

(AQW 2590/01)

Ms de Brún: The Southern Health and Social Services Board advise me that the total cost of the "in house" service is made up of the total gross payroll cost of Home Helps/Domiciliary Care Workers plus the total associated costs including training, travel, management and administration. The payroll cost includes basic pay, national insurance, superannuation and holiday and sickness pay.

The total cost per hour is the total cost divided by the number of hours worked.

Chomhairligh Bord Sláinte agus Seirbhísí Sóisialta an Deiscirt gurb é atá sa chostas iomlán seirbhíse inmheánaí ná costas iomlán oll-phárolla Cuiditheoirí Baile/Oibrithe Cúram Baile móide costais bhainteacha san iomlán traenáil, taisteal, foireann bhainisteoireachta agus riarachán. San áireamh leis an chostas párolla tá bunphá, árachas náisiúnta, aoisliúntas agus pá saoire agus tinnis.

Is é an costas iomlán san uair an costas iomlán roinnte ar líon na n-uaireanta a oibríodh.

Miscarriages: Counselling and Post-Operative Support

Mr Dalton asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail her policy for counselling and post-operative support for both partners after a miscarriage. (AQW 2601/01)

Ms de Brún: Care for women and their partners experiencing miscarriage is delivered by the obstetric and gynaecology teams within acute hospital settings and by community midwives, GP's or health visitors in the community/primary sector. Linkages are in place with genetic counselling services, clinical psychology services, social services and with voluntary support groups. Women and their partners can access any of these by choice or by the identification of a clinical need for such support by professionals involved in their care.

Tugann foirne cnáimhseachais agus gíniceolaíochta laistigh den suíomh géarotharlainne, mná cabhrach pobail agus gnáthdochtúirí nó cuairteoirí sláinte san earnáil phobail/phríomhchúraim cúram do mhná agus dá gcéilí i ndiaidh breithe anabái. Tá na naisc ann le seirbhísí géiniteacha comhairle, le seirbhísí síceolaíochta cliniciúla, leis na seirbhísí sóisialta agus le grúpaí tacaíochta deonacha. Is féidir le mná agus lena gcéilí teacht orthu seo de réir a rogha féin nó trí aithint riachtanais chliniciúil do a leithéid de thacaíocht ó ghairmithe a bhfuil baint acu lena gcúram.

Number of Miscarriages

Mr Dalton asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the number of miscarriages, by each Health Board area, in each year from 1998. (AQW 2602/01)

Ms de Brún: This information is not available.

Níl an t-eolas seo ar fáil.

Effects of Smoking on Unborn Children

Dr Birnie asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what information her Department has on the medical effects of smoking on the health of an unborn child; and to make a statement. (AQW 2603/01)

Ms de Brún: Smoking is a critical women's health issue for both mother and child. Smoking in pregnancy is associated with many problems both for the foetus and newly born baby including miscarriage, placenta damage, pre-term delivery, low birthweight, perinatal death and sudden infant death syndrome.

In March last 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, which will identify pregnant women who smoke as a key target group, will be issued for consultation in June.

Is ceist bharrthábhachtach i sláinte na mban í caitheamh tobac don mháthair agus don pháiste araon. Tá baint ag caitheamh tobac le linn toirchis le cuid mhór fadhbanna don fhéatas agus don leanbh nuabheirthe araon amhail breith anabái, damáiste don phlacaint, breith roimh an téarma, meáchan íseal an linbh, bás imbhreithe agus siondróm báis thobainn naíonáin.

I mí an Mhárta an bhliain seo a chuaigh thart chuir mé Grúpa idir-rannógach Oibre ar Thobac ar bun le cur i bhfeidhm plean chuimsithigh gnímh le tabhairt faoi chaitheamh tobac a fhorbairt agus a stiúradh. Eiseofar an plean, a aithneoidh agus a aimseoidh ar mhná ag iompar clainne a chaitheann tobac mar eochairdhréam, eiseofar le haghaidh comhairlithe i Meitheamh é.

Pregnant Women: Listeria

Dr Birnie asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to outline (a) steps being taken to ensure that the greatest number of pregnant women know of the dangers of listeria to the foetus; (b) what steps were taken to inform pregnant women of the dangers of listeria to the foetus at the first available opportunity. (AQW 2604/01)

Ms de Brún: At their first antenatal appointment mothers-to-be are booked – in by a midwife, who provides a wide range of information, including advice about the danger of listeria arising from certain foods. At this appointment all the expectant mothers should be given a copy of a Departmental publication called “When you are Pregnant”, which provides detailed information on a range of food-related illnesses including listeria.

In addition first-time mothers receive the “Pregnancy Book – a complete guide to a healthy pregnancy”. This includes reference to foods which should be avoided in the early stages of pregnancy. Mothers expecting their second or subsequent child are given a copy of “Your Pregnancy” (published by Bounty), which again makes reference to listeria and related foods. In the later stages of pregnancy the issue of listeria is discussed at Parentcraft classes.

Ag an chéad choinne réamhbhreithe beidh na mná ag dúil le duine clainne le bheith curtha in áirithe ag an bhean ghlúine a chuireann ar fáil réimse leathan eolais, ina measc tá comhairle ann faoi chontúirt listéire atá ar bhianna áirithe. Ag an choinne seo ba chóir cóip d'fhoilseachán na Roinne dar teideal “Agus tú Torrach” a thabhairt do na máithreacha torracha, a léiríonn mioneolas ar réimse tinneas bainteach le bia, listéire san áireamh.

Ar a bharr faigheann máithreacha arb é seo an chéad uair dóibh bheith torrach “Leabhar toirchis-treoir iomlán le haghaidh toirchis shláintiúil”. Cuirtear san áireamh tagairt do bhianna ba chóir a sheachaint sna céimeanna luatha toirchis. Tugtar cóip de “An Toircheas S’agat” (arna fhoisiú ag Bounty) do mháithreacha ag dúil lena dara duine clainne nó leis an chéad duine clainne eile a dhéanann tagairt do listéire agus bianna bainteacha eile. Pléitear ceist listéire sna céimeanna malla toirchis ag ranganna Parentcraft.

Diabetes Care Team: Foyle Community Health and Social Services Trust

Mrs Courtney asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to outline (a) if there is a psychologist employed in the diabetes care team for the Foyle Community HSS Trust; and (b) any steps she will take, if necessary, to address this situation.

(AQW 2611/01)

Ms de Brún: At present there is no psychologist employed in the diabetes care team in the Foyle Community HSS Trust but I understand that the Western HSS Board is examining this matter.

Faoi láthair níl síceolaí ar bith fostaithe ag an Roinn san fhoireann cúram diaibéitis in Iontaobhas Pobail SSS an Fheabhail ach tuigim go bhfuil Bord SSS an Iarthair ag scrúdú na ceiste seo.

Elective Surgery Procedures: Ulster Hospital

Mr Shannon asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail (a) the number of elective surgery procedures that have taken place at the Ulster Hospital since December 2001; and (b) the steps she is taking to improve these figures. (AQW 2613/01)

Ms de Brún:

- (a) From 1 December 2001 to 31 January 2002, the latest date for which information is available, a total of 2,683 elective surgery procedures were carried out at the Ulster Hospital.
- (b) Several steps are being taken by the Ulster Community and Hospitals Trust to improve the situation: additional emergency inpatient lists have been scheduled at the Ulster Hospital to protect planned lists whilst pre-assessment clinics have been introduced to reduce pre-operative length of stay and hence create bed availability for planned work. The Trust has a dedicated Day Procedure Unit at Ards Community Hospital which has increased the number of day cases year on year over the past three years.
- (a) Ó 1 Nollaig 2001 go 31 Eanáir 2002, an dáta is déanaí a bhfuil eolas ar fáil orthu, rinneadh 2,683 modh máinliachta roghnaí in Otharlann Uladh.

- (b) Tá roinnt beart á ndéanamh ag Iontaobhas Otharlanna Pobail Uladh leis an riocht a fheabhsú: liostaí breise éigeandála d’othair chónaitheacha a dhéanamh in Otharlann Uladh chun liostaí pleanáilte a chosaint agus tionscnaíodh clinici réamh-mheasúnaithe leis an fhanacht roimh obráid a laghdú agus mar thoradh air sin níos mó leapacha a chur ar fáil d’obair phleanáilte. Tá Ionad tiomnaithe Modha Lae in Otharlann Pobail na hAirde a mhéadaigh líon na gcásanna lae bliain ar bhliain thar na trí bliana anuas.

Southern Board “In-House” Service for Personal Care: Costs

Mr Hamilton asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the total cost, including administration, of the Southern Health Trust’s “in-house” service for personal care. (AQW 2617/01)

Ms de Brún: The Southern Board advises me that the total cost of “in-house” personal care provided by Armagh and Dungannon Trust, Craigavon and Banbridge Trust, and Newry and Mourne Trust in the Southern Board area in 2000/2001 was £10,724,814.

Chomhairligh Bord an Deiscirt go raibh £10,724,814 costas iomlán cúraim phearsanta “inmheánaigh” a chuireann Iontaobhas Ard Mhacha agus Dhún Geanainn, Iontaobhas Craigavon agus Dhroichead na Banna, agus Iontaobhas an Iúir agus Mhúrn i gceantar Bhord an Deiscirt i 2000/2001.

Southern Board Trusts “In-House” Services: Personal Care

Mr Hamilton asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail within the Southern Board Trusts, any of their “in-house” service provision that does not provide personal care. (AQW 2618/01)

Ms de Brún: The Southern Health and Social Services Board advise me that Armagh and Dungannon HSS Trust, Craigavon and Banbridge Community HSS Trust and Newry and Mourne HSS Trust “in-house” services all provide personal care.

Chomhairligh Bord Sláinte agus Seirbhísí Sóisialta an Deiscirt go gcuireann seirbhísí inmheánacha Iontaobhas SSS Ard Mhacha agus Dhún Geanainn, Iontaobhas SSS Craigavon agus Dhroichead na Banna, agus Iontaobhas SSS an Iúir agus Mhúrn cúram pearsanta ar fáil.

Domiciliary Care in Southern Board Area: Pricing Difficulties

Mr Hamilton asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail any providers of

domiciliary care who have left the Southern Board area in view of pricing difficulties. (AQW 2619/01)

Ms de Brún: The Southern Health and Social Services Board advises that Crossroads Caring for Carers, Extra Care and Provincial Care have left its area due to pricing difficulties.

Chomhairligh Bord Sláinte agus Seirbhísí Sóisialta an Deiscirt gur fhág Cúraim a Thabhairt do Chúramóirí de chuid Crossroads, Cúram Breise agus Cúram Cúige a cheantar mar gheall ar dheacrachtaí le praghasanna.

Maximum Working Week: Junior Doctors

Mr S Wilson asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail (a) the recommended maximum working week for junior doctors; (b) her plans to reduce hours worked to the recommended level; and (c) the evidence she has to confirm that her plan is working. (AQW 2642/01)

Ms de Brún: There is no recommended maximum working week for junior doctors. However, under the New Deal on Junior Doctors' hours introduced in 1991, it is recommended that junior doctors should not on average work more than 56 hours per week and should not be contracted for more than an average of 72 hours per week.

My Department established an Improving Junior Doctors' Working Lives Implementation Support Group (ISG) in August 2001 to work with Trusts and Boards to deliver the New Deal on Junior Doctors' hours.

Since the establishment of the Implementation Support Group, the majority of 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.

Níl uas-sheachtain oibre ar bith molta do dhochtúirí sóisearacha. De réir an Mhargaidh Nua ar uaireanta Dhochtúirí Sóisearacha tionscanta i 1991 áfach, moltar nár chóir do dhochtúirí sóisearacha níos mó ná 56 uair sa tseachtain ar an meán a dhéanamh agus nár chóir dóibh bheith ar chonradh do níos mó ná 72 uair sa tseachtain ar an meán.

Bhunaigh mo Roinn Grúpa Tacaíochta Feidhmithe um Fheabhsú Slí Bheatha Dhochtúirí Sóisearacha (GTF) i Lúnasa 2001 le comhoibriú le hÍontaobhais agus le Boird leis an Mhargadh Nua ar uaireanta Dhochtúirí Sóisearacha a chur i bhfeidhm.

Ó bunaíodh an Grúpa Tacaíochta Feidhmithe, tugadh cuairt ar bhunús na nÍontaobhas agus tugadh comhairle dóibh ar na dóigheanna is fearr le cloí le coinníollacha uaireanta agus scíthe an Mhargaidh Nua. Tá na hÍontaobhais ag cur isteach patrún athraithe oibre anois le haghaidh

measúnaithe ag an GTF de réir chaigheáin an Mhargaidh Nua agus, nuair a chomhaontófar iad, cuirfear i bhfeidhm a luaithe agus is féidir iad seo.

Eating Disorders

Mr M Robinson asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety how many people with eating disorders have been referred to consultant psychiatrists by their GP in the last 12 months. (AQW 2648/01)

Ms de Brún: The information requested is not available.

Níl fáil ar an eolas a iarradh.

Assistance for Diabetics Becoming Visually Impaired or Blind

Mr M Robinson asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what measures are in place to assist those people with diabetes who are becoming visually impaired or blind. (AQW 2649/01)

Ms de Brún: There is a range of services for people with diabetes to help them control and monitor their condition, and reduce its possible effects on vision. Part of the regular review of such people involves eye screening. For those who develop visual impairment, referral is made to consultant ophthalmologists, Low Vision Clinics or community Visual Impairment Teams, as appropriate.

My Department has established a regional group to advise on how the current screening services can be improved to ensure all people with diabetes have regular eye screening carried out and to identify the costs of providing such a service.

Tá réimse seirbhísí ann do dhaoine le diaibéiteas chun cuidiú leo smacht a chur ar a riocht agus monatóireacht a dhéanamh air, agus lena thionchair fhéideartha ar radharc a laghdú. Mar chuid den athbhreithniú rialta ar a leithéid de dhaoine sin déantar scrúdú súile. Do na daoine sin a bhfuil lagradharc orthu, seoltar chuig oftailmeolaithe comhairleacha, Clinicí Radhairc Ísil nó chuig foirne Lagradhairc iad, de réir na rogha atá ceart.

Chuir mo Roinn grúpa réigiúnach ar bun le comhairle a thabhairt ar an dóigh ar féidir na seirbhísí scrúdaithe reatha a fheabhsú le cinntiú go ndéantar scrúdú rialta súile ar na daoine go léir le diaibéiteas agus le costais sholáthar a leithéid de sheirbhís a mheas.

Anti-Depressant Drugs

Mr M Robinson asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what guidelines are available for health professionals regarding the prescribing of anti-depressant drugs. (AQW 2650/01)

Ms de Brún: Health professionals here have access to various sources of guidance regarding the prescribing of anti-depressants. These include The British National Formulary and guidelines, which summarise the clinical guidelines for primary care.

Is féidir le gairmithe sláinte anseo teacht ar fhoinsí éagsúla treorach maidir le hordú frithdhulagrán. Ina measc tá Leabhar Náisiúnta Foirmli agus Treorach na Breataine a dhéanann achoimre ar na treoirilínte cliniciúla do phríomhchúram.

Eating Disorders: Specialist Treatment

Mr M Robinson asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety how many patients diagnosed with eating disorders are currently waiting to receive specialist treatment. (AQW 2651/01)

Ms de Brún: The information requested is not available.

Níl fáil ar an eolas a iarradh.

Diabetes

Mr M Robinson asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what action is being taken in order to reduce dietary levels of fat and sugar with a view to reducing the prevalence of diabetes. (AQW 2652/01)

Ms de Brún: Being overweight or obese is associated with a significantly increased risk of diabetes. A number of initiatives have been taken to address the problem for example the Health Promotion Agency has developed a community based nutrition education programme “Cook it” targeted at low income families. The Agency has also worked with the Department of Education to produce nutritional standards for school meals and organised a regional seminar on tackling overweight and obesity aimed at primary care workers last month.

During June 2002, the Health Promotion Agency will be supporting the British Dietetic Association’s Weight Wise public information campaign to increase public awareness of the health risks of being overweight and to encourage dietary changes and an increased level of physical activity. In addition general practitioners and other health professionals regularly give advice on the importance of diet and physical activity, in the course of their contacts with patients.

Tá baint ag raimhre agus ag otracht le i bhfad níos mó baoil ó dhiaibéiteas. Rinneadh roinnt beart le tabhairt faoin fhadhb, mar shampla, d’fhorbair an Ghníomhaireacht um Chur Chun Cinn Sláinte “Cook It”, clár oideachais pobalbhunaithe ar chothú dírithe ar theaghlaigh ar ioncam íseal. Chomhoibrigh an Ghníomhaireacht leis an Roinn Oideachais chomh maith le caighdeáin chothaithe do

bheilí scoile a chur amach agus d’eagraigh sí seiminéar réigiúnach dírithe ar oibrithe príomhchúraim an mhí seo a chuaigh thart le tabhairt faoi raimhre agus faoi otracht.

I rith mí Mheithimh 2002, beidh an Ghníomhaireacht um Chur Chun Cinn Sláinte ag tacú le feachtas eolais phoiblí *Weight Wise* Chumann Bia-eolaíochta na Breataine le níos mó eolais a chur ar an phobal faoi na baoil shláinte ó raimhre chomh maith le hathruithe cothaithe agus le méadú i leibhéal na gníomhaíochta fisicí a spreagadh. Ina theannta sin, tugann dochtúirí ginearálta agus gairmithe sláinte eile comhairle go rialta ar thábhacht aiste bia agus ghníomhaíochta fisicí, le linn a dteagmhálacha le hothair.

Administration Costs

Mr Beggs asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the total administration costs incurred by (i) her Department; and (ii) each Health and Social Services Board. (AQW 2653/01)

Ms de Brún: The table below shows the projected administration costs of the Department, and each Health and Social Services Board for the 2002/03 year as a percentage of total expenditure.

Total Budget	Total Budget 2002-03 £m	Forecast Management and Administration Costs £m	% of Total Spend £m
DHSSPS	2527.7	34.1	1.35%
NHSSB	502.3	6.3	1.25%
SHSSB	377.8	5.9	1.56%
EHSSB	892.1	9.9	1.11%
WHSSB	352.6	4.7	1.33%

The figures for the Department’s administration costs have been extracted from the Executive’s 2002-03 Budget Statement.

Taispeánann an tábla thíos costais riaracháin réamh-mheasta na Roinne, agus gach Board Sláinte agus Seirbhísí Sóisialta don bhliain 2002/03 mar chéatadán den chaiteachas iomlán.

Buiséad Iomlán	Buiséad Iomlán 2002-03 £m	Bainistíocht Thuartha agus Costais Riaracháin £m	% den Iomlán Caite £m
RSSSP	2527.7	34.1	1.35%
BSSST	502.3	6.3	1.25%
BSSSD	377.8	5.9	1.56%
BSSSO	892.1	9.9	1.11%
BSSSI	352.6	4.7	1.33%

Baineadh figiúirí do Chostais Riaracháin na Roinne ó Ráiteas Buiséid an Fheidhmeannais 2002/03.

Administrative Staff

Mr Beggs asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the number of administrative staff employed by (i) her Department; and (ii) each Health and Social Services Board. (AQW 2654/01)

Ms de Brún: My Department currently employs 678 administrative staff.

The Eastern Health and Social Services Board currently has 145 administrative and clerical staff, the Northern Board has 152, the Southern Board 92 and the Western Board 81.

Tá 678 d'fhoireann riarcháin fostaithe ag an Roinn s'agam faoi láthair.

Tá 145 d'fhoireann riaracháin agus chléireach fostaithe ag Bord Sláinte agus Seirbhísí Sóisialta an Oirthir faoi láthair, 152 ag Bord an Tuaiscirt, 92 ag Bord an Deiscirt agus 81 ag Bord an Iarthair.

Functions: Health Boards

Mr Beggs asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what functions are carried out by the Health Boards which could be carried out directly by her Department. (AQW 2655/01)

Ms de Brún: All the functions conferred on the Department by the Health and Personal Social Services (Northern Ireland) Order 1972, which were delegated by the Department to Health and Social Services Boards, could be exercised by the Department.

Legislation would be necessary if the Department were to exercise directly a small number of functions relating to public health and the inspection of residential homes, carried out by the Boards, but which were not delegated to them by the Department.

D'fhéadfadh an Roinn na feidhmeanna ar fad a bhronnann an tOrdú um Sheirbhísí Sláinte, Pearsanta agus Sóisialta (Tuaisceart Éireann), 1972 ar an Roinn agus ar thug an Roinn údarás do na Boird Seirbhísí Sláinte agus Sóisialta ina leith a chomhlíonadh.

Bheadh reachtaíocht riachtanach dá mbeadh an Roinn le roinnt bheag feidhmeanna a chomhlíonadh a bhaineann le sláinte phoiblí agus cigireacht thithe cónaithe, a dhéanann na Boird, ach nár bhronn an Roinn orthu.

Functions: Health Boards

Mr Beggs asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what functions are carried out by the Health Boards which could be carried out directly by Health Trusts. (AQW 2656/01)

Ms de Brún: [holding answer 14 March 2002]: All the functions carried out by Health and Social Services

Boards could be carried out by Health and Social Services Trusts, by virtue of the Health and Social Services Order (NI) 1994.

D'fhéadfadh na hIonabhaais Seirbhísí Sláinte agus Sóisialta na feidhmeanna a dhéanann na Boird Seirbhísí Sláinte agus Sóisialta a dhéanamh de bhua an Ordaithe um Sheirbhísí Sláinte agus Sóisialta (TÉ) 1994.

Northern Ireland Ambulance Service: Funding

Mr Beggs asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what funding the Northern Ireland Ambulance Service received during each of the last 3 years from (i) her Department; and (ii) each of the Health and Social Services Boards. (AQW 2658/01)

Ms de Brún: The information requested is as follows:

	1999/2000	2000/2001	2001/2002*
EHSSB	£9,528k	£10,209k	£10,490k
NHSSB	£5,352k	£5,726k	£6,258k
SHSSB	£4,116k	£4,332k	£4,703k
WHSSB	£3,751k	£4,050k	£4,980k
DHSSPS	£1,576k	£2,269k	£4,644k

*These figures refer to the projected amounts for the last financial year.

Mar a leanas atá an t-eolas a iarradh:

	1999/2000	2000/2001	2001/2002*
BSSSO	£9,528k	£10,209k	£10,490k
BSSST	£5,352k	£5,726k	£6,258k
BSSSD	£4,116k	£4,332k	£4,703k
BSSSI	£3,751k	£4,050k	£4,980k
RSSSSP	£1,576k	£2,269k	£4,644k

*Déanann na figiúirí seo tagairt do na suimeanna tuartha don bhliain airgeadais seo caite.

Northern Ireland Ambulance Service: Funding

Mr Beggs asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what are the costs and benefits, if any, of funding the Northern Ireland Ambulance Service through the Area Health Boards. (AQW 2659/01)

Ms de Brún: The Health and Social Services Boards are responsible for assessing the health and social care needs of their resident populations and for commissioning an appropriate range of services to meet identified needs. The formal establishment of a four Board Ambulance Commissioning Group earlier this year, will ensure a single negotiation process for the regional development of A&E ambulance services. The Ambulance Service Trust, in common with the other HPSS Trusts, receives its income from the four Boards on the basis of the volume and quality of service that Boards want to secure from Trusts. This

arrangement ensures that health and social care provision remains sensitive and responsive to locally identified needs.

Tá na Boird Shláinte agus Sheirbhísí Sóisialta freagrach as measúnú riachtanais shláinte agus shóisialta líon mhuintir a limistéir agus as coimisiúnú réimse ceart seirbhísí le riar ar riachtanais aitheanta. Cinnteoidh bunú foirmiúil Grúpa Coimisiúnaithe Otharchairr ceithre Bhord ní ba luaithe sa bhliain seo próiseas singil idirbheartaíochta d'fhorbairt reigiúnach seirbhísí otharchairr T & É. Faigheann Iontaobhas na Seirbhíse Otharchairr mar aon le hIontaobhais SSSP eile a ioncam ó na ceithre Bhord Sláinte agus Seirbhísí Sóisialta de réir méid agus cáilíocht na seirbhísí is mian le Boird Iontaobhais a sholáthar. Cinntíonn an socrú seo go bhfuil an soláthar sláinte agus cúraim shóisialta tuisceanach ar agus freagrach go fóill do riachtanais áitiúla aitheanta.

Northern Ireland Ambulance Service

Mr Beggs asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety if she has any plans to fund directly the Northern Ireland Ambulance Service from her Department so that intermediate layers of bureaucracy can be removed and that an overview of the needs of the Northern Ireland public can be made regardless of Board boundaries. (AQW 2660/01)

Ms de Brún: I have no plans to change the current arrangements for funding the Ambulance Service. However, the formal establishment of a four Board Ambulance Commissioning Group earlier this year, will ensure a single negotiation process for the regional development of A&E ambulance services. Intermediate care and patient care services will continue to be commissioned at the appropriate local level to ensure that they remain responsive to local need.

Níl sé ar intinn agam na socruithe reatha do mhaoiniú na Seirbhíse Otharchairr a athrú. Cinnteoidh bunú foirmiúil Ghrúpa Coimisiúnaithe Otharchairr cheithre Bhord níos luaithe i mbliana áfach go mbeidh próiseas idirbheartaíochta amháin ann d'fhorbairt reigiúnach sheirbhísí otharchairr T&É. Coimisiúnófar seirbhísí cúraim idirmheánaigh agus cúraim idirmheánaigh othar ag an leibhéal áitiúil cuí go fóill le cinntiú go mbeidh siad freagrach do riachanais áitiúla fós.

Laboratory Services: Southern Health and Social Services Board

Mrs Carson asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety how she will ensure the temporary transfer of laboratory services from South Tyrone Hospital to Craigavon Area Hospital will not have a detrimental effect on the care of patients from the South Tyrone area. (AQW 2667/01)

Ms de Brún: I am advised that the Southern Health and Social Services Board and Trust have taken steps to

ensure that the temporary transfer of laboratory services has not affected the quality of patient care.

For example, South Tyrone has online access to the laboratory at Craigavon Hospital, ensuring that laboratory results are available quickly to clinicians. Specimens can be transported urgently when required, and arrangements are in place to ensure that laboratory results are available for out-patient clinics.

Cuireadh in iúl dom go ndearna Bord agus Iontaobhais Sláinte agus Seirbhísí Sóisialta an Deiscirt bearta le cinntiú nach raibh tionchar ag aistriú sealadach seirbhísí saotharlainne ar cháilíocht chúram othar.

Mar shampla, is féidir le Tír Eoghain Theas teacht ar an tsaotharlann in Otharlann Chreag na hAbhann ar an idirlíon, ag cinntiú go bhfuil torthaí saotharlainne ar fáil go gasta do dhochtúirí. Is féidir eiseamail a iompar go práinneach más gá iad, agus tá socruithe i bhfeidhm le cinntiú go bhfuil torthaí saotharlainne ar fáil do chlinicí éisothair.

Temporary Transfer of Laboratory Services

Mrs Carson asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety if she will end the temporary transfer of laboratory services from South Tyrone Hospital to Craigavon Area Hospital in order to reduce the additional running costs of maintaining the service on the Craigavon Area Hospital site. (AQW 2668/01)

Ms de Brún: My priority is to ensure that the Southern Health and Social Services Board and Trusts provide safe and effective services. The temporary transfer of laboratory services from South Tyrone Hospital was necessary following the withdrawal of training recognition from the hospital in 2000.

Is í mo thosaíocht le cinntiú go soláthraíonn Bord Sláinte agus Seirbhísí Sóisialta an Deiscirt agus Iontaobhais seirbhísí slána agus éifeachtacha. Bhí aistriú sealadach seirbhísí saotharlainne ó Otharlann Thír Eoghain Theas riachtanach i ndiaidh chealú aitheantais oiliúna ón otharlann i 2000.

Temporary Transfer of Laboratory Services

Mrs Carson asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety when the laboratory service, which was temporarily transferred to Craigavon Area Hospital, will be relocated back to South Tyrone Hospital. (AQW 2669/01)

Ms de Brún: The temporary transfer of laboratory services from South Tyrone Hospital was necessary following the withdrawal of training recognition from the hospital in 2000. Laboratory services are inherently linked with hospital structure and have to be considered in the context of decisions about the overall development

of hospital services. Any major changes to laboratory services need to take full account of the outcome of the wider strategic review currently underway. They cannot proceed in advance of key decisions as to the future of role of current hospitals.

Bhí aistriú sealadach seirbhísí saotharlainne ó Otharlann Thír Eoghain Theas riachtanach i ndiaidh chealú aitheantais oiliúna ón otharlann i 2000. Tá seirbhísí saotharlainne ceangailte go nádúrtha le struchtúr otharlainne agus ní mór machnamh a dhéanamh orthu i gcomhthéacs socruithe déanta faoi fhorbairt iomlán seirbhísí otharlainne. Caithfidh athrú mór ar bith do sheirbhísí saotharlainne toradh an athbhreithnithe straitéisigh níos leithne ar siúl faoi láthair a chur san áireamh go hiomlán. Ní féidir leo dul ar aghaidh roimh shocruithe tábhachtacha faoi ról otharlanna na haimsire seo sa todhchaí.

Waiting Lists

Mr M Robinson asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to outline (a) the number of people currently on Health Service patient waiting lists; and (b) how this figure compares to the same date last year. (AQW 2700/01)

Ms de Brún: As at the end of December 2001, there were 57,704 patients waiting for inpatient admission. This compares to 50,416 at December 2000. This information is published in my Department's quarterly waiting list bulletin, which is available in the Assembly Library.

Ó dheireadh Mhí na Nollag 2001, bhí 57,704 othar ag fanacht le hiontráil othair chónaithigh. I gcomparáid leis seo bhí 50,416 ag an Nollaig 2000. Foilsítear an t-eolas seo i mbileog nuachta ar liostaí feithimh ráithiúil na Roinne s'agam, atá ar fáil i Leabharlann an Tionóil.

"Bed-Blocking"

Mr M Robinson asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what impact "bed-blocking" has had on the Health Service waiting lists in the last year. (AQW 2701/01)

Ms de Brún: It is not possible to establish the precise impact of delayed discharges on waiting lists. In general terms, however, the capacity of the hospital service to treat new patients, either in terms of planned (elective) procedures or medical admissions can be reduced if hospitals are coping with significant numbers of inpatients who are medically fit for discharge, but cannot leave hospital until suitable community care arrangements are put in place.

Ní féidir tionchar díreach na moille i scaoileadh amach daoine ar liostaí feithimh a mheas. Is féidir cumas na seirbhíse otharlainne le hothair nua a chóireáil, bíodh sin trí mhodhanna (roghnacha) pleanáilte nó trí ghlacadh

isteach míochaine, a laghdú de ghnáth áfach má tá otharlanna ag déileáil le líon mór othar cónaitheach atá folláin go leor le scaoileadh amach, ach nach féidir leo an otharlann a fhágáil go dtí go mbeidh socruithe cuí cúraim phobail curtha i bhfeidhm.

Advertisement and Promotion of Tobacco Products

Mr J Kelly asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety if she intends to ban the advertisement and promotion of tobacco products. (AQW 2706/01)

Ms de Brún: I am determined that the advertisement and promotion of tobacco products should be banned without unnecessary delay.

The Westminster Government has recently agreed to take a Private Member's Bill controlling the advertising and promotion of tobacco products through the House Of Commons. I welcome this development and, having carefully considered the matter, have concluded that our interests are best served by inclusion in the Bill. My officials will carefully monitor the Bill's progress through the House of Commons and will also monitor recent legislative changes in the South.

Táim diongbháilte gur chóir fógraíocht agus cur chun cinn táirgí tabac a chosc gan aon mhoill neamhriachtanach.

Chomhaontaigh Rialtas Westminster le déanaí Bille Príobháideach a rialaíonn fógraíocht agus cur chun cinn táirgí tabac a thabhairt trí Theach na dTeachtaí. Fáiltím roimh an bhforbairt sin agus, tar éis machnamh cúramach ar an ábhar, tháinig mé ar an tuairim gur fearr a chomhlíonfar ár leasanna trína bheith san áireamh sa Bhille sin. Déanfaidh m'oifigigh monatóireacht chúramach ar dhul chun cinn an Bhille trí Theach na dTeachtaí agus déanfaidh siad monatóireacht chomh maith ar athruithe reachtaíochta a tharla le déanaí sa Deisceart.

Herceptin

Mr Shannon asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety how many women in Northern Ireland qualify for the drug Herceptin. (AQW 2754/01)

Ms de Brún: The information requested is not available.

Níl fáil ar an eolas a iarradh.

Residential and Nursing Homes

Mr Berry asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the number of (a) residential homes; and (b) nursing homes in each Board area. (AQW 2756/01)

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.

RESIDENTIAL AND NURSING HOMES IN EACH BOARD AREA, 31 MARCH 2001

Board	Residential homes	Nursing homes
EHSSB	160	114
NHSSB	91	66
SHSSB	81	48
WHSSB	82	38
Total	414	266

Tá an t-eolas léirithe sa tábla thíos. Tá na figiúirí seo foilsithe san fhoilseachán bliantúil Staitisticí Pobail atá ar fáil i Leabharlann an Tionóil.

TITHE CÚRAIM CHÓNAITHE AGUS ALTRANAIS I NGACH CEANTAR BOIRD, 31 MÁRTA 2001

Bord	Tithe Cónaithe	Tithe altranais
BSSSO	160	114
BSSST	91	66
BSSSD	81	48
BSSSI	82	38
Iomlán	414	266

Acute Hospitals Review

Mr McHugh asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety when she intends to publish her proposals in relation to the Acute Hospitals Review. (AQW 2790/01)

Ms de Brún: Following consideration of the outcome of the initial consultation and after discussion at the Executive, proposals on the way forward can be put out for full public consultation and consideration by the Assembly. It is hoped that final decisions can be taken in the course of 2002.

I ndiaidh breithniú a dhéanamh ar thoradh na chéad chomhchomhairle agus i ndiaidh plé ag an Choiste Feidhmiúcháin, is féidir moltaí faoin bhealach chun tosaigh a chur faoi chomhchomhairle phoiblí agus faoi bhreithniú an Tionóil. Táthar ag súil gur féidir na cinntí deireannacha a ghlacadh le linn 2002.

Acute Hospitals Review: Cost

Mr McHugh asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what has been the cost to her Department to date of the Acute Hospitals Review. (AQW 2791/01)

Ms de Brún: The cost to date of the work associated with the Acute Hospitals Review Group is £613,194. This figure includes salaries, commissioned research,

expenses and the cost of printing, distributing and consulting on the Review Group's report. The work of the Review Group is now complete. Work on the Acute Hospitals Review is continuing within my Department.

Is é £613,194 costas na hoibre go dtí seo bainteach le Grúpa Athbhreithnithe ar Ghéarocharlanna. San áireamh leis an fhigiúr tá tuarastail, taighde coimisiúnaithe, costais agus costas maidir le priontáil, dáileadh agus comhairliú ar thuairisc an Ghrúpa Athbhreithnithe. Tá obair an Ghrúpa Athbhreithnithe críochnaithe. Tá obair an Ghrúpa Athbhreithnithe ar Ghéarocharlanna ag dul ar aghaidh laistigh den Roinn s'agam.

Acute Hospitals Review

Mr McHugh asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety if her proposals in relation to the Acute Hospitals Review will address the siting of the new hospital in the south-west. (AQW 2792/01)

Ms de Brún: I can confirm that the question of a new hospital in the Fermanagh/Tyrone area will be addressed in a Consultation Paper which can issue following discussions at the Executive.

Is féidir liom a chinntiú go rachfar i ngleic leis an cheist faoi otharlann nua i gceantar Fhear Manach/Thír Eoghain i bPáipéar Comhairlithe is féidir a eisiú i ndiaidh caibidlí leis an Fheidhmeannas.

Valuation and Lands Agency: Tyrone and Fermanagh Hospital Site

Mr Hussey asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety if the Valuation and Lands Agency have drawn up a disposal strategy for the Sperrin Lakeland Trust in regard to land at its Tyrone and Fermanagh Hospital site in Omagh; and, if so, to detail the strategy. (AQW 2798/01)

Ms de Brún: The Valuation and Lands Agency (VLA) has drawn up a disposal strategy for the land owned by the Department at the Tyrone and Fermanagh Hospital site but has not drawn up a strategy in relation to land owned by Sperrin Lakeland Trust at this site.

This strategy envisaged disposing of the 184½ acres over a 5-year period, commencing in 1999/2000 and finishing in 2004/2005. This phased approach is designed to maximise sales proceeds by not flooding the market.

To date disposal action has been commenced or completed for 44 acres. This includes 12 acres on long-term lease to Omagh District Council, who are considering buying out their interest. The major disposal has been 18 acres to Drumragh Integrated College in order to build a new school. Other completed or impending disposals include sales to Housing Associations who are housing former hospital patients, the buy out of a Lease by

Omagh Riding Group for the Disabled, and the provision of a site for a new children's home for the Trust.

Rinne an Ghníomhaireacht Luachála agus Tailte (VLA) straitéis le talamh ar leis an Roinn é suíomh Otharlann Thír Eoghain agus Fhear Manach a dhíol ach níl straitéis curtha le chéile maidir leis an talamh ag an suíomh seo ar le hIontaobhas Speirín Tír na Lochanna é.

Bhí súil ag an straitéis seo fáil réitigh de 184½ acra thar thréimshe 5 bliain, ag tosú i 1999/2000 agus ag críochnú i 2004/2005. Tá an cur chuige céimithe seo deartha chun uasmhéid díolacháin a bhaint amach trí mhargadh báite a sheachaint.

Go nuige seo cuireadh tús leis an ghníomh díola nó tá sé críochnaithe maidir le 44 acra. Áirítear leis seo 12 acra ar léas fadtéarmach do Chomhairle Cheantair na hÓmaí atá ag déanamh machnaimh ar a hábhair suime a cheannach thar barr amach. Ba é an mórdhíol a rinneadh ná 18 acra le Coláiste Imeastha Drumragh chun scoil úr a thógáil. I measc na ndíolachán eile a cuireadh i gcrích nó atá idir lámha tá díolacháin le Cumainn Thithíochta atá ag cur iarothair otharlainne i dtithe, ceannach thar barr amach Léasa ag Grúpa Marcaíochta na hÓmaí do dhaoine Míchúmasacha agus soláthar suímh úir do theach páistí ar son an Iontaobhais.

Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder

Mr Davis asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail, by Board area, (a) the number of children waiting for a paediatric assessment for Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD); and (b) the level of resources available to address the need for paediatric assessment for ADHD.

(AQW 2801/01)

Ms de Brún: The information requested is not available.

Níl fáil ar an eolas a iarradh.

REGIONAL DEVELOPMENT

Coastal Erosion

Mr Shannon asked the Minister for Regional Development to consider co-operating with other Departments to address coastal erosion and the impact it has upon land owners.

(AQW 2192/01)

The Minister for Regional Development (Mr P Robinson): There are long-standing inter-Departmental arrangements in place for undertaking essential protection works arising as a consequence of coastal erosion. My Department is, for example, responsible for the structural integrity of roads, including footways and promenades, which have been adopted into the public road network and are affected by coastal erosion.

I have recently advised the Minister for Agriculture and Rural Development, Mrs Brid Rodgers, that, if necessary, my Department is willing to co-operate with her Department and others in confirming the respective roles of Departments in this regard.

Improve A20: Newtownards to Portaferry

Mr Shannon asked the Minister for Regional Development what steps will he take to improve the A20 from Newtownards to Portaferry due to the large number of serious accidents resulting in death and injury in the last few years.

(AQW 2337/01)

Mr P Robinson: I can assure the Member that my Department's Roads Service is committed to reducing the number of accidents on our roads. In this regard a partnership approach is vital if the problem is to be addressed effectively. While the Department of the Environment's road safety responsibilities relate to education, publicity and the co-ordination of road safety policy, my Department is responsible for road safety engineering measures. Other parties also have important roles to play, including the Police in terms of enforcement, as well as road users themselves.

In this context and in order to make optimum use of the limited resources available, Roads Service maintains the roads and investigates locations where accident clusters have been identified. While no accident clusters have been identified along the A20 Newtownards to Portaferry road, a number of schemes have been carried out over the last 3 years to improve safety along the road:

- provision of high friction surfacing and the erection of a crash barrier on the bend at Ballygarvin;
- improvements at Kelly's Corner, just south of Greyabbey; and
- traffic calming measures in Kircubbin.

In addition, Roads Service is assessing the feasibility of a more substantial bend realignment scheme at Ballygarvin, which if viable, will be considered for future inclusion in their minor works programme.

While no other improvement works are proposed for this road at this time, I can assure the Member that Roads Service will continue to keep the road under review.

Road Safety: M2

Mr Dalton asked the Minister for Regional Development what measures he aims to take to improve road safety on the M2 following a rise in recent attacks on vehicles.

(AQW 2418/01)

Mr P Robinson: Recently there have been a spate of attacks from bridges and all such attacks must be condemned by the whole community. Unfortunately

they are not new, nor are they confined to the M2. There is also a widespread problem of stone throwing from the roadside, which can have equally serious consequences for those using the roads.

I can assure you that my Department's Roads Service and the Police treat these incidents very seriously and that the matter is being kept under constant review. The agreed conclusion at present is that engineering measures such as the erection of screens on bridges should only be implemented as a last resort. This is also the view of our counterparts in Great Britain where similar problems have existed for some time. In the meantime we feel that better answers to this difficult social problem lie in areas such as enhanced enforcement together with strong community leadership and education.

Silent Valley Reservoir

Mr Bradley asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail, in percentage terms, the usage and leakage of water exiting daily from the Silent Valley Reservoir. (AQW 2448/01)

Mr P Robinson: The volume of water drawn from the Silent Valley reservoirs is normally in the region of 143 megalitres per day (M1/day). However, draw off fluctuates on a daily basis as a result of a range of factors including customer demand and the availability of water from other sources. The draw off is being kept to a minimum at present, consistent with other operational needs, in order to conserve the water supplies in the reservoirs.

It is estimated that unaccounted for water (or leakage) amounts to some 54 M1/day in the Silent Valley distribution system including customers' pipework. Water Service intends to invest £25 million over the next four years to reduce leakage to economic levels across Northern Ireland by 2006. This will involve a reduction of some 20 M1/day in the Silent Valley distribution system.

Damage to Motor Vehicles: Inferior Roads

Mr Bradley asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail the number of claims that have been made against his Department, between 1 January 2001 and 31 January 2002, for damage to motor vehicles as a result of inferior roads. (AQW 2449/01)

Mr P Robinson: During the 13 month period 1 January 2001 to 31 January 2002 there were 2,197 claims lodged against the Department relating to damage to motor vehicles on the public roads. These claims were lodged due to a variety of reasons, including occasional defects and, on a number of occasions, to the actions of other parties carrying out works on the public roads.

Congestion Tax

Mr Shannon asked the Minister for Regional Development if there are plans to instigate a congestion tax on roads similar to proposals in the UK. (AQW 2511/01)

Mr P Robinson: My Department has no immediate plans to introduce a congestion tax on roads in Northern Ireland. However, in developing the consultation paper on "A Proposed Regional Transportation Strategy for Northern Ireland", published in February 2002, my Department considered a range of travel demand management and revenue raising mechanisms.

Since the initial consultation stage of the Strategy, there has been broad support for the principle of road user charging, provided revenue is reinvested in transportation infrastructure and services, and subject to consideration of the economically disadvantaged, the adverse impacts of diverted traffic, and equity and social inclusion issues.

Studies undertaken on the introduction of road user charging in Belfast suggest that it is a potentially viable option, and this will be considered further during the development of the Belfast Metropolitan Transport Plan. In the meantime, my Department will closely monitor the impact of any such road user charging initiatives when they are introduced in other parts of the United Kingdom.

Downpatrick to Newry Road: Upgrade

Mr O'Neill asked the Minister for Regional Development what plans he has to upgrade the Downpatrick to Newry road. (AQW 2512/01)

Mr P Robinson: My Department's Roads Service has carried out a number of upgrading schemes costing some £620,000 comprising road realignment, junction improvement and safety measures on the A25 Downpatrick to Newry road over the last 5 years.

A further scheme, costing £50,000, to provide a footway at Kilcoo is programmed for the next financial year. These upgrades are in addition to improvements arising from schemes in the ongoing structural maintenance and resurfacing programme.

Banbridge to Newcastle Road: Upgrade

Mr O'Neill asked the Minister for Regional Development what plans he has to upgrade the Banbridge to Newcastle road. (AQW 2513/01)

Mr P Robinson: My Department's Roads Service has carried out a number of upgrading works, costing some £715,000, on the section of the A50 between Banbridge and Castlewellan over the last 5 years. These schemes comprised road realignment, junction improvement and safety measures.

A further scheme, costing £18,000, to improve the Gargarry Road junction is programmed for the next financial year. These works are additional to improvements arising from schemes in the ongoing structural maintenance and resurfacing programme.

The Promenade, Portstewart: Foul- and Stormwater Sewers

Mr McClarty asked the Minister for Regional Development to outline if he intends to offer compensation to businesses which have experienced a decrease in revenue as a result of the sewerage improvement scheme and resultant Promenade road restrictions in Portstewart.

(AQW 2514/01)

Mr P Robinson: Water Service is replacing foul- and stormwater sewers in Portstewart at a total cost of £2.7 million. The scheme is being taken forward in four phases. Phases 1 to 3 are complete. Phase 4, which is estimated to cost £650,000 started on 11 October 2001 and is due to be completed in early July this year.

Throughout the scheme, Water Service has liaised closely with the public, local businesses and statutory authorities to limit the effects of pipelaying in the town. At all times access for parking was available and pedestrian access to shops was maintained.

This major scheme will directly benefit many people in Portstewart as well as the environment generally. All reasonable steps were taken by the Department to ensure that disruption to businesses and the public during the works is minimised as much as possible. I have no plans therefore to offer compensation for any loss of profit which may have occurred during the works.

The Promenade, Portstewart: Foul- and Stormwater Sewers

Mr McClarty asked the Minister for Regional Development to outline (a) the timetable for the completion of the sewerage improvement scheme in Portstewart; and (b) the completion date for road resurfacing.

(AQW 2515/01)

Mr P Robinson: Water Service is replacing the foul- and storm water sewers in Portstewart at a total cost of £2.7 million. The scheme is at an advanced stage and is due to be completed in early July 2002.

Road resurfacing commenced at The Promenade on 11 March 2002 and is due to be completed just before Easter. The work, which is being carried out by Roads and Water Services, involves the provision of a new surface on The Promenade and Harbour Road from the Diamond to Atlantic Circle.

The permanent reinstatement of other roads, in which sewers and water mains have been replaced, will be completed by early July 2002.

Upgrading Roads: South Armagh

Mr Kennedy asked the Minister for Regional Development what plans he has to upgrade the following roads (a) Cluster Road, Newtownhamilton; (b) Whiterock Road, Newtownhamilton; (c) Ballintemple Road, Whitecross; and (d) Markethill Road, Newtownhamilton, given their current condition.

(AQW 2533/01)

Mr P Robinson: My Department's Roads Service intends to carry out the following planned maintenance work in 2002/03:

- to resurface 150 m of Cluster Road (estimated cost £2,000) and to surface dress the remaining 1150 m of road (estimated cost £3,000); and
- to resurface 770 m of Whiterock Road in 3 sections (estimated cost £10,500) and to surface dress 1300 m of the road (estimated cost £3,500).

Roads Service does not intend to carry out any planned maintenance work on either Ballintemple Road or Markethill Road, but three sections of the latter road have been identified for possible inclusion in the 2003/04 resurfacing programme (estimated cost £70,000).

All of the above roads will, of course, continue to be routinely inspected by Roads Service and any necessary response maintenance work will be carried out as appropriate.

Unauthorised Road Alterations

Mr Hamilton asked the Minister for Regional Development to outline (a) the sanctions Roads Service can impose against people carrying out unauthorised road alterations; and (b) if Roads Service has authorised the roadworks taking place at the junction of the Ballyroan Road/Belfast Road at Dundonald, and if not, what action will be taken.

(AQW 2550/01)

Mr P Robinson: Where road alterations constitute an offence under the Roads (NI) Order 1993, my Department may prosecute the offender.

My Department's Roads Service has advised me that the work carried out at the junction of Ballyroan Road and Belfast Road, was unauthorised. I understand that, whilst the work did not damage the carriageway, Roads Service had concerns about the manner in which the verge had been left. This matter was drawn to the attention of the individual who had carried out the work and he immediately effected the necessary repairs. He was also advised that he should have obtained Roads Service's consent before undertaking the original work.

In light of the above, Roads Service has concluded that it would not be an appropriate use of public resources to initiate a prosecution in this particular case.

Far Circular Road, Dungannon

Mrs Carson asked the Minister for Regional Development, pursuant to AQW 2177/01, in respect of the Far Circular Road, Dungannon, what criteria rendered the 8 claims lodged in 2000/01 unsuccessful. (AQW 2559/01)

Mr P Robinson: The 8 claims lodged in 2000/01 in respect of the Far Circular Road, Dungannon all related to the same defect and occurred on the same day, 28 November 2000. Entitlement to compensation from the Department in such circumstances however is not automatic. While Article 8 of the Roads (NI) Order 1993 allows motorists to claim compensation, it also provides the Department with a defence against a claim if it can show that it operated a reasonable system of inspection and repair of the road in question. That stretch of road had been inspected regularly on a 2 monthly cycle. The last inspection prior to the accident was on 25 September 2000 when no defects were noted. While the next inspection took place on 29 November 2000, such flexibility in the application of the inspection cycle has been accepted as reasonable by the Courts in Northern Ireland.

The Department also responds promptly to public complaints about defects on the road. A complaint about this defect was made on 28 November 2000 at 17.45 after which it was inspected and a temporary repair made that evening.

The criterion therefore for turning down these claims is that the systems of regular inspection and repair and of responding to public complaints had been fully complied with on this occasion.

Regional Development Strategy: Legislation

Mr Dalton asked the Minister for Regional Development, pursuant to AQW 2241/01, to clarify the obligations which have been placed on a Department or Departments to introduce legislation as part of the implementation of the Regional Development Strategy for Northern Ireland 2025. (AQW 2576/01)

Mr P Robinson: Further to my answer to AQW 2241/01, the Regional Development Strategy does not impose an obligation on a department or departments to introduce legislation as part of its implementation.

The Strategic Planning (Northern Ireland) Order 1999 and the proposed amendment to that Order, which I will bring forward in the Strategic Planning Bill, provide the

legal framework within which the implementation of the Regional Development Strategy will proceed.

In fulfilling their statutory obligation under the Strategic Planning (Northern Ireland) Order 1999, it will be a matter for departments to determine what, if any, new legislation is required in pursuance of their own policies and programmes.

Vandalism on Bus Shelters

Mr Dalton asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail the number of attacks on bus shelters in the Greater Belfast area, including Newtownabbey.

(AQW 2577/01)

Mr P Robinson: My Department's Road Service is aware of 657 acts of vandalism on bus shelters in the Greater Belfast area since the 1 January 2001 that have required repairs. The level of these repairs can range from minor items to replacement of all of the glass panels.

Under Road Service's current bus shelter contract, all of the above repairs are the responsibility of the shelter provider, Adshel. There is no cost to the public purse in relation to the provision, repair or general maintenance of bus shelters during the period of this 15 year contract which was awarded on 1 January 2001.

Total Spend on Road Improvements: Strangford Constituency

Mr Hamilton asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail (a) the total spend on road improvements in the Strangford constituency over the last 3 years; and (b) the total spend as a percentage of total road improvement for Northern Ireland over the same period.

(AQW 2591/01)

Mr P Robinson: My Department's Road Service does not maintain details of expenditure on road improvements on a parliamentary constituency basis nor for the Peninsula area of the Strangford constituency. However, I am able to provide statistics for the district council areas of Ards and Castlereagh, which form the majority of the Strangford 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 expenditure on minor road improvements includes minor works, accident remedial schemes, transportation measures and minor bridge strengthening. The resources available for such works are allocated to the 4 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 2000/2001

	1998/1999 £,000s	1999/2000 £,000s	2000/2001 £,000s
Ards	453	204	297
Castlereagh	1431	408	870
Total	1884	612	1167
% of Total Capital Expenditure – Province – Wide	9%	3%	4%
Ards Borough Council area only, as a % of Total Capital Expenditure – Province – Wide	2%	1%	1%

**Total Spend on Road Improvements:
Strangford Constituency**

Mr Hamilton asked the Minister for Regional Development what percentage of total spend on road improvements was spent in the Peninsula area of the Strangford constituency. (AQW 2592/01)

Mr P Robinson: My Department's Road Service does not maintain details of expenditure on road improvements on a parliamentary constituency basis nor for the Peninsula area of the Strangford constituency. However, I am able to provide statistics for the district council areas of Ards and Castlereagh, which form the majority of the Strangford constituency.

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Ballyalton Road

Mr Hamilton asked the Minister for Regional Development what plans has Roads Service to restrict the use of the single track at Ballyalton Road being used as a 'short cut' for traffic travelling from Comber to the Dundonald dual carriageway and vice-versa.

(AQW 2593/01)

Mr P Robinson: My Department's Roads Service currently has no plans to introduce restrictions on vehicles using Ballyalton Road. However, as you may be aware, the current North Down and Ards Area Plan includes proposals for the improvement of the primary route network around Comber and Newtownards. One of these proposals is the construction of Phase 2 of the Comber Bypass. Work on that scheme is due to commence later this year.

When completed, the proposals included in the Area Plan will help to alleviate congestion in the town centres. They should also encourage road users to use the main roads, thereby reducing traffic flows on rural roads which may currently be used as 'short cuts', including Ballyalton Road. Roads Service will continue to monitor the situation.

Traffic Calming Schemes

Mr Shannon asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail (a) if he will consider increasing the funding for traffic calming schemes; and (b) if requests for such schemes from estates and areas within the Strangford constituency will be implemented. (AQW 2605/01)

Mr P Robinson: In April 2001, my Department launched a Traffic Calming Initiative to help address the high demand for traffic calming right across Northern Ireland. At that time, the funds available were increased for traffic calming for the 2001/2002 financial year by some 30%. This amounted to an annual expenditure of £1.8 million, an increase of £400,000 on the original allocation. This allowed my Department's Roads Service to implement around 45 schemes, rather than the 35

schemes originally planned. Two of these schemes were carried out at Main Street, Millisle and Main Street, Kircubbin within the Strangford constituency.

With regard to funding for future years, the Regional Transportation Strategy proposes increased funding of some £23.7 million for traffic calming initiatives over the next ten years. This would more than double the current funding level. Until the final strategy is agreed and the significantly enhanced funding is secured, I propose to maintain the traffic calming budget for 2002/2003 at the increased level of £1.8 million.

In the meantime, despite the recent increase in funding, the demand for traffic calming measures still greatly exceeds the resources available for this type of work. Priorities therefore have to be established to ensure that the available resources are targeted towards those locations that would derive the greatest benefit, primarily in terms of accident reduction. Accordingly, all requests for traffic calming are assessed and prioritised using criteria such as road accident history, vehicle speeds, volume and type of traffic and environmental factors, such as the presence of schools, playgrounds, shops etc.

As regards the Strangford constituency, I can advise that two schemes for that area are currently programmed for 2002/2003, at Darragh Road and the West Winds Estate in Comber.

Wastewater Treatment Works: Ards Peninsula

Mr Shannon asked the Minister for Regional Development if he will liaise with his Ministerial colleague in the Department of the Regional Development to ensure residential development can continue in the Ards Peninsula in light of the upgrading of the sewage works in the villages of Ballywalter, Ballyhalbert, Ballygowan and Lisbane. (AQW 2606/01)

Mr P Robinson: As part of the ongoing programme to upgrade wastewater treatment works to meet the requirements of the Urban Wastewater Treatment Regulations (NI) 1995, Water Service plans to commence the upgrading of the works in Ballywalter, Ballyhalbert, Ballygowan and Lisbane in 2004/05. This is of course subject to completion of all the required procedures, including planning approval, and the availability of the necessary resources at that time.

In the interim, the Environment and Heritage Service has indicated that it does not wish any further properties to be connected to the public sewerage system where this would cause overloading of the system or exacerbate non-compliance with the Regulations. In such circumstances, Water Service will advise Planning Service of the impact of the proposed development and of the need to consult with the Environment and Heritage Service. The

granting of planning approval is of course a matter for Planning Service alone.

My officials will continue to liaise with officials in the Department of the Environment on these matters, but we must be guided by the advice coming from them on these environmental issues. I would be willing to liaise with the Minister of the Environment on any suggestions he may have to deal with the situation.

Telecommunication Masts: Departmental Property

Mr O'Neill asked the Minister for Regional Development what is his policy in dealing with the erection of telecommunication masts on Departmental property. (AQW 2634/01)

Mr P Robinson: The policy on the erection of telecommunication masts at Departmental property, other than within the public road boundary, is currently being reviewed. The review is at an advanced stage and I hope to be in a position to consult the Regional Development Committee about its conclusions shortly. Since the review commenced last year, the Department has not entered into any agreements with telecommunication companies for the erection of masts on Departmental land.

However, telecommunications companies, which are licensed by the Department of Trade and Industry under the Telecommunications Act 1984, have a statutory right to place apparatus, including masts, within the public road boundary in accordance with the Telecommunications Code and the relevant legislation. This requires a licensed company to give my Department's Road Service 28 days notice of its intention to install apparatus within the public road. In assessing such notices, Roads Service can consider only matters that affect the safety and convenience of road users. The companies must also obtain planning approval for the installation.

Road Safety Implications: Bus Lanes

Dr Birnie asked the Minister for Regional Development what assessment has he made of the road safety implications, particularly with respect to cyclists, of the decision to allow taxis to use bus lanes. (AQW 2638/01)

Mr P Robinson: Officials from my Department's Roads Service consulted with their counterparts in the Department of Transport, Local Government and the Regions and a number of local authorities in England who presently allow taxis to use bus lanes. From these consultations, it would appear that there have been no identifiable adverse safety problems associated with the schemes presently operating in Great Britain and, to date, no authority has proposed abandoning their scheme.

By limiting the types of taxis permitted to use bus lanes to Belfast public hire taxis and “black” taxis licensed to operate bus-type services, Roads Service will be in a position to monitor the overall operation of the bus lanes and gather relevant safety information which will be used to help formulate future policy with regard to other taxis. A decision on whether or not to allow the introduction of other taxi types will not be taken until a suitable monitoring period has elapsed.

Antrim-Knockmore Railway Line

Dr Birnie asked the Minister for Regional Development what assessment has he made of the impact on passenger numbers on the Antrim-Knockmore railway line of variations on the timetabling of train services.

(AQW 2639/01)

Mr P Robinson: In March 2001 Translink conducted a survey which showed that on average just over 100 passengers journeys per day originated from or terminated at stations on the Antrim/Knockmore line. Figures gathered by Translink during the period May 2001 to November 2001 indicate that there are now less than 80 passenger journeys per day.

Up to 10th June 2001 116 train services operated in both directions each week along the line. Since 10th June 2001 some 27 train services have operated in both directions each week along the line.

Water System: Leakage

Mr M Murphy asked the Minister for Regional Development to outline his strategy in relation to identifying leakage within the water system in (a) the business/commerce sector; (b) the public sector; and (c) the domestic sector.

(AQW 2730/01)

Mr P Robinson: Water Service has adopted a leakage strategy to identify, manage and control leakage. The strategy consists of five main elements, which are:

- the design and setting up of District Metered Areas;
- design and implementation of pressure management schemes;
- replacement of watermains and service pipes;
- leak location and repair;
- revision of data and completion of technical reports.

The strategy is aimed at all parts of the water distribution system. As part of its intensive leakage management programme, Water Service carries out leakage detection exercises on the water distribution network. These exercises often identify leaks, on private property, which are the responsibility of the owner to repair. In these circumstances, a waste notice is issued, requiring the owner to have the leak repaired within 28 days. It is estimated that 20% of leakage is the responsibility of customers.

Water Service has a proactive campaign of raising the awareness of its customers of using water wisely, through a number of initiatives, including leaflets drops, and exhibitions. All customers have been advised, through a series of leaflet drops in 2000, 2001, and 2002 on the efficient use of water and of the importance of repairing leaks.

The majority of the business, commercial and public sectors are metered and these customers pay for water used. The onus is therefore on these customers to reduce costs by regularly monitoring their water consumption and repair any leaks detected on their pipework. During 2001, a leaflet giving useful hints on how to save water and save money was sent to all metered customers. Water Service is liaising with the Area Health and Social Services Boards to promote water efficiency in hospitals.

Water Efficiency Plan

Mr M Murphy asked the Minister for Regional Development to outline his approach to the promotion of water savings in domestic dwellings, aside from leaflets urging conservation.

(AQW 2731/01)

Mr P Robinson: As part of its Water Efficiency Plan, Water Service has promoted initiatives to increase the awareness of the need to use water wisely. Customers have been made aware of these initiatives through a series of leaflets, which in addition to urging conservation, provide practical tips on how to save water in the home and elsewhere.

Water Service promotes water efficiency measures at exhibitions, including ‘Ideal Home’, agricultural shows and garden festivals throughout Northern Ireland. It also has a ‘Water Bus’ which visits schools throughout Northern Ireland which aims to educate children on a variety of aspects of Water Service’s activities including information on water efficiency. The children are encouraged to complete a water audit either during or prior to the visit.

Water Service provides practical assistance in the form of cistern displacement devices, which reduce the amount of water used each time the toilet is flushed. These are known as Hippo bags and are provided free to customers, on request. To date over 37,000 have been issued to customers. Water Service is currently reviewing its water regulations to encourage the use of water fittings in new plumbing installations that are more water efficient, e.g. smaller sized cisterns.

Falling Water Reserves

Mr M Murphy asked the Minister for Regional Development to indicate when he and the Water Service first became aware of falling water reserves from last September, in advance of press coverage on the shortage in January 2002.

(AQW 2732/01)

Mr P Robinson: Levels in all reservoirs across Northern Ireland are monitored by Water Service on a continuous basis. It is normal for reservoir levels to fall from springtime as a result of decreasing rainfall in late spring and summer months. However, the storage levels generally recover as a result of increased rainfall in the autumn and winter. The unusually dry autumn prevented the normal recharge of the reservoirs particularly in the Silent Valley where the rainfall was the lowest for over 30 years.

My predecessor, Gregory Campbell and I have been kept advised of water storage levels across Northern Ireland since the summer of 2001. In light of the developing situations, I felt it was prudent to alert the public in January 2002 to the water situation in the Silent Valley and further promote the need for customers to use water wisely and conserve supplies.

Water Supply

Mr M Murphy asked the Minister for Regional Development what measures have been implemented to control the demand of water, given the below average rainfall over the last year. (AQW 2733/01)

Mr P Robinson: Water Service seeks to meet the water needs of all its customers, but it is the customer who ultimately controls the total demand for water, whatever the rainfall levels. Reduced demand can therefore only come about through the actions of customers in using water wisely and conserving it where possible. Water Service will continue to encourage customers to do so and will continue to actively promote its Water Efficiency Plan.

A high profile campaign is underway to persuade all customers to use less water, and as part of this, a leaflet promoting water saving techniques is currently being issued to all 720,000 properties in Northern Ireland. In addition Water Service is urging all customers to fit Hippo bags in their toilet cisterns. These are easy to fit and can save up to 3 litres of water each time the toilet is flushed. They are available free of charge and can be obtained by telephoning Water Service's Customer Service Unit on 08457440088.

The Water Efficiency Plan is an important element of Water Service's Water Resource Strategy, which addresses the total water needs over a 30-year period, and how these needs can best be met.

Water Supply

Mr M Murphy asked the Minister for Regional Development what reassurance can he give the business sector and local citizens in general that their water supply needs will be met without disruption; and to make a statement. (AQW 2734/01)

Mr P Robinson: All impounding reservoirs in the Province, apart from those in the Silent Valley, are full. There are therefore no concerns about the water supply in any areas other than those supplied from the Silent Valley reservoirs.

The unusually dry autumn and mild winter meant that the Silent Valley reservoirs were not replenished in the normal way and by January were only one-third full. The increased rainfall during February and March has improved the storage levels and the reservoirs are now over 60% full. However, the reservoirs would normally be around 90% full at this time of year.

There is therefore no immediate threat to water supplies in those areas of County Down and Belfast supplied from the Silent Valley. However, to avoid difficulties later in the year, we need average rainfall over the coming months, and the co-operation of customers to use water wisely and conserve supplies where possible. Water Service will also take all possible operational measures to reduce demand on the Silent Valley reservoirs.

Knockmore Railway Line

Mr Dalton asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail any steps being taken to gain funding from the Rural Transport Fund to subsidise the Knockmore Railway Line. (AQW 2789/01)

Mr P Robinson: The Rural Transport Fund supports road passenger transport services in rural areas under the powers in Sections 11 and 75A of the Transport Act 1967. These powers do not permit the Fund to be used to subsidise railway services.

Planning Regulations for Farm Land: Relaxation

Mr Paisley Jnr asked the Minister for Regional Development if he has any plans to relax planning in the countryside regulations for farm land. (AQO 1143/01)

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 planning policy guidance on a range of

important issues. My officials have already started work on a new planning policy statement on development in the countryside. 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 challenge to maintain the economic and community life of rural areas in the face of the hardships currently besetting farmers. I also recognise the tension that exists between the desire for development in the rural area, particularly for business and residential use, and the need to protect good farm land and the general environment of our countryside. A balance will need to be struck if we are to avoid the detrimental effects of either excessive development or the blight on rural communities from a policy, which is too restrictive.

Clearly this is an issue of significant public interest and I will ensure that the Assembly, its committees and rural communities, are fully consulted as the work on this strategic planning policy progresses.

Damaged Bus Shelters

Mr McCarthy asked the Minister for Regional Development how much has been spent on the replacement or repair of damaged bus shelters in each of the last 3 years. (AQW 2794/01)

Mr P Robinson: My Department's Roads Service, in partnership with most district Councils (Omagh, Fermanagh and Derry excluded), entered into a new 15 year contract with bus shelter provider Adshel on 1 January 2001. Under this contract, all of the shelters provided (including replacements) are erected, maintained and repaired by Adshel at no expense to the Department.

Prior to this contract with Adshel, the replacement or repair costs incurred by Roads Service, in respect of damaged bus shelters cannot be readily identified as they were included in overall costs against other routine maintenance activities.

SOCIAL DEVELOPMENT

Disability Living Allowance: Appeal Tribunals

Mr Weir asked the Minister for Social Development what is the average length of time to process a Disability Living Allowance appeal, from lodging notice of appeal to the verdict being delivered at the tribunal hearing. (AQW 2561/01)

The Minister for Social Development (Mr Dodds):

The figures for February 2002 show that it takes Disability Living Allowance Branch, on average, 73 working days from date of receipt of an appeal request to the date the case is submitted to The Appeals Service to arrange the appeal hearing. Upon receipt of the submission it takes a further 27 weeks, on average, for the decision to be made at the tribunal hearing.

Disability Living Allowance: Appeal Tribunals

Mr Weir asked the Minister for Social Development what was the total budget allocated to Disability Living Allowance appeal tribunals in each of the last 5 years. (AQW 2562/01)

Mr Dodds: The budget allocated to The Appeals Service and to The Office of the President of Appeals (formerly the Independent Tribunal Service) is to cover the cost of all benefit hearings. The allocation specifically for Disability Living Allowance appeal tribunals is not readily available and could only be obtained at disproportionate cost.

However, in the 1997/98 year the total allocation was £3,175,152; £2,962,295 in 1998/99; £2,727,174 in 1999/00; £3,400,572 in 2000/01 and £3,755,968 for the 11 months ended February 2002.

Disability Living Allowance: Appeals Tribunals

Mr Weir asked the Minister for Social Development how many Disability Living Allowance appeals were successful at tribunals in each of the last 5 years. (AQW 2563/01)

Mr Dodds: In the 1997/98 year appeals against 1452 components of Disability Living Allowance were successful at tribunals; 1294 in 1998/99; 937 in 1999/00; 1202 in 2000/01 and 1895 during the 11 months ending February 2002.

Disability Living Allowance: Appeals Tribunals

Mr Weir asked the Minister for Social Development how many cases were heard in Disability Living Allowance appeal tribunals in each of the last 5 years. (AQW 2564/01)

Mr Dodds: In the 1997/98 year appeals against 8534 components of Disability Living Allowance were heard; 6507 in 1998/99; 5059 in 1999/00; 9641 in 2000/01 and 13668 during the 11 months ending February 2002.

Harbison Report

Mr Shannon asked the Minister for Social Development to ring-fence monies for the Voluntary and Community Sector to help implement the recommendations of the Harbison Report. (AQW 2565/01)

Mr Dodds: The Harbison report made a number of key recommendations:

- to develop performance indicators for voluntary and community-based activity;
- to undertake work on community infrastructure and, in particular, on identifying and addressing weak community infrastructure;
- develop a database of government and other funding of the voluntary and community sector;
- establish a forum for funders of the voluntary and community sector; and
- establish a Task Force to identify how the medium and long-term sustainability of the voluntary and community sector can be achieved.

Work on the development of performance indicators is ongoing. The Voluntary Activity Unit within my Department has been successful in acquiring funding through Executive Programme Funds to undertake a programme of work on weak community infrastructure. It is not necessary to ring-fence additional monies at this stage to progress both areas of work.

Development of the proposed funding database, a Funders Forum and Task Force are subject to resources being secured. It is not possible at this stage to identify what resources would need to be directed towards the voluntary and community sector for implementation of the outstanding recommendations of the Report.

Harbison Report

Mr Shannon asked the Minister for Social Development what action has he taken to implement the recommendations of the Harbison Report. (AQW 2566/01)

Mr Dodds: The recommendations of the Harbison Report are detailed in AQW 2565/01.

An Interim report outlining progress on the development of performance indicators was published in October 2001 and a final report is expected in the summer.

A one-day Conference was held recently involving key stakeholders to discuss the complex issue of weak community infrastructure. The Voluntary Activity Unit within my Department have also been successful in acquiring £3 million through Executive Programme Funds to undertake a programme of work within the statutory sector to help build community infrastructure in areas where it is weakest and maintaining areas where the infrastructure is currently positive.

Proposals to develop a database to record funding to the voluntary and community sector are well advanced. A Scoping Study has been completed and it is planned to develop a pilot application soon.

An initial meeting of the major funders to the voluntary and community sector has been held. It is planned to progress a Funders Forum in the next few months.

A Task Force was proposed to identify alternative funding sources for the voluntary and community sector and to address sustainability of the sector.

It is hoped to begin the work of the Task Force and progress the Funders Forum and the funding database next financial year, subject to securing resources.

Official Credit Cards

Mr Dallat asked the Minister for Social Development how many official credit cards are in use in his Department and how much has been spent to date on each card in the current financial year. (AQW 2623/01)

Mr Dodds: There are no official credit cards in use in the Department for Social Development and therefore no spend to date in the current financial year.

State Pension

Mrs I Robinson asked the Minister for Social Development to detail, by constituency, the number of people who are currently in receipt of state pension. (AQW 2629/01)

Mr Dodds: The number of persons receiving Retirement Pension by Parliamentary Constituency is 244,039 and is detailed in the table below. The figures are the most recent available and are for September 2001.

Constituency	Retirement Pension Customers
Belfast East	16,196
Belfast North	15,433
Belfast South	14,271
Belfast West	11,257
East Antrim	12,600
East Londonderry	11,910
Fermanagh and South Tyrone	11,474
Foyle	10,921
Lagan Valley	14,774
Mid Ulster	10,310
North Antrim	15,545
North Down	15,434
Newry and Armagh	12,907
South Antrim	13,159
South Down	13,804

Constituency	Retirement Pension Customers
Strangford	14,595
Upper Bann	14,203
West Tyrone	10,260
Missing Postcode	4,986
All Claimants	244,039

1. In producing this analysis, individual records were attributed to wards and Parliamentary Constituency on the basis of their postcode. Not all records can be correctly allocated to a ward using this method, and some cannot be allocated at all.
2. Past investigation has demonstrated that misallocations and non-allocations do not necessarily occur randomly between areas, and at ward level the proportion of records misallocated or unallocated can be substantial.
3. At present, it seems likely that a higher than average proportion of the records that cannot be attributed to a ward are in the following areas: Fermanagh District Council, Derry District Council and parts of Belfast City Council.

Housing Waiting List

Mr S Wilson asked the Minister for Social Development to detail, by constituency, the number of people (a) on the housing waiting list in each of the last 5 years; (b) waiting for transfer; and (c) waiting for accommodation for the elderly. (AQW 2643/01)

Mr Dodds: The Housing Executive does not maintain records on a constituency basis, however, the information is available by district council area, and is shown in the tables below. Figures from 1999/00 include applicants for housing association tenancies.

WAITING LIST APPLICANTS

District Council Area	1996/97	1997/98	1998/99	1999/00	2000/01
Antrim	631	608	589	582	463
Ards	753	751	725	816	810
Armagh	459	451	426	369	357
Ballymena	655	677	740	769	678
Ballymoney	267	254	282	250	227
Banbridge	308	307	286	296	298
Belfast	6294	5607	5914	8869	8456
Carrickfergus	647	614	602	664	612
Castlereagh	677	688	717	1286	1229
Coleraine	525	588	603	653	605
Cookstown	224	212	207	176	179
Craigavon	923	686	679	821	819
Derry	1704	1521	1414	1683	1448
Down	823	729	792	919	808
Dungannon	480	422	333	349	396
Fermanagh	632	541	527	522	479
Larne	338	318	267	273	268

District Council Area	1996/97	1997/98	1998/99	1999/00	2000/01
Limavady	325	337	337	330	305
Lisburn	1517	1353	1342	1943	1822
Magherafelt	260	245	256	254	212
Moyle	176	160	150	154	131
Newry+Mourne	916	1013	1012	1102	848
Newtownabbey	932	915	892	1139	1153
N. Down	913	842	769	949	793
Omagh	508	415	400	415	272
Strabane	389	396	381	423	410
Total	22276	20650	20642	26006	24078

TRANSFER APPLICANTS

District Council Area	1996/97	1997/98	1998/99	1999/00	2000/01
Antrim	373	361	333	266	261
Ards	497	505	448	430	402
Armagh	285	271	244	171	189
Ballymena	536	546	489	417	370
Ballymoney	226	200	174	175	152
Banbridge	269	216	188	168	147
Belfast	3621	3453	3187	3819	4545
Carrickfergus	351	362	297	322	295
Castlereagh	591	650	563	619	694
Coleraine	557	533	513	414	357
Cookstown	142	135	117	92	95
Craigavon	759	626	493	441	388
Derry	1457	1192	928	962	869
Down	410	314	352	356	325
Dungannon	246	202	163	199	175
Fermanagh	335	311	247	246	223
Larne	304	259	239	246	203
Limavady	244	236	217	196	177
Lisburn	942	870	795	752	786
Magherafelt	184	179	153	138	141
Moyle	130	128	110	106	66
Newry+Mourne	498	495	389	361	266
Newtownabbey	753	708	619	551	575
N. Down	478	461	413	455	401
Omagh	399	331	250	238	200
Strabane	363	349	319	230	270
Total	14950	13893	12240	12370	12572

ELDERLY APPLICANTS

District Council Area	1996/97	1997/98	1998/99	1999/00	2000/01
Antrim	68	68	80	66	64
Ards	204	178	166	209	235

District Council Area	1996/97	1997/98	1998/99	1999/00	2000/01
Armagh	67	69	69	63	70
Ballymena	112	113	131	118	200
Ballymoney	46	39	42	45	41
Banbridge	55	46	52	59	63
Belfast	1258	1008	981	1132	1397
Carrickfergus	186	185	172	263	280
Castlereagh	212	194	199	288	275
Coleraine	97	95	94	113	179
Cookstown	33	37	56	36	33
Craigavon	205	154	151	202	185
Derry	192	156	129	180	212
Down	101	88	81	118	159
Dungannon	83	68	51	66	72
Fermanagh	126	88	103	120	135
Larne	69	64	53	84	91
Limavady	30	36	36	23	34
Lisburn	333	292	252	313	381
Magherafelt	47	44	53	42	42
Moyle	25	24	19	13	18
Newry+Mourne	121	150	153	166	140
Newtownabbey	208	181	169	209	279
N. Down	371	316	241	407	622
Omagh	83	69	56	61	37
Strabane	59	54	59	63	57
Total	4391	3816	3648	4459	5301

ELDERLY TRANSFER APPLICANTS

District Council Area	1996/97	1997/98	1998/99	1999/00	2000/01
Antrim	93	87	92	73	75
Ards	194	177	151	172	163
Armagh	72	70	74	56	52
Ballymena	159	154	144	108	105
Ballymoney	60	42	41	49	42
Banbridge	104	77	64	64	54
Belfast	1215	1117	1029	1315	1253
Carrickfergus	155	146	132	148	148
Castlereagh	247	113	231	234	208
Coleraine	160	158	144	119	118
Cookstown	37	29	30	25	28
Craigavon	264	205	160	111	131
Derry	321	243	170	202	203
Down	121	87	90	122	71
Dungannon	68	55	41	54	36
Fermanagh	77	66	57	53	62
Larne	96	82	71	88	90
Limavady	47	44	41	43	40
Lisburn	271	259	232	232	189

District Council Area	1996/97	1997/98	1998/99	1999/00	2000/01
Magherafelt	65	54	50	42	48
Moyle	29	24	22	20	11
Newry+Mourne	113	102	86	110	68
Newtownabbey	292	249	208	219	213
N. Down	215	316	168	207	218
Omagh	77	63	43	50	42
Strabane	52	69	65	50	56
Total	4604	4088	3636	3966	3724

Warm Homes Scheme

Mr Beggs asked the Minister for Social Development, pursuant to AQW 2246/01, what efforts has he made to encourage applications from areas such as East Antrim, which have had a low up-take of the Warm Homes Scheme to date. (AQW 2663/01)

Mr Dodds: The Warm Homes Scheme is marketed through an established network of housing, health, social service and voluntary/community organisations. The development of this effective referral procedure is a model of collaborative working across traditional sectoral boundaries and facilitates the effective targeting of efforts and resources at those in greatest need.

Despite the marketing of the Warm Homes Scheme, its uptake in the East Antrim area is lower than average. Local publicity, which is being arranged, will raise the profile of the Scheme.

Warm Homes Scheme

Mr Beggs asked the Minister for Social Development, pursuant to AQW 2246/01, to account for the variation by constituencies in the number of applications to the Warm Homes Scheme. (AQW 2664/01)

Mr Dodds: The Warm Homes Scheme is demand led and is not funded on a constituency basis. Funding is provided to the scheme manager who responds to requests from individual clients for the installation of energy efficiency measures in their properties. Substantive linkages with organisations in the health and non-governmental sectors have been established under the Warm Homes Scheme to ensure effective targeting of social need and marketing of the Scheme. Uptake of the scheme is monitored to ensure equality in uptake, and to highlight where selective marketing may be required.

Housing Bill: Impact on Students

Mr O'Neill asked the Minister for Social Development what impact he anticipates the Housing Bill will have on students living in rented accommodation. (AQO 1087/01)

Mr Dodds: The Housing Bill includes provisions aimed at improving conditions in Houses in Multiple Occupation (HMO). At present, because of a legal technicality, student accommodation does not come within the definition of a HMO. The new Housing Bill therefore includes provisions which will address this and ensure that student accommodation will be subject to the same registration and inspection process as all other Housing in Multiple Occupation.

Standards of Accommodation

Mr M Robinson asked the Minister for Social Development to detail the number of families who are currently residing in “inappropriate temporary accommodation”.

(AQW 2702/01)

Mr Dodds: Since there is no agreed definition of “inappropriate temporary accommodation”, statistics are not available. In placing households into temporary accommodation, the Housing Executive tries to make the most appropriate placement possible, given all of the circumstances of each case. Considerations include placing people in their own locality unless requested otherwise in accommodation of suitable size and condition. In the first instance, the Housing Executive considers the use of its own stock. If this is unavailable the voluntary sector is used and finally, as a last resort, the private sector. All properties in the private sector used by the Housing Executive are inspected in terms of the standards of accommodation.

The Housing Executive is currently developing a standards manual for both the physical condition and management of all types of temporary accommodation. This was a key recommendation emerging from the Housing Executive’s recent Homelessness Strategy and Services Review. Other Review proposals include the reduction in Bed & Breakfast usage by 50%, development of floating support initiatives, provision of 250 new units of temporary accommodation and 180 units of accommodation with support and the evaluation of outreach services with a view to expanding them.

Families in Temporary Accommodation

Mr M Robinson asked the Minister for Social Development how many families awaiting housing allocation are currently living in temporary accommodation, broken down by local district.

(AQW 2703/01)

Mr Dodds: The following table sets out the information at the end of February 2002, by Housing Executive district office, summarised by the respective Housing Executive area.

District Office	Number
Belfast1	31
Belfast2	33
Belfast3	60
Belfast4	29
Belfast5	10
Belfast6	57
Belfast7	21
Housing Advice Centre	257
Belfast Area total	498
Bangor	47
Newtownards	26
Castlereagh	30
Lisburn	73
Dairyfarm	57
Downpatrick	45
South East Area total	278
Banbridge	9
Newry	16
Armagh	1
Brownlow	18
Portadown	11
Dungannon	23
Fermanagh	31
South Area total	109
Ballymena	53
Antrim	18
Newtownabbey1	7
Newtownabbey2	7
Carrickfergus	8
Larne	11
Moyle	3
Ballymoney	6
Coleraine	37
North East Area total	150
Waterloo Place	75
Waterside	32
Collon Terrace	96
Limavady	4
Magherafelt	6
Strabane	30
Omagh	12
Cookstown	10
West Area total	265
N. Ireland total	1300

Housing Executive Grants

Mr Gibson asked the Minister for Social Development what help is available to householders to improve the quality of their housing stock, specifically privately owned rural housing in West Tyrone. (AQO 1069/01)

Mr Dodds: Help is available through the range of grants administered by the Housing Executive. Principally, Renovation Grant or Replacement Grant is to remedy unfitness, Minor Works Assistance is for smaller scale work, Repairs Grant is to address disrepair, Disabled Facilities Grant is to assist with adaptations to meet the needs of disabled people. The external fabric of terraced properties can be improved by Group Repair. In addition those who qualify under the Warm Homes Scheme may be eligible for a range of measures designed to improve the energy efficiency of their homes.

ASSEMBLY COMMISSION

Translation Facilities

Mr McMenamin asked the Assembly Commission to make a statement on the lack of simultaneous translation

facilities for MLAs during Assembly debates, in relation to the commitment made in the Good Friday Agreement under Rights, Safeguards and Equality of Opportunity to 'take resolute action to promote the (Irish) language'.

(AQW 2523/01)

The Representative of the Assembly Commission (Mrs E Bell): Currently only the Speaker and the Clerks at table have access to simultaneous translation facilities to ensure that proceedings of the Assembly are conducted in accordance with Standing Orders. During the period of the Shadow Assembly, the Commission received a report setting out options for the provision of translation facilities both in the Assembly Chamber and Committee Rooms. If the Assembly, on the basis of a recommendation either from the Committee on Procedures or the Business Committee, decide that translation facilities should be made available to Members, the Commission will be happy to revisit its earlier research to determine the most appropriate option for extending the current translation facilities.

NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

Friday 19 April 2002

Written Answers to Questions

OFFICE OF THE FIRST MINISTER AND DEPUTY FIRST MINISTER

Amnesty for Terrorists

Mr Weir asked the Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister what representations they have made to HM Government to oppose the introduction of an amnesty for terrorists on the run. (AQW 2529/01)

Reply: We have not jointly made representations to the UK Government about the introduction of an amnesty for those on the run.

Appointment Process

Mr A Maginness asked the Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister what arrangements have been put in place to ensure that the appointment process for part-time members of tribunals which are sponsored by the Northern Ireland Departments is fully compliant with the Human Rights Act 1998. (AQW 2861/01)

Reply: As a result of the Scottish case *Starrs and Chalmers –v- Ruxton*, in which it was held that the use of part-time temporary sheriffs did not comply with the independence requirements of Article 6 of the European Convention on Human Rights, new arrangements have been put in place to safeguard the independence of part-time tribunal members whose appointment is the responsibility of the Northern Ireland departments.

The new arrangements have been drawn up by this department, the Northern Ireland Court Service, the Department for Social Development, the Department of Employment and Learning, the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety, and the Department of Education.

The relevant tribunals are the Rent Assessment Panel, the Fair Employment Tribunal, the Industrial Tribunals, the Health Service Tribunal, the Registered Homes Tribunal,

the National Appeal Panel and the Special Educational Needs Tribunal.

A copy of the specific frameworks in respect of each tribunal, which are effective from today, has been placed in the Assembly Library.

Bill of Rights

Mr McGrady asked the Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister what further discussions have taken place with the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland in respect of the Bill of Rights being published. (AQO 1136/01)

Reply: We have not discussed this matter jointly with the Secretary of State.

Report of Working Group on Travellers

Mr C Murphy asked the Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister what resources have been identified by the Executive to implement the Final Report of the PSI Working Group on Travellers. (AQO 1121/01)

Reply: Work on the development of the Executive's strategic response to the Promoting Social Inclusion Working Group Report on Travellers is at an advanced stage.

We look forward to publishing our response shortly.

Any resources required for the implementation of actions falling out of this strategic response are a matter for individual Departments.

Review of Public Administration

Mr Byrne asked the Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister to make a statement on progress on the review of public administration. (AQO 1133/01)

Reply: Members will be aware that the proposed terms of reference for the Review of Public Administration have been the subject of a pre-consultation process over the past number of weeks. They were debated in this Assembly on 25 February and since then officials have been engaged in a series of meetings with umbrella organisations representing a broad spectrum of stakeholder interests.

The pre-consultation has now concluded, and we have received a significant number of responses. All these responses have been carefully analysed, and work is in progress to produce revised terms of reference as quickly as possible.

Separately, work has been progressing on the appointment of the high level independent experts and the establishment of the multi-disciplinary Review team.

Legislative Programme

Mr Paisley Jnr asked the Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister how many Bills the Executive plans to bring before the Assembly between now and the Summer Recess. (AQO 1137/01)

Reply: Ministers have been examining their legislative programmes for the remainder of this Assembly's mandate, taking account of the need for all Bills to have received Royal Assent before dissolution on 21 March 2003. The Executive will shortly consider the outcome of this review, but the indications at this stage are that Ministers will be trying to ensure that over two dozen Bills are introduced by this September. Ministers are aware that it would be preferable if as many of these Bills as possible are introduced before the summer recess.

Executive Meetings: Minutes

Mr Ford asked the Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister what plans it has to publish the minutes of Executive meetings. (AQO 1115/01)

Reply: There are no plans to publish the minutes of Executive meetings.

Meeting with the Taoiseach

Mr A Doherty asked the Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister what plans there are to meet with an Taoiseach, Mr Bertie Ahern. (AQO 1131/01)

Reply: We currently have no plans jointly to meet the Taoiseach outside our commitment to British Irish Council and North South Ministerial Council.

British-Irish Council

Mr Beggs asked the Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister to detail the improvements to East-West links resulting from the establishment of the British-Irish Council. (AQO 1135/01)

Reply: The last BIC meeting, which was held on 30 November 2001, set in motion programmes of work on tourism and telemedicine. This was in addition to work already underway on drugs, the environment and social inclusion, which is proceeding.

A Conference for decision makers on 'Bridging the Digital Divide' is scheduled to take place in Jersey on 24 to 26 April. This Conference provides an opportunity for representatives from a number of Northern Ireland Departments to hear at first hand the models of good practice and experience of dealing with this issue. Similarly, a number of conferences under the Drugs sector are planned for the Autumn, these will help to advance co-operation in this field. All of this illustrates

how member administrations are working positively to improving East-West links.

North/South Ministerial Council

Mr S Wilson asked the Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister when will the next meeting of the North-South Ministerial Council take place. (AQO 1097/01)

Reply: The next meeting of the North/South Ministerial Council is scheduled for today, Monday 15 April, in Dublin.

The meetings scheduled for Monday 15 April will be on Foyle, Carlingford and Irish Lights Commission followed by an Agriculture meeting. Both meetings will be held in the Department of Agriculture, Food and Rural Development, Dublin.

Executive Meeting

Mr McCarthy asked the Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister to make a statement on business transacted at the last meeting of the Executive. (AQO 1117/01)

Reply: The last Executive meeting was held on 28 March 2002. Business transacted at Executive meetings is confidential and is only made public as and when agreed by the Executive.

AGRICULTURE AND RURAL DEVELOPMENT

BSE/TSE

Mr Beggs asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development when she intends to purchase BSE/TSE (Transmissible Spongiform Encephalopathy) test kits by public tender. (AQW 2802/01)

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development (Ms Rodgers): Arrangements for the purchase by public tender of BSE/TSE test kits have yet to be finalised. However my Department intends to tender for the supply of such kits during the first half of this Financial Year. Until the tendering process is completed it is necessary to maintain existing arrangements for supply of test kits in order to ensure continuity of testing and meet EU legislative requirements.

BSE/TSE

Mr Beggs asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to detail the cost of purchasing BSE/TSE

(Transmissible Spongiform Encephalopathy) test kits over the last 12 months. (AQW 2803/01)

Ms Rodgers: Since the introduction of the EU TSE surveillance programme last July, the Department has incurred £651,330 expenditure on TSE test kits.

Gosford Castle

Mr Savage asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to detail (a) the purchaser of Gosford Castle; (b) the agreed purchase price; and (c) the purpose for which the Castle will be used.

(AQW 2919/01)

Ms Rodgers: The purchaser of Gosford Castle has not yet been identified;

The purchase price has not been agreed; and

The purpose for which the Castle will be used has not yet been agreed upon.

Forest Service is considering proposals from a number of potential purchasers and has requested more detailed information from each by 24 May. A final decision on the future of Gosford Castle will not be taken until the further information sought has been fully evaluated.

It is the Department's policy not to divulge the details of commercial contracts.

CULTURE, ARTS AND LEISURE

Arts Council of Northern Ireland

Mr Gibson asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure what steps he is taking to support theatres and arts organisations. (AQW 2679/01)

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure (Mr McGimpsey): The Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure makes funding available through the Arts Council of Northern Ireland for the support of theatres and arts organisations in Northern Ireland. The Arts Council of Northern Ireland recently announced its funding allocations for 2002/03 and I will arrange to send you a copy of this announcement and the Arts Council's five year arts plan which sets out the strategic context for their funding decisions.

Amateur Football Clubs

Mr Gibson asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure what plans he has to encourage amateur football clubs. (AQW 2681/01)

Mr McGimpsey: My proposed soccer strategy will aim to encourage both professional and amateur soccer in Northern Ireland. I enclose a copy of the Advisory Panel report, which has been published for consultation. Chapter 2: League Structure, Chapter 4: Youth Development, and Chapter 13: Playing Facilities will provide particular encouragement to amateur football. I have also placed a copy in the Assembly Library. Following a detailed assessment of the comments received from the consultation exercise, I aim to publish a draft strategy by the summer.

Development of Sport at Community Level : West Tyrone

Mr Gibson asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure what plans he has to assist the development of sport at community level in West Tyrone.

(AQW 2682/01)

Mr McGimpsey: Statutory responsibility for the development of sport in West Tyrone rests with the District Councils covering that area. Each District Council will have a Leisure Division, manned by a Sports Development Officer, who should be able to provide specific advice on plans to assist the development of sport at community level in their area.

On a broader level, the Sports Council for Northern Ireland, which is funded by my Department, already supports a range of sports development schemes from which local communities throughout Northern Ireland can benefit. These include a number of community development and club development programmes. In addition, the Sports Council recently launched a new "Strategy on Sport for Young People" which was drawn up in conjunction with representatives from DCAL, schools, local authorities etc. This Strategy outlines future plans for the development of youth sport across Northern Ireland and points to a move from school to community provision, with posts of community development officers and community co-ordinators at grass roots level, leading the way.

Disability Access Legislation

Mr Hussey asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure how is the Sports Council for Northern Ireland assisting Sports Clubs to prepare for incoming Disability Access legislation. (AQW 2735/01)

Mr McGimpsey: The Sports Council for Northern Ireland are acutely aware of the need to disburse Lottery funding for capital projects which provide for the needs of people with disabilities and are cognizant of the requirements of existing disability legislation.

The Sports Council for Northern Ireland provide comprehensive guidelines to all applicants regarding the

distribution of capital Lottery funds, which stress the need to ensure that full access to any proposed development is in line with disability legislation. In addition, the Sports Council for Northern Ireland also employ a technical officer who is fully conversant with disability access legislation and who can offer advice to governing bodies and sports clubs on the specific design and minimum technical requirements of sports facility development.

World Cup Tournament: England

Mr Shannon asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure will he be offering congratulations and best wishes to England as they prepare to compete in the forthcoming World Cup tournament. (AQW 2764/01)

Mr McGimpsey: As Minister with responsibility for sport in Northern Ireland, my first priority is the Northern Ireland team, and it would not therefore be appropriate for me to offer formal congratulations and best wishes to England. You are aware that my proposed soccer strategy aims to raise the standard of the local game, and I hope that this will help the Northern Ireland team towards future World Cup competitions. I plan to publish a draft soccer strategy by the summer.

Disability Related Groups: Funding

Mr Hussey asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure, pursuant to AQW 2491/01, in relation to the 'substantial capital investment for improving access for the disabled', to detail (a) the programmes/schemes and criteria utilised in the distribution of this funding; and (b) the distribution of this funding over the last 5 years. (AQW 2776/01)

Mr McGimpsey: (a) The full list of Capital Programmes is attached – Appendix A.

All Lottery Fund Capital programmes are assessed against a set of criteria as outlined in the information and guidance booklet supplied for each programme.

Each Lottery Capital programme features the following equality of opportunity and social inclusion key assessment criteria:

"The Sports Council for Northern Ireland (SCNI) is committed to providing equality of opportunity for people who may suffer social disadvantage because of their:

- Gender
- Disability
- Ethnic origin
- Religious belief
- Political opinion

- Marital status
- Having or not having dependants
- Age
- Sexual orientation

No Lottery award will unjustifiably discriminate against any of the above broad range of social groups.

In particular SCNI recognises that women, young people and people with disabilities are frequently under-represented in terms of access to and/or participation in sporting activities.

Where an application demonstrates an innovative and imaginative programme of activities, which significantly increases participation for women, young people and people with disabilities, then those applications will accord a higher priority."

Information and guidance booklets further advise applicants that all new provision and extension/upgrading should provide adequate access provision for people with disabilities.

Special cases are identified in the Club Sport and Community Sport Programmes where SCNI offers higher percentage awards, 90% as opposed to 70%, for projects promoting social inclusion and projects targeting social need.

Scoring Matrices for each of the Capital programmes are similar. Each criterion receives a weighting, ranging from 1-3. This weighting acts as a multiplier to reflect priorities. In each Capital programme the maximum weighting of 3 is given to each criteria relating to disability and social inclusion issues.

The Sports Council has distributed £45m between 1995 and 2001 to Capital projects. It is a condition of award that every project provides access for people with disabilities. Details of awards to groups in respect of disability specific projects is attached – Appendix B.

APPENDIX A: CAPITAL PROGRAMMES

Club Sport
"A Sports Council Lottery Fund capital programme to assist sports clubs and governing bodies of sport with the development of locally-based sports facilities."
Community Sport
"A Sports Council Lottery Fund capital programme to assist community based organisations with the development of sporting facilities."
Major Projects – Sports Share
"A Sports Council Lottery Fund capital programme to assist with the development of sports facilities for community and post-primary school use."
Major Projects – Performance Facilities
"A Sports Council Lottery Fund capital programme to assist with the development of national or regional training and competition facilities."

APPENDIX B: AWARDS TO DISABILITY SPECIFIC PROJECTS

Applicant	Award £	Date of Award	Programme	Notes
Share Holiday Village	26,000	04/04/95	Capital	
Muckamore Abbey Swimming Pool	100,000	02/10/01	Capital – Community Sport	
Skiability	15,500	04/10/01	Capital – Club Sport	
Knights Wheelchair Basketball	6,200	23/01/01	Major International Event	Willi Brinkmann Cup
British Blind Golf Championships	10,000	32/10/01	Major International Event	
Janet Gray – Water-skiing	16,500	09/03/99	Development of Talented Individuals	Gold Medals won – targets attained
Janet Gray – Water-skiing	14,240	19/03/02	Talented Athlete	
Men’s Disability Bowls Squad	2,202	18/09/01	Talented Athlete	Commonwealth Games preparation
Mary Rice	5,000	01/07/99	Development of Talented Individuals	Award rejected by applicant
Sharon Rice	3,000	01/07/00	Development of Talented Individuals	Award rejected by Applicant
Michael Smith	3,000	01/07/99	Development of Talented Individuals	Award rejected by applicant
Northern Ireland Blind Sports	4,000	01/07/99	Millennium Award	Event organised to celebrate the Millennium
Special Olympics Northern Ireland	4,500	01/07/99	Millennium Award	Event organised to celebrate the Millennium
Strabane District Caring Services Sports Club	4,000	01/07/99	Millennium Award	Event organised to celebrate the Millennium
NI Sports Association for People with Learning Difficulties	5,000	01/07/99	Millennium Award	Event organised to celebrate the Millennium
NI Carp Anglers	5,000	07/11/01	Awards for All	Disabled toilet facilities
Aubrey Bingham & Jason Black – Wheelchair Tennis	5,000	14/09/99	Development of Talented Individuals	Paralympic preparation 2000
Skiability	4,924	04/12/02	Awards for All	Course fees, accommodation & transport
Carrickfergus Sailability Scheme	14,000	04/12/01	Capital – Club Sport	

Disabilities

Mr Hussey asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure, pursuant to AQW 2491/01, to detail the range of disabilities covered by the term ‘talented athletes with disabilities’; and to define ‘talented’.

(AQW 2778/01)

Mr McGimpsey: I am afraid it is not possible to detail the “range of disabilities covered by the term ‘talented athletes with disabilities’”, as what is a disabling factor in one sport may not be a disabling factor in another. The Governing Body for each sport determines if an athlete is disabled for that particular sport and each application for funding is assessed on its own merits.

The term ‘talented’ generally applies to athletes, whether able bodied or disabled, who demonstrate potential to prepare for and compete in identified international Games/Championships.

Ulster-Scots Agency

Dr Birnie asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to outline (a) if the Ulster-Scots Agency is preparing a business plan; and, if so, (b) when will it be completed.

(AQW 2786/01)

Mr McGimpsey: Tha Boord o Ulstér-Scotch is currently preparing a business plan and it hopes to have a draft ready by the end of April for presentation to the Board. The draft Business Plan also requires the approval of the North South Ministerial Council (NSMC) and it will be considered at a meeting of NSMC in due course.

CURNS

Dr Birnie asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure what steps he has taken to promote the Ulster-Scots speaking groups ‘CURNS’.

(AQW 2787/01)

Mr McGimpsey: My Department, along with the Department of Arts, Heritage, Gaeltacht and the Islands (DAHGI) funds the North/South Language Implementation Body which incorporates Tha Boord o Ulstèr-Scotch. Tha Boord is responsible for promoting greater awareness and use of Ullans and Ulster-Scots cultural issues. I understand that Tha Boord has not received any applications for assistance from Ulster-Scots 'CURNS'. I am, however, sure that Tha Boord would welcome contact from 'CURNS'.

I will make sure that Mr George Holmes of Tha Boord o Ulstèr Scotch is aware of your interest in this matter.

EDUCATION

Grammar Schools: Disadvantaged Areas

Mrs Carson asked the Minister of Education, pursuant to AQO 1012/01, to detail the index used to ascertain the statistic that only 8% of school children from disadvantaged areas attend grammar schools. (AQW 2687/01)

The Minister of Education (Mr M McGuinness): The 8% figure refers to the proportion of children enrolled at grammar schools who are entitled to free school meals.

11-Plus

Mrs Carson asked the Minister of Education, pursuant to AQO 1012/01, to detail, by Council area, in the last 5 years (a) the number of school children who had the opportunity to sit the 11-plus; (b) the number and grades of school children who sat the 11-plus; and (c) the number of school children from each grade who attended grammar schools. (AQW 2688/01)

Mr M McGuinness: As the information requested is extensive, I will arrange to have it placed in the Assembly Library. I enclose a copy for your personal use.

11-Plus

Mrs Carson asked the Minister of Education, pursuant to AQO 1012/01, to detail by Council area in the last 5 years, the number of (a) school children from disadvantaged areas who had the opportunity to sit the 11-plus; (b) the number of children from disadvantaged areas who sat the 11-plus; (c) the grades achieved by school children from disadvantaged areas; and (d) the number of school children from disadvantaged areas from each grade who attended grammar schools. (AQW 2711/01)

Mr M McGuinness: As the information requested is extensive, I will arrange to have it placed in the Assembly

Library. I enclose a copy for your personal use. This relates to parts (a) – (c) of the question.

Since information on the number of pupils from each primary school who went on to grammar school is not held centrally, figures are not available for part (d) in respect of the pupils in parts (a) – (c) of the answer.

11-Plus

Mrs Carson asked the Minister of Education to detail (a) the percentage of boys and girls, by grade, who sat the 11-plus and subsequently attended a grammar school over the past 5 years; and (b) how this percentage compares with other areas of similar socio-economic conditions. (AQW 2712/01)

Mr M McGuinness: (a) The information requested is not available by grade for males and females separately.

PERCENTAGE OF PUPILS WHO ENTERED GRAMMAR SCHOOL, BY GRADE ACHIEVED IN THE TRANSFER TEST

Grade in transfer test	1997	1998	1999	2000	2001
A	95.4	95.3	95.2	95.1	95.2
B1	81.8	85.8	83.6	83	87.5
B2	53.8	52	57.7	58.6	68.6
C1	21	17.1	21.1	29	32.6
C2	6.4	8.7	9.7	12.9	13.2
D	1	0.7	0.9	1.3	1.2

The numbers of boys and girls who entered grammar schools in each of the last five years expressed as a percentage of those who sat the test, are as follows:

	1997	1998	1999	2000	2001
Boys	50.5	51	51.9	52.4	54.2
Girls	48.3	49.2	50.2	51.2	51.8

(b) In other academically selective areas the Transfer Procedure is operated in a different way and direct comparison with our situation is not possible.

Andrews Memorial Primary School

Mr Shannon asked the Minister of Education, pursuant to AQW 2346/01, to outline which of the four factors resulted in Mr George Forester not being re-appointed. (AQW 2713/01)

Mr M McGuinness: I am advised by the South-Eastern Education and Library Board that the Management of Schools Sub-committee considered the current composition of Board Representatives, the expressed interest of SEELB members, application forms for Governorship from members of the public and the need to improve gender balance. They decided to recommend the appointment of a newly elected local Councillor, who had expressed

an interest, as the SEELB representative for Andrews Memorial Primary School. The Committee for the Management of Schools agreed the recommendation of the Sub-committee.

Educational Psychologist Consultation

Mr Davis asked the Minister of Education to detail, by Board area, (a) the number of children who are waiting for an Educational Psychologist consultation (Stage 3 referral); and (b) the level of resources available for educational psychology for primary school children over the last 3 years. (AQW 2800/01)

Mr M McGuinness: [holding answer 11 April 2002]: The number of children who are waiting for an Educational Psychologist consultation (Stage 3 referral) is as follows:

BELB	306
NEELB	471
SEELB	650
SELB	374
WELB	Not available *

* The WELB operates a "time management" system, whereby schools are allocated a quantity of educational psychology time according to the school population and other factors such as free school meals.

The level of resources for educational psychology for primary school children cannot be identified separately. The overall figures for the cost of the psychology service, for the last 3 years, are as follows:

	1999/2000	2000/2001	2001/2002
BELB	921,000	974,000	1,000,112
NEELB	901,591	1,067,664	1,096,147
SEELB	831,000	775,000	861,000
SELB	846,416	910,463	Not available
WELB	783,000	812,000	912,000

Sign Language

Mr Carrick asked the Minister of Education if he has any plans to introduce sign language into the school curriculum. (AQW 2806/01)

Mr M McGuinness: There are no proposals to introduce sign language into the present statutory school curriculum. It is a matter for individual schools to decide what options they wish to make available to pupils as part of the broader curriculum, taking account of factors such as the level of demand from pupils and parents.

The curriculum is currently under review by the Northern Ireland Council for the Curriculum, Examinations and Assessment who will consider any proposals put to them about the inclusion of particular subjects.

Areas of Joint Concern

Dr Birnie asked the Minister of Education what meetings he has had with the Minister for Employment and Learning to discuss areas of joint concern.

(AQW 2841/01)

Mr M McGuinness: Both Departments co-operate and work closely on areas of joint concern. My first meeting to take forward these issues has been arranged for 30 April.

Rathcoole, Abbot's Cross and Whitehouse Primary Schools

Mr K Robinson asked the Minister of Education, pursuant to his announcement on 27 March 2002, to ensure that funding will be awarded to Rathcoole, Abbot's Cross and Whitehouse Primary Schools. (AQW 2945/01)

Mr M McGuinness: The funding announced on 27th March extended the assistance provided under the education element of the Executive Support Package for North Belfast, announced on 17th December 2001, to the remaining primary schools in the area. This package provided financial support to primary schools suffering from the effects of widespread disturbances in North Belfast and the backwash from the protest at Holy Cross Girl's Primary School. Rathcoole, Abbot's Cross and Whitehouse Primary Schools fall outside the defined geographical area and are not eligible for funding under this initiative.

EMPLOYMENT AND LEARNING

Mesothelioma

Mr Dallat asked the Minister for Employment and Learning what action she will take to help sufferers from mesothelioma who, as a result of the recent judgement by the Court of Appeal in Great Britain in the Fairchild case, are unable to obtain compensation from their former employers through the Courts.

(AQW 2942/01)

The Minister for Employment and Learning (Ms Hanna): This is a dreadful disease and I do not think it would be right if employees, former employees or their dependants were left without recourse to some level of compensation as a result of this judgement. As an interim measure therefore I am extending the compensation scheme administered by my Department under the Pneumoconiosis etc (Workers Compensation) Order 1979 to cover the making of payments to qualifying sufferers from mesothelioma who are affected by the judgement in the Fairchild case.

ENTERPRISE, TRADE AND INVESTMENT

Genesis Business Park, Aldergrove

Mr Dalton asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to give his assessment of the employment opportunities to be created as a result of the development of the Genesis Business Park at Aldergrove.

(AQW 2714/01)

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment (Sir Reg Empey): This private sector venture when fully developed has the potential to create large-scale employment opportunities and lead to a substantial strengthening of the local economy. The development which envisages a mix of commercial activities is still at a relatively early stage and it is difficult to predict with any accuracy the number of potential new jobs.

Mr Dalton asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment how he will assist economic development at the newly proposed Genesis Business Park at Aldergrove.

(AQW 2716/01)

Sir Reg Empey: This is a mixed use private sector development proposal put forward by TBI plc, the company which owns Belfast International Airport. The development will not receive public funding but Invest NI will be prepared to assist with the marketing of any business space which would be suitable for inward investment or other projects supported by Invest NI.

Tourism: Sperrins

Mr Gibson asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment, pursuant to AQW 615/01, to provide an update on the steps he is taking to promote tourism and support the tourist industry in the Sperrins.

(AQW 2746/01)

Sir Reg Empey: In November 2001, I stated that the Northern Ireland Tourist Board (NITB) supports walking, cycling and angling promotions for the area and markets the Sperrins banner on its web-site and in its Northern Ireland regional guide.

With NITB support a public/private sector partnership covering the Council areas of Strabane, Omagh, Magherafelt and Cookstown was 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.

The Northern Ireland Tourist Board (NITB) is in receipt of bids to support these activities under the EU Peace and Reconciliation Programme. Sperrins Tourism

Limited has recently been approved as an intermediary funding body for the Natural Rural Resource Tourism Initiative (NRRTI – a joint initiative between NITB/DARD/EHS) in the Sperrins region. The group is currently preparing a Sustainable Tourism Strategy for this Initiative which will be completed by mid June.

Invest Northern Ireland

Mr Shannon asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment what incentives have been and are available for firms to locate in the Strangford constituency.

(AQW 2747/01)

Sir Reg Empey: Invest NI provides an attractive range of financial and non-financial support services to companies wishing to locate in, and throughout Northern Ireland providing they are or have the potential to trade externally. There are no specific incentives for the Strangford area.

This support ranges from financial grants, equity, business development, product development and company development programmes. Invest NI Executives are also able to provide advisory, information and appraisal services to firms.

In addition to this direct support, within the Strangford constituency Invest NI, in partnership with Ards, Castlereagh and Down Councils, provides indirect support to local start up businesses through the Business Start Up Programme. This partnership also provides funding for a number of programmes delivered through the Ards Business Centre, Castlereagh Enterprise and the Down Business Centre which also focus on local businesses.

Relocating: Strangford Constituency

Mr Shannon asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to detail (a) the number of firms who have expressed an interest in relocating in the Strangford constituency in the last 3 years; and (b) the number who have relocated in other parts of the Province.

(AQW 2748/01)

Sir Reg Empey: Neither the Department nor its Agencies maintain records on firms interested in particular areas or relocating to areas – as this is often a decision of the company alone.

I can confirm however that, prior to the establishment of Invest Northern Ireland, 94 LEDU-sponsored local businesses established in the Strangford constituency in the last 2 years. In the same period the constituency has benefited from IDB-backed investments by Korean-owned firm Humax which employs 150 people in the manufacture of digital set top boxes and ICS Computing which will eventually employ around 144 people. Due

to how the information is collated, it is not possible to provide figures for a three year period.

Over the same period 2,610 LEDU-sponsored businesses were established throughout Northern Ireland, whilst there were 49 announcements by IDB client companies to locate/expand within Northern Ireland. Companies will decide where to locate based on a number of factors such as skilled labour availability, proximity to universities, airports, suppliers etc.

LEDU Budget

Mr Dallat asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to detail the value of the LEDU budget that the successful applicant for the post of Financial Director for Invest Northern Ireland was responsible for in his previous post. (AQW 2782/01)

Sir Reg Empey: The Finance Director was responsible for the total LEDU budget, which in the last financial year, 2001/02, amounted to £32.65 millions including, European Peace and Recollection funds.

Invest Northern Ireland: Financial Director

Mr Dallat asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to outline (a) the recruitment procedures used to appoint the Financial Director for Invest Northern Ireland; and (b) the budget for this post. (AQW 2783/01)

Sir Reg Empey: On 1 April 2002 all LEDU staff were transferred to Invest NI under the provisions of the Industrial Development Act (Northern Ireland) 2002. Those provisions align with the requirements of the Transfer of Undertakings and Protection of Employment legislation and guarantee staff no lesser terms and conditions of service. The LEDU Corporate Services Director (who for a period was acting Chief Executive), on transfer, was placed in the Finance Director post in Invest NI. The Finance Director is responsible for the total Invest NI's budget of £181.4 million in the current financial year, 2002/03.

Atwell/Gribben Case (LEDU)

Mr Dallat asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to outline (a) any action taken against the official connected with the Artwell/Gribben fraud case (LEDU); and (b) if they are still in post or have been promoted. (AQW 2785/01)

Sir Reg Empey: In both cases Atwell and Gribben were dismissed, successfully prosecuted and jailed. In both cases control weaknesses were the major factor. The immediate supervisor in the Gribben case took early retirement in April 1999.

Northern Ireland Tourist Board

Mr Dallat asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to detail (a) the position held by Mr Roy Bailie in the Northern Ireland Tourist Board (NITB) in the financial years 1992-93 to 2000-01; and (b) the total value of contracts awarded to W & G Baird Ltd by NITB in each of those years. (AQW 2788/01)

Sir Reg Empey: Mr Roy Bailie was appointed to the Board of the Northern Ireland Tourist Board on the 1 September 1994, in November 1995 he was appointed Deputy Chairman and on 1 July 1996 he was appointed Chairman. The total value of contracts awarded for the financial years 1992-93 to 2001-01 to W&G Baird Limited and associated companies, were as noted in the table below.

Financial Year	Value £
1992-93	206,000
1993-94	183,000
1994-95	263,771
1995-96	306,890
1996-97	306,006
1997-98	243,058
1998-99	125,305
1999-00	169,408
2000-01	190,330
Total	1,993,768

THE ENVIRONMENT

European Legislation and Directives : Disposal of Waste/Recycling

Mr M Robinson asked the Minister of the Environment to list all European legislation and directives for the disposal of waste and recycling which to date have not been implemented; and to detail the timetable for implementation. (AQW 2718/01)

The Minister of the Environment (Mr Nesbitt): There are currently 4 Directives on matters associated with the disposal of waste and recycling which have not been transposed or have been only partially transposed in Northern Ireland. A list of these together with the anticipated dates for their transposition is set out below.

Directive 75/439/EEC – Disposal of Waste Oils

This is a UK-wide infraction case due to the failure by the UK to transpose Article 3 of the Directive which requires promotion of waste oil regeneration. Northern Ireland is developing a response in parallel with the rest

of the UK but as yet no date has been agreed for transposition.

Directive 75/442/EEC - Waste Framework Directive

Anticipated transposition date – September 2003

Directive 99/31/EC - Landfill of Waste

Anticipated transposition date – November 2003

Directive 2000/53 – End of Life Vehicles

Anticipated transposition date – late 2003

In addition, the Commission is pursuing infraction proceedings against the United Kingdom as a whole in respect of incorrect transposition of the following 2 Directives relating to the disposal of waste:

Directive 75/442/EEC – Waste Framework

Directive

Anticipated transposition date – September 2003

Directive 91/689/EEC - Hazardous Waste

Anticipated transposition date – late 2003

Coastal Forum

Mr McClarty asked the Minister of the Environment, pursuant to AQW 2666/00, what progress has been made to establish a coastal forum. (AQW 2842/01)

Mr Nesbitt: Because of the cross-cutting nature of issues effecting the coast, my predecessor, Sam Foster sought views on the merits of a coastal forum from the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development and the Minister for Regional Development. While both saw potential benefit in bringing together those with an interest in the coastline, they indicated that they would need more detail on the remit of any such body before coming to any conclusion on whether they could support the setting up of a forum.

There was also the question of funding for such a body, covering both its running costs and the cost of any work it might wish to undertake.

In response to these issues, my Department commissioned a scoping study to examine the remit of a possible Coastal Forum and to make recommendations on matters including the responsibilities, structure and management of such a body, its relationships with statutory and other bodies, issues which it might address, means of commissioning research and possible review mechanisms. A full report is expected shortly. On the issue of funding, I am pleased that my Department was successful in securing £100,000 in the 2002/2003 budget round, to allow a Forum to be set up and serviced. However, a bid on the Executive Programme Funds for resources to cover the work programme which the Forum is likely to

generate, including items such as research, contract staff and publications was unsuccessful.

As I have said, the establishment of a Forum would have implications for a number of other Departments. It will therefore be necessary to have the support of other Ministers before any Forum can be established. When the report of the scoping study is available, I will wish to consider it and the funding issues with the other Ministers involved.

Belfast Metropolitan Area Urban Capacity Study

Ms Lewsley asked the Minister of the Environment, in respect of the Belfast Metropolitan Area Urban Capacity Study, to outline (a) what stage the Study is currently at; (b) the resources which have been allocated for the Study; (c) where the expertise has been drawn from; (d) the methodology used for the Study; and (e) if the Study is using a dynamic model. (AQW 2849/01)

Mr Nesbitt: An Urban Capacity Study is being carried out by the Department in the context of the preparation of the Belfast Metropolitan Area Plan. This study is being conducted to assess the potential of existing Urban areas within the Belfast Metropolitan Area to accommodate new development. It will form part of the Draft Plan.

- (a) The survey work associated with the study is now nearing completion and the specialist consultants who have been appointed by the Department are currently devising a methodology which will be used to assess the likely housing output.
- (b) The survey part of the study is being carried out by three qualified planners who are being assisted by staff with specialist mapping skills and personnel from a variety of Government Departments. The specialist consultancy team includes staff with a variety of expertise which includes knowledge of the local housing market, urban design, architecture and planning.
- (c) The expertise has been drawn from within my Department and from other Departments and the private sector. The consultation exercise being carried out by the appointed consultants aims to draw upon local knowledge from the 6 Councils, the construction industry, the carried out by the appointed consultants aims to draw upon local knowledge from the 6 Councils, the construction industry, the community sector and the Northern Ireland Housing Executive.
- (d) The methodology being used is based upon Best Practice from elsewhere adjusted to suit local circumstances.
- (e) The study is dynamic in that it looks at past trends, makes allowance for output from windfall sites (sites which become available for development but

which cannot be identified, such as surplus institutional land and vacant buildings) and is informed by specialist local knowledge of the housing market.

Coastal Zone Management

Mr McClarty asked the Minister of the Environment to detail all European Union Directives on Coastal Zone Management; and to make a statement on his Department's compliance with these Directives. (AQW 2850/01)

Mr Nesbitt: There are no specific European Directives on Coastal Zone Management. There is however a proposed European Community Recommendation on implementing Integrated Coastal Zone Management (ICZM).

The Recommendation asks Member States to undertake a national stocktaking of legislation, institutions and stakeholders involved in the management of the coastal zone and, based on this, to develop a national strategy or strategies to implement ICZM.

It is likely that the Recommendation will be adopted in the near future. The UK Government is in the lead in negotiating the Recommendation. However my officials are in contact with UK officials on the implications of the Recommendation for Northern Ireland to ensure that any Northern Ireland interests are taken into account in developing the UK negotiating line.

Waste Packaging

Mr McGrady asked the Minister of the Environment what discussions have been held with business and industrial representatives throughout Northern Ireland regarding the financial implications of the implementation of the Producer Responsibility (Packaging Waste) (Northern Ireland) Regulations 1999 and Amendments; and to make a statement. (AQW 2856/01)

Mr Nesbitt: Prior to the implementation of the Producer Responsibility Obligations (Packaging Waste) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 1999 and the subsequent Producer Responsibility (Packaging Waste) (Amendment) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 1999, consultation documents were issued for comment to industry, district councils, industrial representatives, Government Departments and other interested parties. Over 1000 copies of each document issued.

Each consultation document included a full regulatory impact assessment of the effects and financial implications of the proposed Regulations.

As part of the process of making businesses aware of the implications of the Packaging Waste Regulations, a series of awareness seminars were also held throughout Northern Ireland before the Regulations were implemented in 1999. These seminars were conducted by my Department's Environment and Heritage Service (EHS) and by

the Industrial Research and Technology Unit of the then Department of Economic Development.

EHS staff regularly meet with businesses to discuss their recovery and recycling obligations and potential compliance costs.

Composting Units

Mr Ford asked the Minister of the Environment if he will require that a composting unit be included before granting planning permission for any new residential developments. (AQW 2881/01)

Mr Nesbitt: The Department has no plans at present to require the provision of composting units under all planning approvals for new residential developments as a matter of policy.

However, Waste Management Plans prepared by local councils in their waste planning role under the Waste Management Strategy for Northern Ireland, will be key material planning considerations in Planning Policy Statement (PPS) 11- Planning and Waste Management, which is due to be published before the summer. The Department will seek advice from relevant councils on any waste management requirements in relation to appropriate planning applications, through the normal consultation process on development proposals. The PPS will also contain guidance not only on residential but on all new development in terms of the early consideration of waste issues in the design process, and effective management of waste in development proposals.

I believe that the Waste Management Plans, which are currently out for public consultation, will provide the best mechanism for ensuring that all waste is properly managed. Therefore, it would be inappropriate for me to pre-empt the outcome of this process by implementing the measure you suggest at present.

Regional Development Strategy

Mr McGrady asked the Minister of the Environment what further action will he take to develop Downpatrick as a Growth Town by the Area Plan Team in the Planning Service; and to make a statement. (AQO 1144/01)

Mr Nesbitt: The Regional Development Strategy recognises the role of the Region's main towns as hubs of economic activity and services. It identifies the need for towns to achieve the 'critical mass' required to support growth.

The Strategy sets an indicator for future housing growth for each District Council area up to 2015. Development plans prepared by the Department have a key role in the allocation of housing growth in specific locations. The future development of Downpatrick will

be considered within the context of the draft Ards and Down Area Plan 2015, which is programmed for publication this year.

The new Ards and Down Plan will allocate growth to the District towns, other settlements and the countryside in the Districts over the Plan period. In making provision for growth, due weight will be given to the need to reinforce the leading role of Downpatrick as a major centre of administration, employment and services.

Fermanagh District Council

Mr Gallagher asked the Minister of the Environment to detail the number of mobile phone masts that have been approved in Fermanagh District Council area to date. (AQO 1145/01)

Mr Nesbitt: The number of mobile phone masts that have been approved in the Fermanagh District Council area since 1994, when relevant records began to be kept, is 95.

The Member may also wish to know that I recently published a Planning Policy Statement on Telecommunications and will shortly be bringing forward legislation to introduce full planning control on all new telecommunication development, including mobile phone masts.

I expect the legislation to be laid before the Assembly within the next few weeks and that, subject to the scrutiny by the Assembly, it should come into operation by the end of May 2002.

Telecommunication Masts : Foyle Constituency

Mr McLaughlin asked the Minister of the Environment to detail the amount of times telecommunication mast companies shared masts in the Foyle constituency. (AQO 1102/01)

Mr Nesbitt: My Department does not keep records of mast sharing arrangements between telecommunications operating companies.

However, my Department recognises the importance of keeping the numbers of radio and telecommunications masts, and the sites for such installations to a minimum, consistent with the efficient operation of the network.

The sharing of masts is therefore a strong feature in my Department's new Planning Policy Statement, PPS 10 -Telecommunications. For any new mast, applicants will reasonably be expected to provide evidence that they have considered the possibility of erecting antennas on an existing building, mast or other structure and indicate why this approach has not been pursued.

PPS 10 has now been published and the new legislation requiring full planning permission for all telecom-

munications development will be laid in the Assembly within the next few weeks.

Countryside "Clean-Up"

Mr Bradley asked the Minister of the Environment to designate a specific day for a co-ordinated 'clean-up' of the countryside. (AQO 1101/01)

Mr Nesbitt: I have no plans to designate a specific day as suggested by the Member, although I would like to see our towns and countryside clean and tidy every day.

District Councils are responsible, under the Litter (NI) Order 1994, for clearing litter and cleaning roads in both the towns and countryside of Northern Ireland.

My Department's Environment and Heritage Service funds the efforts of the UK voluntary sector charity Environmental Campaigns, ENCAMS, which operates as 'Tidy Northern Ireland' here. The work of Tidy Northern Ireland includes organising programmes and events aimed at tackling litter problems.

I am aware that Tidy Northern Ireland has worked very successfully with the Councils in co-ordinating litter campaigns, including last year's 'Spring Clean-up' campaign, and more recently, the 'Just Bin It' campaign.

Good waste management practices will also help to deal with the litter problem. My Department's Waste Management Strategy aims to reduce the amount of waste produced and to re-use and recycle more of what is produced. District Councils have now published for consultation draft Waste Management Plans which will give effect to the Strategy at local level.

Ards Area Plan

Lord Kilclooney asked the Minister of the Environment when will the Ards Area Plan be published; and if he will make a statement on the progress of its preparation. (AQW 3008/01)

Mr Nesbitt: The Ards and Down Area Plan 2015 is the first to be prepared in the context of the Regional Development Strategy, which was formulated in September 2001. The Regional Development Strategy sets out the strategic planning framework that will shape development over the next 25 years and will help guide the preparation of all development plans.

The Strategic Planning (Northern Ireland) Order 1999 requires the Plan to be "consistent with" the Regional Development Strategy. The requirement of consistency has necessitated extensive discussions and additional work to ensure that the Plan will be consistent with all the approaches to sustainable development required by the Strategy.

For your information, DRD is currently consulting on changes to the Strategic Planning Order to amend the obligation of consistency to one in which plans are required to be “in general conformity” with the RDS.

It is proposed to introduce a formal procedure whereby DRD will issue a ‘statement of conformity’, to clarify that a development plan conforms with the RDS at draft plan, and at final adoption stage.

Preparation of the Draft Plan Written Statement and supporting technical documentation for the Ards and Down Area Plan is well advanced. Prior to publication clearance on ‘consistency’ will require consultations with the Department of Regional Development (DRD) on the completed draft. As a result I anticipate that the draft plan will be published during August 2002.

last 3 years for which statistics are available, where an alcohol induced illness was recorded as the main cause of death. Coding of deaths registered in 2001 will not be finalised until May 2002.

International Classification of Diseases - ICD9	1998	1999	2000
303 – Alcohol dependence syndrome	2	5	1
305.0 – Acute alcohol intoxication, non-dependent abuse of drugs	1	2	0
571.2 – Alcoholic cirrhosis of the liver	0	2	2
571.3 – Alcoholic liver damage, unspecified	0	0	1
E860.9 – Accidental poisoning by alcohol, not elsewhere classified	0	0	1
Total	3	9	5

Review Team

Dr Birnie asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel what conclusions did the recent review of procedures for the appointment and promotion of senior civil servants come to with respect to (a) male/female balance; and (b) community balance. (AQW 2690/01)

Dr Farren: The Review Team has concluded their review and I have only recently received the report from Lord Hermon Ouseley. As previously stated, I will be considering the report and will bring my recommendations to the Executive in the near future. It would not be appropriate for me to comment on the conclusions contained in the report in advance of discussion at Executive.

Aggregates Tax

Dr Birnie asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel to outline (a) his assessment of the extent to which public spending in Northern Ireland exceeds the tax revenues raised in the region for each of the last 5 years; and (b) how this has changed as a percentage of the Gross Domestic Product (GDP). (AQW 2720/01)

Dr Farren: There is no published estimate available for aggregate tax revenues generated within Northern Ireland, and thus it is not possible to provide the information requested.

Gap Funding: Peace II Programme

Mr Berry asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel to detail (a) organisations who benefited from Peace and Reconciliation Interim (Gap) Funding 2000-02; (b) the amount each organisation received; and (c) their geographical location and remit. (AQW 2721/01)

Dr Farren: The arrangements for Gap Funding for the PEACE II Programme came into effect from 1 April 2001. The Special EU Programmes Body, as Managing

FINANCE AND PERSONNEL

Alcohol-Related Deaths: Ards Borough Council Area

Mr Shannon asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel how many alcohol-related deaths were recorded in the Ards Borough Council area in each of the last 3 years. (AQW 2677/01)

The Minister of Finance and Personnel (Dr Farren): The table below shows the number of cases in the Ards Borough Council area, in each of the last 3 years for which statistics are available, where an alcohol induced illness was recorded as the main cause of death. Coding of deaths registered in 2001 will not be finalised until May 2002.

International Classification of Diseases - ICD9	1998	1999	2000
303 – Alcohol dependence syndrome	2	5	1
305.0 – Acute alcohol intoxication, non-dependent abuse of drugs	1	2	0
571.2 – Alcoholic cirrhosis of the liver	0	2	2
571.3 – Alcoholic liver damage, unspecified	0	0	1
E860.9 – Accidental poisoning by alcohol, not elsewhere classified	0	0	1
Total	3	9	5

Alcohol-Related Deaths: Strangford Constituency

Mr Shannon asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel how many alcohol-related deaths were recorded in the Strangford constituency in each of the last 3 years. (AQW 2678/01)

Dr Farren: The table below shows the number of cases in the Ards Borough Council area, in each of the

Authority for the Programme, has advised that, based on the latest available information, the total amount of Gap Funding awarded to projects to date is approximately £11.5m covering 626 projects. This is in addition to the £9m made available by the Executive in the previous financial year. The arrangements for Gap Funding are due to be phased out by the end of April 2002 at which time information on the total amount for Gap Funding will be available.

The detail of information requested is of such a volume that it is not possible to provide the answer in the standard format. However, tables setting out the information requested have been placed in the Assembly Library.

Peace I Funding

Mr Maskey asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel to provide a breakdown of Peace I Funding by electoral wards. (AQW 2723/01)

Dr Farren: A copy of the information has been placed in the Assembly Library.

Gap Funding: Peace II Programme

Mr Berry asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel to detail (a) prisoners and ex-prisoners organisations which benefited from Peace and Reconciliation Interim (GAP) Funding 2000-02; (b) by how much each organisation benefited; and (c) their geographical location and remit. (AQW 2738/01)

Dr Farren: The arrangements for Gap Funding for the PEACE II Programme came into effect from 1 April 2001. The Special EU Programmes Body, as Managing Authority for the Programme, has advised that, based on latest available information, the total amount of Gap Funding allocated to prisoners and ex-prisoner organisations to date is approximately £900,000 covering a total of 32 organisations. The arrangements for Gap Funding are due to be phased out by the end of April 2002 at which time information on the total amount for Gap Funding will be available.

Absence Record

Mr Beggs asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel, pursuant to AQW 2067/01, to detail the criteria used to determine 'unacceptably high absence records' which would prevent civil servants from applying for promotion. (AQW 2739/01)

Dr Farren: There is no central criteria for deciding what constitutes an 'unacceptably high' absence record. Each case is considered on the individual circumstances of the officer. It is for the employing Department to be

satisfied that any decision to exclude a candidate from an internal promotion competition is fair and defensible.

Demographic Movement of Protestants

Mr Shannon asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel if the Census figures will show large demographic movements of Protestants in the Province. (AQW 2762/01)

Dr Farren: It is planned that the first census based outputs will inform the 2001 mid year estimates of population due for release in late summer 2002. These will be followed in late 2002 by a Key Statistics report which will provide frequency counts on each of the Census questions. In early 2003 more detailed Census outputs will be released and it will also be possible to request specially commissioned analyses. The Census collects information on individuals' current address and, where different, their address one year prior to the Census. Aggregate data on those who have moved can be analysed by different variables including religion. Information will also be available to allow comparisons between the 2001 Census and the 1991 Census for different geographical areas on a range of variables including religion.

Aggregates Tax

Mr Savage asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel to define which quarry aggregates (i) qualify; and (ii) do not qualify for tax abatement. (AQO 1125/01)

Dr Farren: Throughout the UK, virgin aggregate has been subject to the tax of £1.60 per tonne from 1 April 2002. The Finance Act 2001 (clause 17) defines aggregate, for the purposes of the tax, as rock, gravel or sand together with any other substances incorporated in or naturally occurring with it. Several exempt categories are listed and include:

- Aggregate that has been previously used for construction purposes.
- Rock that has not been crushed.
- Aggregate that has necessarily arisen from the excavation of a building site.
- Aggregate that has necessarily arisen from the dredging of navigation channels.
- Aggregate that has necessarily arisen during the course of highway construction.
- Aggregate consisting of coal, lignite, slate or shale.

Importing of virgin aggregate is treated in exactly the same way as virgin aggregate originating in the UK – the tax is due when it is commercially exploited. Imported processed products containing aggregate from outside the UK are not subject to the tax. Aggregate exported from the UK is exempt from the tax providing

there is valid documentary evidence that the aggregate has left the UK.

In Northern Ireland, the Treasury is proposing to phase in the tax on aggregate used in the production of processed products. Processed products are defined as concrete, mortar, asphalt, coated roadstone and coated chippings or surface dressing. Aggregate used in the production of any of these materials will be exempt from the tax in 2002/03, with a stepped increase of 20 per cent annually until full implementation is reached in 2007/08. This proposal remains subject to EU State Aid approval.

Planning Service: Religious Make-Up

Mr J Kelly asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel to detail the religious make-up of Planning Officers at senior and junior level in each local Divisional Planning Office and Sub-Divisional Office within the Planning Service. (AQW 2941/01)

Dr Farren: The specific purpose for which community background monitoring information is collected is to address the extent to which the Northern Ireland Civil Service (NICS) offers and provides equality of opportunity and fair participation to both sections of the community. The compositional profile of staff working in a particular office or branch is not relevant in informing the development of policies and practices that promote equality of opportunity and fair participation across the NICS. This means that community background information is not maintained at the level requested.

HEALTH, SOCIAL SERVICES AND PUBLIC SAFETY

Consultation Documents

Mrs Carson asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety, pursuant to AQW 1967/01, how many consultation documents were jointly published by the different agencies with or on behalf of her Department. (AQW 2425/01)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety (Ms de Brún): No consultation documents have been jointly published. However, Boards, Trusts and Agencies have been involved in the preparation of some 21 documents initiated by the Department since the establishment of the Executive in December 1999.

Níor comhfhoilsíodh doiciméad comhairlithe ar bith. Bíodh sin mar atá, bhí Boird, Iontaobhais agus Gníomhaireachtaí páirteach in ullmhú 21 doiciméad ar chuir an Roinn tús leo ó bunaíodh Coiste an Fheidhmeannais i Mí na Nollag 1999.

Coronary Care in Sperrin Lakeland Trust

Mr P Doherty asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail (a) if there have been occasions during the last 12 months when the Tyrone County Hospital cardiac ambulance was not available due to a shortage of coronary care nurses; (b) her assessment of the current staffing level for coronary care in the Sperrin Lakeland Trust considering the catchment area for this service has been extended following removal of acute services from the South Tyrone Hospital in Dungannon. (AQW 2465/01)

Ms de Brún: (a) I am advised that there was one occasion during the last twelve months when the Tyrone County Hospital cardiac ambulance was withdrawn due to the unavailability of a cardiac care nurse.

(b) A full review of the nursing requirement for all acute hospital services was undertaken by the Trust and the Western Health and Social Services Board during 2001. This review identified a need for an increase in the nursing establishment in a range of clinical areas including the medical/coronary care wards. The Board and the Trust have implemented measures to address this need within the resources available.

(a) Cuireadh in iúl dom go raibh teagmhas amháin ann le linn an dá mhí déag anuas nuair a tarraingíodh siar otharcharr cairdiach de dheasca nach raibh altra cúraim chairdiach ar fáil.

(b) Rinne an tIontaobhas agus Bord Sláinte agus Seirbhísí Sóisialta an Iarthair athbhreithniú iomlán ar na riachtanais altrachta do na seirbhísí géarotharlainne go léir le linn 2001. D'aimsigh an t-athbhreithniú seo an gá le níos mó altraí a fhostú i réimse ábhar cliniciúil, sna bardaí míochaine/cúraim chorónaigh chomh maith. Chuir an Bord agus an tIontaobhas bearta i bhfeidhm le tabhairt faoin ghá seo ó laistigh de na hacmhainní ar fáil.

'Valuing People' Report

Mrs E Bell asked the the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to outline (a) if she has considered the 'Valuing People' report on adults with learning difficulties in England and Wales; and (b) if she has any plans to implement its findings in Northern Ireland. (AQO 1026/01)

Ms de Brún: My Department has considered the report. Its findings will be used to inform future policy and service development for people with a learning disability.

Rinne mo Roinn machnamh ar an tuairisc. Bainfear úsáid as a torthaí le dul i bhfeidhm ar pholasaí agus ar fhorbairt seirbhíse sa toadhchá do dhaoine le míchumas foghlama.

Trolley Waits: February/March 2002

Mr Berry asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the trolley waits in all hospitals in February/March 2002. (AQW 2541/01)

Ms de Brún: This information is detailed in the table below.

PATIENTS WAITING FOR INPATIENT ADMISSION AFTER THE DECISION TO ADMIT HAS BEEN TAKEN IN A&E DEPARTMENT, BY TRUST/HOSPITAL, FEBRUARY AND MARCH 2002

Trust/Hospital	February	March
Altnagelvin	3	0
Antrim	72	66
BCH	86	59
Causeway	25	31
Craigavon Area	133	217
Downe	3	11
Lagan Valley	111	119
Mid-Ulster	4	1
Mater	206	182
Royal	67	91
Sperrin Lakeland	0	3
Ulster	261	197
Total	971	977

These figures refer to the total number of patients waiting for inpatient admission at 9.00 a.m. each morning on each day in February and March 2002 and were obtained from my Department's Winter Pressures monitoring exercise.

Tá an t-eolas léirithe sa tábla thíos.

OTHAIR AG FANACHT AR IONTRÁIL OTHAR CÓNAITHEACH I NDIAIDH DON CHINNEADH DON IONTRÁIL BHEITH DÉANTA I ROINN T & É DE RÉIR IONTAObHAIS/OTHArlAINNE FEABHRA AGUS MÁRTA 2002

Iontaobhas/Otharlann	Feabhra	Márta
Alt na nGealbhan	3	0
Aontroim	72	66
OCBF	86	59
An Clochán	25	31
Ceantar Craigavon	133	217
An Dún	3	11
Gleann an Lagain	111	119
Lár-Uladh	4	1
Mater	206	182
Ríoga	67	91
Speirín Tír na Lochanna	0	3
Uladh	261	197
Iomlán	971	977

Baineann na figiúirí seo le líon iomlán na n-othar ag fanacht ar iontráil othar cónaitheach ag 9.00 a.m. gach maidin ar gach lá i mí Feabhra agus mí Mhárta 2002 agus fuarthas iad ó chleachtadh monatóireachta ar Bhrúna Geimhridh de chuid mo Roinne.

Management Boards

Mr Hamilton asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety whether the local health and social care groups will be operational from 1 April 2002; and to ensure that there will be no interregnum in the provision and commissioning of services. (AQW 2553/01)

Ms de Brún: Health and Social Services Boards are currently engaged in the process of establishing Management Boards for their Local Health and Social Care Groups. I expect the majority of Management Boards to be appointed during the course of the month of April and I am content to leave it to the Groups themselves to determine when they will be operational.

This will not, however, have any adverse impact on the provision and commissioning of services. It is not the intention that Groups should take on commissioning responsibilities during their first year, while they build up the necessary experience and skills. For the year 2002/03, all services will be commissioned by the Health and Social Services Boards. The additional services which fundholders have been providing for their patients will also be maintained by the Boards for next year, until the new Groups have time to determine their longer-term future.

I have set firm targets for Groups to take on the commissioning of some services from April 2003 and I will expect them to take on this responsibility where they are able to do so.

Faoi láthair, tá Boird Shláinte agus Sheirbhísí Sóisialta ar tí Boird Stiúrtha dá nGrúpaí Áitiúla Sláinte agus Cúraim Shóisialta a bhunú. Tá mé ag súil go gceapfar bunús na ndaoine do na Boird Stiúrtha i rith mhí Aibreáin agus tá mé sásta fágáil faoi chúram na nGrúpaí féin cinneadh a dheanamh ar an uair a dtosóidh siad ag obair.

Ní bheidh drochthionchar ar bith aige seo ar sholáthar agus ar choimisiúnú seirbhísí áfach. Ní cheaptar gur chóir do na Grúpaí tabhairt faoina geúraimí coimisiúnaithe i rith a gcéad bhliana go dtí go mbeidh an taithí riachtanach agus na scileanna riachtanacha acu. Don bhliain 2002/03, coimisiúnóidh na Boird Shláinte agus Sheirbhísí Sóisialta na seirbhísí go léir. Coinneoidh na Boird na seirbhísí breise fosta a bhí cisteshealbhóirí ag soláthar dá n-othar don bhliain seo chugainn, go dtí go mbeidh am go leor ag na Grúpaí cinneadh a dhéanamh ar a dtodhchaí fhadtéarmach.

Leag mé spriocanna cinnte síos do Ghrúpaí le tabhairt faoi choimisiúnú roinnt seirbhísí ó Aibreán 2003 agus beidh mé ag súil go dtabharfaidh siad faoin chúram seo nuair a bheidh siad ábalta sin a dhéanamh.

Local Health and Social Care Groups

Mr Hamilton asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail (a) the mechanisms that are in place to facilitate the movement of commiss-

ioning services to the local health and social care groups; and (b) the timescale for this to be completed.

(AQW 2554/01)

Ms de Brún: No specific mechanisms need to be put in place to facilitate the movement of responsibilities for commissioning services to Local Health and Social Care Groups. As Groups progress and develop the capacity to manage a budget for commissioning services, the associated responsibilities will progressively be delegated to them by their Health and Social Services Board.

It is not possible to set a timescale for this process to be completed. The Groups will take time to become properly established and they will develop at different paces. However, I certainly envisage Groups assuming some commissioning responsibilities from 1 April 2003.

Ní gá bearta ar leith a chur i bhfeidhm le haistriú na freagrachta as coimisiúnú seirbhísí go Grúpaí Áitiúla Sláinte agus Cúraim Shóisialta a éascú. De réir mar a théann na Grúpaí chun cinn agus a fhorbraíonn siad a gcumas le buiséad do choimisiúnú seirbhísí a stiúradh, tiomnóidh a mBord Sláinte agus Seirbhísí Sóisialta na cúraimí bainteach leo dóibh de réir a chéile.

Ní féidir tréimhse ama do chríochnú an phróisis seo a leagann síos. Glacfaidh sé am sula mbeidh na Grúpaí ag feidhmiú mar is ceart agus forbróidh siad ag amanna éagsúla chomh maith. Silim go cinnte áfach go dtabharfaidh na Grúpaí faoi roinnt cúraimí coimisiúnaithe ó 1 Aibreán 2003.

Beds in Nursing/Residential Homes

Mr S Wilson asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the number of beds lost in (a) nursing homes; and (b) residential homes for each Health Board in each of the last 5 years.

(AQW 2556/01)

Ms de Brún: Information on net losses or gains in numbers of beds in residential and nursing homes in each Board is detailed in the tables below.

NET LOSSES/GAINS IN BEDS IN RESIDENTIAL AND NURSING HOMES IN EACH BOARD, 1996/97 - 2000/01

(A) RESIDENTIAL HOMES

Board	Year				
	1996/97	1997/98	1998/99	1999/00	2000/01
EHSSB	-52	+83	-110	-120	-17
NHSSB	+16	-24	+16	+15	+4
SHSSB	+142	+242	+176	-40	+15
WHSSB	+52	+248	+89	+156	+37

(B) NURSING HOMES

Board	Year				
	1996/97	1997/98	1998/99	1999/00	2000/01
EHSSB	-3	-74	-51	-68	-74

Board	Year				
	1996/97	1997/98	1998/99	1999/00	2000/01
NHSSB	+99	+19	-11	-40	-1
SHSSB	-92	-233	-194	+46	-59
WHSSB	+4	-156	-113	-65	-79

Tá eolas ar ghlancailleadh nó ar ghlánghnóthachain i líon na leapacha i dtithe cónaithe agus altranaís i ngach Bord léirithe sna tábla thíos.

GLANCHAILLEADH /GLANGHNÓTHACHAIN LEAPACHA I DTITHE CÓNAITHE AGUS ALTRANAIS I NGACH BORD, 1996/97 - 2000/01

(A) TITHE CÓNAITHE

Bord	Bliain				
	1996/97	1997/98	1998/99	1999/00	2000/01
BSSSO	-52	+83	-110	-120	-17
BSSST	+16	-24	+16	+15	+4
BSSSD	+142	+242	+176	-40	+15
BSSSI	+52	+248	+89	+156	+37

(B) TITHE ALTRANAIS

Bord	Bliain				
	1996/97	1997/98	1998/99	1999/00	2000/01
BSSSO	-3	-74	-51	-68	-74
BSSST	+99	+19	-11	-40	-1
BSSSD	-92	-233	-194	+46	-59
BSSSI	+4	-156	-113	-65	-79

Clerical Staff: A&E Departments

Mrs I Robinson asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to (a) list the number of accident and emergency clerical officers for each of the Board areas; (b) list their respective grade levels for each of the Board areas; and (c) outline the reason for any difference in the grade levels. (AQW 2692/01)

Ms de Brún: The number of clerical staff (whole time equivalent), by grade, employed in accident and emergency departments within each Health & Social Services Board area is set out below:

	Grade 2	Grade 3	Grade 4	Grade 5
Eastern	35.05	36.40	-	0.50
Northern	17.60	1.31	2.25	-
Southern	22.93	5.08	1.00	-
Western	7.30	-	-	-

Grading of individual posts is a matter for Health and Social Services Trusts, based on the level of responsibility and duties, in accordance with grading definitions within

the Administrative and Clerical Terms and Conditions of Service Handbook.

Tá líon na bhfoirne cléireachais (coibhéis lánaimseartha), de réir gráid, fostaithe ag rannóga timpistí agus éigeandála laistigh de gach ceantar Bord Sláinte & Seirbhísí Sóisialta leagtha amach thíos:

	Grád 2	Grád 3	Grád 4	Grád 5
Oirthear	35.05	36.40	-	0.50
Tuaisceart	17.60	1.31	2.25	-
Deisceart	22.93	5.08	1.00	-
Iarthar	7.30	-	-	-

Is ábhar a bhaineann le hIontaobhais Shláinte agus Sheirbhísí Sóisialta é grádú poist aonair bunaithe ar leibhéal freagreachtaí agus dualgas, de réir miniúcháin ghrádaithe laistigh de Lámhleabhar Téarmaíochtaí Riaracháin agus Cléireachais agus Coinníollacha Seirbhíse.

Regional Fertility Centre

Ms Lewsley asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to outline (a) the range and extent of fertility counselling services; and (b) where these are currently located. (AQW 2705/01)

Ms de Brún: The Regional Fertility Centre at the Royal Group of Hospitals currently offers an independent counselling service, which is provided by the Church of Ireland Social Work department based in Talbot Street, Belfast. In addition, the nursing and medical staff employed in the Centre also provide counselling, as required, to couples attending the Centre.

Faoi láthair tairiscíonn Ionad Réigiúnach Torthúlachta ag Grúpa Ríoga Otharlann seirbhís chomhairleach neamhspleách, a soláthraíonn Roinn Oibre Sóisialta Eaglais na hÉireann atá lonnaithe i Sráid Talbot, Béal Feirste. Ina theannta, soláthraíonn an fhoireann altranaís agus míochaine san Ionad seirbhís chomhairle, de réir mar is gá, do lánúineacha ag freastal ar an Ionad.

Harmful Effects of Alcohol: Pregnant Women

Dr Birnie asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety how much money is allocated each year to inform pregnant women of the harm caused to their unborn child by drinking alcohol. (AQW 2724/01)

Ms de Brún: The cost of informing pregnant women of the harmful effects of alcohol is not separately identified. This aspect of education is an integral part of the antenatal programme which encourages women to ensure they have a healthy diet, do not smoke and reduce or cease alcohol consumption.

Ní aimsítear an costas ar bhonn scartha ar mhná torracha a chur ar an eolas faoi thionchair dhochracha alcóil. Is cuid imeastha gné seo an oideachais den chlár réamhbhreithe a spreagann mná chun cinntiú go bhfuil aiste shláintiúil bia acu, nach gcaitheann siad tobac agus go laghdaíonn siad nó go stopann siad den alcól.

Breast Cancer

Mr Shannon asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety how many women in Northern Ireland, per Board area, have had breast cancer in each of the last 3 years. (AQW 2725/01)

Ms de Brún: The latest figures available for each Board area are as follows:

NUMBER OF INCIDENT CASES OF BREAST CANCER DIAGNOSED IN EACH BOARD AREA BETWEEN 1996 AND 1998

		1996	1997	1998
Eastern Board	Incidence Cases	368	350	363
	Crude Rate per 100,000	105.5	100.0	103.7
Northern Board	Incidence Cases	216	206	196
	Crude Rate per 100,000	101.3	96.0	90.8
Southern Board	Incidence Cases	155	142	166
	Crude Rate per 100,000	101.5	92.3	107.2
Western Board	Incidence Cases	117	136	158
	Crude Rate per 100,000	84.8	97.8	112.7
All Boards¹	Incidence Cases	868	867	914
	Crude Rate per 100,000	101.8	101.1	106.1

¹The sum of the Board figures may not equal the All Boards total as not all cases had postcode details associated with them.

Is iad a leanas na figiúirí is déanaí do gach Bordcheantar:

LÍON NA GCÁSANNA TEAGMHAIS AILSE CÍCHE A DIAGNÓISÍODH I NGACH BORDCHEANTAR IDIR 1996 AGUS 1998

		1996	1997	1998
Bord an Oirthir	Cásanna Teagmhais	368	350	363
	Líon gach 100,000	105.5	100.0	103.7
Bord an Tuaiscirt	Cásanna Teagmhais	216	206	196
	Líon gach 100,000	101.3	96.0	90.8
Bord an Deiscirt	Cásanna Teagmhais	155	142	166
	Líon gach 100,000	101.5	92.3	107.2
Bord an Iarthair	Cásanna Teagmhais	117	136	158
	Líon gach 100,000	84.8	97.8	112.7
Gach Bord¹	Cásanna Teagmhais	868	867	914
	Líon gach 100,000	101.8	101.1	106.1

¹Tá seans ann nach ionann suim fhigiúirí na mBord agus iomlán na mBord Uile as siocair nach raibh sonraí postchóid bainteach le gach uile chás.

Immunisation for Children

Mr M Robinson asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to outline the vaccines which formed part of the recommended programme for children in (a) 1980; (b) 1985; (c) 1990; (d) 1995; and (e) 2000.

(AQW 2727/01)

Ms de Brún: Information on the schedules for routine immunisation for children is available for the years 1984, 1988, 1992 and 1996 and is detailed in the table below.

IMMUNISATION SCHEDULES FOR ROUTINE ADMINISTRATION

Year	Recommended vaccinations/immunisations
1984	Diphtheria, tetanus, pertussis, polio, measles, BCG, rubella ⁽¹⁾
1988	Diphtheria, tetanus, pertussis, polio, measles, MMR ⁽²⁾ , BCG, rubella ⁽¹⁾
1992	Diphtheria, tetanus, pertussis, Hib ⁽³⁾ , polio, MMR ⁽²⁾ , BCG
1996	Diphtheria, tetanus, pertussis, Hib ⁽³⁾ , polio, MMR ⁽²⁾ , BCG

⁽¹⁾ Girls only.

⁽²⁾ From 1 October 1988.

⁽³⁾ Haemophilus influenzae B

Tá eolas ar fáil do na sceidil le haghaidh gnáth-imdhíonta do na blianta 1984, 1988, 1992 agus 1996 léirithe sa tábla thíos.

SCEIDIL IMDHÍONTA LE HAGHAIDH GNÁTHRIARACHÁIN

BLIAIN	Vacsáin/Imdhíontaí molta
1984	Diftéire, teiteanas, triuch, polaimiailíteas, bruitíneach, BCG, bruitíneach dhearg ⁽¹⁾
1988	Diftéire, teiteanas, triuch, polaimiailíteas, bruitíneach, MMR ⁽²⁾ , BCG, bruitíneach dhearg ⁽¹⁾
1992	Diftéire, teiteanas, triuch, Hib ⁽³⁾ , polaimiailíteas, MMR ⁽²⁾ , BCG
1996	Diftéire, teiteanas, triuch, Hib ⁽³⁾ , polaimiailíteas, MMR ⁽²⁾ , BCG

⁽¹⁾ Cailíní amháin.

⁽²⁾ Ó 1 Deireadh Fómhair 1988.

⁽³⁾ Haemophilus influenzae B

Delayed Discharges

Mr Berry asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what steps are being taken to reduce the delay in discharges from the acute hospital sector in the constituencies of Newry & Armagh and Upper Bann.

(AQW 2728/01)

Ms de Brún: The Southern Health and Social Services Board advise that there has been a significant improvement in the number of delayed discharges from its acute hospitals over the last 3 to 6 months. The Board has worked closely with colleagues in all of the Trusts in its

area in order to minimise the numbers of patients with delayed discharge. At the end of February 2002, there were only 6 patients in Craigavon Area Hospital Trust in this position, which is a 75% reduction compared to August 2001. A similar improvement has also occurred in Daisy Hill Hospital.

The improvement has been achieved by;

- Targeting winter pressure funding to facilitate hospital discharge.
- Implementing changes to the management of waiting lists for long-term care so that hospital patients are guaranteed a certain proportion of long term places in the community.
- The appointment of an additional bed manager.
- Maintaining intermediate care services in the community.

On 12 March 2002, I announced my intention to allocate a further £19.1 million to the provision of community care services in 2002/03. Some of this money is to enable Boards to expand their caseload capacity by over 1,000 new packages of care next year in response to emerging demand. Priority continues to be given to minimising delayed discharge and to the restoration of domiciliary care as a realistic alternative to institutional care.

Thug Bord Sláinte agus Seirbhísí Sóisialta an Deiscirt le fios go raibh feabhas mór ann i líon na moilleanna i scaoileadh amach daoine óna ghéarotharlanna le 3 go 6 mí anuas. Bhí an Bord ag obair go dlúth lena chomhghleacaithe sna hIontaobhais go léir ina limistéar féin le líon na n-othar a bhfuil moill ann ina scaoileadh amach ón otharlann a íoslaghdú. Ag deireadh mhí Feabhra 2002, ní raibh ach 6 othar in Otharlann Craigavon sa riocht seo, sin laghdú 75% i gcomparáid le Lúnasa 2001. Bhí feabhas mar an gcéanna ann in Otharlann Daisy Hill chomh maith.

Baineadh an feabhas amach trí;

- Airgead do bhrúnna geimhridh a dhíriú ar éascú scaoileadh amach othar ó otharlanna.
- Chur i bhfeidhm athruithe do láimhseáil liostaí feithimh do chúram fadtéarmach sa dóigh go gcuirfear coibhneas ar leith d'áiteanna fadtéarmacha i leataobh sa phobal d'othair otharlainne.
- Cheapadh bainisteoir breise leapacha.
- Choinneáil seirbhísí cúraim idirthréimhse sa phobal.

Ar 12 Márta 2002, d'fhógair mé go raibh sé ar intinn agam £19.1 milliún breise a thabhairt do sholáthar seirbhísí cúraim phobail i 2002/03. Cuideoidh cuid den airgead seo le Boird a acmhainn dá riar cásanna a mhéadú le bhreis agus 1,000 pacáiste nua cúraim an bhliain seo chugainn mar fheagairt ar an mhéadú san éileamh. Tá tosaíocht á tabhairt go fóill d'íosmhéadú moilleanna i scaoileadh amach othar agus d'athchur ar

fáil cúraim bhaile mar rogha réadúil eile in áit cúraim institiúide.

Age Concern

Mr Berry asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what progress has been made following the meeting with 'Age Concern' directors in January 2002. (AQW 2757/01)

Ms de Brún: I met with representatives of Age Concern on 16 January 2002 to discuss free nursing care and free personal care.

The Health and Personal Social Services Bill, which is carrying the measure to facilitate free nursing care, completed its Second Stage in the Assembly on Tuesday 12 March and is now going to the Committee Stage for detailed consideration.

A Working Group, chaired by the Chief Nursing Officer, is working on the development of an assessment tool for the assessment for nursing care. Piloting of the tool at seven selected sites across the four Health and Social Services Board areas, has been going on since January 2002. This phase of the work is now nearing completion and it is intended, following evaluation of the test results, to make recommendations on a preferred methodology and appropriate mechanism for funding nursing care on an individual basis. It is proposed to consult key stakeholders on the suitability of the tool and the guidance on its use.

My Department will also prepare and consult on the comprehensive guidance required to implement free nursing care and will initiate training of health professionals on the application of the assessment tool in the lead in to the introduction of the policy.

At my meeting with Age Concern, I indicated that an Inter-departmental Group had been established to advise on the costs and practicalities of providing free personal care. It is expected that the Inter-departmental Group will report its findings to the Executive by the end of June this year.

Bhuail mé le hionadaithe Age Concern ar 16 Eanáir 2002 le cúram altranais saor agus le cúram pearsanta saor a phlé leo.

Bhí Dara Céim de léamh an Bhille Sláinte agus Seirbhísí Sóisialta Pearsanta, ina bhfuil beart ann le cúram altranais saor a éascú, críochnaithe sa Tionól Dé Máirt 12 Márta agus tá mionmhachnamh á dhéanamh air anois ag Céim an Choiste.

Tá Grúpa Oibre, ar a bhfuil An Príomh-Oifigeach Altranais ina Chathaoirleach air, ag obair ar fhorbairt mhodha mheasúnaithe le cúram altranais a mheasúnú. Bhí píolótú an mhodha seo ag dul ar aghaidh i seacht suíomh roghnaithe ar fud na gceithre Bhordcheantar Sláinte agus Seirbhísí Sóisialta ó Eanáir 2002. Tá an

chéim seo den obair ag teacht chun críche anois, agus tá sé socraithe, i ndiaidh torthaí an scrúdaithe a mheasúnú, moltaí a dhéanamh ar an mhodheolaíocht is fearr agus ar mheicníochtaí cuí do mhaoiniú cúraim altranais ar bhonn indibhidiúil. Moltar le dul i gcomhairle le heochairpháirtithe leasmhara ar fheiliúnacht an mhodha agus ar an treoir faoina úsáid.

Ullmhóidh mo Roinn agus rachaidh sí i gcomhairle ar an treoir chuimsitheach atá de dhíth le cúram altranais saor a chur i bhfeidhm chomh maith agus cuirfidh sí tús le hoiliúint ghairmithe sláinte ar chur i bhfeidhm an mhodha mheasúnaithe roimh thionscnamh an pholasaí.

Ag an cruinniú s'agam le Age Concern, chuir mé in iúl gur bunaíodh Grúpa Idir-rannóg le comhairle a thabhairt ar chostais agus ar fhéidearthachtaí sholáthar cúraim phearsanta shaoir. Táthar ag súil go dtabharfaidh an Grúpa Idir-rannóg tuairisc ar a thorthaí don Fheidhmeannas roimh dheireadh mhí Mheitheamh an bhliain seo.

Sure Start

Mr Close asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety how many parents are benefiting from the Sure Start programme during (a) pregnancy; (b) the first year of their child's life; and (c) the second to fourth year of their child's life. (AQW 2769/01)

Ms de Brún: Information is not readily available in the form requested and could only be provided at disproportionate cost.

Níl eolas ar fáil go réidh san fhoirm iarrtha agus ní fhéadfaí é a fháil ach ar chostas díréireach.

Sure Start

Mr Close asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail (a) the number of lone parents who are benefiting from the Sure Start programme during the first year of their child's life; and (b) the anticipated number who will benefit from Sure Start next year. (AQW 2770/01)

Ms de Brún: The information requested is not available.

Níl fáil ar an eolas a iarradh.

Hospital Waiting Lists

Mr Berry asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to outline (a) why hospital waiting lists have increased to 58,000, as outlined in her Press Release of 7 March 2002; and (b) the main problem areas surrounding this issue. (AQW 2772/01)

Ms de Brún: Waiting lists have increased because demand for hospital services has been rising. In particular, the pressures created by increased medical admissions over the past year have reduced the capacity of hospitals to carry out elective surgery.

The waiting list problem has its roots in the historic under-funding of health and social services over a number of years and a lack of hospital capacity to deal with rising demand.

Tháinig borradh ar liostaí feithimh toisc go raibh éileamh ar sheirbhísí otharlainne ag méadú. Go háirithe, na brúnna a chruthaigh iontrálacha míochaine méadaithe le bliain anuas a laghdaigh acmhainn na n-otharlann chun míochaine roghnach a dhéanamh.

Tá fréamh fhadhb na liostaí feithimh saite i ngannmhaoiniú stairiúil seirbhísí sláinte agus sóisialta le roinnt blianta anuas agus easpa acmhainne le deileáil leis an éileamh méadaithe.

Funding of Private Residential Homes for Pensioners

Mr Shannon asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what assistance is available to pensioners who cannot afford the fees of private residential homes. (AQW 2773/01)

Ms de Brún: Health and Social Services Boards may provide or arrange the provision of residential accommodation under Articles 15 or 36 of the Health and Personal Social Services (Northern Ireland) Order 1972.

The financial support available to each resident is dependent on their financial circumstances and ability to contribute towards the charge for residential or nursing home care. Residents may receive help with care home charges where the overall value of their capital assets, including savings and property, is less than the higher capital limit prescribed in Regulation 20 of the Health and Personal Social Services (Assessment of Resources) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 1993. These regulations, which are aligned with the test of eligibility for Income Support, prescribe the form of financial assessment to be applied.

Where an individual's capital assets, including savings and property, amount to less than £18,500, increasing to £19,000 from 22 April 2002, the Board will arrange and pay for his or her care, following a full assessment of need for care. The resident is then required to refund the Board an assessed contribution according to their ability to pay.

From 22 April 2002 a new capital disregard is introduced which gives permanent residents the choice to have the value of their former home disregarded for the first three months of their stay in residential accommodation.

Is féidir go soláthróidh agus go socróidh Boird Shláinte agus Sheirbhísí Sóisialta cóiríocht chónaithe faoi Ailt 15 nó 36 den Ordú Sláinte agus Seirbhísí Sóisialta Pearsanta (Tuaisceart Éireann) 1972.

Braitheann an tacaíocht airgeadais ar fáil do gach cónaitheoir ar a chúinsí airgeadais féin agus ar a gcumas le cuid den táille do chúram cónaithe nó altranaís bhaile a íoc. Is féidir le cónaitheoirí cuidiú a fháil le táillí cúraim bhaile a íoc má tá luach iomlán a sócmhainní caipitil, airgead taisce agus sealúchas san áireamh, níos lú ná an teorainn chaipitil níos airde leagtha amach i Rialachán 20 de na Rialacháin (Measúnú Acmhainní) Shláinte agus Sheirbhísí Sóisialta Pearsanta (Tuaisceart Éireann) 1993. Leagann na rialacháin seo, atá ceangailte le hiniúchadh na hiontofachta le haghaidh Thacaíocht Ioncaim, síos cineál an mheasúnaithe airgeadais atá le cur i bhfeidhm.

Nuair atá sócmhainní caipitil duine aonair, airgead taisce agus sealúchas san áireamh, níos lú ná £18,500 san iomlán, agus a mhéadaíonn go £19,000 san iomlán ó 22 Aibreán 2002, socróidh agus íocfaidh an Bord as a c(h)úram, i ndiaidh measúnú iomlán a dhéanamh ar an ghá le cúram. Tá ar an cónaitheoir ansin táille measúnaithe a aisíoc leis an Bhord de réir a gcumais le híoc as.

Ó 22 Aibreán 2002, tionscnófar tarscaoileadh nua caipitil a thabharfaidh an rogha do chónaitheoirí buana gan luach a seantí a bheith curtha san áireamh don chéad trí mhí dá gcónaí i gcóiríocht chónaithe.

Community Care Services for Elderly

Mr M Robinson asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what measures are in place to allow elderly patients to remain in their own homes. (AQW 2779/01)

Ms de Brún: A range of local intermediate care schemes have been piloted to make community services more responsive to the needs of elderly patients. Examples of these are the Rapid Response Nursing, Hospital at Home, Intensive Community Care and Home from Hospital schemes that provide care in the community, prevent inappropriate admissions to hospital and minimise delay in discharge from acute care in hospital.

HSS Trusts are required to undertake individual needs-based assessments for community care services. Where appropriate there are various measures in place to allow elderly patients to remain in their homes. These include the provision of care-managed domiciliary services to support a person at home, including aids to living and essential adaptations to the home. Home Help services can also give clients practical assistance and care in their own homes. Meals on wheels services are also provided to elderly enable clients to stay at home.

Carers play a key role in supporting people at home and therefore a range of support mechanisms to help carers is provided in the community by Trusts and by voluntary organisations. Such services include respite care and sitting services. Information, counselling and training is also provided particularly to new carers to allow them to adjust to their caring role.

Rinneadh píolótú ar réimse scéimeanna áitiúla cúraim idirthréimhseach chun iarracht a dhéanamh seirbhísí pobail a bheith níos freagraí as riachtanais othar aosta trí scéimeanna amhail Altranais Mearfhreagartha, Ospidéal sa Bhaile, Dianchúram Pobail agus Ospidéal ón Bhaile a sholáthraíonn cúram sa phobal, a chuireann cosc ar ghlacadh isteach míchuí othar in ospidéal agus a íosmhéadaíonn an mhoill ar scaoileadh amach othar ó ghéarchúram in ospidéal.

Ní mór d'Iontaobhais SSS measúnuithe bunaithe ar riachtanais an duine aonair a dhéanamh do sheirbhísí cúraim phobail. Mar a mbíonn sé cuí tá bearta éagsúla i bhfeidhm chun ligean d'othair fanacht ina dtithe féin. Ina measc tá soláthar seirbhísí cúraim bhaile cúram-stiúrtha chun tacú le duine sa bhaile, chomh maith le háiseanna maireachtála, agus le hathchóiriú riachtanach an tí. Is féidir le seirbhísí Cuidiú Baile cuidiú praiticiúil agus cúram a thabhairt do chliaint in dtithe féin fosta. Soláthraítear seirbhísí 'béilí ar rothaí' do sheandaoine fosta chun cur ar chumas cliant fanacht sa bhaile.

Tá ról iontach tábhachtach ag feighlithe i dtacaíocht daoine sa bhaile agus mar sin de, tá réimse beart tacaíochta soláthraithe sa phobal ag Iontaobhais agus ag eagraíochtaí deonacha le cuidiú le feighlithe. Ina leithéid de sheirbhísí seo tá cúram faoisimh agus seirbhísí feighlí. Tugtar eolas, comhairle agus oiliúint d'fheighlithe nua ach go háirithe chomh maith chun ligean dóibh socrú síos ina ról feighle.

Long-term Care for Elderly

Mr M Robinson asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what is the average monthly cost of long-term care for an elderly person in (a) hospital; and (b) a nursing home. (AQW 2780/01)

Ms de Brún: The average monthly cost of long term care for an elderly person is as follows;

The cost of a bed in hospital depends on the nature and severity of the condition treated and the nature of the treatment provided. Inclusive of all overhead costs, this can range from £2600 per month (in an elderly care ward, of which £790 would be in respect of medical and diagnostic costs not incurred in a nursing home) to some £39,000 (for an intensive care bed in the Royal Victoria Hospital).

A place in a nursing home typically costs around £1,550 per month.

Seo a leanas meánchostas míosúil cúraim fhadtéarmaigh seanduine;

Braitheann costas leapa in ospidéal ar ghéire an reachta, ar an sórt reachta cóireáilte agus ar an sórt cóireála tugtha. Leis na costais go léir san áireamh, is féidir leis seo bheith sa réimse ó £2600 an mhí (i mbarda chúram seandaoine, arb é £790 an costas a bheadh ann maidir le costais mhíochaine agus dhiagnóiseacha nár tarraingíodh ar theach altranais) go timpeall is £39,000 (do leaba dianchúraim in Otharlann Ríoga Victoiria).

Cosnaíonn áit i dteach altranais timpeall is £1550 an mhí de ghnáth.

REGIONAL DEVELOPMENT

Hog Park Point, Lough Neagh

Mr M Murphy asked the Minister for Regional Development to outline (a) his assessment of the economic implications of the new water source at Hog Park Point, Lough Neagh, considering the current need to address the reduction of leakage and waste within the water system; and (b) if all economic options were fully researched prior to reaching this decision.

(AQW 2740/01)

The Minister for Regional Development (Mr P Robinson): Water Service's proposal, arising from the 1994 Water Resource Strategy, to develop a new water source to abstract up to 130 megalitres of water per day at Hog Park Point, Lough Neagh, has been included in the current review of the water resources strategy for the period up to 2030. The review takes into account the full range of economic factors, projected water demand, population growth, climatic change and the potential for leakage reduction and demand management.

The review is nearing completion and I expect that the draft strategy will be published for consultation before the summer.

Hog Park Point, Lough Neagh

Mr M Murphy asked the Minister for Regional Development why he is financing a new water source at Hog Park Point, Lough Neagh when so much water is lost through leakage and waste in the commercial and domestic sectors. (AQW 2741/01)

Mr P Robinson: Water Service's proposal, arising from the 1994 Water Resource Strategy, to develop a new water source to abstract up to 130 megalitres of water per day at Hog Park Point, Lough Neagh, has been included in the current review of the water resources strategy for the period up to 2030. The review

takes into account the full range of economic factors, projected water demand, population growth, climatic change and the potential for leakage reduction and demand management.

The review is nearing completion and I expect that the draft strategy will be published for consultation before the summer.

No financial commitment has therefore been made for the construction of the proposed new water source at Hog Park Point.

A8 Larne to Belfast Road: Safety

Mr Beggs asked the Minister for Regional Development if plans to improve road safety on the Belfast to Larne Road A8 junctions at (i) Millbrook; and (ii) Antiville have been developed using the Transport Research Laboratory guidance for safe roundabouts.

(AQW 2742/01)

Mr P Robinson: My Department's Roads Service has advised me that the appraisal of these junctions, the assessment of the options to improve their safety and the detailed design of the roundabout solutions were implemented in accordance with the Design Manual for Roads and Bridges. This suite of documents, which are jointly produced by the four overseeing roads organisations in England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland, cover all aspects of road design and maintenance in the UK.

A8 Larne to Belfast Road: Upgrade

Mr Beggs asked the Minister for Regional Development if any objections were made at (a) the planning stage to upgrade the A8 Larne to Belfast junctions at Millbrook and Antiville; (b) the vesting stage of the project; and, if so, (c) what is the process and timescale for determining the validity or otherwise of the objection(s).

(AQW 2743/01)

Mr P Robinson: I have been advised by my Department's Roads Service that no objections were received following publication of the Direction Order and Environmental Statement for these proposed improvements. However, one objection was received following the publication of the Notice of Intention to make a Vesting Order.

When an objection is received it is duly assessed and the objector is consulted with a view to resolving the issues raised and having the objection withdrawn. If the objection is not withdrawn the Department may cause a local inquiry to be held if it appears to the Department to be necessary to do so or may make the vesting order without recourse to an inquiry. An inquiry could delay this scheme by at least 6 months.

In this case Roads Service officials have arranged to meet with the objector with a view to resolving the objection.

B7 (Burren Village to Milltown Crossroads)

Mr Bradley asked the Minister for Regional Development what is the proposed start date for the reinstatement of the section of the B7 between Burren Village and Milltown Crossroads, Warrenpoint. (AQW 2799/01)

Mr P Robinson: During the last 12 months or so various works to upgrade the local sewerage and drainage systems have been carried out along a section of the B7, between Burren Village and Milltown Crossroads.

As some of the excavations involved were up to 4.3 metres deep, significant settlement was anticipated and final reinstatement had to be delayed accordingly. I am pleased to advise you, however, that resurfacing in asphalt of 1,350 metres of the road, which will include the section affected by the above works, is programmed to commence in mid-May 2002.

Public Transport

Mr Beggs asked the Minister for Regional Development why two bodies (NI Transport Holding Company and Translink) are necessary to manage public transport. (AQW 2914/01)

Mr P Robinson: The existing structures for the oversight and delivery of public transport services in Northern Ireland are enshrined in the Transport Act (NI) 1967. The Northern Ireland Transport Holding Company was established under the Act to hold and manage the property and undertakings of the former Ulster Transport Authority, and it is also empowered to form subsidiary companies. It has established 6 subsidiary companies, operating various aspects of public transport business. The Holding Company and its subsidiaries are controlled by a Common Board of Directors. Translink is not a separate entity but rather a trading name, under which the bus and rail companies operate. I am currently reviewing the institutional arrangements for the planning and delivery of public transport in Northern Ireland.

Harland & Wolff: Lease

Mr Campbell asked the Minister for Regional Development when did Harland & Wolff first indicate that changes in the terms of their lease with Belfast Harbour Commission were needed to prevent the closure of the yard.

(AQO 1112/01)

Mr P Robinson: I was first notified of the company's desire to secure the removal of the restrictive user clause from its lease of some of the lands it currently occupies

within the Harbour Estate, when Sir David Fell, Chairman of the H & W Group, met Sir Reg Empey and myself on 18 February 2002 to brief us on the company's new Business Plan.

The company has identified an area amounting to some 80 acres as being no longer required for its shipbuilding activities. Its new Business Plan envisages a more compact yard, diversification of engineering activity, as well as the regeneration of those lands no longer required for shipbuilding. Consequently the proposal does have major implications for the company's future and land use generally within the Harbour Estate.

Sir Reg Empey's interest mainly centres on the feasibility of the company's new business plan. It was recognised at the outset that a view on the business plan would inform our decision making process on the land. While our respective Departments have been working within the very tight timescale notified by the company, the seriousness of the company's situation and the complexities of the issues demanded that the matter be given careful consideration and this inevitably has taken time.

I am sympathetic to the plight of Harland and Wolff Heavy Industries and I am willing to facilitate the company in their efforts to secure a future for shipbuilding and ship repair in Belfast. However I am approaching this matter in a strategic manner, mindful to the very considerable economic development and job creation potential of the land within the Harbour Estate which Harland and Wolff have indicated to be surplus to their ship building requirements.

In addressing the land issue I have made it clear that any arrangement reached between Belfast Harbour Commissioners as the landlord and Harland and Wolff as the tenant must be justifiable and acceptable in its own right, regardless of what the future holds for Harland and Wolff Heavy Industries Ltd. I am also concerned to ensure that the public interest in the lands is fully safeguarded and that they are used and developed in the best interests of the people of Northern Ireland. The conditions which would attach to any agreement between BHC and Titanic Properties Ltd would be so constructed to meet these primary objectives and would be a matter for negotiation.

Planning Service

Mr McFarland asked the Minister for Regional Development what protocol exists between his Department and the Department of the Environment Planning Service to identify the effects of new building development on road and waste water infrastructures. (AQO 1108/01)

Mr P Robinson: Planning Service consults Road and Water Services about all planning applications for developments that may affect the public road, and the water and wastewater infrastructures. This consultation

is carried out under the terms of Service Level Agreements which define the respective roles and responsibilities of each Service in the consultation process. Both Roads and water Services consider the impact of the proposed development, and make appropriate recommendations to Planning Service.

The decision on whether or not to grant planning approval is a matter for Planning Service alone. I am advised that in instances, where either the roads or wastewater infrastructure is inadequate, and no satisfactory alternative can be found, Planning Service will normally refuse the planning application.

M1 Signage: Omagh

Mr McElduff asked the Minister for Regional Development to include 'Omagh' on a greater number of route confirmatory signs on the M1 motorway. (AQO 1141/01)

Mr P Robinson: I can advise the Member that, as far as the M1 motorway is concerned, Omagh is already mentioned on 4 route confirmatory signs and either Omagh or 'The West' are included on 11 Advance Direction signs. Furthermore Omagh is mentioned on 8 signs on the A4 (from the end of the M1 to Ballygawley) and a further 11 signs on the A5 (between Ballygawley and the town).

I believe this level of signing is adequate to direct motorists to the town and I have, therefore, no plans at present to increase the signage.

Toomebridge Bypass

Mr J Kelly asked the Minister for Regional Development when work will begin on the Toomebridge Bypass. (AQO 1123/01)

Mr P Robinson: I am pleased to advise that all statutory procedures for the Toome Bypass are complete, and preparatory site work has already been undertaken to remove hedges before the start of the bird nesting season. My Department's Roads Service has initiated a design and build contract process by selecting a preferred contractor following a competitive tendering procedure. The detailed design and target price for the main works are presently being finalised. If these are satisfactory, the main works contract should be awarded during April, with work starting next month.

Infrastructure Funding Division

Mr Morrow asked the Minister for Regional Development what steps he is taking to investigate the potential for the use of private finance within his Department; and to make a statement. (AQO 1106/01)

Mr P Robinson: I have established a new Infrastructure Funding Division within my Department tasked to investigate the potential to use private finance and alternative funding solutions to address the significant investment backlog in our roads, water and transport services.

During the debate on the draft Regional Transportation Strategy on 4 February 2002, I advised the Assembly that an additional £950 million is needed to deliver the transportation vision as outlined in the Regional Development Strategy over the next 10 years. An additional £500 million investment in our water and sewerage network is required for the same period if we are to achieve compliance with European Directives on water quality. Given the scale of this funding need, it is clear that traditional public expenditure funding will be unable to fully bridge this investment gap.

The new Infrastructure Funding Division is investigating a range of alternative funding solutions such as developers contributions, congestion charges and bond finance. The Unit is also investigating the potential for greater use of Public Private Partnerships as part of my Department's forward investment programme.

This work is at an early stage, but I will keep the Assembly informed of developments.

A509 Enniskillen to Aghalane Road: Upgrade

Mr McHugh asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail any plans to upgrade the road from Enniskillen to Aghalane. (AQO 1122/01)

Mr P Robinson: As you may be aware, a road improvement scheme on the A509 Enniskillen to Aghalane road, between Montiagh and Mackin, is currently in progress. The scheme is estimated to cost £200,000.

In addition, my Department's Road Service plans to carry out a road realignment scheme on the A509 at Mackin Hill near Derrylin. This scheme, which is estimated to cost £220,000, is included in the 2002/03 minor works programme. A number of objections to the scheme have however been received from local landowners. The timing of the scheme is therefore dependent on a resolution of these objections.

Bus Lanes

Mr S Wilson asked the Minister for Regional Development what plans he has to extend the use of bus lanes; and to make a statement. (AQO 1107/01)

Mr P Robinson: My Department's Roads Service proposes to extend the use of nearside with-flow bus lanes in Belfast by:

- introducing Belfast public hire taxes and "black" taxis licensed to operate bus type services in bus lanes from April 2002;
- taking forward proposals to permit the introduction of motor-cycles to bus lanes; and
- reviewing the operation of the lanes and giving further consideration to the role of private hire taxis.

Decisions concerning which vehicle types are admitted to individual bus lanes are based on traffic and transportation needs, with road safety being a major contributing factor.

My Department is in consultation with the Assembly Committee on the issue and I would hope to be in a position to provide you with further information before too long.

Bus Lanes

Mr Paisley Jnr asked the Minister for Regional Development if powered two-wheel vehicles will be given the right to use bus lanes. (AQO 1140/01)

Mr P Robinson: I would refer you to my answer of 4 March 2002 in response to your recent Oral Assembly Question AQO 906/01 and my response to AQO 1107/01 which I answered today.

Width of Main Trunk Roads

Mr Byrne asked the Minister for Regional Development to outline Roads Service policy in relation to the width of main trunk roads throughout Northern Ireland; and to make a statement. (AQO 1111/01)

Mr P Robinson: My Department's Roads Service has no specific policy in relation to the width of main trunk roads.

As you may know, trunk roads comprise a mix of road types ranging from motorways to single carriageways. The current standards of construction for all road types are contained in the Design Manual for Roads and Bridges which has been published jointly by the road authorities in England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland. The Design Manual provides that the carriageway width for a rural main road (which could also be a trunk road) is 7.3 metres with two 1 metre wide hardstrips and a 2.5 metre wide grass verge. Where a footway is provided, it is located within the 2.5 metre wide verge

Roads Service would normally carry out improvements to the country's trunk road network to the standards contained in the Design Manual. However, some non-standard road widths may be used to suit particular locations. Also, whilst a substantial proportion of the trunk road network in Northern Ireland has been improved to

current standards, there are significant sections that are largely unimproved.

Hannahstown and Glenavy: Upgrade of Roads

Ms Lewsley asked the Minister for Regional Development if there are any plans to upgrade the roads structure in the Hannahstown and Glenavy areas in 2002-03.

(AQO 1128/01)

Mr P Robinson: My Department's Roads Service plans to carry out 2 minor works schemes in the Hannahstown and Glenavy areas in 2002/03. These schemes are being undertaken to improve sight-lines at the junction of Leathemstown Road and Quarterlands Road at Dundrod and at the junction of Glenavy Road and Hungry House Lane between Lisburn and Glenavy. Completion of both schemes is subject to the successful acquisition of necessary land.

Also, schemes to resurface Upper Springfield Road and the A26 Moira Road, between Glenavy and Ballinderry Upper, remain under consideration for inclusion in future resurfacing programmes.

Downpatrick Wastewater Treatment Works

Mr McGrady asked the Minister for Regional Development what assessment he has made of the sewerage works in Downpatrick; and to make a statement.

(AQO 1142/01)

Mr P Robinson: The performance of Downpatrick Wastewater Treatment Works is assessed on an on-going basis against the regulatory standards set by the Environment and Heritage Service. Samples of the effluent from the Works are collected at the discharge point to the Quoile River. Over the past 5 years, the Works has consistently complied with the regulatory standards. All samples taken during 2001 complied with the regulatory standards.

The Works was designed to treat a population equivalent of 16,000, and presently caters for around 13,000. It is not overloaded and is generally performing well. Water Service will continue to monitor its performance, and will take any necessary measures to further improve the efficiency of the treatment process. Arrangements have been made to install new screening equipment at the inlet to the Works. This is expected to be operational within the next two months, and will enhance the reliability of the Works.

An appraisal study has been undertaken to identify the upgrading required to cater for future growth, and the possibility of increasingly stringent effluent discharge standards. The scheme is currently programmed to commence in 2005, at an estimated cost of £2.3 million.

A2 Warrenpoint to Rostrevor Road: Resurfacing

Mr M Murphy asked the Minister for Regional Development if he has any plans to resurface the A2 Warrenpoint to Rostrevor road.

(AQO 1099/01)

Mr P Robinson: My Department's Roads Service has advised me that it plans to resurface in asphalt the following 2 stretches of the A2 Warrenpoint to Rostrevor road early in the incoming financial year 2002/03:

- some 650 metres from the mini-roundabout in Rostrevor to Monument Corner (costing approximately £40,000); and
- some 800 metres of half the width of the carriageway (the seaward side) from Monument Corner towards Warrenpoint (costing approximately £40,000).

Lough Neagh: Drinking Water

Mr Ford asked the Minister for Regional Development what discussions he has had with the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development and the Minister of the Environment regarding the quality of drinking water drawn from Lough Neagh.

(AQO 1119/01)

Mr P Robinson: Lough Neagh is a very significant source of drinking water as it supplies around one-third of the water used on a daily basis in Northern Ireland. Consequently, my Department's Water Service is very keen that the quality, and indeed the quantity, of water in the Lough is protected. Standards of wholesomeness of water are prescribed in The Water Quality Regulations (Northern Ireland) 1994. Water Service regularly monitors the quality of drinking water from the Lough Neagh, and publishes the results in public registers and in an annual report.

The Department of the Environment is responsible for the quality of water in Lough Neagh. Its Drinking Water Inspectorate has an independent responsibility to assess and regulate compliance against the regulatory standards for drinking water. The Inspectorate audits Water Service's compliance against these standards, and publishes an annual report, which provides an overview of drinking water quality in Northern Ireland. The Department of the Environment is also responsible for implementing the requirements of The Surface Water (Abstraction for Drinking Water) (Classification) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 1996. These Regulations require that surface water used for drinking purposes, be classified under one of three quality categories and given appropriate treatment. The water in Lough Neagh is in the middle category, and Water Service is satisfied that the treatment processes are able to cope with variations in the quality of the raw water abstracted from the Lough.

The Department of Agriculture and Rural Development has no statutory responsibility for water quality. It

has, however, carried out research into water quality in Lough Neagh for over 30 years, and provides advice to the other Departments as necessary.

While I have not personally had any discussions with the Ministers of Agriculture and Rural Development, and the Environment on this matter, our officials work closely together to discuss ways to protect water quality generally, and in particular in Lough Neagh. Indeed all three Departments are represented on the Lough Neagh Co-ordinating Committee which is working on the production of a Lough Neagh Management Strategy.

SOCIAL DEVELOPMENT

Cost of Vandalism to Housing Executive: Newry and Armagh

Mr Berry asked the Minister for Social Development to detail the cost of vandalism to the Housing Executive in each of the last 2 years in the constituency of Newry and Armagh. (AQW 2758/01)

The Minister for Social Development (Mr Dodds): This information is not available in precisely the format requested. However, the Housing Executive has supplied the following information for its Newry and Armagh districts:

	2000/01	2001/02
Newry and Armagh Districts	£50,488	£95,820

Costs under the heading of vandalism relate to both damage to dwellings and to communal areas. However, the figures may not reflect the total cost of vandalism, because it is not possible to separate such costs from work relating to Change of Tenancy repairs or Refurbishment of Vacant Dwellings.

Litter Removal

Mr Hilditch asked the Minister for Social Development to detail (a) the planned maintenance programme for litter removal from footways to the rear of Housing Executive properties and garage areas; and (b) the response maintenance provided for these areas. (AQW 2822/01)

Mr Dodds: Whilst litter removal from adopted areas is normally the responsibility of the relevant District Council, the Housing Executive retains this responsibility where it has ownership of the area in question. These areas would primarily be hard and soft landscaping, play areas, communal drying areas, unadopted footways, stairways or communal entrances. Costs associated with litter removal are not recorded separately.

The Housing Executive's policy is to inspect such areas at least once every 6 months. However, the Housing Executive's District Offices have the flexibility to increase this cycle of inspection, and subsequent remedial action, as they consider necessary. In addition to the inspection process, response maintenance repair orders will be issued where excessive litter or rubbish is being dumped. Estate Wardens have also been introduced, who will report directly to the District Office on instances of litter or illegal dumping on estates, including abandoned vehicles.

A new contract has recently been introduced in each of the Housing Executive's Districts, which allows District Offices to make more formal arrangements for responding to the need for rubbish removal. This facility gives the District Office the option of using a specialised cleaning contractor to clean identified areas, on a cyclical basis and at a pre-defined price. Whilst not making the responsive side of rubbish removal redundant, it should significantly reduce the problem.

Repairs Scheme

Mr Shannon asked the Minister for Social Development to detail the timescale for maintenance work to Housing Executive houses from the notification of the repair to the initial response. (AQW 2823/01)

Mr Dodds: The Housing Executive introduced a classification system for its Repairs Scheme in 1990. This scheme sets predefined timescales for response repairs to Housing Executive property, as follows:

Emergency - The Housing Executive aims to have a contractor at the property within 24 hours.

This type of repair is designed to deal with genuine emergencies. The contractor will also inform the Housing Executive if additional work is required for example, repairs which may be classified as Emergency, are electrical fittings in contact with water or live or bare electric wiring.

Urgent - The Housing Executive aims to have a contractor at the property within 4 working days.

Work that is not considered as emergency but needs a quick response is classified as Urgent, for example, faults at electrical fittings, faults at water heating circuits or faults in electrical heating systems.

Routine - The Housing Executive aims to have a contractor at the property within 4 weeks.

If a repair is not classified as Emergency or Urgent then it is deemed to be Routine. However, there may be exceptions to this, that is where the Housing Executive already has a planned programme of maintenance for an area, which includes the property needing repair. For example, repairs that may be classified as Routine are cleaning or repairing gutters or downpipes, easing or re-fitting doors or window-sashes, or plasterwork repairs.

Disability Living Allowance/Incapacity Benefit: Osteoporosis Sufferers

Mr Shannon asked the Minister for Social Development to detail, per Board area, the number of (i) males; and (ii) females who suffer from osteoporosis and are in receipt of Disability Living Allowance or Incapacity Benefit. (AQW 2825/01)

Mr Dodds: The tables below provide the number of customers who are recorded as suffering from Osteoporosis and in receipt of Incapacity benefit at August 2001 and analysed by gender and Health and Social Services Board area. Comparable information on customers of Disability Living Allowance is not available. These are the latest figures available.

INCAPACITY BENEFIT CLAIMANTS WHO SUFFER FROM OSTEOPOROSIS BY GENDER AND HEALTH AND SOCIAL SERVICES BOARD AREA - AUGUST 2001

	Male	Females	Total
Missing Postcode	1	1	2
Eastern	14	30	44
Northern	5	10	15
Southern	4	12	16
Western	2	11	13
Total	26	64	90

1. In producing these analyses, individual records were attributed to wards and Board on the basis of their postcode. Not all records can be correctly allocated to a ward using this method, and some cannot be allocated at all.
2. Past investigation has demonstrated that mis-allocations and non-allocations do not necessarily occur randomly between areas, and at ward level the proportion of records mis-allocated or unallocated can be substantial.
3. At present, it seems likely that a higher than average proportion of the records that cannot be attributed to a ward are in the following areas: Fermanagh District Council, Derry City Council and parts of Belfast City Council.

Special Purchase of Evacuated Dwellings

Mr G Kelly asked the Minister for Social Development how the SPED Scheme (Special Purchase of Evacuated Dwellings) has operated in relation to people who have been forced to leave their Housing Executive homes as a result of Loyalist violence in North Belfast. (AQW 2836/01)

Mr Dodds: The Scheme for the Purchase of Evacuated Dwellings (SPED) does not apply to Housing Executive properties. Its purpose is to assist owneroccupiers who are forced to leave their dwellings because of threat or intimidation.

Alternative Accommodation: Intimidation

Mr G Kelly asked the Minister for Social Development to detail the number of people put out of Housing

Executive homes as a result of Loyalist violence in North Belfast. (AQW 2855/01)

Mr Dodds: Where Housing Executive tenants seek alternative accommodation because of intimidation they are treated as being homeless. In homelessness cases information on the source of intimidation and on the tenure of the applicant is not recorded.

However, within North Belfast (Housing Executive Belfast Districts 4 and 6), provisional end of year figures indicate that 318 households presented to the Housing Executive as homeless due to intimidation/civil disturbance during 2001/2002. The figures for the previous year (2000/01) totalled 254 presenters in the same Districts.

Osteoarthritis

Mr Shannon asked the Minister for Social Development to detail, per Board area, the number of (i) males and (ii) females who suffer from osteoarthritis and are in receipt of Disability Living Allowance or Incapacity Benefit. (AQW 2880/01)

Mr Dodds: The tables below provide the number of customers who are recorded as suffering from Osteoarthritis and in receipt of Incapacity Benefit at August 2001 and receipt of Disability Living Allowance at November 2001, and analysed by gender and Health and Social Services Board area. These are the latest figures available.

INCAPACITY BENEFIT RECIPIENTS WHO SUFFER FROM OSTEOARTHRITIS BY GENDER AND HEALTH AND SOCIAL SERVICES BOARD AREA - AUGUST 2001

	Male	Females	Total
Missing Postcode	16	6	22
Eastern Health Board	437	203	640
Northern Health Board	285	112	397
Southern Health Board	216	92	308
Western Health Board	216	96	312
Total	1,170	509	1,679

DISABILITY LIVING ALLOWANCE RECIPIENTS WHO SUFFER FROM OSTEOARTHRITIS BY GENDER AND HEALTH AND SOCIAL SERVICES BOARD AREA - NOVEMBER 2001

	Male	Females	Total
Missing Postcode	180	409	589
Eastern Health Board	3,698	7,353	11,051
Northern Health Board	1,856	3,540	5,396
Southern Health Board	2,158	3,811	5,969
Western Health Board	2,002	3,477	5,479
Total	9,894	18,590	28,484

1. In producing these analyses, individual records were attributed to wards and Board area on the basis of their postcode. Not all records can be correctly allocated to a ward using this method, and some cannot be allocated at all.

- Past investigation has demonstrated that mis-allocations and non-allocations do not necessarily occur randomly between areas, and at ward level the proportion of records mis-allocated or unallocated can be substantial.
- At present, it seems likely that a higher than average proportion of the records that cannot be attributed to a ward are in the following areas: Fermanagh District Council, Derry District Council and parts of Belfast City Council.

Jobseeker's Allowance and Income Support

Mrs I Robinson asked the Minister for Social Development to detail, by constituency, the number of people currently in receipt of Jobseekers Allowance or Income Support. (AQW 2894/01)

Mr Dodds: The tables below provide the number of customers in receipt of Jobseekers Allowance and Income Support by constituency at February 2002. These are the latest figures available.

JOBSEEKER'S ALLOWANCE CUSTOMERS BY CONSTITUENCY AT FEB 2002

Constituency	Claimants
Missing Postcode	732
Belfast East	1,425
Belfast North	2,926
Belfast South	1,924
Belfast West	3,876
East Antrim	1,537
East Londonderry	2,153
Fermanagh and South Tyrone	2,025
Foyle	4,321
Lagan Valley	1,024
Mid Ulster	1,165
Newry and Armagh	2,255
North Antrim	1,909
North Down	1,293
South Antrim	1,400
South Down	1,841
Strangford	1,364
Upper Bann	1,702
West Tyrone	2,430
Total	37,302

INCOME SUPPORT CUSTOMERS BY CONSTITUENCY AT FEB 2002

Constituency	Claimants
Missing Postcode	3,919
Belfast East	7,854
Belfast North	14,996
Belfast South	7,798

Constituency	Claimants
Belfast West	18,202
East Antrim	5,682
East Londonderry	8,175
Fermanagh and South Tyrone	9,647
Foyle	14,800
Lagan Valley	6,136
Mid Ulster	9,663
Newry and Armagh	11,878
North Antrim	8,772
North Down	5,106
South Antrim	6,573
South Down	9,048
Strangford	6,224
Upper Bann	9,633
West Tyrone	10,544
Total	174,650

- In producing these analyses, individual records were attributed to wards and constituency on the basis of their postcode. Not all records can be correctly allocated to a ward using this method, and some cannot be allocated at all.
- Past investigation has demonstrated that mis-allocations and non-allocations do not necessarily occur randomly between areas, and at ward level the proportion of records mis-allocated or unallocated can be substantial.
- At present, it seems likely that a higher than average proportion of the records that cannot be attributed to a ward are in the following areas: Fermanagh District Council, Derry District Council and parts of Belfast City Council.

Social Security Agency

Mr Carrick asked the Minister for Social Development what performance targets have been set for the Social Security Agency. (AQW 2938/01)

Mr Dodds: The following targets have been set with the objective of continuing to provide high levels of service to customers. I am satisfied that the targets represent a demanding challenge for the Agency. The targets will be included in the Agency's 2002-2005 Strategic & Business Plan, which is due for publication later this month. A copy of the Plan will be placed in the library. The targets are as follows:

1. Customer Satisfaction	
90% of customers to regard the Agency's service as satisfactory or better.	
2. New Deal initiatives	
To help 4,000 people move from welfare to work through their participation in New Deal initiatives.	
3. Benefit Accuracy (financial)	
Disability Living Allowance	Financial accuracy to be 95%

Incapacity Benefit	Financial accuracy to be 95%
Income Support	Financial accuracy to be 95%
Jobseeker's Allowance	Financial accuracy to be 95%.
4. Benefit Clearance Times	
Disability Living Allowance	To clear cases on average within 60 days
Disability Living Allowance (special rules)	To clear cases on average within 20 days
Incapacity Benefit	To clear cases on average within 30 days
Income Support	To clear cases on average within 12 days
Jobseeker's Allowance	To clear cases on average within 12 days.
5. Fraud	
To reduce the levels of fraud and error in benefit systems by 5% each year, bringing the baseline levels down to:	
5.95% for Income Support	
6.29% for Jobseeker's Allowance	
2.61% for Incapacity Benefit.	
6. Financial Recovery	
Recovery of overpayments - £4.5 million.	

Social Fund Discretionary Budget

Mr Carrick asked the Minister for Social Development to detail the Northern Ireland Social Fund discretionary budget for 2002-03. (AQW 2974/01)

Mr Dodds: I am pleased to announce that the Social Fund gross discretionary budget for 2002/03 will be £51 million. £10.76 million will be allocated to grants; £40.14 million to loans and £0.1 million will be held as a contingency reserve. The new allocations represent an increase of £1.73 million over the initial gross budget set at April 2001.

The Community Care Grant (CCG) budget has been increased by £0.5 million to £10.76 million. This will provide more help to Customers, in particular families with children and the disabled.

The loans budget has been increased to £40.14 million, an increase of £1.23 million on the initial 2001/02 loans budget. To improve the fairness of the scheme, budgets will be allocated in a way that will over time achieve greater consistency of outcome for applicants wherever they live.

Details of the individual District budget allocations, together with a note explaining the basis on which they have been made, have been placed in the Northern Ireland Assembly Library today.

NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

Friday 26 April 2002

Written Answers to Questions

AGRICULTURE AND RURAL DEVELOPMENT

Taste of Ulster

Mr Kennedy asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to detail the support that she has given to the 'Taste of Ulster' initiative in the last 12 months.
(AQW 2811/01)

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development (Ms Rodgers): My Department's financial contribution to the Taste of Ulster in the last 12 months amounted to £3,787, paid in September 2001, in respect of the Taste of Ulster's participation at the Congress of European Agriculture, Waterfront Hall.

Taste of Ulster

Mr Kennedy asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to detail those events her Department will work with the 'Taste of Ulster' initiative in the next 12 months.
(AQW 2862/01)

Ms Rodgers: There are no requests from Taste of Ulster for my Department's participation in any initiative Taste of Ulster may be planning.

My Department has no plans at present to participate in events in association with the Taste of Ulster.

However should an appropriate opportunity arise in the future the expertise and potential contributions of Taste of Ulster will be considered.

Cull Scheme for Restricted Dairy Herds

Mr Bradley asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development what plans she has to introduce a cull scheme to address the financial burden imposed on the owners of restricted dairy herds who are forced to

rear livestock of no current or subsequent value; and to make a statement.
(AQW 2888/01)

Ms Rodgers: I have no plans to introduce a cull scheme for restricted dairy herds. Under current Tuberculosis legislation the Department can only pay compensation in respect of animals slaughtered by the Department because of the disease. The Government's position in relation to any other losses is that there is no provision or precedent for any such payments.

Review of Brucellosis Eradication Policy

Mr Beggs asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development when will the review of Brucellosis eradication policy be published.
(AQW 2889/01)

Ms Rodgers: The review team has just completed its draft report which is currently being considered by senior officials in the Department and elsewhere. I will then consider the final report before presenting it to the Assembly. I would hope to have this completed by the Summer but as you will appreciate some parts of the process are outside my control.

Taste of Ulster

Mrs Carson asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development what interim funding arrangements have been made for the 'Taste of Ulster' initiative pending the outcome of the 'Vision' report.
(AQW 2946/01)

Ms Rodgers: My Department's interim arrangement for funding in respect of Taste of Ulster is on the basis of a pre-agreed fee for commissioned projects.

The Royal Show 2002

Mrs Carson asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to detail (a) her Department's budget in relation to 'The Royal Show 2002'; and (b) how this money will be used to promote Northern Ireland at this show.
(AQW 2948/01)

Ms Rodgers: My Department does not intend to incur any expenditure in respect of this show.

Royal Show 2002

Mrs Carson asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to detail (a) her plans for the representation of Northern Ireland at the 'Royal Show 2002'; and (b) the promotional arrangements her Department has set in place for this important event.
(AQW 2949/01)

Ms Rodgers: There are no plans to facilitate representation of Northern Ireland at the Royal Show 2002; and promotional arrangements have been suspended for this event. I will keep the position of my Department's involvement at the Royal Show in future years under review.

IFEX 2002

Mrs Carson asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to detail (a) her Department's financial contribution to IFEX 2002; and (b) what other support has been given to this event. (AQW 2950/01)

Ms Rodgers: My Department is providing (a) a contribution of £3,000 to the inaugural IFEX Food Conference to be held on the occasion of IFEX 2002; and (b) an exhibit within IFEX 2002 at standard commercial rates and a contribution of a selection of local food produce to the IFEX Salon Culinaire at a cost not exceeding £250.

Credit Cards

Mr Dallat asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to detail (a) the number of credit cards in use in (i) her Department; (ii) Executive Agencies of her Department; (iii) NDPBs of her Department; and (iv) any other bodies funded by her Department; and (b) how much has been spent on each card in the financial year ended 31 March 2002. (AQW 2982/01)

Ms Rodgers:

Number of Credit Cards in use	
Department - Office Services	3 cards
Travel Claims Branch	3 cards
Private Office	2 cards
Executive Agencies	No cards
NDPBs ARINI	1 card
Livestock & Meat Commission	4 cards
North-South Implementation Body	
Loughs Agency of the FCILC	1 card
Spend FYE 31st March 2002	
(i) Office Services	
Card 1	£476,110
Card 2	£30,260
Card 3	£9,234
Travel Claims Branch	
Cards 1,2 & 3	£nil
Private Office	
Cards 1 & 2	£nil
(ii) Executive Agencies	£nil
(iii) NDPBs – ARINI	

Card 1	£1,331
Livestock & Meat Commission	
Card 1	£3,623
Card 2	£6,295
Card 3	£7,429
Card 4	£14,140
(iv) North-South Implementation Body	
Loughs Agency of the FCILC	
Card 1	£7,252**

** FYE Jan. to Dec. 2001

Equality Scheme

Mr Beggs asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development what is the criteria used to determine which groups or individuals are consulted as part of the equality impact assessment of any new proposals. (AQW 3044/01)

Ms Rodgers: Under the terms of DARD's Equality Scheme my Department is obliged to consult the full range of organisations representing those covered by Section 75. I appreciate that many of these groups may not be affected by many of my Department's policy proposals and I have asked my officials to explore with the Equality Commission better targeted consultation in order to reduce the burden on consultees.

CULTURE, ARTS AND LEISURE

Athletes with Disabilities: Funding

Mr Hussey asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure, pursuant to AQW 2491/01, to detail assistance, financial or other, offered to 'athletes with disabilities' who are not classified as 'talented' by the Sports Council for Northern Ireland. (AQW 2775/01)

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure (Mr McGimpsey): As I explained in my response to AQW 2776/01, the Sports Council affords a higher priority to applications for funding for projects which significantly increase participation for people with disabilities. It has been a condition of award for all Capital projects undertaken since 1995 (amounting to some £45m) that access for people with disabilities is included. In addition, in 2001/02, the Council provided support for disabled athletes who have not been accepted on to the Lottery Sports Fund's Talented Athlete programme, as follows:

- Sports Development Grant to Disability Sport Northern Ireland of £30k to cover a Development Officer's salary and associated programme costs;

- Equity Challenge Fund grants totalling £12,510 to individual organisations to enable them to develop their services to disabled participants;
- funding of £6,000 for Competition and Coaching to support
 - (a) the Northern Ireland Paraplegic Association team to go to the World Boxing Championships in Spain;
 - (b) the Irish Disabled Fly-fishing Association to go to the World disabled Fly-fishing championships in Wales;
 - (c) the Ulster Deaf Sports Council to go to the International Deaf Sports Association World Soccer Championships in Spain;
 - (d) training sessions for the Northern Ireland Blind Sports Association in bowling, cycling, sailing, sea angling, ten pin bowling, athletics, soccer and golf; and
 - (e) competitions for the Northern Ireland Blind Sports Association in bowling, athletics, sailing, sea angling and ten pin bowling.
- funding of £1,500 for improving core services, e.g.
 - (a) database development;
 - (b) a Disability Sports Information Factsheet;
 - (c) club promotional fliers for each DSNI member club;
 - (d) production of a DSNI newsletter
 - (e) development of a DSNI website;
 - (f) production of a calendar of events.

A further dimension of the Sports Council's assistance to sportsmen and women with disabilities is through the work of mainstream sports which have integrated disability sections, e.g. wheelchair basketball and wheelchair tennis.

Disability Related Groups: Funding

Mr Hussey asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure, pursuant to AQW 2491/01, to detail funding by the Sports Council for Northern Ireland for 'talented athletes with disabilities' over the past five years.

(AQW 2777/01)

Mr McGimpsey: Talented athletes with disabilities are required to compete, on an equal basis, with the able bodied for funding under the Sports Lottery Talented Athlete Programmes, which exist to assist Northern Ireland's leading sports people to compete successfully at international level. Details of awards to talented athletes with disabilities over the past five years are as follows:

1997/98 £	1998/99 £	1999/00 £	2000/01 £	2001/02 £
Nil	16,500	16,000	2,202	14,240

The Sports Council encourages all talented athletes, including those with disabilities, to apply for funding under the Talented Athlete programmes.

I would emphasise, however, that funding under these programmes is for performance at the highest level, and is only one of the sources of funding available from the Sports Council to disabled athletes. Details of additional funding opportunities for people with disabilities who do not come under the remit of the talented athlete programmes are included in my response to AQW 2775.

Public Libraries

Mrs I Robinson asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to (a) define the concept of electronic public libraries; and (b) outline any action he has taken to provide such services across each respective Education and Library Board. (AQW 2804/01)

Mr McGimpsey:

- (a) A public library provides access to knowledge, information and works of the imagination through a range of resources and services and is equally available to all members of the community regardless of race, nationality, age, gender, language, disability, economic and employment status and educational attainment. Electronic libraries will extend the range of services on offer and will combat the digital divide between information-rich and information-poor and extend lifelong learning opportunities to disadvantaged sectors society. It will also enable other traditional library services such as enquiries and inter-library loans to be developed electronically.
- (b) The Electronic Libraries Project for Northern Ireland aims to create within Northern Ireland a modernised public library service that will deliver cost-effective services to the community to meet present and future needs. It will link all public libraries to the National Grid for Learning (NGFL) and through that to Learn Direct. The contract between the service provider and the five education and library boards was signed in January 2002. Implementation of the new services is expected to start next month with all libraries and mobile libraries live by July 2003.

The project will provide personal computers for public use in all branch libraries; a computerised library management system to operate in all libraries including mobile libraries; an electronic libraries portal or gateway to a wide range of quality-assured information sources; modern IT systems for use by the staff in libraries; and a range of associated services, e.g. fax services.

Library users will have access to the same range of library services in every public library in Northern Ireland, regardless of size or location, including the

ability to request books held by any branch and have them delivered to their local library. They will have access to the world wide web and information on CD ROMs and have the use of office software such as word processing.

Targeting Social Need

Mr S Wilson asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to detail, in each of the past 5 years, (a) the percentage of his budget relating to Targeting Social Need; (b) the actual spend for TSN; (c) the number of people employed relating to TSN; (d) the number of people who benefited from these programmes; (e) the actual and practical benefits as a result of his TSN programmes; and (f) the tasks specifically undertaken and completed. (AQW 2896/01)

Mr McGimpsey: New TSN was initially developed under Direct Rule, reflecting Government priorities at that time. Following Devolution, the Northern Ireland Executive adopted New Targeting Social Need as its main policy for addressing social deprivation and it has been integrated into the Programme for Government. New TSN is a long-term approach to addressing problems of people in greatest social need. Its emphasis is on tackling unemployment and increasing employability, tackling inequalities in areas such as health, education and housing and the problems of disadvantaged areas and promoting social inclusion. The policy commits each Department to develop New TSN Action Plans. I attach a copy of a recent publication which sets out this Department's Action Plan for the period 2001 – 2003 as well as those actions achieved prior to March 2001.

New TSN is not a policy with its own budget, rather it is a theme which applies across all relevant spending programmes and seeks to maximise the impact of existing spending programmes in support of those who are in greatest social need. A research report on the public expenditure implications commissioned by the Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister entitled "Public Expenditure and New Targeting Social Need" was published in November 2001. This can be accessed on the internet at www.research.ofmdfmi.gov.uk. The main references to this Department are contained in pages 13 and 14 and I have attached copies of these for ease of reference.

Many of the Department's business areas contribute to TSN objectives, particularly in relation to providing access to facilities and services by disadvantaged groups, increasing job opportunities in disadvantaged areas and promoting social inclusion.

The Public Library Service contributes to New TSN objectives through ensuring access to disadvantaged people to education and learning facilities with a view to improving employability and increasing social and economic

participation. The Department estimates that about 5% (£970k) of public library resources have been "skewed" to areas of social disadvantage. Each of the education and library board areas has opened a centre of excellence providing adaptive technology for the disabled and visually impaired people to enable access to the internet and world wide web.

Also in the area of education the Public Record Office of Northern Ireland, as part of its outreach and learning strategy, is opening up contact with schools in areas of social disadvantage. The Department is also researching the demand for Irish and Ulster-Scots child care and pre-school education and minority ethnic language issues.

Investment in the performing and creative arts also contributes to New TSN objectives, although the precise allocation of resources is difficult to quantify. The Arts Council has estimated that it spent in the region of £900k (13% of grant-in-aid) in 2000-01 on TSN objectives and this figure rose to £1.3m (or 16% of grant-in-aid) in 2001-02. In addition to this some 32% of spend on the Awards for All scheme administered by the Community Fund in the period April 2001 – December 2001 was directed at the most disadvantaged local authority areas. The nature of the benefits derived from these programmes include increased levels of participation in the arts by communities in areas of social and economic deprivation, the development of arts skills in these communities and increased involvement of young people. Many of the projects are still ongoing but those completed include:

- Elmgrove Primary School, Beersbridge Road, Belfast
- NIHE – Art and Housing Research
- The Wedding Community Play project
- Compantas Amharcclianne Aisling Gear, Falls Road, Belfast.

Of the £450k budget for the Creativity Seed Fund in 2001-02, around £70k was directed to pilot projects that are designed to impact on marginalised young people – Northern Visions £30k, Synergy E Media £25k and Children's Express £15k.

Of the £412k grant-in-aid to the Northern Ireland Film Commission for 2001-02, £110k was directed to organisations (the Nerve Centre £80k and Northern Visions £30k) with a track record in working with people from disadvantaged groups/areas.

The Department has an ongoing commitment to invest at least 60% of its water recreation budget in disadvantaged areas. This investment is in public facilities designed to promote the recreational potential of inland waterways. Five projects were funded in disadvantaged areas in 2000/2001 and eight in 2001/2002. Furthermore the Department has recently been allocated £5m under the Water-Based Tourism Measure of Peace II for an Angling Development programme and a Water Recreation

programme. The Department is committed to allocating at least 60% of the funding from these programmes to areas of social need. These programmes should help to attract tourists and stimulate economic investment in waterway corridors.

The Department has no data on the number of beneficiaries or the numbers of people employed as a result of these programmes. Research work has been carried out to establish baseline data for future TSN monitoring purposes.

Safety Conditions at Road Racing

Mr Shannon asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure what funding was awarded to improve safety conditions at road-racing in 2001-02. (AQW 2900/01)

Mr McGimpsey: My Department made available £100k as a contribution towards the implementation of a programme of safety improvements in accordance with the recommendations made within the Road Race Task Force Report of December 2000.

To date my Department has paid £98.5K to the Motor Cycle Union and the other partners involved in the improvement programme i.e. Department of Regional Development, British Telecom and Northern Ireland Electricity. In addition the Sports Council for Northern Ireland have also made a contribution to enhancing road race safety, through the Sports Lottery Fund, of £13,250 for medical equipment and £10,250 for protective safety equipment.

EDUCATION

Expenditure per Secondary School Pupil

Mr Beggs asked the Minister of Education to detail the net expenditure per secondary school pupil by Education and Library Board area for (a) the Controlled Sector; and (b) the Maintained Sector in each of the last 5 years. (AQW 2389/01)

The Minister of Education (Mr M McGuinness): *[supplementary answer]:* In my answer to the above Assembly Question on 15th March 2002, I supplied you with information, provided by Education and Library Boards, on the net expenditure per pupil, by Board area, for controlled and maintained primary and secondary schools for each of the past five years.

A detailed check of the information against that contained in the corresponding tables contained in Section 8 of the recent report published by the Northern Ireland Audit Office "Indicators of Education Performance and Provision" has revealed a number of discrepancies in

the two sets of figures for the 1998-99 financial year. These differences arose from different interpretations by Boards of exactly what was required and also from slight variations in accounting practices. My officials have liaised closely with the Audit Office and the Education and Library Boards to resolve these issues and I attach tables containing revised information for AQW2389/01 and AQW2390/01, which can be fully reconciled with the revised figures in the Audit Office report.

I would like to apologise for any inconvenience caused by this late change to the figures. However I am sure that you will agree that it is essential that the two sets of figures are fully reconciled and have been compiled by the Boards on a completely consistent basis. The revised figures have also been adjusted for inflation, on a consistent basis with the NIAO figures to make comparison between different years easier.

The figures below have been provided by the Education and Library Boards and set out the net expenditure per primary school pupil over the past five years at 2000-01 prices.

Board	Sector	1996/97	1997/98	1998/99	1999/00	2000/01
BELB	Controlled	£1,980	£1,974	£2,064	£2,230	£2,234
	Maintained	£1,844	£1,830	£1,873	£2,014	£1,991
NEELB	Controlled	£1,778	£1,729	£1,801	£1,899	£2,001
	Maintained	£1,864	£1,835	£1,901	£2,025	£2,121
SEELB	Controlled	£1,868	£1,743	£1,828	£1,989	£2,294
	Maintained	£1,879	£1,808	£1,868	£2,066	£2,231
SELB	Controlled	£1,909	£1,895	£1,913	£2,122	£2,166
	Maintained	£1,845	£1,819	£1,898	£2,016	£2,087
WELB	Controlled	£1,963	£1,942	£1,948	£2,131	£2,291
	Maintained	£1,866	£1,861	£1,852	£1,958	£2,058

The figures below have been provided by the Education and Library Boards and set out the net expenditure per secondary school pupil over the past five years at 2000-01 prices.

Board	Sector	1996/97	1997/98	1998/99	1999/00	2000/01
BELB	Controlled	£3,340	£3,143	£3,127	£3,361	£3,620
	Maintained	£3,096	£3,016	£2,987	£3,028	£3,224
NEELB	Controlled	£2,921	£2,902	£2,889	£3,017	£3,090
	Maintained	£2,976	£2,955	£2,982	£3,082	£3,389
SEELB	Controlled	£3,100	£2,821	£2,870	£3,003	£3,217
	Maintained	£2,839	£2,732	£2,751	£3,060	£3,149
SELB	Controlled	£2,727	£2,710	£2,750	£3,042	£3,188
	Maintained	£2,823	£2,767	£2,798	£3,016	£3,066
WELB	Controlled	£3,282	£3,225	£3,023	£3,215	£3,230
	Maintained	£2,902	£2,885	£2,839	£2,985	£3,254

Expenditure per Primary School Pupil

Mr Beggs asked the Minister of Education to detail the net expenditure per primary school pupil by Education and Library Board area for (a) the Controlled Sector; and (b) the Maintained Sector, in each of the past five years. (AQW 2390/01)

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Nursery Schools

Mr S Wilson asked the Minister of Education to list, by Board area, (a) the number of nursery schools; (b) the name of these schools; (c) the number of places available in each of these schools; and (d) the number of applications received for each of these schools in each of the past 5 years. (AQW 2805/01)

Mr M McGuinness: The number of nursery schools in each Board is as follows:

Belfast Board	34 nursery schools
Western Board	12 nursery schools
North – Eastern Board	17 nursery schools
South – Eastern Board	18 nursery schools
Southern Board	18 nursery schools
Total	99 Nursery Schools

The data requested is only available for the period since the statutory open enrolment arrangements in nursery schools were introduced in the 1999-2000 school year. As the information requested is extensive, I will arrange to have it placed in the Assembly Library. I enclose a copy for your personal use.

The figures include multiple applications from parents applying to more than one nursery school and therefore do not correlate directly to the number of children seeking a nursery school place.

School Capital Building Programme

Mr Dalton asked the Minister of Education to detail the implementation plans for the four South Antrim schools included in the recently announced school capital building programme; and to make a statement. (AQW 2840/01)

Mr M McGuinness: The North-Eastern Education and Library Board is taking forward the planning of the three controlled schools with a view to work starting at Loanends Primary School in March 2003, Crumlin High School in July 2002, and Hillcroft Special School in September 2003. The planning of Millquarter Primary School is being taken forward by the school trustees with a view to work starting in March 2003.

Speech or Language Difficulties

Mrs I Robinson asked the Minister of Education to detail the number of primary school-age children who have a primary speech or language difficulty.

(AQW 2890/01)

Mr M McGuinness: It is not possible from the data available to identify pupils' primary disability but the number of primary school-age children who have a statement of special educational needs relating to speech or language difficulties is as follows:

Primary Schools	879
Special Schools	1,372
Total	2,251

Targeting Social Need

Mr S Wilson asked the Minister of Education to detail, in each of the past 5 years, (a) the percentage of his budget relating to Targeting Social Need; (b) the actual spend for TSN; (c) the number of people employed relating to TSN; (d) the number of people who benefited from these programmes; (e) the actual and practical benefits as a result of his TSN programmes; and (f) the tasks specifically undertaken and completed.

(AQW 2892/01)

Mr M McGuinness: My Department in its current form came into being in December 1999, and the Executive adopted New TSN in June 2000, so I am answering this question in respect of New TSN and the years 2000-01 and 2001-02.

(a)-(b) New TSN is not a policy with its own budget, but a theme which runs through spending programmes. Table 3 of the report Public Expenditure and New Targeting Social Need (OFMDFM), January 2002) gives a breakdown of the DE 2001-02 budget, which indicates that most of this budget is relevant to New TSN to a greater or lesser degree. (This was also the position in 2000/01.) Table 14 of that report provides an analysis of skewing actions under New TSN.

(c) My Department in January 2001 set up an Equality Rights and Social Inclusion Unit to take a more focussed approach at a strategic level to the promotion of Equality and NTSN. There are currently 8

staff within this Unit. However, NTSN Objectives are distributed throughout the Department's core business areas and as such all staff in the Department have an impact on progressing NTSN.

(d) It is not possible to identify all the direct beneficiaries of highly-New-TSN-relevant expenditure or skewing, and even where it is there would be double-counting between programmes.

(e)-(f) I am satisfied that the skewing of resources under New TSN has contributed to an improvement in educational standards. The New TSN Annual Report 2001 (OFMDFM) highlights specific examples of progress with actions taken during the period January 2000- March 2001. In addition, an initial evaluation of New TSN is to be conducted later this year, and will include an assessment of the resultant benefits.

Speech or Language Difficulties

Mrs I Robinson asked the Minister of Education to detail the number of children entering primary school education who have speech and language delays.

(AQW 2893/01)

Mr M McGuinness: The number of 4 year olds with a statement of special educational needs relating to speech or language difficulties is as follows:

Primary Schools	123
Special Schools	202
Total	325

Jaffe Centre, Belfast

Mr B Hutchinson asked the Minister of Education what are his plans for dealing with pupils with emotional and behavioural difficulties, in light of the closure of the Jaffe Centre in Belfast.

(AQW 2897/01)

Mr M McGuinness: Since the closure of the Jaffe Centre as a school for children with emotional and behavioural difficulties (it is now known as the Loughshore Educational Resource Centre), the Belfast Education and Library Board has based there some 20 teachers who operate its Education Otherwise Than At School (EOTAS) provision. This aims to meet the needs of these, and other, children with behavioural and other difficulties in a more meaningful and flexible manner.

From the Centre approximately 190 children are supported under EOTAS, 20-25 of whom are under the DISC (Dolphin Initiative for Secondary Children) scheme and 12-18 of whom are under the STEP project.

Six children are currently educated in the Centre on full-time EOTAS provision, with a further two groups of

6 receiving education in specific subject areas such as Science, Home Economics and IT.

The remaining children are educated in small local groups, in libraries, youth centres etc.

Alternative Education Provision

Mr B Hutchinson asked the Minister of Education what plans he has to support the development of community-based alternative education projects.

(AQW 2898/01)

Mr M McGuinness: All resources to support alternative education provision are allocated to the Education and Library Boards who determine how these resources will be used to meet the needs of young people in their areas. This can include the purchase of places in community based alternative education projects on an agreed basis. An additional 100 places have been funded since September 2001 with resources allocated from the Executive Programme Children's Fund.

Additional Resources: North and West Belfast

Mr B Hutchinson asked the Minister of Education if he has any plans to offer extra resources to schools in North and West Belfast to assist in dealing with (i) behavioural problems; (ii) truancy; (iii) school refusal; and (iv) pupil counselling.

(AQW 2899/01)

Mr M McGuinness: Additional resources have been allocated to schools in North and West Belfast as part of the North Belfast Support Package last December. The education element of this Package has made some £2.9m available for improved physical security at schools, counselling for staff and pupils and additional youth provision, and this includes an additional £250,000 to the Belfast Education and Library Board's Behaviour Support team to provide an additional three teachers for the remainder of this academic year and two further academic years to address the needs in North Belfast.

This is in addition to the resources which have been allocated to the Belfast Board (and the other Boards) under the Behaviour Strategy, the Children Order or the EPF Children's Fund to address poor behaviour, non attendance and pupils' counselling support; in general, it is for the Boards to determine how these specific resources should be targeted.

In addition some 11 schools in the area also receive extra funding and professional support through the Schools Support Programme.

Use of Credit Cards

Mr Dallat asked the Minister of Education to detail (a) the number of credit cards in use in (i) his Department;

(ii) Executive Agencies of his Department; (iii) NDPBs of his Department; and (iv) any other bodies funded by his Department; and (b) how much has been spent on each card in the financial year ended 31 March 2002.

(AQW 2953/01)

Mr M McGuinness: My Department currently has two corporate credit cards in operation. Several NPDBs/ sponsored bodies are also presently using corporate credit cards. Details of the number of cards used and expenditure incurred in the financial year ended 31 March 2002 are set out below.

DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION

Cardholder	Total Spend in Year Ended 31 March 2002
Minister/Private Secretary	£5,683
Permanent Secretary	£117

DPBS/SPONSORED BODIES

Organisation	Cards in Use	Total Spend in Year Ended 31 March 2002
NEELB	1	£5,858
SELB	11	£10,751
BELB	0	-
WELB	0	-
SEELB	0	-
Staff Commission	0	-
CCEA	1	Nil
CCMS	0	-
NICIE	2	£1,350
Youth Council	6	£6,771

In addition, my Department has put into effect, from 15 April 2002, use of the Government Procurement Card for the purchases of stationery supplies. To date, no costs have been incurred.

Low Income Families

Mr S Wilson asked the Minister of Education to detail (a) the origin of the statement '8% of pupils in grammar schools are from low income families' [press release of 26 March 2002]; and (b) the research upon which this figure is based.

(AQW 2954/01)

Mr M McGuinness: The 8% figure refers to the proportion of children enrolled at grammar schools who are entitled to free school meals. The source of the figure is the 2000-01 school census.

Teacher's Salaries

Mr Beggs asked the Minister of Education to detail, by Board area, the average salary for teachers employed in the (a) Nursery School sector; (b) Primary School

sector; (c) Secondary School sector; and (d) Grammar School sector. (AQW 2968/01)

Mr M McGuinness: The average salaries (excluding employers' costs) that were paid to teachers in the sectors requested during September 2001 were as follows:

	BELB £	NEELB £	SEELB £	SELB £	WELB £	All ELBs £
(a) Nursery	29,700	28,801	30,635	30,981	27,850	29,593
(b) Primary	26,160	26,958	26,512	26,470	27,439	26,708
(c) Secondary	26,752	27,036	26,462	27,007	26,979	26,847
(d) Grammar	27,353	27,284	26,757	27,368	27,571	27,267

As Voluntary Grammar Schools are responsible for their own payrolls, only Controlled Grammar Schools are included in row (d). The higher average salary costs in the nursery school sector result from the fact that these schools generally have small numbers of teaching staff and are headed by a principal.

These average salary figures are based on the September 2001 payroll and do not take account of arrears of salary increases resulting from the threshold assessment process which were paid to the relevant teachers in the period between October 2001 to 31 March 2002, as these would artificially increase the figures.

Department's Estate

Mr Hussey asked the Minister of Education to detail those parts of his Department's estate not used for departmental or related ancillary purposes. (AQW 2996/01)

Mr M McGuinness: My Department's estate does not extend beyond the General Office Estate which is the responsibility of the Department of Finance and Personnel.

Special Educational Needs

Mr M Robinson asked the Minister of Education how he plans to improve the assessment and provision of education services for young people with special educational needs. (AQW 3015/01)

Mr M McGuinness: I am planning to make a number of improvements for the assessment and provision for services for children with Special Educational Needs. My plans include:

- legislation which will give children with special educational needs provision which is at least equal to that contained in the Special Education Needs and Disability Act 2001, which places a greater emphasis on inclusive education in a mainstream setting;

- with the Department of Education and Science in Dublin, the creation of an all-Ireland Centre of Excellence for the education of children and young people with Autistic Spectrum Disorders (ASD);
- the development of CD-Roms for teachers, and videos for parents, of children with ASD and dyslexia;
- the imminent publication of Task Groups Reports on Autism and Dyslexia, the recommendations of which I believe will set the agenda for our work in these fields for the foreseeable future;
- the installation of state-of-the-art communications technology for children with severely limited motor control (Camera Mouse);
- through the Regional Strategy Group (RSG), the development of consistent assessment and diagnostic criteria for the identification of children with special educational needs, particularly ASD and dyslexia, which will ensure that all children with similar needs have access to similar levels of provision;
- also through RSG, guidance on the inclusion of children with special educational needs in mainstream education;
- guidance to schools, agreed by teachers' unions, on helping children who have particular medical needs.

Burns Report

Mr K Robinson asked the Minister of Education to detail (a) the number and names of groups he has met in relation to the consultation process for the Burns Report; (b) the number and names of groups and individuals he has arranged to meet; and (c) his plans to meet with groups and individuals who represent a wide range of views in connection with the Burns Report.

(AQW 3043/01)

Mr M McGuinness: I am engaged in a series of meetings with key partners to listen to their views and to help to stimulate and inform a constructive debate on the issues. Nine meetings have already taken place with the following:

- Vice-Chancellors of the local universities
- Principals of Further Education Colleges
- Progressive Unionist Party
- Chief Executives of the Education and Library Boards
- Belfast Partnerships
- Council for Catholic Maintained Schools
- Five main Teacher Unions
- Northern Ireland Council for Voluntary Action
- Northern Ireland Council for Integrated Education

Further meetings have been arranged with the Governing Bodies Association, the Catholic Heads Association, the Secondary Heads Association, the Minister for Employ-

ment and Learning, the Transferor Churches, primary school principals, the Association of Head-teachers in Secondary Schools and the National Association of Educational Inspectors, Advisers and Consultants.

I also intend to meet with Comhairle na Gaelscolaíochta and the Council for Curriculum, Examinations and Assessment.

I have also written to all the political parties to arrange meetings over the coming weeks.

Capital Funding Programme

Mrs E Bell asked the Minister of Education if he will consider capital funding for schools for children with special educational needs outside the capital programme for other educational establishments. (AQO 1157/01)

Mr M McGuinness: I am content that the present arrangements for the capital funding of special schools have due regard to the needs of children in this sector. My Department tries to include at least one special school in its capital programme each year and, since 1990, eighteen special schools - representing over 37% of special schools - have benefited under these arrangements. This is a much higher proportion than for any other school sector and reflects the educational need. Five new special schools were included in the capital programmes I announced over the last three years - Donard in 2000, Strabane and Clifton in 2001, and Hillcroft and Tor Bank this year.

I will of course continue to press for additional capital resources at every opportunity.

Human Rights Commission

Mr C Murphy asked the Minister of Education to outline the human rights implications for academic selection; and to make a statement. (AQO 1195/01)

Mr M McGuinness: I am aware that the Human Rights Commission has expressed concerns about:

- the 11-plus test and its effect on the primary curriculum and a child's right to an effective education;
- the problems in ensuring equality of opportunity in the primary and post-primary system;
- admissions policies to post-primary schools which may discriminate on certain grounds

and that it will be addressing these issues in its response to the current consultative process on the Burns Report. My own view is that the current arrangements are unfair, particularly for disadvantaged families and new arrangements must address this.

Post-Primary Provision

Mr McElduff asked the Minister of Education what progress has been made on the consultation on post-primary provision. (AQO 1178/01)

Mr M McGuinness: Consultation is ongoing and will last until 28 June. My Department is using a variety of methods to make sure that everyone has the opportunity to contribute to this debate. A detailed response booklet will issue at the end of this month to schools, further education colleges, community groups and training organisations to facilitate consideration of the key issues and to help structure responses. In late May my Department will be issuing a Household Response Form to every household giving information about the review and seeking the views of the public on the key issues. A household survey is planned to gather more in-depth views from the public and we are also considering how best to get the views of young people.

A summary analysis of the responses received will be published around the end of September.

I am currently engaged in a series of meetings involving the key players in our education system. I am keen to listen to suggestions, build consensus and stimulate discussion of the issues during the consultation period. I must emphasise that no decisions on future arrangements have been taken. I want to hear views on the Burns proposals, modifications to those proposals or alternative arrangements.

Classroom 2000 Scheme

Mr McNamee asked the Minister of Education to detail (a) the number of primary schools which have been equipped and connected under the Classroom 2000 Scheme; and (b) the date this process will be completed. (AQO 1194/01)

Mr M McGuinness: 316 primary schools will be equipped with local infrastructure and connected to the Internet under the Classroom 2000 Scheme by the end of April 2002. The target for completion of all primary schools is December 2002.

Communities in Schools Pilot Project

Mr McHugh asked the Minister of Education to detail (a) the impact to date of the 'Communities in Schools initiative'; and (b) if he intends to extend this initiative to other schools suffering high levels of disadvantage. (AQO 1193/01)

Mr M McGuinness: The Communities in Schools (CIS) Pilot Project, which involves six post-primary schools in Belfast, is seeking to implement and evaluate the benefits of CIS in these schools. The evaluation of the pilot is expected to be completed in Summer 2003;

some initial evaluation findings are expected in Summer 2002. I would wish to consider the evaluation findings before making any decisions on the way forward.

Teachers' Salaries and Conditions

Mr M Murphy asked the Minister of Education if he plans to initiate an inquiry into teachers' pay and conditions. (AQO 1179/01)

Mr M McGuinness: I met the Chairman and representatives of both sides of the Teachers' Salaries and Conditions of Service Committee (Schools) on Thursday 18 April to discuss their agreed terms of reference and how an inquiry might be taken forward.

I am meeting the chairman of the Education Committee tomorrow and I expect to make an announcement very soon after that.

Burns Review

Mr O'Neill asked the Minister of Education to outline the timescale for the implementation of any new legislation as a result of the Burns Review. (AQO 1172/01)

Mr M McGuinness: The need for new legislation and the timescale for implementing it cannot be determined until decisions are taken on the review of post-primary education. No decisions will be made until I have considered the responses to the consultation process.

Educational Psychologists

Ms Lewsley asked the Minister of Education how many Educational Psychologists are currently employed in each Board area. (AQO 1175/01)

Mr M McGuinness: I refer to the answer given in response to AQW 1650/01 on the same subject. The number of educational psychologists employed in each Education and Library Board area in January 2002 was as follows:

Board	Full-Time	Part-time
Belfast	16	13
Western	22	4
North eastern	20	4
South-Eastern	18	9
Southern	22	8

EMPLOYMENT AND LEARNING

TSN Programme

Mr S Wilson asked the Minister for Employment and Learning to detail, in each of the past five years, (a) the

percentage of her budget relating to Targeting Social Need; (b) the actual spend for TSN; (c) the number of people employed relating to TSN; (d) the number of people who benefited from these programmes; (e) the actual and practical benefits as a result of her TSN programmes; and (f) the tasks specifically undertaken and completed. (AQW 2901/01)

The Minister for Employment and Learning (Ms Hanna): New Targeting Social Need is the Executive's main policy for addressing social deprivation and has been integrated into the Programme for Government. The New TSN policy is a theme which applies to all relevant programmes and services provided by all Departments, and operates by using more of our existing resources to benefit people in greatest objective social need.

TSN is not a discrete policy with its own budget. Rather it is a theme that runs through all relevant spending programmes across all Northern Ireland departments. It was for this reason that, in Spring 1999, as a necessary part of the development of New TSN, PriceWaterhouseCoopers were commissioned to survey all programmes, services and schemes across all NI Departments to locate each on a "spectrum of applicability", i.e. to state in broad terms the degree of relevance of New TSN to each.

Further research commissioned by OFMDFM in 2001, which measured and assessed the relevance of all resources across Public Expenditure in Northern Ireland towards New TSN, found that less than 1% of the DEL's budget had no relevance to TSN.

The New TSN policy commits each NI Department and the NIO to develop Action Plans setting out their proposals for implementing New TSN over the three-year period beginning on 1 January 2000. This Department has been working hard to implement our New TSN Action Plan and a number of significant achievements have been made particularly in relation to reducing unemployment and increasing employability.

Given the long-term aspects of the New TSN policy, the Executive ensured that evaluation was built into the policy. This commitment is made explicit in the Programme for Government and the initial evaluation is currently in train and first outcomes planned for the end of 2002. The aim of this interim evaluation is to assess the way in which New TSN is being implemented and to examine its impact with a view to informing future thinking on the policy.

My Department will contribute to the evaluation which will draw on external experts to ensure objectivity. Ministers will consider the outcomes of this first comprehensive evaluation of the policy to help inform future thinking on New TSN. In addition, all final reports from the evaluation of New TSN will be made publicly accessible.

Shadow Trust Organisation: South Belfast

Ms McWilliams asked the Minister for Employment and Learning to outline (a) why the Shadow Trust Organisation in South Belfast did not receive funding to allow training to continue with people who have mental health problems; and (b) what support will they receive in its absence. (AQW 2932/01)

Ms Hanna: Shadow Trust applied for European Social Fund assistance from the Programme for Building Sustainable Prosperity. There was extreme competition for the substantial but finite £18.3m available for the next two years with the Department receiving 139 applications seeking £33m for the same period. A total of 57 projects were successful. My Department is unable to provide funding to offset the loss of European Funding.

ENTERPRISE, TRADE AND INVESTMENT

Taste of Ulster

Mr Kennedy asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to outline any future funding arrangements which have been made available for the 'Taste of Ulster' initiative. (AQW 2807/01)

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment (Sir Reg Empey): No future funding arrangements have yet been put in place. The Board of the Northern Ireland Tourist Board (NITB) will only be able to consider further financial support to Taste of Ulster when the overall funding of Taste of Ulster is more evident.

The Board of NITB has made a payment of £10,000 in January 2002 to assist Taste of Ulster to continue their activities until end March 2002.

Taste of Ulster

Mr Kennedy asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to outline (a) if the 'Taste of Ulster' guide will continue to be published on an annual basis; and (b) if it will be available free of charge at all entry points into Northern Ireland. (AQW 2808/01)

Sir Reg Empey: The Taste of Ulster guide will be produced by June 2002 with 60,000 copies to be produced. Funding for the production of the guide in future years has not been agreed.

I understand from Taste of Ulster that the latest guide will be available on the same basis as before, including free distribution at entry points.

Taste of Ulster

Mr Kennedy asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment if the 'Taste of Ulster' guide will continue to fulfil its role in benchmarking quality eating establishments through its independent inspection scheme. (AQW 2809/01)

Sir Reg Empey: Inspections to allow the compilation and issue of the new guide (June 2002) have now been completed.

The capability of Taste of Ulster to continue to fulfil its current role will depend on appropriate funding being available. Discussions are ongoing with Taste of Ulster regarding possible future funding.

Taste of Ulster

Mr Kennedy asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to detail the events/activities in which 'Taste of Ulster' will be involved in the next 12 months. (AQW 2810/01)

Sir Reg Empey: Taste of Ulster is planning to be involved in the European Food Fair in Brussels in late April/May. NITB is not aware of any plans to participate in any other events over the next 12 months as this would be dependent on future funding.

Windfarm: Tunes Plateau Site

Mr McClarty asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to outline the potential benefits of the proposed offshore wind farm at Portstewart in relation to (a) tourism; (b) the economy; (c) energy directives; and (d) global expertise in renewable energy. (AQW 2843/01)

Sir Reg Empey: It is not yet clear if a competent developer will come forward to acquire a lease to develop a windfarm on the Tunes Plateau site. Firm assessments of the benefits and impacts which the proposed project may present can only be undertaken once a detailed project plan is agreed with a developer. The proposed project represents a potential £200m investment in marine and electrical engineering and it is envisaged that the majority of steel structural, and foundational works for the project could be carried out in Northern Ireland. The site characteristics will require any future developer to operate at the upper limit of current technical capability and this experience would demonstrate the capability of Northern Ireland in a major offshore development. Northern Ireland is required to contribute to the UK target on renewable energy which was set to meet EU commitments. This proposed project will offer a major boost to any efforts to contribute as much as is practicable to those targets in a manner which meets the requirements of EU Directive 2001/77/EC.

Experience in other parts of Europe has already shown that an engineering project of this nature often attracts significant positive interest from visitors to the area surrounding the windfarm. It will not be possible to fully assess the potential impact of this project on tourism until a detailed project plan has been submitted by a developer, although clearly it will be important to address any negative aspects as they become known.

Windfarm Portstewart

Mr McClarty asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment how he intends to alleviate community fears over the proposed offshore wind farm at Portstewart with specific regard to (a) environmental exploitation; (b) coastal zone impact; (c) the proximity to a designated area of outstanding natural beauty; and (d) house prices in northern coastal locations. (AQW 2844/01)

Sir Reg Empey: If this proposed project does eventually proceed any developer will be required to complete a full assessment of the impact which the windfarm will potentially have on the environment (as required by the Food & Environmental Protection Act). This process will specifically address concerns over the marine ecology and ensure that any negative impact identified is responsibly dealt with. The onshore elements of the project will be covered by planning legislation and will be subjected to the same rigorous analysis and public scrutiny as any other development plan of this size and importance. It is my intention to ensure that the local community at all levels is kept fully informed of plans as they become clear. Officials in my Department and any developer will agree a consultation plan covering key stages of the project as soon as a developer declares an interest in the lease of the site. There is no information on how any project of this kind would impact on house prices.

Counterfeit Goods

Mr Gibson asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment what progress he has made in combating trade in counterfeit goods. (AQW 2845/01)

Sir Reg Empey: My Department's Trading Standards Service, (TSS), is active in enforcing the provisions of the Trade Marks Act 1994 and the Trade Descriptions Act 1968. TSS activities are concentrated on high street retailers where consumers would not expect to find counterfeit goods for sale. In the past six months TSS officers have carried out seizures of counterfeit goods (some 2100 articles) at 22 premises. As a result, several files are being prepared for submission to the Department of the Director of Public Prosecutions with a recommendation to institute legal proceedings against the alleged offenders.

As TSS is not the only organisation involved in combating trade in counterfeit goods, on 3 April 2002, it

organised and hosted an event where several leading trade mark proprietors demonstrated methods for identifying counterfeit goods to a number of Northern Ireland's enforcement agencies. TSS will continue to be proactive in this area of work.

Senior officials from my Department participate in an inter-departmental group set up under the Organised Crime Task Force with the aim of co-ordinating the work being done in departments on tackling fraud. My officials will have a particular focus on combating trade in counterfeit goods.

Windfarm Portstewart

Mr McClarty asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to detail (a) the potential benefits to the Northern Ireland energy consumer of the proposed offshore wind farm at Portstewart; and (b) the timetable for implementation of the proposed scheme. (AQW 2853/01)

Sir Reg Empey: Northern Ireland is totally dependent upon imported fuels for the generation of electricity. The major benefits of renewable and sustainable energy rest in the development and use of a natural, environmentally friendly, indigenous resource which strengthens the future resilience of the energy system in Northern Ireland and offers greater choice to the consumer. The implementation timetable included in the agreement for lease issued by Crown Estates during the tender process requires a developer to install 50 megawatts (approximately 15 turbines) in each of three summer seasons commencing 2005.

Motor Vehicle Insurance

Mrs I Robinson asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to detail the number of insurance companies currently offering motor vehicle insurance to drivers in Northern Ireland. (AQW 2854/01)

Sir Reg Empey: It is not possible to provide definitive estimates of the number of insurance companies currently offering motor vehicle insurance to drivers in Northern Ireland for two key reasons. Firstly, company information is collected on the basis of the Standard Industrial Classification (1992) and a separate code for motor insurance does not exist. Secondly, many companies based outside NI (and indeed outside the UK) will offer insurance to NI drivers and information on these companies is not available.

However, the latest figures from the September 1999 Census of Employment showed that there were 81 businesses with employees in Northern Ireland in the industrial category 'Insurance and pension funding, except compulsory social security' and a further 181 businesses in 'Activities auxiliary to insurance and pension funding'.

NITB Chairman

Mr Dallat asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment if the Chairman of the Northern Ireland Tourist Board, Mr Roy Bailie, has had his contract extended, and if so, on what basis. (AQW 2863/01)

Sir Reg Empey: Mr Bailie's term of office as Chairman of NITB was extended for six months at the end of his first term from 1 July 1999 to 31 December 1999. This was to ensure that the NITB remained at full strength during the transitional period from direct rule to devolution and was in line with the general policy of appointments to public bodies at that time. Mr Bailie was subsequently reappointed for a second three-year term of office expiring on 31/12/02. The extension and reappointment were made in line with Office of the Commissioner for Public Appointments (OCPA) Guidelines.

Targeting Social Need

Mr S Wilson asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to detail, in each of the past 5 years, (a) the percentage of his budget relating to Targeting Social Need; (b) the actual spend for TSN; (c) the number of people employed relating to TSN; (d) the number of people who benefited from these programmes; (e) the actual and practical benefits as a result of his TSN programmes; and (f) the tasks specifically undertaken and completed. (AQW 2902/01)

Sir Reg Empey: New TSN was initially developed under direct rule. Following the devolution and the restructuring of the six Northern Ireland Departments into the present eleven Departments, New TSN was formally adopted by the Executive in June 2000. At that time, I assumed full responsibility for the effective implementation of the policy within DETI and the following information therefore relates to the period from 2000 onwards.

New TSN Activity

DETI's New TSN Action Plan sets out the Department's New TSN objectives and targets for the three-year period beginning on 1 January 2000. The Plan covers a wide range of activity aimed at effectively targeting people and areas in greatest need but with a particular focus on reducing unemployment and increasing employment opportunities for the unemployed and long-term unemployed.

As you will be aware, New TSN is not a policy with a specific budget but rather a theme that runs through all relevant spending programmes, seeking to ensure that we make best use of existing resources and maximise the impact of existing spending programmes in support of those who are in greatest objective social need. Moreover, New TSN is not only about targeting resources, but also about targeting efforts and seeking to deliver

programmes and services in ways which are more helpful to those in need.

On this basis, it is impossible to meaningfully reduce New TSN activity to a single expenditure figure. However, in order to provide some illustration of the impact which New TSN has had on expenditure in disadvantaged areas, the following table details monies which DETI and its agencies have allocated to companies in New TSN areas during the period 2000-01 to 2001-02:

Business Area	Monies Committed 2000/01	Jobs Created 2000/01	Monies Committed 2001/02	Jobs Created 2001/02
IDB	£32,300,000	4,559 (promoted)	Not yet available	Not yet available
LEDU	£16,978,240	659*	£17,901,449	Not yet available
IRTU	£9,059,554	-	£8,777,476	-
NITB	£1,613,779	-	£784,937	-
Information Age Unit	£1,271,094	17	£1,287,970	116

* Figure based on an annual survey of LEDU client companies and relates to the net change in employment within client base over the calendar year.

As part of its commitment to New TSN, DETI has also introduced new monitoring arrangements to increase our knowledge of the impact of government assistance to companies on the labour market and, in particular, on the unemployed. The initial findings are due to be published within the next month or two.

Evaluation of New TSN

In line with the commitment made in the Programme for Government, a major OFMDFM-led evaluation of the initial impact of new TSN policy across all Departments is currently in train with the first outcomes due by the end of 2002. DETI will, of course, contribute fully to the evaluation, drawing on external experts to ensure objectivity.

Progress to Date

In the meantime, DETI's New TSN Action Plan for the period April 2001 – March 2003, (published on 21 March 2002) contains details on progress made towards all of the Department's New TSN objectives and targets for the period up to 31 March 2001 as well as information on our updated objectives and targets for 2001-2003. A further progress report is currently being prepared and will be published later this year.

Aerospace Industry

Mr Gibson asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment what steps he is taking to encourage research and development in the aerospace industry. (AQW 2903/01)

Sir Reg Empey: My Department recognises the importance of research and development across all industry in Northern Ireland. Similarly, innovation will be a keynote for Invest Northern Ireland and this will be manifest in the promotion of innovation in all its aspects, the stimulation of higher levels of R&D and improvements in knowledge transfer.

My Department, previously through IRTU and now through Invest NI, promotes a range of programmes aimed at supporting and enhancing local research and development capability and capacity.

Since 1995 support of £2.5 million has been provided to support a range of research projects and capability building in the aerospace sector.

I understand that the Northern Ireland Aerospace Consortium, which works for the mutual benefit of over 95% of Northern Ireland's Aerospace capability, is continuing to liaise with Invest NI on a range of R&D initiatives in the aerospace sector.

Knowledge Transfer

Mr Gibson asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment what steps he is taking to promote 'knowledge transfer' between the university sector and industry. (AQW 2905/01)

Sir Reg Empey: The Department has actively promoted 'knowledge transfer' between the universities and industry, with the goal of strengthening the technology base of businesses enabling them to become more competitive at an international level.

'Knowledge transfer' has been enhanced through a range of measures.

Major infrastructural improvements, including the current Centres of Excellence programme and preceding Technology Development Programme, continue to establish industrially focussed, university research centres which enhance the competitiveness of both established and emerging businesses. This significant and ongoing investment will further develop Northern Ireland's ability to carry out research aimed at wealth creation, cross-sectoral collaboration and technology transfer.

The Department has been involved in the creation of Business Incubator facilities. Established incubator units include those at the University of Ulster's Magee and Coleraine campuses with well-developed plans for further facilities.

The Networking Programme encourages both industrialists and academics to access knowledge, capability and international contacts by assisting with travel costs. Since 1995 the programme has assisted approximately 700 visits.

The START programme aims to promote the transfer of knowledge and technology from the university research base to local industry and since 1995 £10.6 million has been provided to 37 projects.

TCS (formerly known as Teaching Company Scheme) supports partnerships between companies and universities for their mutual benefit. Northern Ireland currently has 54 active programmes.

The Department has also part funded the Manufacturing Technology Partnership which draws upon the expertise of the Universities to provide advice and support for Small and Medium Enterprises (SMEs).

Shipbuilding

Mr Gibson asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment if he will make a statement on the future of shipbuilding in Northern Ireland. (AQW 2906/01)

Sir Reg Empey: Harland and Wolff have submitted a draft business plan to restructure its shipbuilding and engineering activities to reflect current market circumstances. The plan revolves around the sale of existing land which is surplus to future shipbuilding requirements in order to raise the funds necessary to carry through the restructuring proposals. The land issue is primarily a matter for the Department for Regional Development. Discussions are continuing between the relevant parties in order to establish an agreement which will produce an outcome which is in the best interests of the people of Northern Ireland.

Unsolicited Faxes

Mr Gibson asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment what research has been undertaken on systems to allow people to opt out of receiving unsolicited faxes; and to make a statement. (AQW 2933/01)

Sir Reg Empey: As far as I have been able to establish there is no current technology capable of distinguishing between faxes which an individual or corporate body would wish to receive and those which they would not.

However, it is illegal, under the Telecommunications (Data Protection and Privacy) (Direct Marketing) Regulations 1998, for a company to send to an individual or a corporate body, faxes conveying material for direct marketing purposes, if the individual or corporate body has notified that company that they do not wish to receive such material. They can register with the Direct Marketing Association's Fax Preference Services (telephone: 0845-0700-702) to stop companies sending them unsolicited faxes.

Additionally, these Regulations make it illegal for a company to send faxed material for direct marketing

purposes to an individual, unless that individual consents to the receipt of such material.

If problems persist after registering with the Fax Preference Services, complaints should be referred to the Information Commissioner's Office at Wycliffe House, Water Lane, Wilmslow, Cheshire SK9 5AF (telephone: 01625-545745).

Under the Northern Ireland Act 1998, telecommunications is a reserved matter (paragraph 29 of Schedule 3) and therefore, falls outside the responsibility of the Assembly. I will, nonetheless, keep the situation surrounding unsolicited faxes under review.

Consumer Protection

Mr Gibson asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment what steps he is taking to improve consumer protection. (AQW 2934/01)

Sir Reg Empey: The Northern Ireland Executive, in its Programme for Government, has given a commitment to develop and publish a Consumer Strategy for Northern Ireland. On 7 March I issued, for consultation, a draft Consumer Strategy for Northern Ireland with a closing date for responses of 10 May 2002.

The Consumer Strategy is designed, in particular, to deliver, better educated consumers, a consumer protection framework that deals effectively with unfair trading, a strong cohesive consumer voice at the heart of Government, enhanced access to consumer advice and protection and protection services, including a new consumer helpline, consumer support programmes which target the most disadvantaged areas, communities and individuals and joined-up Government thinking and activity on consumer affairs.

My Department's draft Corporate Plan, as well as containing the commitment to the strategy, proposes the development of effective sustainable consumer affairs policies, which are aligned with key developments both in Great Britain and Europe. This I believe will ensure that Northern Ireland's consumers are afforded a level of support and protection at least on a par with the rest of the United Kingdom.

Also, as part of the Corporate Plan, Trading Standards Service will deliver a programme of services designed to protect both consumers and responsible businesses against sharp practice. In doing so, it will seek to raise public awareness and understanding of the Trading Standards Service, targeting in particular the most deprived areas, communities and people.

Broadband Communications

Mr Gibson asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment what progress is being made in relation to his targets for broadband communications. (AQW 2935/01)

Sir Reg Empey: Consistent with the Programme for Government, the Executive's endorsement of telecommunications strategy, and my recent statement to the Assembly, a range of initiatives are being pursued. These include the development of both a Call for Proposals addressing local access, and a notice seeking Expressions of Interest for Flagship projects. Subject to EU State Aid clearance, the Call for Proposals and Expressions of Interest will issue later this year.

In addition, utilising funding from the DTI Broadband Fund, my Department is working with both the public and private sectors to stimulate a range of innovative feasibility schemes and private actions designed to extend broadband to areas currently considered commercially non-viable. My Department has also launched the SME Satellite Broadband Programme; developed the "Broadband for Business" campaign; held a series of roadshows for local industry (including a presentation in Omagh); and developed the "broadbandforbusiness.com" website to support industry. My officials are also liaising with the Office of the Government Commerce on the technical and procurement issues surrounding the proposal to better aggregate the public sector demand for broadband.

Work-Related Accidents

Mr M Murphy asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to outline policies designed to reduce the number of major work-related accidents. (AQO 1181/01)

Sir Reg Empey: This question has been referred to me for response as my Department has responsibility, through the Health and Safety Executive for Northern Ireland (HSENI), for health and safety at work matters. HSENI's vision is simple and clear. It is to see that the risks to peoples' health and safety arising from work activities are effectively controlled thereby contributing to the overall economic and social well-being of our community. HSENI strives to realise its vision through its four key policies relating to promotion, information, inspection and regulation. All of these policies are aimed at reducing the number of incidents of work-related illness and injury. HSENI recently conducted a public consultation on its draft Corporate Plan for 2002-05 and intends to publish its final Plan on 17 May.

Average Wage Levels

Mr Weir asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to detail, in each of the last 10 years, the average wage levels in Northern Ireland and how they compare with the UK. (AQW 2965/01)

Sir Reg Empey: The average gross weekly earnings of full-time adult employees whose pay was unaffected by absence for each year since 1991 are as follows:

	All Males		All Females		All Persons	
	NI	GB	NI	GB	NI	GB
1991	£272.4	£318.9	£201.7	£222.4	£245.9	£284.7
1992	£298.2	£340.1	£224.2	£241.1	£269.6	£304.6
1993	£313.6	£353.5	£232.5	£252.6	£282.4	£316.9
1994	£319.2	£362.1	£236.7	£261.5	£286.5	£325.7
1995	£330.9	£374.6	£251.4	£269.8	£300.2	£336.3
1996	£337.4	£391.3	£256.9	£283.0	£306.2	£351.7
1997	£355.9	£408.7	£265.2	£297.2	£319.7	£367.6
1998	£367.7	£427.1	£277.6	£309.6	£332.6	£384.5
1999	£376.8	£442.4	£295.1	£326.5	£344.9	£400.1
2000	£393.3	£464.1	£307.3	£343.7	£360.4	£419.7
2001	£409.2	£490.5	£322.2	£366.8	£375.0	£444.3

Source: New Earnings Survey (NES) NI; DETI, GB; ONS

Gas

Mr Shannon asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment if a licence has been granted for the provision of gas for domestic and commercial use in Comber and, if not, what steps he is taking to ensure that residents of Comber have similar opportunities.

(AQW 2972/01)

Sir Reg Empey: A licence for the provision of gas for domestic and commercial use has not been sought for the Comber district. The development of the gas industry to districts such as Comber is primarily a matter for private sector gas companies who can apply to the Director General of Gas for Northern Ireland for a gas licence.

ENVIRONMENT

Mistaken Clamping

Mrs I Robinson asked the Minister of the Environment to detail how many cases of mistaken clamping have taken place in the past year as part of the DVLNI's campaign to clamp down on car tax evasion.

(AQW 2661/01)

The Minister of the Environment (Mr Nesbitt): In the period 1 April 2001 to 31 March 2002, 786 vehicles were clamped. One vehicle was clamped in error.

Disposal of Fridges and Freezers

Mrs I Robinson asked the Minister of the Environment to detail the amount of money allocated by each local district council as part of this year's local rate, to cover the disposal of fridges and freezers.

(AQW 2812/01)

Mr Nesbitt: District councils' allocation for 2002-03 to cover the cost of the disposal of fridges and freezers is

included in their budget for Environmental issues, generally under the cost centres for refuse collection/refuse disposal. Figures are not available, to provide the precise detail requested.

Equality Legislation

Mrs I Robinson asked the Minister of the Environment to detail the amount of money allocated by each local district council as part of this year's local rate, to meet their obligations under equality legislation.

(AQW 2813/01)

Mr Nesbitt: Most district councils make financial provision to meet their obligations under equality legislation, within their overall budget for corporate management. The level of analysis sought is not available and could only be provided at disproportionate cost.

Fixed Speed Cameras

Ms Morrice asked the Minister of the Environment if he will undertake to introduce legislation to allow money raised from speeding fines to pay for fixed speed cameras; and to make a statement.

(AQW 2820/01)

Mr Nesbitt: Arrangements for extending to Northern Ireland the new funding arrangements for the use of fixed speed cameras recently introduced in Great Britain are currently under consideration.

My Department has appointed consultants, with experience of the Great Britain scheme, to assist in the development of a business case for introducing the new funding arrangements in Northern Ireland. The consultants are expected to report by June 2002.

The business case will examine the legislative, funding and organisational arrangements necessary for the introduction of the scheme. It will take account of the complexities arising from the different administrative structures in Northern Ireland, as well as the legal and constitutional arrangements under which some of the functions involved have been transferred to the devolved administration while others remain excepted or reserved to the United Kingdom Government.

Until the business case has been completed and considered by the departments and agencies involved, in particular the Police Service of Northern Ireland and the Department for Regional Development, I am not in a position to advise whether legislation will be required and, if so, whether my Department will be responsible for introducing it.

Enforcement Officers and Cases: Backlog of Cases

Mrs I Robinson asked the Minister of the Environment, pursuant to AQW 2627/01, what action he intends to take to address the backlog of cases.

(AQW 2908/01)

Mr Nesbitt: My response to your earlier question indicated that there were 2,849 current cases and that 1,485 cases had been cleared in the last year. A high number of current cases is not unusual, since enforcement action is often a lengthy and complex process.

However, a number of steps have, or are, being taken which should improve case processing. New staff are being recruited to tackle the backlog of planning applications and deliver the other targets set out in the Programme for Government, and management structures within Divisional Planning Offices are being strengthened. That will enable more time at managerial level (SPTO and above) to be devoted to enforcement work.

In addition, in a number of offices, the initial investigation of alleged planning infringements is undertaken by staff within development control teams. One enforcement team, in Belfast Division, has been enhanced by an additional member of staff. Overtime is also being used, where appropriate.

The adequacy of the resources allocated to enforcement is kept under review, and is being considered as part of a Review of Planning Fees, on which I propose to consult later in the year.

Finally, I am aiming to strengthen the enforcement powers available to the Department in the forthcoming Planning (Amendment) Bill and to simplify and streamline the enforcement process.

New Targeting Social Need

Mr S Wilson asked the Minister of the Environment to detail, in each of the past 5 years, (a) the percentage of his budget relating to Targeting Social Need; (b) the actual spend for TSN; (c) the number of people employed relating to TSN; (d) the number of people who benefited from these programmes; (e) the actual and practical benefits as a result of his TSN programmes; and (f) the tasks specifically undertaken and completed. (AQW 2921/01)

Mr Nesbitt: New Targeting Social Need (New TSN) is the Executive's main policy for addressing social deprivation. It is a key element of the Programme for Government. New TSN does not have a budget, rather it is a policy that runs through all relevant spending programmes and services provided by departments. It operates by using more of our existing resources to benefit people in objective social need.

The New TSN Action Plan for the period January 2000 to March 2003 sets out the Department's objectives for ensuring that issues of social need and exclusion are at the forefront of policies and operational programmes. A key objective is the current review of the £19.5 million resources element of the General Exchequer Grant to take account of socio-economic disadvantage.

The Department has many regulatory functions and the scope for targeting resources is limited. However, we can help people in social need in other ways. For example, the Planning Service objectives are designed to encourage development in areas of disadvantage.

The Department is working hard to implement the Action Plan objectives. A full report of progress is included in the Department's revised Action Plan for 2001-03, which can be accessed at the Department's website, www.doeni.gov.uk. A further updating of the Action Plan is underway.

The Programme for Government contains an explicit commitment to an evaluation of the benefits and achievements of New TSN, which is a long-term policy. The initial evaluation, which will be subject to external validation to ensure objectivity, is currently in train with first outcomes planned for the end of 2002. The aim of this interim evaluation is to assess the way in which New TSN is being implemented and to examine its impact with a view to informing future thinking on the policy. My Department will contribute to the evaluation. The final reports of the evaluation will be made publicly accessible.

Abandoned Vehicle Legislation

Mr Shannon asked the Minister of the Environment to outline (a) the timescale for the review of abandoned vehicle legislation contained in the Pollution Control and Local Government (NI) Order 1978; and (b) when the amended legislation will be made law.

(AQW 3009/01)

Mr Nesbitt:

- (a) The review of the abandoned vehicle legislation contained in the Pollution Control and Local Government (Northern Ireland) Order 1978 is currently underway and is expected to be completed by the end of June this year.
- (b) Pending the outcome of the review, and in light of the need to give priority in the deployment of my Department's resources to the transposition of EC Directives, no commitment can be given at this stage as to when any amending legislation might be brought forward.

FINANCE AND PERSONNEL

Construction Industry

Mr Gibson asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel to make a statement on the future prospects for the construction industry. (AQW 2904/01)

The Minister of Finance and Personnel (Dr Farren):

Following representations from the Construction Employers Federation and the Construction Industry Group I met with representatives of both bodies on 7 March to discuss a range of industry-related topics, including the industry's workload.

At the meeting, the representatives agreed that the earlier concerns about a perceived reduction in output, based on a survey of the industry's 20 biggest contractors, was not reflected across the whole industry and that a recovery appeared to have taken place towards the end of 2001.

Provisional figures in the Northern Ireland Construction Bulletin, published by the Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency, indicate that the value of construction output for 2001, at 1995 prices and seasonally adjusted, was 69 points higher than in 2000.

Rate Collection Agency

Mr Attwood asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel what performance targets have been set for the Rate Collection Agency (RCA) for 2002-03.

(AQW 2909/01)

Dr Farren: For 2002-03 the following performance targets have been set for the RCA.

Output

To collect 98% (or the 2001-02 outturn if higher) of the Gross Collectable Rate (excluding Late Assessments) (forecast to be around £705m) by 31 March 2003.

Efficiency

To achieve a forecast unit cost of £11.44 for collecting rates per hereditament, excluding development costs for the Rates in the Millennium (RIM) and ONE Projects, representing a 1% improvement in real terms on 2001-02.

To achieve a forecast unit cost of £26.17 for processing Housing Benefit cases, excluding development costs for the RIM and ONE Projects, representing a 1% improvement in real terms on 2001-02.

Quality of Service

- To accurately calculate and advise District Councils of the Actual Penny Product outturn for 2001-02, and the Estimated Penny Product for 2003-04 by 1 November 2002.
- To process 98% of Housing Benefit applications free from error.
- To achieve an average turnaround time for processing regular, non-annual Housing Benefit applications of 26 days.
- To issue all eligible rate refunds within 14 working days of being identified as a rate refund.

- To achieve, by 31 March 2003, an overall rating for service provision of 'satisfied' or above from at least 90% of respondents.

Financial Management

- To live within budget allocations for 2002-03.

Copies of the Agency's Corporate and Business Plan will be placed in the Assembly Library at the end of April 2002.

Lands Registers

Mr Attwood asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel what performance targets have been set for the Land Registers of Northern Ireland (LRNI) for 2002-03.

(AQW 2910/01)

Dr Farren: For 2002-03 the following targets have been set for LRNI.

1. To achieve a customer satisfaction rate, based on customer surveys, of at least 75%.
2. To achieve a registration accuracy rate of at least 98.5%.
3. To process regular Land Registry dealings in an average of 20 days.
4. To process regular Registry of Deeds dealings in an average of six days.
5. To process regular Statutory Charges Registry dealings in an average of 15 days.
6. To process pre-completion land information applications in an average of four days.
7. To achieve a weighted unit cost target of £30.00 (inclusive of PFI costs).
8. To process 140 application units per member of staff per month.
9. To cover Agency costs out of fee income.

Copies of the Agency's Corporate and Business plan will be placed in the Assembly Library at the end of June.

Peace I

Dr Birnie asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel to detail the total spending under Peace I in (a) Belfast as a whole; and (b) each of the Parliamentary constituencies in Belfast.

(AQW 2911/01)

Dr Farren: Funding from the Special Support Programme for Peace and Reconciliation was granted to project applicants throughout Belfast and Northern Ireland.

The total levels of funding awarded to applicants within the Belfast City Council area and its composite Parliamentary Constituencies are attached in Annex 1.

The total levels of funding awarded to applicants within all of the Belfast Parliamentary Constituencies (Belfast East, Belfast North, Belfast South, Belfast West) are attached in Annex 2. This differs from Annex 1 in that some parts of the Belfast Parliamentary Constituencies fall within other district council areas, eg Lisburn and Castlereagh.

ANNEX 1

(A) AMOUNTS AWARDED UNDER PEACE I IN BELFAST CITY COUNCIL AREA

Council Area	No. of Projects	Amount awarded
Belfast City	2,735	£129,071,707

(B) AMOUNTS AWARDED UNDER PEACE I IN BELFAST CITY COUNCIL AREA BY PARLIAMENTARY CONSTITUENCY

Parliamentary Constituency	No. of Projects	Amount awarded
Belfast East	304	£15,508,033
Belfast North	804	£31,592,209
Belfast South	769	£48,365,747
Belfast West	858	£33,605,718
Total	2,735	£129,071,707

ANNEX 2

(A) TOTAL FUNDING AWARDED UNDER PEACE I IN ALL BELFAST PARLIAMENTARY CONSTITUENCIES

All Belfast Parliamentary Constituencies	No. of projects	Amount awarded
Total	3,074	£145,606,256

(B) AMOUNTS AWARDED UNDER PEACE I BY BELFAST PARLIAMENTARY CONSTITUENCIES

Parliamentary Constituency	No. of projects	Amount awarded
Belfast East	369	£16,399,470
Belfast North	873	£32,937,832
Belfast South	839	£56,236,073
Belfast West	993	£40,032,881
Total	3,074	£145,606,256

Targeting Social Need

Mr S Wilson asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel to detail, in each of the past five years, (a) the percentage of his budget relating to Targeting Social Need; (b) the actual spend for TSN; (c) the number of people employed relating to TSN; (d) the number of people who benefited from these programmes; (e) the actual and practical benefits as a result of his TSN programmes; and (f) the tasks specifically undertaken and completed. (AQW 2922/01)

Dr Farren: As the Member will be aware, New TSN is not a policy with its own budget, rather it is a theme

that runs through all relevant spending programmes across all Northern Ireland departments. It means Departments changing the way they target the money they have so that more of it can be used to benefit those who are most disadvantaged.

A recent study conducted by independent consultants sought to examine the implications for resource allocation arising out of the policy of New Targeting Social Need, across all central Government and its agencies in Northern Ireland. The key findings of the study are that New TSN has been enthusiastically adopted by Departments, and that, while not all change is apparent, already the thrust of public expenditure is supportive of TSN objectives.

New TSN considerations are fully taken into account in reviewing the Programme for Government and its Budget, to which this Department contributes. In addition, emphasis has been made within Executive Programme Funds to ensure New TSN is given significant consideration, particularly in determining the funding of relevant programmes, projects and services. This included taking into account a positive contribution to promoting social inclusion, community development, addressing inequalities, assisting vulnerable people and groups, and deterring social exclusion.

Executive Programme Funds have already provided support to Students, Victims, Travellers, community regeneration projects, the development of a public health strategy, improving the provision of education to ethnic minorities, improving support for those children at risk, and improving reading capabilities amongst our children. In the future, it is expected that the Funds will also provide support to marginalised young people, people from ethnic minority backgrounds, older people, disabled people, carers and lone parents.

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. The Executive has set £55 million aside for the Social Inclusion and Community Regeneration Fund over the years 2001-02 to 2003-04 of which £33.7 million has still to be allocated.

Fully aware of the long-term aspects of the New TSN policy, the Executive ensured that evaluation was built into the policy. This commitment is made explicit in the Programme for Government and the initial evaluation is currently in train and first outcomes planned for the end of 2002. The aim of this interim evaluation is to assess the way in which New TSN is being implemented and to examine its impact with a view to informing future thinking on the policy.

The New TSN Annual Report 2001 provides specific examples of progress across the administration over the period 1 January 2000 – 31 March 2001, and arrangements are already in place to publish the next progress report.

This Department like all departments revised its New TSN Action Plans for the period April 2001 – March 2003 taking account of progress and new priorities arising through the Programme for Government. The revised Action Plans contain details on progress made towards all of the Department's New TSN objectives and targets for the period up to 31 March 2001. Again we are updating our Action Plan for March 2002 to April 2003.

Relief from Rates

Mr Dallat asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel what progress has been made in implementing the 'relief from rates for general stores etc in rural settlements' scheme, announced on 20 March 2001. (AQW 3102/01)

Dr Farren: Recent impact analysis into the effect of any scheme implemented in accordance with the enabling legislation has revealed serious flaws. Many of the properties which were expected to benefit from the scheme would not do so because they are not located (as required by the legislation) within a designated small rural settlement. Moreover, the scheme would not adequately address targeting social need considerations and is unlikely to provide an effective means of sustaining rural services. This view is shared by the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development.

As a consequence the Executive has decided recently to suspend implementation of the current scheme and consider more effective alternatives. I intend to bring early proposals before the Executive by the end of June. However, any new scheme may require primary legislation and this could have implications for the timing of introduction of any scheme.

Under-Resourcing in Education

Mr McElduff asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel what plans he has to provide additional funding needed to address under-resourcing in education. (AQO 1189/01)

Dr Farren: My role is to bring before the Assembly the Budget plans agreed by the Executive to deliver its priorities set out in the Programme for Government, within available resources.

The Assembly adopted a Budget for 2002-03 in December 2001. That Budget provided a 5% increase in provision for the Department of Education. Allocations for future years will be determined by the Executive and put before the Assembly later this year.

Housing Executive House Sales

Ms Armitage asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel if he will consider returning excess capital receipts

from Housing Executive house sales to the Department for Social Development instead of other Government Departments. (AQO 1154/01)

Dr Farren: The planned level of spending on housing - as approved by the Assembly - already takes into account the bulk of receipts that are likely to be realised. Additional capital receipts in recent years have allowed further allocations to where the need is greatest. That can, and has included housing.

For 2002-03 planned house sale receipts built into overall housing expenditure plans stand at £103m. This compares with total receipts of £98m in 2001-02.

Aggregates Tax

Mr Gallagher asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel if agreement has been secured from the European Commission on the deferral of the introduction of Aggregates Tax. (AQO 1165/01)

Dr Farren: Extraction of virgin aggregate for commercial purposes has been subject to the Aggregates Tax since 1 April 2002. However, the Pre Budget Report (November 2001) gave a partial, temporary derogation to NI for aggregate used in processing. Processed materials will be exempt from the Tax in 2002-03, and phased in until full implementation is reached by 2007-08. This measure remains subject to EU State Aid approval but HM Treasury remains confident of a successful outcome within the next few weeks. Commitment has been given by HM Treasury that the first year exemption for aggregate used in processed products in NI will be backdated to 1 April 2002.

Public Private Partnerships

Dr McDonnell asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel what is the progress of the Review into the use of Public Private Partnerships in Northern Ireland. (AQO 1192/01)

Dr Farren: I am pleased to report that the Working Group established to carry out the review into the use of Public Private Partnerships has now met the PfG target deadline for completion of March 2002.

The report is currently being considered by the Executive and expected to be published in mid-May for public consultation. Following this consultation the Executive will determine by September this year a policy framework on PPPs in Northern Ireland as set out in the Programme for Government.

Women's Groups: Funding

Mrs Courtney asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel what is the current position in securing funding

for women's groups in light of the changing criteria of the Community Fund and Peace II Programme.

(AQO 1155/01)

Dr Farren: I am aware of the difficult funding position that Women's Groups face following the change in priority of the lottery backed Community Fund. If these groups present a case through a sponsor department, the issue can be considered alongside other departmental pressures in the Budget 2002 process.

The PEACE II Programme is governed by equality principles and targeted on areas, sectors and groups adversely affected by the conflict, including women and women's groups. Also specific Peace II measures targeted at women include Measure 1.5 "Positive Action for Women" which is targeted at women wishing to re-enter the labour market, and Measure 2.3 "Skilling and Building the Social Economy" includes Women's Centres among its target groups.

Townland Names

Mr McCarthy asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel to detail his policy on the use of townland names in departmental correspondence. (AQO 1169/01)

Dr Farren: The practice within my Department is to use townland names when this information is supplied by the correspondent. A Common Address File project, a partnership between Ordnance Survey of Northern Ireland, Valuation and Lands agency in this Department and Royal Mail is working to establish a definitive index of addresses for use throughout the public and private sectors. One aim of the project is to ensure that the new system will include townland names for every address. The latest bulletin on the Project indicates that a draft CAF should be available this Summer which, following validation and award of a contract to implement, could produce a system by the Spring of 2003.

Executive Programme Funds

Mr O'Neill asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel to outline (a) if the review into the Executive Programme Funds has been completed; and (b) when the next call for bids will be invited. (AQO 1166/01)

Dr Farren: The Review of the Executive Programme Funds has just been completed and the recommendations were agreed at the Executive Meeting on 18 April. We will now be inviting bids under three Funds - a newly created Innovation and Modernisation Fund, the Social Inclusion/Community Regeneration Fund as well as departmental bids under the Children's Fund. Separate arrangements are being put in place for the Children's Fund. Bids under the current round of the Infrastructure Fund are due for submission today.

HEALTH, SOCIAL SERVICES AND PUBLIC SAFETY

Building Maintenance Budget

Mr Shannon asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what is the building maintenance budget for her department in each of the past three years.

(AQW 2413/01)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety (Ms de Brún): The Department of Finance and Personnel holds the maintenance budget for office buildings used by all Departments. Consequently, no direct expenditure is incurred by my Department on building maintenance. In relation to the HPSS estate, the costs of maintaining buildings are met by HSS Trusts and there is no specific building maintenance budget held by my Department.

Coinníonn an Roinn Airgeadais agus Pearsanra an buiséad cothabhála d'fhoirgnimh oifige a úsáideann gach Roinn. Mar thoradh, níl airgead díreach caite ag an Roinn s'agam ar chothabháil foirgneamh. Maidir le heastát na SSPS, díolann Iontaobhas SSS as costais chothabháil foirgneamh agus níl buiséad ar leith cothabhála díri ag an Roinn s'agam.

Mental Health Services

Mr Berry asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what progress has been made in improving the treatment of mental health patients in each Board area.

(AQW 2729/01)

Ms de Brún: All Health and Social Services Boards have reported developments in inpatient and community mental health services, including the development of residential facilities and a range of community service developments as alternatives to hospital admissions. Further service development will take place to meet local need, having regard to the resources available.

Thuiriscigh gach Bord Sláinte agus Seirbhísí Sóisialta forbairtí i seirbhísí othar cónaitheach agus sláinte meabhrach pobail, san áireamh forbairtí áiseanna cónaithe agus réimse forbairtí seirbhísí pobail mar mhalairtí d'iontráil otharlainne. Tiocfaidh tuilleadh forbartha le freastal ar an ghá áitiúil, ag cur san áireamh na háiseanna ar fáil.

Prescription Fraud

Mr Berry asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail (a) the number of prescription fraud cases that have been brought to the Small Claims Court; and (b) how many people have been prosecuted between 1997-2002 as a result. (AQW 2759/01)

Ms de Brún:

- (a) Since it became fully operational in January 2001, the Counter Fraud Unit, which is based in the Central Services Agency, has taken over 300 civil cases to the Small Claims Court, involving patients who have wrongly claimed to be exempt from paying for their prescription and dental treatment charges. In each case, a Court Judgement has been obtained for the payment of the unpaid charges.
- (b) No criminal prosecutions took place during the period 1997 – 2002. It is intended that the new criminal offence of evading Health Service charges introduced in the Health and Personal Social Services Act (NI) 2001 will be used to facilitate the prosecution of cases, where a pattern of fraud can be established. The relevant regulations are scheduled to come into effect in June 2002.
- (a) Ó tháinig sé i bhfeidhm go hiomlán in Eanáir 2001, thug an tAonad Frithchalaoise, atá bunaithe sa Ghníomhaireacht Seirbhísí Lárnacha, breis agus 300 cás sibhialta chuig an Chúirt Mhionéileamh, a bhaineann le hothair a d'éiligh ar bhonn mícheart go raibh siad saor ar oideas agus mhuirir fhiacloireachta a íoc. I ngach cás fuarthas Breithiúnas Cúirte leis na muirir gan íoc a íoc.
- (b) Níor tharla aon ionchúiseamh coiriúil le linn 1997-2002. Tá sé beartaithe go n-úsáidfear an cion coiriúil nua, muirir Sheirbhís Sláinte a sheachaint san Acht um Sheirbhísí Sláinte agus Pearsanta Sóisialta (TÉ) 2001, chun ionchúiseamh cásanna a éascú nuair is féidir an patrún calaoise a léiriú. Tá na rialacháin bhainteacha sceidealta le teacht i bhfeidhm i Meitheamh 2002.

Crossroad Carers

Mr Berry asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to explain (a) why Crossroad Carers in the Southern Board Area are paid an hourly (spot) rate of £7.56, whereas in the Eastern Board the rate is £9.62 per hour; and (b) any action being taken to address the inequality. (AQW 2816/01)

Ms de Brún: The hourly rate offered by the Trusts within the Southern Health and Social Services Board area to Crossroads for its services was consistent with that offered to other independent providers of domiciliary care within the area. The Eastern Health and Social Services Board has advised that each Trust within its area negotiated separately with Crossroads, and that rates agreed by each Trust may vary. No action is planned.

B'ionann an ráta uaire a thug Iontaobhais laistigh de cheantar Bord Sláinte agus Seirbhísí Sóisialta do Crossroads ar son a sheirbhísí agus sin a tairgeadh do sholáthróirí neamhspleácha cúram baile laistigh den cheantar. Chuir

Bord Sláinte agus Seirbhísí Sóisialta an Oirthir in iúl dom go ndearna gach Iontaobhas idirbheartaíocht aonair le Crossroads, agus is féidir go mbeadh éagsúlacht idir na rátaí a d'aontaigh gach Iontaobhas. Níl gníomh ar bith beartaithe.

Diabetics

Mr Shannon asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail (a) the number of diabetics, per Board area, for each of the last 3 years; and (b) the respective diabetic categories.

(AQW 2828/01)

Ms de Brún: The information requested is not available.

Níl fáil ar an eolas a iarradh.

Osteoporosis

Mr Shannon asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail, by Board area, the number of (i) males; and (ii) females who suffer from osteoporosis.

(AQW 2829/01)

Ms de Brún: Information is not available in the form requested.

Níl an t-eolas ar fáil ar an dóigh iarrtha.

Private Independent Hospital Sector

Ms McWilliams asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the number of Health Service patients being dealt with by the private independent hospital sector.

(AQW 2830/01)

Ms de Brún: The information requested is not available and could only be obtained at disproportionate cost.

Níl an t-eolas a iarradh ar fáil agus ní féidir é a fháil ach ar chostas díréireach.

GP Fundholding

Mr Beggs asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety, pursuant to AQW 2180/01, why she had no meeting with the British Medical Association prior to 9 January 2002 to learn of its views and concerns of her proposed structures to replace GP Fundholding.

(AQW 2831/01)

Ms de Brún: Prior to 9 January 2002, I met with representatives of the General Practitioners Committee (GPC) of the BMA on 3 August 2000 as part of my listening exercise prior to the publication of the consultation paper *Building the Way Forward in Primary Care* and with the Chair of the GPC, BMA on 25 January 2001. On the latter occasion, discussions focussed on

the proposed structures for primary care set out in the consultation paper.

Roimh 9 Eanáir 2002, bhuail mé le hionadaithe Choiste GnáthDhochtúirí (GPC) den BMA ar 3 Lunasa 2000 mar chuid de mo chleachtadh éisteachta roimh fhoilsiú an pháipéir chomhairlithe *Ag Tógáil an Bhealaigh chun Tosaigh i bPríomhchúram* agus le Cathaoirleach an GPC, BMA ar 25 Eanáir 2001. Ar an ócáid dheireanach, bhí an plé dírithe ar na struchtúir mholta do phríomhchúram leagtha amach sa pháipéar comhairlithe.

Hot Fire Training Unit

Mr Hilditch asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail (a) the cost of providing a hot fire training unit at Northern Ireland Fire Brigade Training Centre, Boucher Crescent; (b) the number of times it has been used since its purchase; (c) the number of times it has been used since 6 July 2001; and (d) any alternative which is being provided.

(AQW 2832/01)

Ms de Brún: The cost of providing the hot fire training unit at Boucher Crescent was £56,691. The unit was built on-site in July 2001 and has been used 28 times.

The Fire Brigade are looking at alternative sites for the unit, but to date nothing suitable has been found. As an interim measure they are currently considering an engineering solution to reduce smoke emissions and permit unrestricted burning at Boucher Crescent.

Ba é £56,691 an costas chun ionad dóiteáin the a sholáthar ag Corrán Boucher. Tógadh an t-ionad seo ar shuíomh i Mí Iúil 2001 agus úsáideadh é 28 uair.

Tá an Bhriogáid Dóiteáin ag cuardach suíomh eile don ionad, ach go dtí seo níor thángthas ar rud ar bith oiriúnach. Mar bheart idirlinne tá siad ag déanamh machnaimh ar réiteach innealtóireachta chun astuithe toite a laghdú agus dó gan srian a cheadú ar Chorrán Boucher.

Northern Ireland Fire Brigade

Mr Hilditch asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the criteria for providing breathing apparatus training, re-training and refresher courses for (a) retained personnel; and (b) full-time personnel within the NI Fire Service.

(AQW 2833/01)

Ms de Brún: All firefighters must be fully trained in the use of breathing apparatus and all existing operational personnel in the Northern Ireland Fire Brigade (both retained and wholetime firefighters) have successfully completed a Breathing Apparatus Wearers Course.

A programme of refresher courses is currently ongoing and scheduled to finish by November 2002. Additional ad hoc breathing apparatus training and exercises are undertaken at Station level.

Is gá do gach comhraiceoir dóiteáin bheith oile go hiomlán chun gaireas análaithe a úsáid agus d'éirigh le gach duine ag feidhmiú faoi láthair le Briogáid Dóiteáin Thuaisceart Éireann (comhraiceoirí coinnithe agus lán-aimseartha araon) i gCúrsa Caiteoirí Gaireas Análaithe.

Tá clár cúrsaí athnuachana ag dul ar aghaidh faoi láthair agus táthar ag dúil go gcríochnóidh siad faoi Shamhain 2002. Déantar cleachtaidh agus oiliúint ghairis análaithe bhreise go neamhfhoirmiúil ag leibhéal an Staisiúin.

Waiting Lists

Ms McWilliams asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety, pursuant to AQW 1898/01, why no assessment has been made regarding the relationship between Health Service waiting lists and the extent of private practices of some consultants.

(AQW 2852/01)

Ms de Brún: There are no indications that waiting lists are growing as a result of consultants devoting more time than is appropriate to private work, therefore I do not feel an assessment is necessary.

Níl táscairí ann go bhfuil liostaí feithimh ag fás mar thoradh ar lianna comhairleacha ag caitheamh níos mó ama ná mar is cuí ar obair phríobháideach, mar sin de, ní shílím go bhfuil measúnú de dhíth.

Translation Costs

Mr Foster asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail (a) the cost to her Department of providing a translation service, both written and verbal; and (b) how many required home-help hours could be provided for such a cost. (AQW 2857/01)

Ms de Brún: Since the establishment of the Executive, my Department has spent a total of £218,831.63 on translating written material from English into a number of other languages, including Irish and Chinese.

The cost of the translations service does not impact on patient care, including the provision of home helps, since it is paid for out of the administration budget, which is separate from the budget for patient services.

The Department does not provide a verbal translation service.

Ó bhunú an Fheidhmeannais, chaith mo Roinn £218,831.63 ar aistriú ábhair scríofa ó Bhéarla go roinnt teangacha eile, go Gaeilge agus go Sínis chomh maith.

Níl éifeacht ar bith ag costas na seirbhíse aistriúcháin ar chúram othar agus ar sholáthar cuiditheoirí baile mar

go n-íoctar í as an bhuiséad riaracháin atá scartha ón bhuiséad do sheirbhísí othar.

Ní chuireann an Roinn seirbhís aistriúcháin bhéil ar fáil.

Osteoarthritis

Mr Shannon asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail, by Board area, the number of (i) males; and (ii) females who suffer from osteoarthritis. (AQW 2864/01)

Ms de Brún: Information is not available in the form requested.

Níl an t-eolas ar fáil ar an dóigh iarrtha.

W&G Baird Ltd

Mr Dallat asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety, pursuant to AQW 2525/01, to detail, for the past four financial years, the total value of the Northern Ireland Fire Service printing contracts carried out by W & G Baird Ltd and procured through 'Navigator Blue'. (AQW 2865/01)

Ms de Brún: The value of the printing contracts carried out by W & G Baird Ltd and procured through "Navigator Blue" for the last four financial years were 1998-99 Nil, 1999-2000 £11,625, 2000-01 £31,121, and 2001-02 £16,625.

Ba é Náid i 1998-99, £11,625 i 1999-2000, £31,121 i 2000-01, agus £16,625 i 2001-02 luach na gconarthaí clódoireachta déanta ag W & G Baird Ltd agus faighte trí "Navigator Blue" do na 4 bliain airgeadais deireanach.

Fire Authority Cars

Mr Dallat asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety, pursuant to AQW 2446/01, to outline (a) if she is concerned that detachable flashing light systems constitute a danger to other road users, especially when clipped to vehicles travelling at high speed, and (b) when ongoing discussions with the Fire Brigade Union on this matter are likely to be concluded. (AQW 2866/01)

Ms de Brún: There is no evidence to suggest that detachable flashing light systems used by Fire Service vehicles en route to emergency incidents constitute a danger to other road users. The systems comply with current Road Traffic Regulations and similar devices are used by the other emergency services. A further meeting between the Fire Brigade and the Fire Brigades Union is due to take place in May to try to reach agreement on fitting fixed light bars to cars.

Níl fianaise ar bith ann le léiriú go bhfuil na córais inscartha solais splancarnaigh úsáidte ag feithiclí na Seirbhíse Dóiteáin ar a mbealach go teagmhais éigeandála

contúirteach d'úsáideoirí bóthair eile. Comhlíonann na córais na Rialacháin reatha Tráchtá Bóthair agus a macasamhail de ghléasanna úsáidte ag na seirbhísí éigeandála eile. Beidh cruinniú eile ar siúl idir an Bhriogáid Dóiteáin agus Ceardchumann na mBriogáidí Dóiteáin i mí na Bealtaine le teacht ar chomhaontú ar ghléasú solasbharranna do bhogtha ar charranna.

Sure Start Programme

Mr Close asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what evaluation she has made of the Sure Start Programme. (AQW 2869/01)

Ms de Brún: In terms of evaluating Sure Start, the Department has devised a methodology for a regional evaluation of the local Sure Start programme and the evaluation process is currently underway. It is expected that findings emerging from this regional evaluation will be ready towards the end of autumn this year.

Maidir le Sure Start a mheastóireacht, dhear an Roinn modheolaíocht le haghaidh meastóireachta réigiúnaí ar an chlár Sure Start agus tá an próiseas meastóireachta idir lámha faoi láthair. Táthar ag dúil go mbeidh na torthaí a eascraíonn as an mheastóireacht réigiúnach ann ag deireadh an fhómhair i mbliana.

Sure Start Programme

Mr Close asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail which Sure Start Programme areas have incidences of (a) low birth weight and (b) teenage pregnancies as selection criteria. (AQW 2872/01)

Ms de Brún: Although many of the Sure Start projects would have incidences of low birth weight and teenage pregnancies, these would not have been the only criteria applied as a means of selecting projects. Each project was required to provide an assessment of the overall extent to which children in the area were failing to fulfil their potential and provide hard evidence to illustrate the particular problems of young children and their families in the community.

Cé go mbeadh teagmhais meáchan íseal breithe agus toircheas sna déaga ag mórán de thionscadail Sure Start ní hiad sin na critéir amháin a chuirtear i bhfeidhm mar bhealach le tionscadail a roghnú. Iarradh ar gach tionscadal measúnú a chur ar fáil ar cá mhéad a bhí na páistí sa cheantar ag cliseadh lena lánachmhainneacht a bhaint amach agus fianaise chrua a sholáthar le fadhbanna na bpáistí óga agus a dteaghlach sa phobal a léiriú.

Sure Start Funding

Mr Close asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what geographical areas can apply for Sure Start funding. (AQW 2873/01)

Ms de Brún: When Sure Start was introduced here the aim of the programme was to give a better start in life to pre-school children facing the greatest disadvantage. Childcare Partnerships were therefore asked to identify suitable localities within their area and to support potential applicants in these areas to enable them to submit sustainable bids.

As a result, Sure Start projects here operate across a wide geographical spread and there is a reasonable mix of projects across urban and rural settings with approximately one-third of the projects located in rural areas.

Nuair a tugadh Sure Start isteach anseo ba é aidhm an chlár tús níos fearr a thabhairt sa saol do pháistí réamhscoile a bhí faoin mhíbhuntáiste is mó. Iarradh ar Pháirtíochtaí Cúram Páistí mar sin áiteanna ina gceantar féin a aimsiú agus tacú le hiarrthóirí féideartha sna ceantair seo le cur ar a gcumas tairscintí inbhuanaithe a chur isteach.

Mar thoradh air, tá tionscadail Sure Start ag feidhmiú ar fud réimse leathan geografaíochta agus tá meascán measartha tionscadal ann in áiteanna urbacha agus tuaithe agus tá thart ar aon tríú de na tionscadail lonnaithe i gceantair thuaithe.

Sure Start Programme

Mr Close asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what selection criteria is applied in the assessment of areas to receive Sure Start funding.

(AQW 2874/01)

Ms de Brún: While the Sure Start programme was introduced here each of the four Childcare Partnerships was tasked with assessing Sure Start applications in their own particular area and making recommendations to the Department on how they would allocate their share of the overall funding for the programme.

Childcare Partnership Assessment Panels assessed all applications on their content using the core aims of Sure Start as criteria, and, in addition, used key indicator data to identify ward areas of highest need.

Nuair a tugadh an clár Sure Start isteach anseo ba é an dualgas a bhí ar gach ceann de na ceithre Páirtíochtaí Sure Start iarratais ina gceantair féin a mheasúnú agus moltaí a dhéanamh don Roinn ar an dóigh a ndáilfí a sciar den mhaoiniú iomlán ar son an chlár.

Rinne Painéil Mheasúnaithe Páirtíocht Cúram Páiste measúnú ar gach iarratas agus ar a raibh istigh iontu ag úsáid croí-aidhmeanna Sure Start mar chritéir agus ar a bharr bhain siad úsáid as eochairshonraí táscaire leis na togheantair leis na riachtanais is mó a aimsiú.

Sure Start Programme

Mr Close asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what assessment she has made of the Sure Start Programme.

(AQW 2875/01)

Ms de Brún: We are investing in Sure Start to give a better start in life to pre-school children facing the greatest disadvantage. The ultimate aim is to have all our children ready to make the most of the opportunities in school and later life.

I believe that Sure Start provides an opportunity to groups in the statutory, voluntary and community sector that are already providing excellent services for children and families to work together in partnership to provide a more integrated and co-ordinated support system for families in disadvantaged areas.

Táimid ag infheistiú i Sure Start le tús níos fearr saoil a thabhairt do pháistí réamhscoile faoin mhíbhuntáiste is mó. Is é an aidhm sa deireadh ná ár gcuid páistí uile a bheith réidh leis an chuid is féarr a dhéanamh de na deiseanna sa scoil agus sa saol níos moille anonn.

Creidim go soláthraíonn Sure Start deis do ghrúpaí san earnáil reachtúil, dheonach agus pobail atá ag soláthar seirbhísí den scoth cheana do pháistí agus do theaghlaigh le hobair le chéile i bpáirtíocht chun córas tacaíochta níos comhtháite agus níos comhórdaithe do theaghlaigh i gceantair faoi mhíbhuntáiste a sholáthar.

Health Budget

Mrs I Robinson asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what action has she taken to ensure £23.9 million is returned to the Health Budget from the Minister of Finance and Personnel.

(AQW 2876/01)

Ms de Brún: The Minister of Finance and Personnel has indicated that the £23.9 million technical reduced requirement from my Department's budget, together with remaining room to manoeuvre from the February Monitoring round, will be used to augment the Executive Programme Funds and to address some immediate funding issues early in the current financial year. My Department will submit a strong case for a significant share of the resources to be made available to meet pressing needs within the HPSS.

Thug an tAire Airgeadais agus Pearsanra le fios go n-úsáidfí an £23.9 milliún don riachtanas laghdaithe teicniúil ó bhuiséad mo Roinne mar aon leis an fhuilleach airgid eile ó bhabhta Monatóireachta mhí Feabhra, le cur le Cistí Clár an Fheidhmeannais agus le tabhairt faoi roinnt ceisteanna láithreacha maoinithe go luath sa bhliain reatha airgeadais seo. Cuirfidh mo Roinn cás láidir isteach faoi choinne sciar mhóir de na hacmhainní a chuirfear ar fáil le riar ar riachtanais mhóra laistigh de na SSSP.

Underspend

Mrs I Robinson asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what areas of the Health

Service will she target with the £23.9 million underspend in the Department's budget. (AQW 2877/01)

Ms de Brún: I refer the Member to my answer to AQW 2876/01.

Treoraím an Ball do mo fhreagra a thug mé ar AQW 2876/01.

Fire Authority Dogs

Mr Dallat asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety, pursuant to AQW 2527/01, if the duties detailed are being carried out by the two Fire Authority dogs, Storm and Ben since their acquisition; and to make a statement. (AQW 2885/01)

Ms de Brún: Two dogs, trained in the detection of hydrocarbon accelerants were accepted into the Fire Brigade in July 1999 and have been used since for fire investigation, community education and arson awareness programmes.

Since October last year, due to the promotion of his handler, "Ben" has not been fully utilised. However, the Fire Brigade is currently in the process of appointing a replacement handler.

Glacadh dhá mhadadh, oile le Luasairí Hidreacarbóin a fháil amach, isteach sa Bhriogáid Dóiteáin in Iúil 1997 agus ó shin úsáideadh iad do chláracha ar fhiosrú tine, ar oideachas an phobail agus do chláracha eolais ar choirloscadh.

Ó Dheireadh Fómhair anuraidh, mar gheall ar ardú céime a choimhéadaí, níor baineadh úsáid iomlán as "Ben". Tá an Bhriogáid Dóiteáin ar tí comharba a choimhéadaí a cheapadh i láthair na huaire áfach.

Suicide Prevention

Mrs Courtney asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety if a separate and specific strategy for suicide prevention, which is not part of the overall strategy for mental health promotion, is being established in the light of recent figures in the north-west. (AQW 2886/01)

Ms de Brún: A separate strategy for suicide is not being produced since it is important to deal with the risk factors of suicide as part of a broader approach to mental and emotional health. The proposed strategy for mental health promotion will include a specific section on preventing suicide.

Níl straitéis eile d'fhéinmharú á cumadh mar go bhfuil sé tábhachtach le déileáil le fachtóirí an bhaoil ó fhéinmharú mar chuid de chur chuige níos fairsinge do shláinte meabhrach agus mhothúcháin. Sa straitéis mholta um chur chun cinn sláinte meabhrach beidh mír ar leith ar an dóigh le cosc a chur le féinmharú.

Speech Therapists

Mrs I Robinson asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail, by Board area, the number of speech therapists employed. (AQW 2891/01)

Ms de Brún:

The information requested is detailed in the table below.

SPEECH THERAPISTS¹ BY BOARD AREA AT 31 DECEMBER 2001

	Number	WTE ²
Eastern Board	126	105.14
Northern Board	68	56.52
Southern Board	48	43.99
Western Board	38	36.74
Total	280	242.39

¹ Figures Exclude Bank Staff That Maintain Service Delivery By Covering Staffing Shortfalls And Fluctuating Workloads

² WTE – Whole Time Equivalent

Tá an t-eolas iarrtha léirithe sa tábla thíos.

TEIRIPEOIRÍ URLABHRA¹ DE RÉIR BORDCHEANTAIR AR 31 NOLLAIG 2001

	Líon	CLA ²
Bord Oirthearach	126	105.14
Bord Tuaisceartach	68	56.52
Bord Deisceartach	48	43.99
Bord Iartharach	38	36.74
Iomlán	280	242.39

¹ Ní chuimsíonn na figiúirí oibrithe ionaid a choinníonn soláthar na seirbhísí ag dul ar aghaidh leis an easpa oibrithe agus le hualaí athraitheacha oibre a chlúdach.

CLA – Coibhéis Lánaimeartha

Chiropodists

Mrs I Robinson asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail (a) the current number of chiropodists employed by the Health Service; and (b) the breakdown of chiropodists employed in each Board area. (AQW 2925/01)

Ms de Brún: The information requested is detailed in the table below.

CHIROPODISTS EMPLOYED BY BOARD AREA – DECEMBER 2001

	Headcount	WTE ¹
Eastern Board	79	64.48
Northern Board	40	34.91
Southern Board	29	24.78
Western Board	27	23.68
Total	175	147.85

¹ Whole Time Equivalent

Tá an t-eolas a iarradh léirithe sa tábla thíos.

**COSLIANNA FOSTAITHE DE RÉIR BORDCHEANTAIR –
NOLLAIG 2001**

	Líon	CLA ¹
Bord an Oirthir	79	64.48
Bord an Tuaiscirt	40	34.91
Bord an Deiscirt	29	24.78
Bord an Iarthair	27	23.68
Iomlán	175	147.85

¹ Coibhéis Lánaimseartha

**Equitable Funding:
EHSSB/Down Lisburn Trust**

Mr McGrady asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what discussions she has had with the Chairman and Members of the Eastern Health and Social Services Board and the Down Lisburn Trust regarding the need to ensure equitable funding across the EHSSB Trusts; and to make a statement.

(AQW 2943/01)

Ms de Brún: I have had no formal discussions as yet with the Chairman and Members of the Eastern Health and Social Services Board (EHSSB) or the Down Lisburn Trust regarding the matters raised. However, the Chairman of the Eastern HSS Board and the Chairman of Down Lisburn Trust have recently offered to meet with me in order to discuss the issue.

Níl raibh cainteanna foirmiúla agam go fóill beag le Cathaoirleach agus Baill Bhord Sláinte agus Seirbhísí Sóisialta an Oirthir (BSSSO) nó Iontaobhas an Dúin / Lios na gCearrbhach i dtaca leis na hábhair a tógadh. Bíodh sin mar atá, chuir Cathaoirleach Bord SSS an Oirthir agus Cathaoirleach Iontaobhas an Dúin / Lios na gCearrbhach cuireadh orm le gairid bualadh leo chun an cheist a phlé.

Accommodation for Children

Ms Lewsley asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to outline (a) any emergency provision existing for young people aged 14 to 17 who suddenly find themselves homeless as a result of a domestic crisis; and (b) if she is aware of any voluntary/non-statutory agency currently meeting this need. (AQW 2944/01)

Ms de Brún: Under the Children (NI) Order 1995 Health and Social Services Trusts are required to provide accommodation for any child in need who requires it. Children aged under 16 would normally be accommodated either with a foster carer or in a children's home, a small number of which are run by non-statutory sector providers. Young people aged 16 and over may be placed in accommodation run by voluntary agencies, which include

the Simon Community, Foyer, Starting Point or other local groups dealing with homeless people. Bed and breakfast accommodation has also been used for those aged 16 and over.

De réir an Oird Pháistí (TÉ) 1995 ní mór d'Iontaobhais Shláinte agus Sheirbhísí Sóisialta cóiríocht a sholáthar do pháiste ar bith in ánas ar a bhfuil sí de dhíth. De ghnáth, chuirfí páistí faoi 16 d'aois faoi chúram feighlí altrama nó i dteach páistí a réachtálann soláthraithe ón earnáil neamhreachtúil roinnt bheag díobh. Is féidir go gcuirfear páistí níos sine ná 16 bliain d'aois i gcóiríocht réachtáilte ag gníomhaireachtaí deonacha amhail Simon Community, Foyer, Starting Point nó ag grúpaí áitiúla eile a dhéileálann le díthreabhaigh. Úsáideadh cóiríocht leaba agus bricfeasta fosta dóibh siúd a bhí 16 bliain d'aois nó níos sine chomh maith.

Drug Treatment and Rehabilitation Services

Mr M Robinson asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail, by Board area, the level of funding for drug treatment and rehabilitation services in each of the past five years. (AQW 2960/01)

Ms de Brún: The information requested is not available.

Níl fáil ar an eolas a iarradh.

Tyrone and Fermanagh Hospital Site

Mr Hussey asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety, pursuant to AQW 2363/01 and AQW 2798/01, to explain the disparity between these answers. (AQW 3003/01)

Ms de Brún: The apparent disparity arises in relation to land at Sperrin Lakeland between the 120 acres referred to in AQW/2363/01 as HPSS&PS estate not used for HSS&PS or related ancillary purposes; and the 184½ acres referred to in AQW/2798/01 as being land owned by the Department at the Tyrone and Fermanagh Hospital site.

As stated in AQW/2798/01, 44 acres of the 184½ acres owned by the Department are in six disposal lots which are being, or have been, disposed of. In addition there are 20 acres in four plots which are still closely linked with HSSPS activities. These four plots are:

1. Playing fields of seven acres within the hospital site which are used by teams from both the hospital and Drumragh College.
2. A piece of ground in close proximity to the Trust addiction centre.
- 3 & 4

A disused railway embankment and an adjoining small plot of grazing land which are close to villas

being vacated by the Trust and which cannot be regarded as surplus to HSSPS requirements until acceptable access arrangements and alternative possible uses have been determined.

Titeann amach an difear soiléir maidir le talamh i Speirín Tír na Lochanna idir na 120 acra a ndéantar tagairt dóibh in AQW/2363/01 mar eastát na SSSP&SP nár úsáideadh do chuspóirí na SSSP nó coimhdeacha bainteach leis; agus na 184½ acra a ndéantar tagairt dóibh in AQW/2798/01 mar thalamh ar shuíomh Otharlann Thír Eoghain agus Fhear Manach ar leis an Roinn é.

Mar a dúradh in AQW/2798/01, tá 44 acra de na 184½ acra ar leis an Roinn iad i 6 luchtóg indíolta atá le díol nó atá díolta. Ina theannta sin, tá 20 acra i gceithre luchtóg a bhfuil baint dhlúth acu go fóill le gníomhaíochtaí na SSSSP. Seo a leanas na ceithre luchtóg:

1. Páirceanna imeartha 7 acra laistigh le shuíomh na hotharlainne atá úsáidte ag oibrithe ón otharlann agus ó Choláiste Dhroim Rátha.
2. Píosa talaimh cóngarach d'ionad andúilíochta an Iontaobhais.

3 & 4

Claifort iarnróid gan feidhm agus píosa beag talaimh innilte atá sínte leis atá cóngarach do vileanna atá á bhfágáil ag an Iontaobhas agus nach féidir a mheas mar neamhriachanach do na SSSSP go dtí go mbeidh socruithe inghlactha déanta ar a n-úsáid agus ar a n-úsáidí féideartha eile.

GP Patient Lists

Mr M Robinson asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what the average size of GP patient lists has been in each Health Board area in each of the past 3 years. (AQW 3018/01)

Ms de Brún: This information is detailed in the table below.

AVERAGE NUMBER OF PATIENTS PER GP BY BOARD.

Board	1998/99	1999/00	2000/01
EHSSB	1,692	1,677	1,662
NHSSB	1,706	1,692	1,686
SHSSB	1,682	1,687	1,682
WHSSB	1,649	1,639	1,641
Total	1,686	1,676	1,668

Tá an t-eolas seo léirithe sa tábla thíos.

MEÁNLIÓN NA N-OTHAR AG DG DE RÉIR BORD

BORD	1998/99	1999/00	2000/01
BSSSO	1,692	1,677	1,662
BSSST	1,706	1,692	1,686

BORD	1998/99	1999/00	2000/01
BSSSD	1,682	1,687	1,682
BSSSI	1,649	1,639	1,641
Iomlán	1,686	1,676	1,668

Health Impact Assessment

Mr Molloy asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to outline how the health impact assessments of the policies and programmes on other Departments will be implemented. (AQO 1197/01)

Ms de Brún: Officials in my Department are working with Health Departments in other countries, the Institute of Public Health in Ireland, and leading academics in this field to develop an appropriate methodology to conduct health impact assessment here. My officials are also involved in a Working Group led by the Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister to explore the possibility of developing an integrated policy assessment tool that would streamline various impact assessments, including health.

When an appropriate methodology has been developed, each Department will be responsible for assessing the health impacts of their own significant new policy developments. Officials in my Department will support them by providing guidance and advice.

Tá feidhmeannaigh i mo Roinn ag obair le Ranna Sláinte i dtíortha eile, leis an Fhoras Sláinte Poiblí in Éirinn, agus le lucht acadúla ceannródaíochta sa réimse seo le modheolaíocht chuí a fhorbairt le measúnú tionchar sláinte a chur ar bun anseo. Tá mo chuid feidhmeannach rannpháirteach chomh maith i nGrúpa Oibre faoi cheannaireacht Oifig an Chéad Aire agus an Leas-Chéad Aire le hiniúchadh a dhéanamh an féidir uirlis mheasúnaithe polasaí lánpháirtithe a fhorbairt a dhéanfaidh sruthlíniú ar mheasúnuithe éagsúla tionchair, sláinte san áireamh.

Nuair a bheidh modheolaíocht chuí forbartha, beidh gach Roinn freagrach as measúnú a dhéanamh ar thionchair sláinte a bhforbairtí polasaí suntasacha nua féin. Tabharfaidh feidhmeannaigh i mo Roinn tacaíocht dóibh trí threoir agus chomhairle a chur ar fáil.

Cancer Unit: Belfast City Hospital

Ms McWilliams asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety when will building commence in respect of the regional cancer unit at the City Hospital site in South Belfast. (AQO 1153/01)

Ms de Brún: Since the Business Case for the Regional Cancer Centre was approved, my officials have been working actively with the Belfast City Hospital Trust to

conclude the Private Finance process which I inherited, and to identify the options for funding the project.

I am seeking Executive Programme Funds to support a proposal for the existing PFI/PPP partner to design and build the Regional Cancer Centre, which would transfer on completion to Trust ownership and be operated, maintained and refurbished by the Trust. The PFI/PPP partner would design, provide, fund and operate the equipment requirement for 25 years. As I have already reported to the Assembly I will make an announcement before the Summer Recess.

Ó ceadaiodh an Cás Gnó don Lárionad Réigiúnach Ailse, d'oibrigh mo chuid feidhmeannach go gníomhach le hIontaobhas Otharlann Chathair Bhéal Feirste leis an phróiseas Airgeadais Phríobháidigh, a tugadh dom, a thabhairt chun críche agus na roghanna do mhaoiniú an tionscadail a aithint.

Tá mé ag lorg Cistí Chláir an Choiste Fheidhmiúcháin le tacú le togra don chomhpháirtí PFI/PPP atá ann cheana leis an Lárionad Réigiúnach Ailse a dhearadh agus a thógáil; d'aistreofaí é nuair a bheadh sé críochnaithe chuig úinéireacht Iontaobhais agus dhéanfaidh an tIontaobhas é a fheidhmiú, a chothabháil agus a athchóiriú. Dhéanfaidh an comhpháirtí PFI/PPP an riachtanas trealamh a dhearadh, a sholáthar, a mhaoiniú agus a fheidhmiú ar feadh 25 bliana. Mar a dúirt mé leis an Tionól cheana déanfaidh mé fógart roimh Shos an tSamhraidh.

Stillborn or Premature Babies

Dr Birnie asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to outline (a) the number of babies stillborn or premature as a result of smoking by the mother during pregnancy in 1999 and 2000; and (b) if she will publish a table showing the total number of stillbirths and premature births by weeks of gestation, where the mother smoked during pregnancy in 1999 and 2000.

(AQO 1152/01)

Ms de Brún: No information is available to link babies stillborn or premature exclusively to smoking in pregnancy. While smoking is a critical health issue for both mother and child, it is only one of a number of factors associated with stillbirths and premature births.

A table showing the number of stillbirths and premature births in 1999 and 2000 by weeks of gestation, where the mother reported smoking during pregnancy, is set out below.

As I indicated in my reply of 8 April to AQW 2603/01, an inter-sectoral Working Group on Tobacco was established in March last year to develop and oversee the implementation of a comprehensive Action Plan to tackle smoking. The Plan, which will identify pregnant women who smoke as a key target group, is being finalised and will be issued for consultation early in the summer.

NI - PREMATURE LIVE ⁽¹⁾ AND STILL BIRTHS BY WEEKS OF GESTATION WHERE SMOKING BY THE MOTHER WAS REPORTED AS AN ANTENATAL RISK FACTOR ⁽²⁾, 1999 AND 2000

Weeks of gestation	Premature live births		Still births	
	1999	2000	1999	2000
19	0	0	0	0
20	2	0	0	0
21	1	1	0	0
22	4	1	0	0
23	2	2	0	0
24	3	4	4	2
25	5	4	4	0
26	9	8	0	3
27	3	9	0	1
28	9	9	2	1
29	12	19	1	3
30	11	11	1	2
31	24	17	3	2
32	29	31	1	0
33	54	47	2	0
34	60	66	2	1
35	123	85	4	0
36	186	147	5	2
37			3	1
38			2	5
39			3	1
40			7	2
41			0	0
42			0	0
43			0	0
44			0	0
45			0	0
All	537	461	44	26

⁽¹⁾ Babies born before the 37th week of gestation

⁽²⁾ Does not include instances where maternal smoking was not recorded

Source: Child Health System

Níl aon eolas ar fáil le marbh-bhreitheanna nó breitheanna réamhaibí leanaí a cheangal go huile agus go hiomlán le bheith ag caitheamh tobac le linn toirchis. Cé gur ceist chriticiúil sláinte é caitheamh tobac don mháthair agus don leanbh araon, níl ann ach ceann de roinnt bunchúiseanna a bhaineann le marbh-bhreitheanna agus breitheanna réamhaibí.

Tá tábla a thaispeánann an líon marbh-bhreitheanna agus an líon breitheanna réamhaibí i 1999 agus i 2000 de réir na seachtaine den tréimhse iompair, agus tuairisc tugtha ag an mháthair go raibh sí ag caitheamh tobac le linn toirchis, leagtha amach thíos.

Mar a léirigh mé i mo fhreagra ar AQW 2603/01 an 8 Aibreán, bunaíodh Grúpa Oibre ar Thobac i Márta na bliana seo caite le forbairt a dhéanamh ar Phlean Gníomhaíochta cuimsitheach le tabhairt faoi chaitheamh tobac agus le maoirseacht a dhéanamh ar fheidhmiú an phlean sin. Tá an Plean, a thabharfaidh le taispeáint go mbíonn mná atá ag iompar agus a bhíonn ag caitheamh tobac mar spriocghrúpa tábhachtach, á thabhairt chun críche agus eiseofar é do chomhchomhairle go luath sa samhradh.

TE - BREITHEANNA RÉAMHAIBÍ BEO ⁽¹⁾ AGUS MARBH-BHREITHEANNA DE RÉIR NA SEACHTAINE DEN TRÉIMHSE IOMPAIR AGUS GUR TUGADH TUAIRISC GO RAIBH CAITHEAMH TOBAC NA MÁTHAR INA BHUNCHÚIS LE RIOSCA RÉAMHBHEIRTHE ⁽²⁾, 1999 AGUS 2000

Seachtainí den Tréimhse Iompair	Breitheanna réamhaibí beo		Marbh-bhreitheanna	
	1999	2000	1999	2000
19	0	0	0	0
20	2	0	0	0
21	1	1	0	0
22	4	1	0	0
23	2	2	0	0
24	3	4	4	2
25	5	4	4	0
26	9	8	0	3
27	3	9	0	1
28	9	9	2	1
29	12	19	1	3
30	11	11	1	2
31	24	17	3	2
32	29	31	1	0
33	54	47	2	0
34	60	66	2	1
35	123	85	4	0
36	186	147	5	2
37			3	1
38			2	5
39			3	1
40			7	2
41			0	0
42			0	0
43			0	0
44			0	0
45			0	0
Iomlán	537	461	44	26

⁽¹⁾ Naionáin a rugadh roimh an 37ú seachtain den tréimhse iompair

⁽²⁾ Níl cásanna nach bhfuil tuairisc go raibh an mháthair ag caitheamh tobac san áireamh

Foinse: An Córas Sláinte Leanaí

Cross-Border Health-Related Projects

Mr McElduff asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail those cross-border health-related projects which have received financial assistance from the European Union; and to make a statement. (AQO 1150/01)

Ms de Brún: My Department provided financial support totalling £2.36 million through the European Union Special Support Programme for Peace and Reconciliation 1995-1999 to seventeen cross-border health and social care projects. I have arranged for Mr McElduff to be furnished with a list of those projects that received support.

Chuir mo Roinn tacaíocht airgeadais de £2.36 mhilliún ar an iomlán ar fáil trí Chlár Tacaíochta Speisialta an Aontais Eorpaigh um Shíocháin agus Athmhuintearas 1995-1999 do sheacht dtionscadal déag cúraim sláinte agus sóisialta trasteorann. Tá sé socraithe agam go dtabharfar liosta de na tionscadail a fuair tacaíocht don Uasal Mac Giolla Duibh.

A&E South Tyrone Hospital

Mr Gallagher asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety if she plans to extend the opening hours for accident and emergency services at the South Tyrone Hospital during this financial year. (AQO 1182/01)

Ms de Brún: I am committed to ensuring that the best use is made of all facilities at South Tyrone Hospital, within the resources available.

An extension to the opening hours of the Minor Injuries Unit is one of a number of measures currently being considered, as part of a medium term development proposal for the hospital, pending the outcome of the Acute Hospitals Review.

Tá mé tiomanta lena chinntiú go mbainfear an úsáid is fearr as gach saoráid ag Ospidéal Dheisceart Thír Eoghain, laistigh de na hacmhainní atá ar fáil.

Tá síneadh le huaireanta oscailte an Aonaid Mhionghortuithe ar cheann de na bearta atá á meas i láthair na huaire, mar chuid de thogra forbartha meántréimhseach don ospidéal, agus sinn ag feitheamh le toradh Athbhreithniú na nOspidéal GEARLIACHTA.

Health Technical Memorandum 84 (HTM 84)

Rev Robert Coulter asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what is the timescale and cost involved to upgrade all site-owned Health Service hospitals to the Health Technical Memorandum 84 (HTM84) regulations regarding fire safety. (AQO 1164/01)

Ms de Brún: Health Technical Memorandum 84 (Fire Safety in Residential Care Premises) does not apply to hospitals, only to residential care premises.

Ní bhaineann Meabhrán Teicniúil Sláinte 84 (Sábháilteacht Dóiteáin in Áitreabh Cúraim Chónaithigh) le hospidéal, is le háitreabh cúraim chónaithigh amháin a bhaineann sé.

Hayes Review

Mr O'Neill asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to outline the timeframe for the implementation of any new legislation as a result of the Hayes Review. (AQO 1184/01)

Ms de Brún: It is too early to say whether legislation may be needed to implement any aspect of the Acute Hospitals Review.

Following discussion at the Executive, proposals on the way forward can be put out for full public consultation. It is hoped that final decisions can be taken in the course of 2002.

I have made it clear that, until long-term decisions are made, I expect every effort to be made to maintain existing services at all our acute hospitals.

Tá sé róluath a rá an mbeidh reachtaíocht riachtanach le haon ghné den Athbheithniú ar Ospidéal Ghéarliachta a chur i bhfeidhm.

I ndiaidh cainteanna ag an Choiste Feidhmiúcháin, is féidir moltaí ar an bhealach chun tosaigh a chur amach le haghaidh comhchomhairle poiblí. Táthar ag súil go ndéanfar cinní deireanacha i rith 2002.

Thug mé le fios go mbeinn ag dúil go ndéanfar gach iarracht seirbhísí faoi láthair a chothabháil ag gach ceann dár ngéarotharlanna, go dtí go ndéantar cinní fadtéarmacha.

Orthopaedic Work

Mr A Maginness asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety, in relation to non-fracture orthopaedic operations, what is the cost of sending patients and relatives to have work undertaken in (a) private facilities; and (b) NHS hospitals outside Northern Ireland. (AQO 1163/01)

Ms de Brún: The cost of sending patients and relatives to have orthopaedic work undertaken in (a) private facilities for the year 2001-02 was £360,759 and (b) NHS hospitals in Great Britain was £35,545.

Is é an costas a bhain le hothair agus gaolta a chur ar aghaidh d'obair ortaipéideach ná (a) £360,759 i saoráidí príobháideacha don bhliain 2001-02 agus (b) £35,545 in ospidéal SSN sa Bhreatain Mhór.

REGIONAL DEVELOPMENT

Wastewater Treatment Facilities: Larne and Islandmagee

Mr K Robinson asked the Minister for Regional Development what proposals he intends to bring forward to enhance provision for the treatment of sewage in the vicinity of (a) Mill Bay, Islandmagee; (b) Ballystrudder; (c) Ballycarry; and (d) Larne. (AQW 2694/01)

The Minister for Regional Development (Mr P Robinson): Water Service is progressing two projects which will upgrade wastewater treatment facilities in the Larne and Islandmagee areas to meet modern standards.

The larger of the two projects is the provision of a new treatment works to service Larne and communities in the surrounding area. A planning application for the works has been submitted to Planning Service and I understand that a decision is expected soon. Subject to planning approval, construction on site is programmed to start in the incoming financial year. The scheme will take 2 years to complete at an estimated cost of some £10 million.

The other project has involved a strategic assessment of all the sewer catchments on the Islandmagee Peninsula, including those discharging to Larne Lough. Measures identified include transferring wastewater from Ballystrudder to Ballycarry for treatment and the provision of a sewer system and treatment works for Mill Bay. The project also includes for improvements to coastal discharges from the eastern side of the peninsula. Implementation of these proposals will commence on a phased basis this year at a total cost of almost £3 million.

Toomebridge Bypass

Mr J Kelly asked the Minister for Regional Development when the Toomebridge Bypass will be completed. (AQW 2818/01)

Mr P Robinson: In my response to the Member's Oral Assembly Question (AQO 1123/01) on 15 April 2002 I advised that, all being well, the main works contract for the construction of the Toome Bypass should be awarded later this month with work starting on site next month.

It is anticipated that the scheme will take 18 to 21 months to complete.

Far Circular Road, Dungannon

Mrs Carson asked the Minister for Regional Development, pursuant to AQW 2177/01, in respect of the Far Circular Road, Dungannon, to detail, in each of the past five years, (a) the number of claims lodged due to

accidents caused by structural defects affecting the road; and (b) the number of successful claims.

(AQW 2819/01)

Mr P Robinson: The table below details the number of claims lodged with my Department and the number of offers of compensation made in respect of accidents involving damage to vehicles on the Far Circular Road, Dungannon in each of the past five years.

Year	1997/98	1998/99	1999/00	2000/01	2001/02
No of Claims	0	0	0	8	0
Compensation Offered	0	0	0	0	0

Subway Maintenance

Mr Hilditch asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail (a) the cleaning maintenance programme, including graffiti removal, from the subways in Carrickfergus; and (b) the level of response maintenance provided over the past two years.

(AQW 2834/01)

Mr P Robinson: The subways in question are part of the public road and, as such, responsibility for their cleanliness falls to Carrickfergus Borough Council. My Department's Roads Service does however, hose down and disinfect the subways twice a year.

Roads Service is responsible for dealing with graffiti on the subways. In addressing this problem, the Roads Service policy is to remove only graffiti containing offensive language or messages as soon as is practicable. Graffiti which does not contain offensive text is treated as low priority and is generally only removed occasionally.

Responsive maintenance of the subways normally follows routine inspections. Roads Service officials carry out safety inspections of the subways every four weeks. Any surface defects or hazards that are recorded through these inspections are prioritised and repaired as necessary. During the past two years, repairs have had to be carried out on the subways' drainage channels and the pumping systems.

In addition, officials also carry out more detailed structural inspections of the subways once every two years and detailed principal inspections are undertaken once every six years. Any remedial work is prioritised from the inspection reports. Following such inspections on 23 September 1999 the following work was carried out:

- Harbour Subway – concrete repairs were carried out to the roof and the subway was power-washed and repainted. You may be aware that last year, in partnership with the Council, Roads Service arranged to have murals painted on the walls of this subway to brighten it up;
- High Street Subway – minor defects were repaired, the roof was power-washed and repainted; and

- Fisherman's Quay – the roof was power-washed, its coating removed and repainted.

I understand that the Harbour and High Street subways have just recently had another structural assessment carried out and an assessment of Fisherman's Quay subway is still on going. Any work required will be prioritised following analysis of the assessment reports.

Traffic: Derrylin, Co Fermanagh

Mr Foster asked the Minister for Regional Development to outline (a) if he will undertake a survey of pedestrian and vehicular traffic in the village of Derrylin, Co Fermanagh; and (b) if he is aware that two local businesses are willing to finance the provision of a pedestrian crossing in the village.

(AQW 2835/01)

Mr P Robinson: Officials from my Department's Roads Service have advised me that in June 2000, they carried out a survey of pedestrian movements in the village of Derrylin, on a stretch of road which local residents identified as being most in need of a controlled pedestrian crossing. Also, in February 2001, extensive vehicular traffic surveys were carried out in the village. Whilst the volume of vehicular traffic was found to be in the region of 5500 vehicles per day, the pedestrian count was extremely low, with only 5 pedestrians crossing the stretch of road in question during the morning peak period.

The results of these surveys indicate that the level of pedestrian and vehicle conflict in the village is not sufficient to warrant the provision of a controlled pedestrian crossing. Roads Service has therefore no plans at present to undertake any further surveys.

Neither Roads Service nor I am aware that two local businesses are willing to finance the provision of a pedestrian crossing in the village. I should explain, however, that the decision not to provide such a facility in Derrylin is based primarily on road safety grounds and any offer of funding would not lead Roads Service or me to change that decision. I trust you will appreciate that there would be a potential danger in providing a controlled facility which is infrequently used by pedestrians as motorists, becoming familiar with a green signal, may actually fail to stop for the occasional red signal.

Railway Station, Newry City

Mr Berry asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail any plans to upgrade the railway station at Newry City.

(AQW 2858/01)

Mr P Robinson: With my full support the Northern Ireland Transport Holding Company is endeavouring to provide a new railway station in Newry as the present station is unsatisfactory. The land directly opposite the current station is the Company's preferred choice of site

and it is now actively engaged in securing access to this site. However, property negotiations can be complex and will inevitably take time. Nevertheless, the Company is preparing to allocate resources for this development in its Corporate Plan for 2004-05. This will be subject to confirmation depending upon the resources available for public transport.

Beech Hill and Cloghogue, Newry

Mr Berry asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail any plans he has to make the section of roadway between Beech Hill and Cloghogue, Newry a dual carriageway. (AQW 2859/01)

Mr P Robinson: My Department's Roads Service has appointed consultants to undertake a feasibility study to identify the best option for upgrading the stretch of the A1 Belfast to Newry to the Border route from Beech Hill to Cloghogue Roundabout. The study will examine options for:

- improving and upgrading the existing road (including the Newry Bypass) to dual carriageway standard; and
- providing a new dual carriageway route from Beech Hill to join the Newry Bypass in the vicinity of Camlough Road and the dualling of the southern section of the Bypass to dual carriageway standard.

It is anticipated that the consultants will have developed a number of approved options by the Summer 2002 and that the preferred option will be agreed in Spring 2003. In the meantime the scheme will be considered for inclusion in the Roads Service 10-year Forward Planning Schedule which I hope to publish later this year.

Clanrye River, Newry City

Mr Berry asked the Minister for Regional Development if he has any plans to provide a higher standard pedestrian footbridge across Clanrye River, Newry City. (AQW 2860/01)

Mr P Robinson: I have no plans at present to provide a new pedestrian footbridge across Clanrye River in Newry. However, during a recent meeting with a delegation from Newry and Mourne District Council, some Councillors requested that the metal deck of the footbridge, which has been removed to facilitate a flood alleviation scheme, should not be replaced. The Councillors felt that a more ornate deck, more in keeping with the local amenity, should be provided. I have undertaken to visit the site before reaching a decision on this matter.

Enterprise Timetable

Mr Berry asked the Minister for Regional Development if a review of timing arrangements will be carried out at

Newry City Railway Station in light of the fact that the main service from Belfast to Dublin each morning passing through Newry City at 9.00 am does not stop at this Station. (AQW 2867/01)

Mr P Robinson: Translink has advised that there are no immediate plans to change the existing Enterprise timetable and stops, with the possible exception of the 20.35 service from Dublin for which the departure time may be altered by plus or minus 5 minutes. Translink considers that if the existing 0800 service from Belfast to Dublin were to stop at Newry, the disadvantage of the extra journey time for the vast majority of passengers would outweigh any benefits. Translink has also pointed out that there is a limited number of slots available into Dublin Connolly station, so if the existing 0800 service from Belfast were to stop at Newry it would have to leave Belfast some minutes before 0800 in order to fit into its existing slot into Dublin. This earlier start would also disadvantage many passengers starting their journey in Belfast.

Tourism Signage Policy

Mr Hussey asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail progress on the joint Road Service and Northern Ireland Tourist Board review of tourism signage policy. (AQW 2878/01)

Mr P Robinson: My Department's Roads Service has advised me that, in the course of the review of tourist signing policy, which is being carried out jointly by Roads Service and the Northern Ireland Tourist Board, it became increasingly clear that certain aspects could best be explored by means of a number of desktop tourism signing exercises to determine the implications of any policy change. The Northern Ireland Tourist Board is leading in these latest exercises.

Presently, information that will inform the review is being collated for the first study in the Portrush and Giant's Causeway area. Similar work has commenced on the second and third study areas in the Newcastle and Londonderry City areas and further studies are planned.

It is expected that the outcome of these studies will be translated into policy in time for the 2003 tourist season.

Road Signage

Mr Hussey asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail his plans to ensure that road signage reflecting facilities and attractions in villages and towns is not overlooked as a result of the construction of new roads. (AQW 2882/01)

Mr P Robinson: My Department's Roads Service is fully aware of the need to erect road signage to reflect 'local services' and tourist attractions in villages and towns that are bypassed as a result of the construction of new roads.

For your information, current Roads Service policy permits the erection of signs to 'local services' in respect of local communities with a population of between 1,500 and 5,000 people which have been bypassed because of the construction of new roads. This is in common with practice elsewhere in the United Kingdom. 'Local services' signs are not provided in respect of large towns (with populations greater than 5,000), which have been similarly affected, as it is assumed a full range of services will be available.

Signs to tourist attractions will continue to be provided in accordance with current policy, as agreed between Roads Service and the Northern Ireland Tourist Board. Under that policy, which is currently under review, signing may be permitted to a tourist attraction from a newly constructed road, depending on the number of visitors drawn to the attraction and the classification of the road.

Pedestrian Crossing

Mr Shannon asked the Minister for Regional Development what is the current criteria used to measure the need for a pedestrian crossing. (AQW 2884/01)

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 currently used by Roads Service to measure the need for a pedestrian crossing essentially involves an assessment of the number of pedestrians crossing the road and the volume of traffic using it. That 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.

Generally, funding is not an issue in that any site that meets this needs criteria and can be safely provided with regard to engineering considerations, will be funded from existing budgets. In the circumstances I have no plans to introduce new criteria for the funding of pedestrian crossings.

Pedestrian Crossing

Mr Shannon asked the Minister for Regional Development what steps is he taking to introduce new criteria for the funding of pedestrian crossings. (AQW 2895/01)

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 currently used by Roads Service to measure the need for a pedestrian crossing 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. That acts as an initial sift, in that sites above a particular threshold figure are deemed to merit further consideration for a controlled crossing.

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B10/Fernhill Road, Rathfriland

Mr Bradley asked the Minister for Regional Development what steps he will take to reduce the danger to road users at the eastern junction of the B10/Fernhill Road, Rathfriland. (AQW 2915/01)

Mr P Robinson: My Department's Roads Service has advised me that a scheme to improve the eastern junction of the B10 Banbridge to Rathfriland road and the U4342 Fernhill Road has been included in its 2003-04 minor works programme for the Banbridge District Council area. The scheme is subject to the successful acquisition of necessary land and the availability of funds.

I understand that the proposed scheme involves the repositioning of the junction to reduce the speed of traffic entering and exiting Fernhill Road and to discourage use of that road as a shortcut. The scheme will also include the realignment of a stretch of the Banbridge to Rathfriland road and the construction of a layby at the existing bus shelter close to the junction and a footway from the bus shelter to Fernhill Road.

Sewer Baiting

Mr Hilditch asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail the current programmes for sewer baiting. (AQW 2916/01)

Mr P Robinson: Water Service has a network of some 12,000 kilometres of sewers. Rodent infestation is not a significant problem but tends to be more prevalent in older parts of the network in urban areas. Rodent control measures are, therefore, targeted at these sewers and are carried out by staff from both Water Service and District Councils.

Water Service has recently reviewed the arrangements for carrying out rodent control, and now proposes to subject this work to open tender competition to establish call off contracts on a geographical area basis. These will enable rodent control to be undertaken on both a cyclical and ad hoc basis, by either Water Service or contract staff, depending on local circumstances. It is intended to advertise the contracts by the end of June 2002.

SOCIAL DEVELOPMENT

Housing Executive Repairs

Mr Shannon asked the Minister for Social Development what action is taken against Housing Executive contractors where they fail to meet the timescale for response repairs to property. (AQW 2824/01)

The Minister for Social Development (Mr Dodds): If a Housing Executive works order has not been completed by a contractor within the stipulated response time or date, the Housing Executive may employ and pay other persons to carry out the work. Any additional costs incurred in such circumstances become a charge, recoverable by the Housing Executive from the contractor. The costs may be offset against any sums due by the Housing Executive to the contractor.

In cases of persistent failure to comply with response times, a contractor can be suspended and/or have the contract terminated. The contractor may also be excluded from tendering for any future work offered by the Housing Executive.

Meeting Delegations: Political Parties

Mr Adams asked the Minister for Social Development to identify, by party, the number of elected representatives the Minister has met with as part of official delegations to his Department since it was established. (AQW 2837/01)

Mr Dodds: My Department does not have information in this detail. Ministerial meetings with delegations that include members of political parties take place in the same way as meetings with the Departmental Committee.

Handling Correspondence

Mr Adams asked the Minister for Social Development to detail any protocols he has agreed for the handling of correspondence by his Ministerial Office. (AQW 2838/01)

Mr Dodds: The arrangements for handling correspondence in my Department's ministerial office are as follows. Replies to letters from Peers, Members of Parliament, Assembly Members, District Council Mayors or Chairpersons and the heads of certain bodies are signed by me or my Private Secretary following my approval. All replies should issue within 10 working days of receipt. Replies to letters from councillors and representatives of certain other bodies are signed by my Private Secretary and should issue within 10 working days. Letters from other individuals are referred for a direct reply by a Departmental official and replies should be issued within 15 working days of receipt.

Meeting Delegations

Mr Adams asked the Minister for Social Development to detail any protocols his Office follows to decide on which delegations he receives. (AQW 2839/01)

Mr Dodds: My office operates no formal criteria for recommending whether or not I should meet with any particular individual or group. Each case is treated on its merits.

Targeting Social Need

Mr S Wilson asked the Minister for Social Development to detail, in each of the past 5 years, (a) the percentage of his budget relating to Targeting Social Need; (b) the actual spend for TSN; (c) the number of people employed relating to TSN; (d) the number of people who benefited from these programmes; (e) the actual and practical benefits as a result of his TSN programmes; and (f) the tasks specifically undertaken and completed. (AQW 2917/01)

Mr Dodds: Since the Department for Social Development was only established in December 1999 the following answers relate to the Department's New TSN Action Plan which runs from January 2000 to March 2003.

- a. **The percentage of budget relating to Targeting Social Need; and**
- b. **The actual spend for TSN**

New TSN is not a programme with its own budget, but instead it is a policy running through all relevant existing spending programmes. New TSN policy is a long term approach. By consistently addressing the problems of those who are objectively shown to be in greatest need, New TSN should, over time, contribute to the erosion of inequalities.

A report on Public Expenditure and New Targeting Social Need commissioned by the Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister (OFMDFM), found that for the 2001-02 year, this Department's budget allocation made it strongly TSN directed. The whole

budget allocation was found to be relevant to New TSN ranging from low to very high relevance. In fact, some 81.47% of the Department's budget was considered to be in the high/very high relevance ranges. This determination was based on the extent to which spending was linked to the three core New TSN objectives – employability, social inequality and social inclusion and the degree to which it was focused on those in greatest objective need.

The Department has also been successful in securing Executive Programme Funds (EPF) for New TSN initiatives:

2001/2002	£948,000
2002/2003	£1.9m
2003/2004	£2.8m

c. The number of people employed relating to TSN

All of the Department's business areas have specific objectives to achieve as set out in the Department's New TSN Action Plan. All staff contribute in some way to the achievement of the Department's New TSN targets and Mission Statement which is "Together Tackling Disadvantage, Building Communities".

The Department employs approximately 6,000 staff who provide services to the people of Northern Ireland. Of these, 93% are employed by the CSA and SSA which means a high percentage of the Department's staff contribute directly to the delivery of targeting social need.

d. The number of people who benefited from these programmes

It is not possible to specify absolutely the number of people benefiting from the Department's programmes which target social need. However, it should be noted that the SSA delivers benefit services to some 460,000 people throughout Northern Ireland. The Child Support Agency manages a caseload of over 35,000 thereby providing a service to some 70,000 parents. The Department's Housing Division provides funding to the Housing Executive and Housing Associations to meet the needs of their tenants, through improving housing conditions and providing new house builds. The Housing Executive currently manages around 125,000 dwellings with Housing Association stock at over 26,000. The Department's Urban Regeneration and Community Development programmes provide improvements to urban areas throughout NI and also funds voluntary and community organisations which provide much needed services and advice to the public. Therefore the Department for Social Development in delivering its programmes, touches the lives of almost every person in NI.

e. The actual and practical benefits as a result of TSN programmes

f. The tasks specifically undertaken and completed

The Department's recently published Revised New TSN Action Plan for the period April 2001 to March 2003

also includes a progress report covering January 2000 to 31 March 2001. This provides a 'state of play' on each of the 20 targets. The Department will shortly produce its Revised New TSN Action Plan for the period from April 2002 to March 2003 and provide a further progress report on achievement of objectives up to 31 March 2002.

Illegal Dumping Sites

Mr Hilditch asked the Minister for Social Development to detail measures taken to (a) prevent illegal dumping on Housing Executive property; and (b) clear these illegal dumping sites. (AQW 2918/01)

Mr Dodds: Given the size of the Housing Executive estate, of some 115,000 dwellings, it is difficult for the Housing Executive to effectively police illegal dumping. However, the Housing Executive is pro-active in providing environmental schemes where these may help reduce the problem. In addition, the Housing Executive's General Conditions of Tenancy includes a requirement to maintain a dwelling in a clean and tidy condition and the Tenants' handbook advises tenants on the appropriate disposal of rubbish to prevent nuisance or danger in public areas.

The Housing Executive is committed to tackling anti-social activity wherever it occurs on its estates, including illegal dumping. The Housing Executive also encourages residents, who are experiencing nuisance from neighbours, to report it to the local district office, which will seek to resolve the matter in a speedy and efficient manner.

The Housing Executive's policy is to inspect areas under its control at least once every six months. However, the Housing Executive's District Offices have the flexibility to increase this cycle of inspection, and subsequent remedial action, as they consider necessary. In addition to the inspection process, response maintenance repair orders will be issued where excessive litter or rubbish is being dumped. Estate Wardens have also been introduced, who will report directly to the District Office on instances of litter or illegal dumping on estates, including abandoned vehicles.

A new contract has recently been introduced in each of the Housing Executive's Districts, which allows District Offices to make more formal arrangements for responding to the need for rubbish removal. This facility gives the District Office the option of using a specialised cleaning contractor to clean identified areas, on a cyclical basis and at a pre-defined price. Whilst not making the responsive side of rubbish removal redundant, it should significantly reduce the problem.

Social Housing: Newcastle and Crossgar

Mr McGrady asked the Minister for Social Development what steps does he plan to take, in conjunction with the Northern Ireland Housing Executive, to identify

land for the provision of social housing in Newcastle and Crossgar; and to make a statement. (AQW 2939/01)

Mr Dodds: Newcastle is recognised as a popular location with a high demand for social housing. Suitable sites are difficult to acquire because of high land values and competition from the private sector. For example, much work had been done following up the possibility of acquiring a site on the Castlewellan Road, but this has now been put on hold pending further deliberation by the owners.

The Housing Executive and housing associations are actively working in partnership to identify alternative sites and at least one, also on the Castlewellan Road, is currently the subject of preliminary negotiations.

Schemes for 20 new houses in Newcastle and five new houses in Dundrum are programmed for 2003-04, but could be brought forward if land becomes available in the short term. It is possible that some of the need in Newcastle might be met by transfers to the 16 new houses currently under construction by Rural Housing Association in Castlewellan.

The situation in Crossgar is similar. This is an area of growing demand for singles and family accommodation, but again site identification is a problem. A scheme of 10 houses is programmed for 2003-04 and again housing associations are actively looking for a suitable site.

Social Security Appeal No. AR/2/00/S

Mr Fee asked the Minister for Social Development if he will indicate when the adjudication for Social Security Appeal No. AR/2/00/S will be available.

(AQW 2940/01)

Mr Dodds: As Social Security Appeal No. AR/2/00/S refers to an individual case, and on the grounds of confidentiality I am unable to comment directly on this matter. I will write to the member separately about this issue.

Child Support Agency: Targets

Mr Carrick asked the Minister for Social Development what plans he has to publish the targets for the Child Support Agency; and to make a statement.

(AQW 2976/01)

Mr Dodds: The Child Support Agency will publish its 2002-03 Strategic and Business Plan today. Copies will be placed in the Library.

The key targets that I have set for the Child Support Agency for 2002-03 are set out below. The targets reflect the Agency's prime objective to successfully implement the new scheme for new cases, whilst maintaining a good service to our existing clients.

New Cases

- case compliance, to measure the proportion of cases where the non resident parents are paying child maintenance, a value of 75%;
- cash compliance, to measure the proportion of the total amount of child maintenance which is due for payment that is actually being paid, a value of 75%;
- accuracy, 90% on the last decision for all maintenance calculations checked;
- payment arrangements for new cases will have been established on average in six weeks.

Existing Cases

- case compliance, to measure the proportion of cases where the non resident parents are paying child maintenance, a value of 74%;
- cash compliance, to measure the proportion of the total amount of child maintenance which is due for payment that is actually being paid, a value of 72%;
- accuracy, 80% on the last decision for all maintenance assessments checked; and
- a set of Customer Service Standards.

The targets in the Business Plan present the Agency with a challenging year ahead. The Agency intends to achieve a balance between implementing the reforms and maintaining a good service to existing clients but this will become increasingly difficult as the year progresses. There is no doubt that this massive programme of work will stretch the Agency's capacity to the limit.

Housing Benefit Fraud

Mr Gibson asked the Minister for Social Development what steps he is taking to reduce housing benefit fraud. (AQW 2979/01)

Mr Dodds: The Housing Executive is committed to developing and maintaining effective controls to prevent Housing Benefit fraud, and ensuring that if it does occur it will be detected and dealt with appropriately.

To prevent the occurrence of fraudulent claims the Housing Executive has in place a Verification Framework setting out a series of checks which must be carried out before Housing Benefit is paid, and during the currency of a claim. Those include identity checks, and a programme of visits to confirm that claimants' circumstances are as stated.

The Housing Executive is also involved in a programme of data matching through which information provided by Housing Benefit claimants is compared with information held on other benefit systems. All discrepancies are investigated.

All suspicions of fraud are passed to the Social Security Agency for investigation. During 2001-02, 37 cases were

prosecuted, with a further 6 receiving administrative penalties. It is estimated that £2.2 million Housing Benefit was saved as a result of the Housing Executive's counter-fraud initiatives during the year.

ASSEMBLY COMMISSION

Non Executive Bills Unit

Mr Ford asked the Assembly Commission what discussions they have had with the Executive regarding the establishment of a Non-Executive Bills Unit similar to that established by the Scottish Parliament.

(AQW 2784/01)

The Representative of the Assembly Commission (Mr Fee): To date the Assembly Commission has not had any discussions with the Executive regarding the establishment of a Non Executive Bills Unit, as the question of Assembly procedures in this area is not a matter for the Executive.

Following a tendering exercise, the Assembly Commission has established a drafting resource for both Private Members and Committees and this has been available for use since 1 April.

The Speaker is presently considering proposals for procedures regarding the introduction of Non-Executive bills and a paper will shortly be presented to the Committee Chairpersons Liaison Group and the Committee on Procedures for consideration. However, any Member or Committee wishing to introduce a bill in the meantime will be facilitated in doing so by the Bill Office.

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